

Field of Bright Spirit

Intimate Relations with the Natural World

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One summer morning in our back road place in Napa Valley, California, I saw a parade of wild turkeys. Up close. Walking down the driveway. They were enormous; I thought they were herons at first. These high steppers moved lightly and gracefully on long legs, each step deliberate, a dozen turkeys flowing through the grasses. It was a rare and intimate encounter. Usually one sees wild turkeys in the distance standing in a field, and even that is uncommon. This was intimate because I was so close, entering the space of their activity without obstacles. For about a quarter of an hour I stayed with them, mesmerized by their deliberate movement, until they disappeared into the brush.

What is such a moment of intimacy about? In the natural world such encounters can never be predicted or assumed. They happen seemingly randomly, reflecting the complicated perambulations of the myriad beings. Though so much activity is happening all the time, it is very difficult to be attentive to the point of intimacy. Even trained naturalists see little of what actually goes on in an animal's life. Yet in these moments of entry into another's world, one catches a glimpse of the Other. One has the realization—oh! another life besides my own is being

fully lived. Intimacy thus depends on serendipity but also on attention.

A caveat here: this discussion of intimacy with the natural world addresses only the human experience. I do not believe it is possible to know what intimacy means for plants or animals. Without access to some form of interspecies communication in which the nonhuman can accurately represent its own experience, any speculation about such intimacy is likely to reflect human projections of what the other is feeling. Even in scientific interpretations of animal behavior this kind of projection is more common than one would expect. Thus questions about mutuality or degree of intimacy remain an epistemological mystery.

From a Zen perspective, intimacy is a quality of mind—a willingness to be present with what is going on with full physical, mental, and emotional attention. Twelfth-century Zen master Hongzhi said, "If you feel a shadow of a hair's gap, nothing will be received." (1991, 13) The intimate encounter from this perspective is one that is most free of interrupting barriers of self. In human-animal or human-plant encounters, disruptive obstacles come from the human; the others are just gracefully (or maybe obnoxiously) being themselves. People, however, are distracted by ideas, emotions, hesitation, aggression;

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the active mind can generate a wind-storm of thought that clouds the field of intimate meeting. Spiritual training such as Zen helps to quiet the mind/body and develop a stable awareness prepared to receive moment after moment of intimacy. Thir-



teenth-century Zen teacher Eihei Dogen encapsulated the process this way:

To study the self is to know the self.
To know the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be actualized by
the myriad things. (Tanahashi 1985, 70)

Rather than being an occasional gift from the universe, intimacy can be a natural outcome of practice, increasing over time with the cultivation of awareness.

Hongzhi describes two aspects of the intimate encounter: (1) of the other

vividly itself distinct in the moment and (2) "the field of bright spirit" (1991, 18). Thus a person can have both the experience of "twoness"—communing with a specific and separate other—and the experience of "oneness"—touching the unified field of energetic flux out of which all forms arise. Western traditions have sometimes emphasized oneness as a higher taste of intimacy, projecting into that the notion of God or the Absolute. But this overlooks the complex immediacy of call and response that comes through twoness. Together both experiences indicate the dynamic universe of field and form, of beings and moments of meeting constantly arising and passing away. To experience fully both aspects, one cultivates a spacious attention uncluttered by opinions, feelings, perceptions, and other conditionings of the mind. Then one can step away from dualistic views of self and other, of self and unified field, and "roam and play" in both aspects of intimacy (Hongzhi 1991, 9).

What can one learn about an oak or hummingbird through intimate encounters? To answer this we must also ask, How does the mind influence the tone of the encounter? First impressions may reflect cultural stereotypes such as the "creepy" slug or the "awesome" eagle (Kaza 1995). Or they may be penetrated by strong emotion—the terror that arises in encountering a bear, for example. But if you stay close to what is actually going on, organizing patterns begin to emerge. From my creekside studio in California, I have been watching a pair of black phoebes this spring. They flycatch low over the stream and then dart back up into the alders. Each time I climb the stairs they call loudly to each other with what seems to me might be worrying cries. In fact, I discovered that I was passing within six feet of their nest, which was tucked into the eaves.

Over time I have come to see how they favor certain perching spots where perhaps the width of the branch is most comfortable for their feet or the view to the creek is widest. The dimensions of the intimacy expand as I spend more time in their company. I begin to see something about how these birds fly, eat, rest, and speak to each other. Patterns of behavior, patterns of negotiating space, patterns of location start to emerge.

Then there are organizing patterns over time that determine what grows where and why. Along our quiet road, the steep woodland slopes are covered with spring wildflowers. This year is a spectacular season because of the long rains of the El Niño winter. The surprise of finding a handful of yellow globe lilies multiplies as I see how widespread they are this year. It can go the other way, too; in drought years many seeds never sprout, and the pattern of distribution remains hidden. One's experience of intimacy grows by seeing the fluidly shifting manifestations as they vary from year to year. Experienced field naturalists become particularly intimate with these changes, able to distinguish normal variation from extreme hardship such as drought, fire, or toxic impacts.

Cultivating a capacity for intimacy depends both on presence in the moment and on integrating those moments to find pattern or meaning. A small example: Four years ago during one of the tropical storms that dumped torrential rains on California, there was a loud crash in the night. The big ash by the guest cottage had dropped a major limb—over half of its upper mass. We were there with it in this moment of sudden injury. The remaining branches leaned precariously over the barn roof. Seeing the tree's rotten core, we sadly determined that it had to come down. Confronting its death led to more moments of intimacy while sitting by the aged tree. Later that week I watched as the arborist skillfully removed chunk after chunk of the leaning tree. It was sad to see the great ash laid in pieces on the ground. But soon there was all the splitting and stacking, each piece of ash lovingly laid in a monumental woodpile. Now in this cool spring three years later, we burn the last of the wood, grateful for its warmth.

Each stick carries the whole story, and the story goes on in warming our lives.

But what about the experience of intimacy with one's own thinking and feeling mind? Here is the terrain of likes and dislikes, projection, over- and understatement. Here too are the forms and limits of human perceptual organs. To study these streams of sense perception is to learn something about how we interpret light and dark, movement, communication, and context. The hovering perpetual motion of the eyes, the sensitive receptivity of the nose, the electrical field of touch all over the body—all inform the intimate encounter. Each sense consciousness is shaped by previous encounters, registering and shaping important information for future encounters. A tasty discovery of a patch of ripe blackberries imprints with the lure of desire. A scary moment with a coiled snake imprints as an image associated with fear.

Examining the barriers to intimate encounters can be a fruitful practice as part of a spiritual path. Mental, physical, or emotional barriers characterize the conditioned mind, and all human minds are conditioned or shaped by previous experience. Conditioning toward plants and animals, rocks and rivers is greatly affected by cultural-historical patterns. In the postenlightenment industrial West, those revolve around a reductionist, mechanistic view of the natural world and a privileging of human life as most complex and valuable. Places, trees, and insects are typically viewed through the discriminating lens of "useful/useless/harmful" in relation to human needs. These thought forms now underpin virtually all consumer activity in the West, from the extraction of natural "resources" to the selling of consumerist states of mind.

To deconstruct these patterns of conditioned distancing is a painful process, for many of the attachments are linked directly with messages of personal, "animal" survival, the drive of the autonomous self. But the call for intimacy can motivate the practitioner to press on. The delight in this can be so deep and genuine that one is willing to approach the minefield of unconscious attitudes in order to engage the Other more fully. This study of the mind can

benefit from the great wealth of literature in the fields of environmental ethics, environmental history, religion and ecology. Ecofeminists, for example, have developed sophisticated analyses of parallels in the patterns of domination of women and nature; deep ecologists have elucidated the pervasive habit of anthropocentrism. Scholars of religion are exploring the ways in which Judaism and Christianity have contributed to the decline of intimate relations with nature.

Barriers to the practice of intimacy with nature include at least four pitfalls (although certainly others could be named). The first is romanticizing the experience of intimacy with the natural world. By this I mean overstating the significance of the experience in some way. Suppose you encounter a mountain lion: this may simply mean that you happened to cross its foraging path. Romanticizing human-animal or human-plant encounters reflects a telling of the story only from the human perspective, dwelling primarily on the question, What does this mean for me? It is not uncommon for people to assume the mountain lion appeared "for them," as a power animal, a messenger, or a medicine figure. Such assumptions, however, miss seeing the plant or animal in its own independent context and thus undermine the full dimension of twoness.

A second pitfall is developing greed for intimate encounters. One tastes the thrill of seeing into a bird's nest or meeting a gnarled old pine; the state of mind this intimacy engenders is so sharp that one desires more such encounters. That is how people become avid birdwatchers or botanizers. They just want to see more and more of the intimate world of nature. But too often the desire for more is used to rationalize aggressive behavior, as when five parties converge on a rare warbler or people repeatedly trample the desert to see rare cacti.

A third pitfall is that one can become stuck in a perpetual vision quest, always seeking the intimate encounter with nature but never settling enough to integrate multiple experiences. Such habits may characterize the world traveler who hops from one rainforest to the next,

collecting species for his or her life list. In that kind of seeking, one can come to equate intimacy primarily with encountering the unfamiliar, the surprise of seeing something strange. That is one route to intimacy, but it is perhaps more like the closeness of one-night stands. If one comes to experience intimacy primarily in this way, it may actually be difficult or impossible to contact intimacy with the familiar that has accumulated in many moments over time.

A fourth pitfall lies in preferring certain aspects of nature and ignoring others. That approach perpetuates abuse or neglect of the most useful, most beautiful, or most hated species—often to their grave detriment. Several culturewide preference patterns are well known: favoring big organisms over small ones—whales and elephants as more beloved than earthworms; favoring animate beings over inanimate beings—birds and baboons as more “contactable” than serpentine stone; and favoring friendly or benign organisms over harmful or unfriendly ones—butterflies as more inviting than ticks, for example. Also, as one gains more experience in intimacy with the natural world, one tends to notice and be drawn to what is known over what is not known. The familiar bird song heralds a moment of intimacy, while the unfamiliar songs go unnoticed, blurring into the background.

Each of these pitfalls in seeking intimacy generates and reinforces a dualistic orientation by exaggerating human-nature differences or preferring one sort of intimacy to another. From a Zen perspective, however, the deepest embrace of intimacy is based on nondualistic experience. This is core to understanding the nature of reality as interdependent and interpenetrating. Typically one views the oak, the creek, the mountain as separate from one’s self, each being completely isolated and autonomous. The sense of self as isolated and independent perpetuates a dualistic worldview. Zen training drives the practition-

er instead toward nondualistic insight. In spontaneous moments of revelation, the conditioned self drops away and the student tastes the dynamic co-creating universe in which one is participating. One glimpses oneness of self and other within the unified field and also experiences twoness—the self as co-originating with others within the ever-changing matrix. These experiences may appear to be mystical or extraordinary, but actually this kind of awareness can be systematically cultivated.

The practice of nonduality with both aspects of intimacy can be engaged anywhere, any time, with any part of the natural world. The sun, the air, the earth beneath one’s feet are all contact points for awareness. Food and eating are another: savoring the food, learning its sources, meeting the growers—each point of contact increases the depth of intimacy. Even plastic wrapped agrochemical food (McDonald’s, etc.) has its intimate stories—the slaughter of animals, the impacts of cattle on rainforests, the lives of people who handle the products. Sadly, today, with rapid urban development and agricultural clearing, the possibilities for encounter with some species are decreasing precipitously.

Does the practice of nondual intimacy change our behavior toward the natural world? Inevitably. Meeting the other in its “suchness,” a Buddhist term for the full nature of something in a given moment, opens the heart to the exquisite beauty and suffering in the world. The full radiance of hummingbird or swallowtail reveals not only their own miraculous lives but the dazzling energetic force field out of which they arise. Contact may also come through a moment of witnessing another’s suffering. This spring a baby great horned owl fell out of its nest onto the zendo roof at Green Gulch Zen Center; the parents’ screams penetrated the minds of those in meditation below.

Experiencing such intimacy and compassion, one becomes less able to con-

sciously destroy companions in the web of life. It causes too much pain. Instead, one becomes kinder, less aggressive, more receptive in greeting others—trees, crickets, the busy spiders filling the windows. As one removes some of the blocks to intimacy with the “more than human” (rather than the “nonhuman”) world, as David Abram (1996) suggests, one becomes less self-centered, less human-centered, more of a participant than a ruler in the “big conversation.” Living in intimate relation with others, one senses the possibility of “place-specific intelligence” (262)—a co-created dance of minds and mind-forms evolved over time in a particular realm. It becomes not only something to protect, but something to learn from, so that people might come to find a way to live more closely with the natural world. Then perhaps we will increase the odds that the opportunities for such intimacy will continue into the future, sustaining the lives of oaks, whales, and slugs, as well as people.

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