

ZenSpace News

January 2011

Meditation practice can teach us a great deal about how to flow with the dance of relationship.

Dancing on the Razor's Edge

by John Welwood

Intimate relationship is a dynamic, often dizzying dance of contradictions—which is sometimes delightful and seductive, sometimes fierce and combative, sometimes energizing, sometimes exhausting. This dance requires being able to flow continuously back and forth between polar opposites—between coming together and moving apart, taking hold and letting go, engaging and allowing space, yielding and taking the lead, surrendering and standing firm, being soft and being strong. This is not an easy dance to learn. Many couples quickly lose the flow, fall out of step, and wind up deadlocked in antagonistic positions, struggling for supremacy, pushing and pulling, attacking or withdrawing. Teachers of the dance are few, and as the years go by the conventional dance steps we learned from the culture seem increasingly stiff and outmoded. How, we may wonder, can we learn to dance with grace and power?

The back and forth between begins as soon as we find ourselves attracted to another person who moves us. On one hand, we long to break out of our separateness and go out to meet this person who represents a whole new, unexplored world. Yet at the same time, we also experience trepidation. Going out to another entails some big risks, and we find ourselves hanging on for dear life to the very separateness we long to overcome. In our attraction to another, we seem to be expanding and contracting at the same time, or at least in rapid alternation.

Meditation practice can teach us a great deal about how to flow with the dance of relationship, because it is designed to overcome the split between self and other—within ourselves, first of all. Sitting quietly, following the breath while letting thoughts and feelings arise and pass away, we start to overcome our separation from our own experience, which we often keep at arm's length. We see how the struggle of grasping experiences we like, and rejecting experiences we don't like keeps us stuck in reactive mind, and prevents us from being fully present. In releasing ourselves from this struggle with our experience, we discover our larger nature, which is able to be with what is, free of reactivity.

Meditation also helps us work with the basic polar tension of human life—between heaven and earth, emptiness and form—which all relationships intensify. By learning to keep our seat regardless of what is going on in our mind, we come down to earth. We find that we cannot escape this form, this body, these needs and feelings, this karma, these characteristics and traits, this personal history. Following the breath, letting go of mental fixations, and resting again and again in the present moment also connects us with openness and space—the heaven principle. (For a fuller discussion of the heaven and earth principles, see chapter one.) And as we keep our seat and let go with the breath, the whole soft front of the body, through which we let the world and other people in, starts to open up. This soft, open front represents our humanness, which joins together heaven and earth.

In a relationship, keeping our seat might mean maintaining our own sense of integrity in the face of outer demands and manipulations, or inner fears and compulsions. And the meditative practice of letting go of mental fixations might correspond in a relationship to not becoming locked into any fixed position, not making our ego a solid fortress, but being willing to soften our heart, let down our guard, and risk ourselves in love.

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The Buddha likened meditative awareness to tuning a musical instrument—the strings must be neither too tight nor too loose. If we hold on too tight or let go too much, we lose our balance. This kind of balancing act is crucial in relationships. While it is important to respect our own needs (the earth principle), we must also be able to let go of being too identified with them (the heaven principle). While we must be able to meet another with engagement and commitment (form), we must also be able to let go of the relationship, drop all our agendas and ideas about it, and give the connection room to ebb and flow as it may (emptiness). And though we must loosen our boundaries to unite with another person, if we simply merge with the other, we may lose ourselves in the relationship—which usually spells disaster. Relationship is full of these contradictions. We want freedom, yet we also want stability and commitment. Can we have both? Can we remain loving when anger and critical feelings arise? How can we surrender in a relationship without losing our power and being controlled by the other person? How can we come to know another yet continue to see him or her with fresh eyes?

It would be so much easier if we could just maintain a safe distance and a clear set of boundaries to protect us from risking too much, or if we could simply merge with the other person and lose ourselves in the relationship. But neither of these alternatives is possible or satisfactory. In learning to swing back and forth between too tight and too loose, our movements become more fluid, and the dance begins to develop grace and vigor.

The path of working with the polarities and contradictions of being human—in classical Buddhist terms, “the middle way”—involves not identifying with anything: either pleasure or pain, separateness or togetherness, attachment or detachment. The middle way is not some bland middle ground. Rather, it requires us to be alert and awake at all times, so that we do not harden into any position, no matter how righteous it may seem. Not solidifying a position keeps us sensitive to what is needed at each moment, so that the dance of relationship can continue to flow fluidly. When two people become too invested in their positions (for example, “I need more closeness” versus “I need more space”), they become polarized and the dance grinds to a halt.

The middle way is not about weighing one thing against so that the scales even out. It is a much more dynamic and immediate process, which involves becoming aware of how we lose our balance. In losing our seat, the very act of falling out of it wakes us up; and in waking up, we regain our seat. Regaining our seat means coming back to the present, letting go of identifying with this or that position, and taking a fresh look at what is going on and what the situation needs right now. Not that we should never take a stand; indeed, right now the situation may require me to stand up for what is important to me, even fight for it if I have to. But tomorrow, circumstances may call on me to let go of this stand, give in, and let my partner's needs take precedence over mine.

The paradox of relationship is that it calls on us to be ourselves fully, to express who we are without hesitation, to take a stand on this earth, and, at the same time, to let go of fixed positions and our attachment to them. Nonattachment in relationship doesn't mean not having needs or paying no attention to them. If we ignore or deny our needs, we cut off part of ourselves, and therefore have less of ourselves to offer our partner. Nonattachment in the best sense means not being identified with our needs, our likes and dislikes. We recognize certain needs, yet we also have a connection with our larger being, where those needs do not have a hold over us. Then we can either assert our desire or let it go, according to the dictates of the moment.

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Dancing on the Razor's Edge

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Tantric Buddhism describes the middle way—living in the present without fixed strategy or agenda—in sharper terms, as a razor's edge. Whenever we solidify or identify with any position—exclusively arguing for closeness or space, separateness or togetherness, freedom or commitment—we fall off this edge and can harm ourselves because we lose touch with the whole of what we are, in favor of one isolated part. We need to keep coming back again and again to the open-ended quality of the present moment, which is as sharp and thin as a razor's edge.

Finding our way back to fresh, unpredictable nowness is a dynamic rebalancing act, which gives us a slight jolt that wakes us up from our daydreams and imaginings. These little moments of waking up to the present—of beginner's mind—are pulsing with uncertainty. In the split second of nowness I realize that I really don't know what's going on. How could I? I only just arrived here! When I wake up from my fantasy of the relationship and look freshly into my partner's eyes, I suddenly realize, "I don't know who you are." And further, I don't know who I am, I don't know what this relationship is. In such moments there is freedom to start freshly all over again. We don't have to become stuck in our hopes or images about who we are or where this relationship is going. At the same time, we can't make not knowing into a fixed position either.

Dancing on the razor's edge involves living from the ground of our larger being, which allows us to welcome and allow all of what we are as human beings. After a fight with my partner, part of me wants to nurse my anger, and another part of me wants to drop it and show my love instead. This uncertainty brings me once again to the knife-edge of the present. Feeling all that I feel at this moment—I am angry, and I also love you intensely—can be quite unsettling. Yet in such moments we also taste what it means to be human: we have these emotions, and we do not have to deny or transcend them. Nor do we have to get stuck in our angry thoughts, using them to build a solid case that allows us to justify ourselves or attack the other person. Here on the edge of uncertainty, where we are simply present with what is, we can only respond freshly to what is happening. The challenge of feeling all that we are, expanding to include it all, and not settling into a fixed position stretches the heart and allows a larger love to flow, free from confinement to any viewpoint.

Some people would rather meditate in solitude than relate to other people, while others would rather relate than meditate. Personally, I consider meditation and relationship both indispensable for developing the full range of our human capacities. And meditation is the most powerful practice I have found for learning how to handle the challenges of relationship—practice for the further practice of loving another. Both of these practices are equally challenging.

John Welwood, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, an editor of *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, and teacher whose work integrates Buddhist teachings with Western psychological practice. His books include *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation*; *Journey of the Heart*; *Love and Awakening*. His most recent book, *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships*, is the winner of the prestigious Books for a Better Life Award, which since its inception has honored over 300 titles and their authors, including Jimmy Carter, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Stephen Levine, and Thomas Moore. More at johnwelwood.com.

From the Pali Canon

*Having admirable friends
has been praised by the Sage
with reference to the world.
Associating with an admirable friend
even a fool
becomes wise.
People of integrity
should be associated with.
In that way discernment grows.
Associating with people of integrity
one would be released from all suffering & stress,
would know stress,
the origination of stress,
cessation & the eightfold path:
the four noble truths.*

From a poem attributed to Bhikkuni Kisagotami: *Kisagotami Theri* (Thig 10), translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu. Published in *Access to Insight*, August 8, 2010, <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/thig/thig.10.01.than.html>

Dharma Study Opportunities

Sunday January 1 at 10 a.m. ZenSpace closed.

Sunday January 8 at 10 a.m. Discussion led by Maria Betancourt

Sunday January 15 at 10 a.m. Discussion led by Steven Blondeau

Sunday January 22 at 10 a.m. Discussion led by Karla Passalaqua

Sunday January 29 at 10 a.m. Discussion led by Maria Betancourt

Monday discussions at 9 p.m. Discussion of readings and or Sutra study.

Wednesday discussions at 8:30 p.m. Silent group meditation and mindful discussion that leads where it leads. Led by Erika Lefever

Thursday class at 7:30 p.m. *Minding the Body*. Mindfulness through body movement. Led by Steven Blondeau.

Zazenkai

Saturday, January 28 is the quarterly full-day Zazenkai led by Al Fontova at the Church of the Epiphany from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Zazenkai at the Church of the Epiphany provides us with a quiet environment to sit, without the distractions and parking problems that are present at Little Five Points on Saturdays. Participants may come and go as necessary. Activities will include 30-minute sitting periods, a Dharma talk at 11:00 a.m. and time for lunch. ZenSpace will provide tea and juice, but not lunches, so please bring your own.

On this full-day Zazenkai we need one volunteer to help Al set up Saturday morning and two volunteers to help take down Saturday afternoon. Also, we need someone to assume time-keeping responsibilities from 1:30 to 5 p.m. When we have the rest of the schedule and leadership worked out, we'll send out another email later this month.

The Church of the Epiphany is located at:
2089 Ponce De Leon Ave NE
Atlanta, GA 30307

Directions: <http://www.epiphany.org/directions.html>
or check Map Quest or Google Maps to get directions from your home.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to write Al at alfontova@gmail.com.

Saturday, February 11 is our monthly half-day Zazenkai led by Al Fontova at ZenSpace. The schedule will be from 7–11:30 a.m. Best to be there early, as Saturdays are usually busy at Little Five Points and the parking lot tends to get full by mid morning. Contact Al at alfontova@gmail.com.

Newsletter Submissions

We would love to have your input for future newsletters. Please submit articles or news you'd like to share to braper@zenspace.org. Articles can be your own, or copies of other published articles we can reprint with permission, or links to articles available online. Also, any ideas you have for regular monthly features would be appreciated.

Happy New Year!

As we reflect on the year that has just past and go forward into the next let us acknowledge and be mindful of the gifts we have received in our ZenSpace community—gifts of the triple-gem; the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Members and guests share much of themselves with their time, talents, wisdom, experience and simple presence. It's truly a wonderful thing to be part of this community!

There are many great and small opportunities to be a part of ZenSpace—to help out and serve—from washing the cups after tea to taking out the trash to extending a welcome to newcomers to leading or thoughtfully participating in a discussion. A particular thanks goes out to our program and discussion leaders.

Let this gratitude in community continue fortify us as we proceed—*with patience, courage, understanding and determination to meet and overcome the inevitable difficulties, problems and failures in life.*

Weekend Schedule

*Please note that Sunday newcomers instruction is by reservation only.
E-mail scheduling@zenspace.org,

Sunday Jan 1	ZenSpace Closed		
Sunday Jan 8	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Maria Betancourt
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	
Sunday Jan 15	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Steven Blondeau
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	
Sunday Jan 22	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Karla Passalaqua
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	
Saturday Jan. 28	8:30 a.m. — 5:00 p.m	Full-day Zazenkai at the Episcopal Church of the Epiphany (see page 3 for full description)	Al Fontova
Sunday Jan 29	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Maria Betancourt
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	

Weekend Schedule

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*Please note that Sunday newcomers instruction is by reservation only.

E-mail scheduling@zenspace.org,

Sunday Feb 5	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Dale Erwin
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	<i>Topic: "NOT the Dharma: Experience that may transgress traditional Dharma teaching"</i>
Saturday Feb 11	7:00 a.m.–11:30 p.m.	Half-day Morning Zazenkai at ZenSpace	Al Fontova
Sunday Feb 12	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Maria Betancourt
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	
Sunday Feb 19	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Steven Blondeau
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	
Sunday Feb 26	8–8:30 a.m.	Newcomers Instruction*	Karla Passalacqua
	8:30–10 a.m.	Sit	
	10–11 a.m.	Tea & Discussion	

Weekday Schedule

Mondays	6:30–7:30 a.m.	Morning Sit	Bruce Raper
	7–7:30 p.m.	Newcomers Instruction	Dale Erwin
	7:30–9 p.m.	Sit	
	9–9:30 p.m.	Discussion	
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Tuesdays	7:30–8:30 p.m.	Sit	Chuck Currie
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Wednesdays	6:30–7:30 a.m.	Morning Sit	Erika Lefever
	8–9 p.m.	Sit	
	9–9:30 p.m.	Discussion	
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Thursdays	7:30–9 p.m.	Minding the Body	Steven Blondeau

Your donations help keep ZenSpace an open, accessible place for Dharma practice in L5P.

Thank you for your practice of Generosity—the Perfection of “Dana.”

As a small grass-roots center we struggle with paying our rent. Though we’re managing to pay the current month’s rent by the end of the month it often means we don’t meet our lease obligation to pay at the beginning of the month. So please help us keep our doors open if you are able.

Please consider making a monthly pledge to ZenSpace. You can structure the commitment any way you want, for whatever period you choose. A pledge is just a way to maintain accountability with oneself; it does not involve any formal obligation.

In essence, in making a pledge you are simply informing the ZenSpace treasurer that she can expect this amount from you for the following period of months, barring unforeseen circumstances. Contact Erika Lefever, our treasurer, at the email below if you are interested.

Please feel free to share any thoughts with our treasurer at erikamaze@gmail.com or by sending a letter or leaving a note for her at ZenSpace.