

Intimate Relationship as a Spiritual Crucible

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by [John Welwood](#)

While most people would like to have healthy, satisfying relationships in their lives, the truth is that everyone has a hard time with intimate partnerships. The poet Rilke understood just how challenging they could be when he penned his classic statement, **“For one person to love another, this is the most difficult of all our tasks.”**

Rilke isn't suggesting it's hard to love or to have loving-kindness. Rather, he is speaking about how hard it is to keep loving someone we live with, day by day, year after year. After numerous hardships and failures, many people have given up on intimate relationship, regarding the relational terrain as so fraught with romantic illusion and emotional hazards

that it is no longer worth the energy.

Although modern relationships are particularly challenging, their very difficulty presents a special arena for personal and spiritual growth. To develop more conscious relationships requires becoming conversant with how three different dimensions of human existence play out within them: ego, person, and being.

Every close relationship involves these three levels of interaction that two partners cycle through—ego to ego, person to person, and being to being. While one moment two people may be connecting being to being in pure openness, the next moment their two egos may fall into deadly combat. When our partners treat us nicely, we open—“Ah, you’re so great.” But when they say or do something threatening, it’s “How did I wind up with you?” Since it can be terribly confusing or devastating when the love of our life suddenly turns into our deadliest enemy, it’s important to hold a larger vision that allows us to understand what is happening here.

Relationship as Alchemy

When we fall in love, this usually ushers in a special period, one with its own distinctive glow and magic. Glimpsing another person’s beauty and feeling, our heart opening in response provides a taste of absolute love, a pure blend of openness and warmth. This being-to-being connection reveals the pure gold at the heart of our nature, qualities like beauty, delight, awe, deep passion and kindness, generosity, tenderness, and joy.

Yet opening to another also flushes to the surface all kinds of conditioned patterns and obstacles that tend to shut this connection down: our deepest wounds, our grasping and desperation, our worst fears, our mistrust, our rawest emotional trigger points. As a relationship develops, we often

find that we don't have full access to the gold of our nature, for it remains embedded in the ore of our conditioned patterns. And so we continually fall from grace.

It's important to recognize that all the emotional and psychological wounding we carry with us from the past is relational in nature: it has to do with not feeling fully loved. And it happened in our earliest relationships—with our caretakers—when our brain and body were totally soft and impressionable. As a result, the ego's relational patterns largely developed as protection schemes to insulate us from the vulnerable openness that love entails. In relationship the ego acts as a survival mechanism for getting needs met while fending off the threat of being hurt, manipulated, controlled, rejected, or abandoned in ways we were as a child. This is normal and totally understandable. Yet if it's the main tenor of a relationship, it keeps us locked in complex strategies of defensiveness and control that undermine the possibility of deeper connection.

Thus to gain greater access to the gold of our nature in relationship, a certain alchemy is required: the refining of our conditioned defensive patterns. The good news is that this alchemy generated between two people also furthers a larger alchemy within them. The opportunity here is to join and integrate the twin poles of human existence: heaven, the vast space of perfect, unconditional openness, and earth, our imperfect, limited human form, shaped by worldly causes and conditions. As the defensive/controlling ego cooks and melts down in the heat of love's influence, a beautiful evolutionary development starts to emerge—the genuine person, who embodies a quality of very human relational presence that is transparent to open-hearted being, right in the midst of the dense confines of worldly conditioning.

Relationship as Charnel Ground

To clarify the workings of this alchemy, a more gritty metaphor is useful, one that comes from the tantric traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism: relationship as charnel ground. In many traditional Asian societies, the charnel ground was where people would bring dead bodies, to be eaten by vultures and jackals. From the tantric yogi's perspective, this was an ideal place to practice, because it is right at the crossroads of life, where birth and death, fear and fearlessness, impermanence and awakening unfold right next to each other. Some things are dying and decaying, others are feeding and being fed, while others are being born out of the decay. The charnel ground is an ideal place to practice because it is right at the crossroads of life, where one cannot help but feel the rawness of human existence.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche described the charnel ground as "that great graveyard, in which the complexities of samsara and nirvana lie buried." Samsara is the conditioned mind that clouds our true nature, while nirvana is the direct seeing of this nature. As Trungpa Rinpoche describes this daunting crossroads in one of his early seminars:

It's a place to die and be born, equally, at the same time, it's simply our raw and rugged nature, the ground where we constantly puke and fall down, constantly make a mess. We are constantly dying, we are constantly giving birth. We are eating in the charnel ground, sitting in it, sleeping on it, having nightmares on it... Yet it does not try to hide its truth about reality. There are corpses lying all over the place, loose arms, loose hands, loose internal organs, and flowing hairs all over the place, jackals and vultures are roaming about, each one devising its own scheme for getting the best piece of flesh.

Many of us have a cartoon-like notion of relational bliss: that it should provide a steady state of security or solace

that will save us from having to face the gritty, painful, difficult areas of life. We imagine that finding or marrying the right person will spare us from having to deal with such things as loneliness, disappointment, despair, terror, or disintegration. Yet anyone who has been married for a long time probably has some knowledge of the charnel ground quality of relationship—corpses all over the place, and jackals and vultures roaming about looking for the best piece of flesh. Trungpa Rinpoche suggests that if we can work with the “raw and rugged situation” of the charnel ground, **“then some spark or sympathy or compassion, some giving in or opening can begin to take place. The chaos that takes place in your neurosis is the only home ground that you can build the mandala of awakening on.”** This last sentence is a powerful one, for it suggests that awakening happens only through facing the chaos of our neurotic patterns. Yet this is often the last thing we want to deal with in relationships.

Trungpa Rinpoche suggests that our neurosis is built on the fact that:

...large areas of our life have been devoted to trying to avoid discovering our own experience. Now [in the charnel ground, in our relationships] we have a chance to explore that large area which exists in our being, which we've been trying to avoid. That seems to be the first message, which may be very grim, but also very exciting. We're not trying to get away from the charnel ground, we don't want to build a Hilton hotel in the middle of it. Building the mandala of awakening actually happens on the charnel ground. What is happening on the charnel ground is constant personal exploration, and beyond that, just giving, opening, extending yourself completely to the situation that's available to you. Being fantastically exposed, and the sense that you could give birth to another world.

This also describes the spiritual potential of intimate

involvement with another human being.

Another quote with a similar feeling comes from Swami Rudrananda (known as Rudy, a German teacher who was a student of the Indian saint Swami Nityananda), further describing how to work with neurosis in this way:

Don't look for perfection in me. I want to acknowledge my own imperfection, I want to understand that that is part of the endlessness of my growth. It's absolutely useless at this stage in your life, with all of the shit piled up in your closet, to walk around and try to kid yourself about your perfection. Out of the raw material you break down [here he is also speaking of the charnel ground] you grow and absorb the energy. You work yourself from inside out, tearing out, destroying, and finding a sense of nothingness. That nothingness allows God to come in. But this somethingness—ego and prejudices and limitations—is your raw material. If you process and refine it all, you can open consciously. Otherwise, you will never come to anything that represents yourself ... The only thing that can create a oneness inside you is the ability to see more of yourself as you work every day to open deeper and say, fine, "I'm short-tempered," or "Fine, I'm aggressive," or, "Fine, I love to make money," or, "I have no feeling for anybody else." Once you recognize you're all of these things, you'll finally be able to take a breath and allow these things to open.

Rudy suggests that we have to acknowledge and embrace our imperfections as spiritual path; therefore grand spiritual pretensions miss the point. In his words, **"A man who thinks he has a spiritual life is really an idiot."** The same is true of relationships: beware of thinking you have a "spiritual relationship." While loving connection provides a glimpse of the gold that lies within, we continually corrupt it by turning it into a commodity, a magical charm to make us feel okay. All the delusions of romantic love follow from there.

Focusing on relationship as a spiritual or emotional “fix” actually destroys the possibility of finding deep joy, true ease, or honest connection with another.

Sooner or later relationship brings us to our knees, forcing us to confront the raw and rugged mess of our mental and emotional life. George Orwell points to this devastating quality of human love in a sentence that also has a charnel ground flavor to it: “The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, and that one is prepared, in the end, to be defeated, and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one’s love upon other human individuals.”

This then is the meaning of the charnel ground: we have to be willing to come apart at the seams, to be dismantled, to let our old ego structures fall apart before we can begin to embody sparks of the essential perfection at the core of our nature. To evolve spiritually, we have to allow these unworked, hidden, messy parts of ourselves to come to the surface. It’s not that the strategic, controlling ego is something bad or some unnecessary, horrible mistake. Rather, it provides the indispensable grist that makes alchemical transformation possible.

This is not a pessimistic view, because some kind of breakdown is usually necessary before any significant breakthrough into new ways of living not so encumbered by past conditioning. Charnel ground, then, is a metaphor for this breakdown/breakthrough process that is an essential part of human growth and evolution, and one of the gifts of a deep, intimate connection is that it naturally sets this process in motion. Yet no one wants to be dismantled. So there are two main ways that people try to abort this process: running away and spiritual bypassing.

The problem with running away when a relationship becomes difficult is that we are also turning away from ourselves and

our potential breakthroughs. Fleeing the raw, wounded places in ourselves because we don't think we can handle them is a form of self-rejection and self-abandonment that turns our feeling body into an abandoned, haunted house. The more we flee our shadowy places, the more they fester in the dark and the more haunted this house becomes. And the more haunted it becomes, the more it terrifies us. This is a vicious circle that keeps us cut off from and afraid of ourselves.

One of the scariest places we encounter in relationship is a deep inner sense of unlove, where we don't know that we're truly lovable just for being who we are, where we feel deficient and don't know our value. This is the raw wound of the heart, where we're disconnected from our true nature, our inner perfection. Naturally we want to do everything we can to avoid this place, fix it, or neutralize it, so we'll never have to experience such pain again.

A second way to flee from the challenges of relationship is through spiritual bypassing—using spiritual ideas or practices to avoid or prematurely transcend relative human needs, feelings, personal issues, and developmental tasks. For example, a certain segment of the contemporary spiritual scene has become infected with a facile brand of “advaita-speak,” a one-sided transcendentalism that uses nondual terms and ideas to bypass the challenging work of personal transformation.

Advaita-speak can be very tricky, for it uses absolute truth to disparage relative truth, emptiness to devalue form, and oneness to belittle individuality. The following quotes from two popular contemporary teachers illustrate this tendency: “Know that what appears to be love for another is really love of Self, because other doesn't exist,” and “The other's 'otherness' stands revealed as an illusion pertaining to the purely human realm, the realm of form.” Notice the devaluation of form and the human realm in the latter statement. By suggesting that only absolute love or being-to-being union is real, these teachers equate the person-to-person element

necessary for a transformative love bond with mere ego or illusion.

Yet personal intimacy is a spark flashing out across the divide between self and other. It depends on strong individuals making warm, personal contact, mutually sparking and enriching each other with complementary qualities and energies. This is the meeting of I and Thou, which Martin Buber understood not as an impersonal spiritual union but as a personal communion rooted in deep appreciation of the other's otherness.

A deep, intimate connection inevitably brings up all our love wounds from the past. This is why many spiritual practitioners try to remain above the fray and impersonal in their relationships—so as not to face and deal with their own unhealed relational wounds. But this keeps the wounding unconscious, causing it to emerge as compulsive shadowy behavior or to dry up passion and juice. Intimate personal connecting cannot evolve unless the old love wounds that block it are faced, acknowledged, and freed up.

As wonderful as moments of being-to-being union can be, the alchemical play of joining heaven and earth in a relationship involves a more subtle and beautiful dance: not losing our twoness in the oneness, while not losing our oneness in the twoness. Personal intimacy evolves out of the dancing-ground of dualities: personal and trans-personal, known and unknown, death and birth, openness and karmic limitation, clarity and chaos, hellish clashes and heavenly bliss. The clash and interplay of these polarities, with all its shocks and surprises, provides a ferment that allows for deep transformation through forcing us to keep waking up, dropping preconceptions, expanding our sense of who we are, and learning to work with all the different elements of our humanity.

When we're in the midst of this ferment, it may seem like some

kind of fiendish plot. We finally find someone we really love and then the most difficult things start emerging: fear, distrust, unlove, disillusion, resentment, blame, confusion. Yet this is a form of love's grace—that it brings our wounds and defenses forward into the light. For love can only heal what presents itself to be healed. If our woundedness remains hidden, it cannot be healed; the best in us cannot come out unless the worst comes out as well.

So instead of constructing a fancy hotel in the charnel ground, we must be willing to come down and relate to the mess on the ground. We need to regard the wounded heart as a place of spiritual practice. This kind of practice means engaging with our relational fears and vulnerabilities in a deliberate, conscious way, like the yogis of old who faced down the goblins and demons of the charnel grounds.

The only way to be free of our conditioned patterns is through a full, conscious experience of them. This might be called "ripening our karma," what the Indian teacher Swami Prajnanpad described as bhoga, meaning "deliberate, conscious experience." He said, "You can only dissolve karma through the bhoga of this karma." We become free of what we're stuck in only through meeting and experiencing it directly. Having the bhoga of your karma allows you to digest unresolved, undigested elements of your emotional experience from the past that are still affecting you: how you were hurt or overwhelmed, how you defended yourself against that by shutting down, how you constructed walls to keep people out.

Another term for directly engaging our karma might be "conscious suffering." This involves saying "yes" to our pain, opening ourselves to it, as it is. This kind of yes doesn't mean, "I like it, I'm glad it's like this." It just means, "Yes, this is what's happening." Whatever comes up, you are willing to meet it and have a direct experience of it. For example, if you're hard-hearted, you have a full experience of that. Then you see how acknowledging this affects you and what

comes from doing that.

Bhoga involves learning to ride the waves of our feelings rather than becoming submerged in them. This requires mindfulness of where we are in the cycle of emotional experience. A skilled surfer is aware of exactly where he is on a wave, whereas an unskilled surfer winds up getting creamed. By their very nature, waves are rising fifty percent of the time and falling the other fifty percent. Instead of fighting the down cycles of our emotional life, we need to learn to keep our seat on the surfboard and have a full, conscious experience of going down. Especially in a culture that is addicted to "up," we especially need our "yes" when the down cycles unfold—to be willing to fall apart, retreat, slow down, be patient, let go. For it's often at the bottom of a down cycle, when everything looks totally bleak and miserable, that we finally receive a flash of insight that lets us see the hidden contours of some huge ego fixation in which we've been stuck all our life. Having a full, conscious experience of the down cycle as it's occurring, instead of fighting or transcending it, lets us be available for these moments of illumination.

While the highlands of absolute love are most beautiful, few but the saints can spend all their time there. Relative human love is not a peak experience nor a steady state. It wavers, fluctuates, waxes and wanes, changes shape and intensity, soars and crashes. "This is the exalted melancholy of our fate," writes Buber, describing how moments of I/Thou communion cannot last too very long. Yet though relationships participate fully in the law of impermanence, the good news is that this allows new surprises and revelations to keep arising endlessly.

Relationship as Koan

Relating to the full spectrum of our experience in the

relational channel ground leads to a self-acceptance that expands our capacity to embrace and accept others as well. Usually our view of our partners is colored by what they do for us—how they make us look or feel good, or not—and shaped by our internal movie about what we want them to be. This of course makes it hard to see them for who they are in their own right.

Beyond our movie of the other is a much larger field of personal and spiritual possibilities, what Walt Whitman referred to when he said, “I contain multitudes.” These “multitudes” are what keep a relationship fresh and interesting, but they can only do that if we can accept the ways that those we love are different from us—in their background, values, perspectives, qualities, sensitivities, preferences, ways of doing things, and, finally, their destiny. In the words of Swami Prajnanpad, standing advaita-speak on its head: **“To see fully that the other is not you is the way to realizing oneness ... Nothing is separate, everything is different ... Love is the appreciation of difference.”**

Two partners not holding themselves separate, while remaining totally distinct—“not two, not one”—may seem like an impossible challenge in a relationship. Bernard Phillips, an early student of East/West psychology, likens this impossibility of relationship to a Zen koan, a riddle that cannot be solved with the conceptual mind. After continually trying and failing to figure out the answer, Zen students arrive at a genuine solution only in the moment of finally giving up and giving in. In Phillips’ words:

Every human being with whom we seek relatedness is a koan, that is to say, an impossibility. There is no formula for getting along with a human being. No technique will achieve relatedness. I am impossible to get along with; so is each one of you; all our friends are impossible; the members of our families are impossible. How then shall we get along with them? ... If you are seeking a real encounter, then you must

confront the koan represented by the other person. The koan is an invitation to enter into reality.

In the end, to love another requires dropping all our narcissistic agendas, movies, hopes, and fears, so that we may look freshly and see “the raw other, the sacred other,” just as he or she is. This involves a surrender, or perhaps defeat, as in George Orwell’s words about being “defeated and broken up by life.” What is defeated here, of course, is the ego and its strategies, clearing the way for the genuine person to emerge, the person who is capable of real, full-spectrum contact. The nobility of this kind of defeat is portrayed by Rilke in four powerful lines describing Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel:

Winning does not tempt that man

For this is how he grows:

By being defeated, decisively,

By constantly greater beings.

In relationship, it is two partners’ greater beings, gradually freeing themselves from the prison of conditioned patterns, that bring about this decisive defeat. And as this starts reverberating through their relationship, old expectations finally give way, old movies stop running, and a much larger acceptance than they believed possible can start opening up between them. As they become willing to face and embrace whatever stands between them—old relational wounds from the past, personal pathologies, difficulties hearing and understanding each other, different values and sensitivities—all in the name of loving and letting be, they are invited to “enter into reality.” Then it becomes possible to start encountering each other nakedly, in the open field of nowness, fresh and unfabricated, the field of love forever vibrating with unimagined possibilities.

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