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Intimate Relationship as a Practice and a Path

It furthers one to have somewhere to go . . .

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We need a path, not to go from here to there, but
to go from here to here.

JAKUSHO KWONG

THE SPANISH PHILOSOPHER Ortega y Gasset once wrote that “no land in human topography is less explored than love.” If this be so, then the dream of love current in our society—which tells us that finding the right person, falling in love, and settling down together is the ticket to everlasting bliss and security—is like a tourist’s approach to this unknown land. This fantasy leads us to believe that relationships should somehow unfold in predictable ways and require little special effort or attention. As the Beatles sang: “All you need is love . . . it’s easy.” Yet just as going abroad to “do” the familiar sights on a packaged tour limits perception and diminishes the joy of making new discoveries, so when we try to make relationships fit into a familiar, conventional fantasy we lose the spice that brings out the richest flavors of love: the unknown.

Real intimacy is, first and foremost, a journey into this unknown. Relating to an *other* of the *other* sex faces us with the

great other inside us as well—a whole range of unexplored qualities and dimensions of our being, beyond the familiar “me” we know so well. In confronting us with the great unknown inside us, love sharpens our senses and calls on us to grow and develop in unforeseen ways.

So to taste the real depth and richness of love’s potential, we need to explore this uncharted territory on our own rather than follow tourist maps. Trying to make a relationship match some fixed image in our mind works against developing our deepest resources, which grow out of responding to the real challenges along the way. What we most need today is not some ideal goal to live up to, but a sense of the real adventure on which we are embarking. The *dream of love* distracts us from the real *path of love*, which continually leads into vast, unforeseen possibilities.

Path is a term that points to the great challenge of human existence: the need to awaken, each in our own way, to the greater possibilities that life presents. The nature of a path is to lead us on a journey, and it is life’s deepest urge to move forward in this way. Whenever our lives have this sense of forward momentum, we feel an unmistakable stream of vitality flowing through us, which tells us that we are on to something real. Unfortunately, however, we are often not aligned with this force moving deep within. As the Sufi poet Rumi described our situation, “We who are blind think our horse is lost, yet all the while he is sweeping us onward like the wind.” Though the steed of our aliveness is carrying us forward whether we like it or not, we often remain asleep in the saddle.

Thus relationships can proceed in either of two directions—toward sleep or wakefulness—and we each have a personal choice about which way they will go. We can try to use them to prop us up, to allay our insecurities, or to prove that we are worthwhile, acceptable, lovable. Doubting that we are basically good to begin with, we may seek comfort and consolation from them. We may even try to turn them into a fortress against impermanence, to protect us from the ever-changing nature of life. Yet when we use relationships primarily for comfort and

security, they only stagnate, putting us more deeply asleep and reinforcing habitual patterns of fear and self-doubt.

The other choice is to regard intimacy as a way to come more fully alive, by helping us bring forth *the goodness and strength already present within us*. Instead of looking to a relationship for shelter, we could welcome its power to wake us up in those areas where we are asleep and where we avoid naked, direct contact with life. This approach puts us on a path. It commits us to movement and change, providing forward direction by showing us exactly where we most need to grow. Embracing relationship as a path also gives us a practice: learning to use each difficulty along the way as an opportunity to go further, to connect more deeply, not just with our partner, but with our own aliveness as well.

By contrast, dreaming that love will save us, solve all our problems or provide a steady state of bliss or security only keeps us stuck in wishful fantasy, undermining the real power of love—which is to transform us. For our relationships to flourish, we need to see them in a new way—as a series of opportunities for developing greater awareness, discovering deeper truth, and becoming more fully human.

CONFLICT AS OPPORTUNITY

Unfortunately, not many couples are prepared to take the adventurous route, to make use of the challenges that their love holds in store for them. Yet when this kind of shift in perspective does occur, it points the way toward a richer and more deeply satisfying relationship.

One couple I worked with had been happily married for two years without having to face any major challenges in their relationship. Then, during a series of arguments over their children from previous marriages, they hurt each other deeply. The woman, Allyn, had never been able to deal with difficult feelings. Her way of handling her hurt and vulnerability when she felt badly treated by her husband was to explode in rage and then

withdraw. This would cause Matthew, a lawyer who approached everything logically, to close down as well. By the time they came to see me for counseling, they had reached a complete standoff and were barely on speaking terms.

At first they wanted me to “fix it” for them—provide some advice or solution that would help them put their relationship back the way it was. But it was too late for that. They disagreed on too many core issues and had hurt each other too deeply to go back to their old patterns of avoidance and denial. Instead, their conflict presented them with an opportunity to grow and evolve. Alyn was being called on to open to her tender, vulnerable feelings instead of avoiding them through rage and blame. As for Matthew, facing the rawness he felt with his wife provided perhaps the greatest chance he would ever have to open to a deeper dimension of life. What else in his fast-paced world would call on him so powerfully to soften up, accept his own tender feelings, and expose his heart to the light of day? It was inspiring to work with this couple as they gradually came to realize that saving their relationship meant breaking through old limitations and growing in significant new ways.

This kind of growth is challenging because it often costs us what we hold most dear: namely, our old ways of staying secure and defended. Yet the promise in such a situation is equally powerful: If we open up in the ways it requires, our relationship will deepen immeasurably. And we will broaden out as human beings, becoming more flexible, loving, and responsive to life as a whole.

BECOMING FULLY HUMAN

When we welcome the opportunities they provide for growth, relationships become a powerful force in our development, providing just the kind of impetus we need if we are to realize our larger potential. As human beings we are the “unfinished animal.” Our nature is open-ended and malleable, and we are forever discovering anew what we are capable of. Although we

are given a human body at birth, we are not given our full humanity. *Becoming human means discovering our fullness and learning to live from it. This involves bringing forth more of who we really are and becoming more available to whatever life presents.*

To live from our fullness, we must have access to a whole range of human capacities. We need power, fierceness, and toughness to persevere and get things done; compassion, tenderness, gentleness, and generosity to nurture ourselves and those we love. We must be able to feel both joy and sorrow if we are to taste life’s many flavors. We need patience and determination, as well as humor and abandon. Sometimes we need to exert discipline; other situations call for letting go into sensuality and playfulness. We need both discriminating intellect and spontaneous intuition. We must be able to act decisively when necessary. At other times the most powerful thing is simply to let things be.

All the most universally valued qualities—humor, generosity, gentleness, courage, patience, and so on—help us realize and express our humanness, by enabling us *to be fully present with what is*. Generosity, for instance, allows us to extend ourselves to what is going on around us, while patience enables us to let it be. Tenderness is a willingness to be pierced by reality, while fierceness allows us to cut through and penetrate situations. Humor is a way of playing with what is, taking it lightly, rather than making it solid and heavy. Each of these qualities allows us to engage with a different facet of reality. The more of them we have access to, the more we can embrace the whole of life—in its joys and delights, as well as in its difficulties and sorrows.

Each of us has access to this whole spectrum of human qualities, at least as seed potentials. Yet most of us have developed one sort of quality—such as toughness—while neglecting its opposite—such as tenderness. In this way, we are all somewhat lopsided and incomplete. This sense of incompleteness is what draws us toward relationship. Yet what would complete us? Is it just companionship? Beyond finding companionship, we have a deeper need to live from our fullness, to engage with life as fully as we can. What we are missing is the other half of our

human wholeness—those untapped potentials that need to be cultivated if we are to realize the full range and depth of who we are.

Our longing to taste life fully is what sets us on a path. This longing arises from a larger intelligence operating in us, which leads us toward those qualities we most need to realize. Thus we are often most strongly attracted to people who manifest qualities we lack or who challenge us to develop them. We feel excitement and passion when we sense that such a person could help us realize a greater fullness and depth of being than we have yet discovered. Thus falling in love is born out of our yearning to come into ourselves more fully.

Yet if we are blind to this larger intelligence operating in us, imagining instead that someone else could give us what we lack, then our passion may bring us more pain than enrichment. For instance, if a man imagines that he can find the spontaneity and aliveness missing from his life only through vivacious women, his relationships with them may only intensify his hunger and emptiness. Yet if he can discover in his attractions to such women a desire to realize his own fiery, energetic qualities, then he has a path.

CONDITIONED PATTERNS

What prevents us from living more fully and having more enriching relationships is a set of narrow, limited notions about who we are. It takes dedication and exertion to break out of these constricting ideas. Whether our seed potentials ripen and bear fruit depends entirely on whether we cultivate them and remove the obstacles to their growth.

Yet by the time we start to become aware that we have such a choice, a great deal of heavy baggage already encumbers us. We have become conditioned into habitual reaction patterns that cloud our awareness, distort our feelings, and restrict our capacity to open to life and to love. The seed of our humanity has become encased in a hard shell. Our defensive postures,

which we originally fashioned to shield us from pain, have become a dead weight keeping us from bursting forth into life's radiance. Since these old ways of doing things fight for dear life to maintain their hold on us, it takes intention and effort to break loose from their grip.

We have no single word in English for these conditioned defensive patterns, so I will borrow a term from the Eastern traditions—*karma*, which literally means “the action of cause and effect.” Although this term as used in the East often refers to inherited tendencies from past lives, we can also use it in a more psychological sense to describe conditioned tendencies established during *this* life, from childhood through the present. Regardless of where we think of karma as coming from, the result is the same: years of habitual contraction, avoidance, denial, unconsciousness, and fear have entangled us in a web of reactive patterns, threatening to constrict or cut off our life force.

HEART AND KARMA

Yet underneath all our conditioning, the basic nature of the human heart is an awake presence, *an openness to reality*. We are born curious, responsive, and alert to the world around us. As Thoreau put it, “Be it life or death, we crave only reality”—and this taste for reality points to a basic sanity and wholesomeness at the core of our nature. Our innate sensitivity and desire to connect with reality is the seed of wisdom, which can ripen within each one of us. Unfortunately, the accumulated inertia of the past, as it has become frozen into our personality structure, usually prevents our larger “wisdom mind” or “wisdom heart” from fully ripening. T. S. Eliot points to this other side of us when he writes, in contrast to Thoreau, “human kind cannot bear very much reality.”

So each of us has two forces at work inside us: an embryonic wisdom that wants to blossom from the depths of our being, and the imprisoning weight of our karma; an unconditioned awake

presence that wants to connect fully with life, and our conditioned personality patterns that narrow our perception and keep us half-asleep. From birth to death, these two forces are always at work, and our lives hang in the balance. In youth, our green life energy is usually stronger than our habitual patterns. We are still flexible, our habits have not totally solidified, and we imagine that we can overcome any obstacles standing in our way. Yet every time we repeat a habitual reaction, we wear "grooves" in our psyche. By the time we reach old age, these grooves have become deeply etched. Old people who have not worked on themselves become inflexible, stuck, set in their ways. Somewhere in midlife the weight of karmic accumulation starts to overpower our life force. Midlife crisis is the realization that time is running out and our karma is catching up with us. At that point, we can no longer just get by on our youthful energy. Unless we bring our larger intelligence and awareness to bear on our defensive postures, they will harden further, freezing us into a living rigor mortis. This cannot be emphasized too strongly: If we do nothing, our karma *will bury us*.

Intimate relationships can help free us from our conditioning by allowing us to see exactly how and where we are stuck. They continually bring us up against things in ourselves that we cannot stand. They stir up all our worst fears and neuroses—in living Technicolor. When we live alone, we are often unaware of our habitual patterns because we live inside them. A relationship, on the other hand, heightens our awareness of all our rough edges. When someone we love reacts to our neurotic patterns, they bounce back on us and we can no longer ignore them. As we see and feel the ways we are stuck, a desire to move in a new direction naturally begins to stir in us. There is ferment, and thus a real possibility for change and renewal. Our path begins to unfold.

Unfortunately, many couples lose heart when their initial honeymoon period comes to an end and they start to encounter difficult things in themselves and each other. Yet as long as we imagine that something is wrong when a relationship stirs up our most difficult emotional issues, we will never be able to set forth on love's real journey. In my experience, the greatest

obstacle to growth in a relationship is a couple's belief that "it shouldn't be this hard." Yet the reason it often *is* hard is that we are set in our ways, and it takes great energy and dedication to break free of them. Love helps us to do so, by inspiring us to open our heart. The honeymoon phase in a relationship is a pure experience of open heart. It gives us a sense of what is possible, which we can draw on for inspiration when we bog down. Trying to maintain that state, however, only prevents us from moving forward.

When Matthew and Allyn's honeymoon phase ended and they began to discover the real difficulties in their relationship, they at first felt bewildered and discouraged. For they had no idea how or even why they should proceed with a relationship if it brought up so much pain. Matthew's struggle with Allyn was calling on him to come to terms with what he feared most—his own feelings. He had long ago decided to cut himself off from them and become completely logical instead, so that he would never have to be like his mother, whom he regarded as "an emotional wreck." Yet now he was face to face with all his wife's feelings, and—what was worse!—his own as well. As for Allyn, she had worked hard never to feel needy and vulnerable again after years of neglect as a child. Yet these were the exact feelings that her struggle with Matthew aroused.

From the standpoint of bliss or security, this couple appeared to be in terrible shape. Yet their situation also awakened them to an important new realization—that their love was asking each of them to grow and their conflict was showing them the directions in which they most needed to go. From a path point of view, their difficulties provided a tremendous opportunity, by motivating them to clear out obstacles in the way of their development. This new perspective gave them the vision and incentive they needed in order to persevere through this difficult period in their relationship.

Intimate relationships are ideally suited as a path *because they inspire our heart to open while at the same time activating all the pain and confusion of our karmic entanglements*. If anyone else but Allyn had challenged Matthew to face his feelings, he might have

simply disappeared. But since his heart was so open to her, he could not get away that easily! Because he loved his wife and wanted to be with her, he had to go forth and confront his greatest fears.

Love is a transformative power precisely because it brings the two different sides of ourselves—the expansive and the contracted, the awake and the asleep—into direct contact. Our heart begins to work on our karma: Rigid places in us that we have hidden from view suddenly come out in the open, and soften in love's blazing warmth. And our karma starts to work on our heart: As we come up against difficult places in ourselves and our partner, our heart has to open and expand in new ways. In this way, the challenges of intimate relationship provide a rare and special opportunity—to venture beyond our self-imposed limitations and claim the larger power and wisdom that is our human birthright.