



The Zen of Inner Bonding

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Disclaimer: If you're looking for a real authority on Zen, look elsewhere. I am merely a piddly part-time zen student and am no authority on the practice of Zen or on the study of Buddhism. Even still, the zen I have practiced has helped me to see the world in a whole new way and I am grateful for that. That said, know that whenever one tries to describe the ineffable, one lies! Enjoy.

There is a Buddhist sutra, or sacred teaching, called the “Identity of Relative and Absolute”. It is filled with delightful images that allow me to ponder the relationship between that which is “relative” or “of the world”, and that which is “absolute”, ineffable, and in the realms of “great mystery”. When some people think of Buddhism or of Zen, images may come to mind of austere monks in robes “detaching themselves” from the world and trying to “get off the wheel of existence.” What I enjoy about the teachings of Zen is that there is a strong emphasis on the balance between the Absolute and Relative aspects of reality. The “Identity of Relative and Absolute” puts it like this:

*Light and darkness are a pair,
like the foot before and the foot behind, in walking.
Each thing has its own intrinsic value and is
related to everything else in function and position.
Ordinary life fits the absolute like a box and its lid.
The absolute works together with the relative
like two arrows meeting in mid-air.*

I appreciate how Inner Bonding inherently holds within it the keys to balance between the Absolute and the Relative. By practicing Inner Bonding regularly, and by being sure to dialog with both the inner child and spiritual guidance, we make sure not to “bypass” one of these poles of reality. At the same time, having a deeper understanding of the Absolute and Relative from the perspective of Zen can help to assure this balance.

About the Absolute

The Absolute goes by many names: the “ground of being”, Oneness, God, Spirit, All-That-Is, “Vast Emptiness”, universal mind, Truth, Love, and more. Even science offers an absolute perspective, where we find that at the micro-level, nothing is as it appears and everything is interconnected. Objects that appear to be solid—like a solid oak chair, a human being, or an apple, are not solid after all. Not only that, but that which is non-solid in one “object” blends and becomes indistinct from another “object”, so that “ultimately” there is no chair, no person, no apple—but only “vibration”, “energy”, “essence”. To see the Absolute is to perceive the underlying sea of energy which is the essence of the chair, the person, the apple. To experience the Relative is to sit in the chair and enjoy the cool and crisp sensation of your teeth biting into a ripe Fuji apple. Another Buddhist Sutra, the Heart Sutra, expresses this dichotomy when it states, “...Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness no other than form.”

In Inner Bonding, we connect with the Absolute through the vehicle of our spiritual guidance. When we have gotten so lost in the drama of our existence that we “forget” who we are, our guidance reminds us. If we think we are unattractive, unworthy, or shameful, guidance reminds us that we are a part of “all that is”, a spark of the Divine, and that we can be nothing other than precious and beautiful. If someone says something that makes us question who we are, we can return to guidance to find equilibrium. When we feel unsafe in our “bodies”, guidance reminds us that we are *more* than a body—we are “essence”, we are “Spirit”. When we lose someone we love, guidance reminds us that, in *essence*, we haven’t lost anyone. They are right here with us now, only we can’t see them. Opening to the Absolute perspective through our guidance in this way can help us to feel peaceful and at ease, even in painful, difficult or stressful situations.

About the Relative

The Relative is the world of form and of duality, of up and down, black and white, skillful deeds and harmful activity. It is this life into which we are born and eventually die. It is the landscape of all of our human experiences, good, bad and in-between. When we live in the Relative, as we all do, we are subject to both the painful and joyful experiences of life. We are witness to the atrocities of humanity—war, incest, poverty, violence, hatred and greed; and, we learn to manage the best we can in a world that is unpredictable, uncertain and impermanent. We fall down and we feel pain. A friend is on the “wrong” road at precisely the wrong second, and she is gone forever. We feel the loss, the grief, the rage of our human emotions. Despite life’s impermanence, we are attached to the ones we love, and it hurts when they leave. At the same time, the very fact that this life is fragile and impermanent sometimes wakes us up and motivates us to live passionately, to take risks, to learn, explore, and create. We feel the joy of laughing with our children, the rush of cool wind on a rollercoaster; we watch the setting sun with our lover; we help an ant out of the puddle in the kitchen sink. Life is good.

With Inner Bonding, we connect with the Relative through the voice and feelings of our inner child. When we burn our hand on the stove, our inner child feels the pain and lets us know he needs care. If a loving adult is present, we will take the hand of the child, also the hand of the adult, and run it under cold water. Likewise, if we harm ourselves with painful thoughts—judgments, criticisms, demands, stories—our inner child lets us know that something in the internal system has gone awry and that she’d like us to get things back on track. Through emotions and physical sensations he signals us that he is angry, frightened, anxious or confused. And, when we adjust our behavior based on feedback from our inner child, we notice our body relax, our mood lightens, we re-engage with the world, and the inner child signals her joy and satisfaction.

Balancing the Relative and Absolute

When I sit for talks given by one of the teachers at the zendo I attend, there is frequent conversation about how to be fully in the world, to live our lives passionately, to fight for causes and manifest our dreams, and yet to know that at the Absolute level, there is no “I” who is “living” in a “world”. There is no story with a beginning. And, there is no end.

I often give an example, when I am doing group work with clients, of what I think the balance between Relative and Absolute “looks” like. I take one step forward and say something to the effect of, “I am precious and innocent”. Then, I take another step and say, “I made a mistake and need to make an amends.” I go back and forth like this, from Absolute—“I am always safe”, to Relative, “I am angry and scared after being attacked”—showing the paradox, as well as the delicate balance between the Relative and Absolute.

What happens in our lives, and why I believe it is important to have an understanding and experience of the Absolute and Relative, is that we get out of balance. When we tip too much toward the Relative, we experience things like depression, hopelessness and rage. We watch the news and we decide that this world is a miserable place and that there is nothing that one small person can do about it. Or, we look at our personal situation and see no way out. We get overwhelmed with our feelings—“becoming” the inner child as Margaret Paul likes to say. And, it becomes too difficult to cope. We may use strategies like panic attacks, isolating, getting physically sick, getting lost in drinking, food or television to avoid our feelings of hopelessness and overwhelm. Using Inner Bonding at a time like this will help us to shift, but knowing that we are “stuck” in the Relative can also give us an idea of “the way out”—the antidote. Knowing that we are stuck in the Relative, we can ask our guidance more specific questions: How do I rebalance my internal system? What are the Absolute truths that I have forgotten? Can you help me to *feel* the truth of the Absolute? What thoughts and actions in my life led to this imbalance toward the Relative? And, why did I think those thoughts and take those actions? This final question offers another valid way of finding out the “very good reasons” for the behaviors of the wounded adult or teenager inside of us.

In the Relative, we can be aware or unaware. We can escape from or avoid the feelings of the inner child—and thereby avoid life—by denying, ignoring, or medicating our feelings. We can also avoid the true feelings of our inner child through drama, exaggeration, story telling, and blame. If we choose to be awake and aware rather than asleep and avoidant in our lives, we have the opportunity to fully experience the wild ride of the Relative world by being open to the whole spectrum of feelings that are available to us. We risk pain and sorrow and grief, but we gain the substance of felt experience, of life lived, love expressed, and of compassion and understanding shared with those who chose to be awake with us.

When we tip too far in the direction of the Absolute, we feel out of touch and disconnected from our human experience. We don’t know what we are feeling, and therefore, we don’t even know that we are hurting ourselves, that our inner child feels alone and abandoned. Even when we are on a spiritual “high” and are experiencing “bliss”, there are usually deeper layers of feelings that are not being acknowledged. Our inner child may say, “While you’re blissing out over there, I’m left alone with my feelings of pain and sadness.”

Being overly identified with the Absolute not only disconnects us from ourselves, it separates us from compassion, empathy and from the experiences of others. We may feel arrogant or superior toward others. We may engage in behaviors of caretaking, “teaching”, or “saving”. We may believe that we know the truth, that we are right, and that others are wrong, ignorant and inferior. We prop ourselves up with beliefs that we are special or “better than”. When we are stuck in the Absolute, we engage in strategies like dissociation, sexual addiction, purging, ingestion of mind altering drugs, and spiritual “bypassing”—since everything is “One”, there’s no need to address the problems in myself or in the world.

My favorite Buddhist teacher, from the Vipassana tradition, Jack Kornfield, once wrote about some of his experiences with his teacher Ajhan Chah. At the time, Jack Kornfield was confused and frustrated by what appeared to be contradictions in Ajhan Chah’s teachings. For one student, he would say, “You need to be more rigorous in your meditation practice.” For another, he would say, “You need to be kinder to yourself. Why not take a break from your meditation practice?” Ajhan Chah shared the wisdom of his teachings with this illustration (paraphrased):

Imagine that someone is walking down a path that is treacherous and unknown to them but well known to me. On either side of the road are drop offs. As the person walks, I notice they are getting dangerously close to the drop off on the left and yell out to them, “Move a little to the right”, and they get back to the center of the road. As the person continues walking, they start to drift far to the right and I yell, “Move a little to the left”. I simply let them know when I notice that they are moving away from their center—their place of balance. That is all.

In Ajhan Chah’s illustration, neither left nor right is the “correct” or “best” way to go, but having awareness of both left and right and maintaining a balance between them helps us to stay on track in our lives. This is true of the Relative and the Absolute as well. When we incorporate our understanding of the Absolute and Relative into our Inner Bonding practice, we find that we can allow our guidance to aid us in returning to balance and equilibrium by simply asking, “What would help to bring me back into balance *right now*?” This is similar to, but different than asking guidance, “What is the loving action I need to take?” Try it out. See if your guidance gives you any new insight when you ask a slightly different question. And, use any new understanding you have gained from learning about the Relative and the Absolute to ask your guidance specific questions about returning to a state of balance. You may find, as I have, that you begin to observe with delight the shift from misalignment and attunement that takes place when you “move a little to the left” or to the “right” of Absolute or Relative.

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