

Wherever You Go There THEY Are

Developing Genuine Relationships

Irini Rockwell

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We live in a world full of people. We relate and communicate with others every day of our lives. Yet we have very little instruction on how to foster genuine relationships and have deep, meaningful communication. Whether in our personal sphere of people with whom we are intimate, or in the more public arena of work relationships, or on a global scale across cultures and religions, we need to discover how best to relate and communicate. This is our challenge.

Most of us take our relationships for granted. We assume that James, our boss, or Molly, our neighbor, or Steven, our student, is going to meet our expectations of how a boss or neighbor or student should think and act. Too often we are surprised to find that it is not so. Misunderstandings lead to conflicts, which lead to a frozen atmosphere. Communication comes to a standstill. Too often we get caught up with the task at hand, whatever it is. However, when we give relationships themselves some attention, they will go more smoothly and everything we do with others will feel supported by that relationship.

Developing good relationships takes practice. We need to start with a good intention to make our relationships more of a priority in our lives. We need to arouse our motivation to have healthy interactions with people. It is an act of generosity. Then we will need patience and a certain sense of discipline to stick to our good intention. We will need exertion and understanding. Perhaps most importantly, we will need a way to work with our own thoughts, feeling and actions. We will need a practice that allows us to work with ourselves.

Whether you are someone with a difficult family life or have a conflictual work environment or are working in the service of others, such as therapy or teaching, or are in a position of leadership, the same principles apply. The underlying theme is having conscious relationships with those around you. Conscious relationships bring out the best qualities in each person and enhance interpersonal communication. Used in conjunction with the Five Wisdom work, (Rockwell, 2002) developing conscious relationships are a creative and dynamic way of working with others.

Genuine relationships begin with the commitment to work with ourselves

Interestingly, making a good relationship starts with making a good relationship with ourselves. We need to take the effort to see who we are and how we interact with others and the world. Sitting meditation, the practice of just being, is a good place to start. It provides us with the time and space to come back to ground zero, starting with where we are. It is very experiential, not hypothetical, and it's practical. Sitting meditation trains us to be directly in the moment and open to whatever arises. We cultivate an ability to be present, which is fundamental to being with others. The instruction on how to meditate is simple, though at times challenging to do because of its very simplicity, it's non-doing intent. We sit, we breathe in and out, and when thoughts arise we let them go and come back to just sitting and breathing. Simply being.

Meditation is the most fundamental discipline of looking at oneself without judgment. For many of us this is a first step in honest facing of whatever is happening with us. It cuts through our attempts to resist what is happening and dissolves habitual pattern of avoidance. We learn that we can just stay with it: whatever is happening is happening. We can ride it out. Meditation awakens the intelligence of seeing our trips, seeing our patterns. The intention is to recover our own aliveness. When we are willing to stay with what is awkward or painful, we come alive. When we find our situation unworkable, we close down. So, we begin to make friends with our world and ourselves. We become aware of an inner strength and expanded awareness.

Being with ourselves while being with others

The more we work with ourselves, the more we open to others; the more we know ourselves, the more we can know others. It is a potent combination of a personal and interpersonal path. There is an oscillation between self and other. We put the emphasis

on working with ourselves; then we can be more spontaneous when with others. It makes relating with others a very lively journey.

Our relationships can be a vehicle for essential change. Most relationships, at some point or other, become confusing. So it is an opportunity to work with our own and another's confusion. When we commit to doing this kind of work ourselves, we can be of enormous help to others. We can learn to trust our presence and intelligence. Great teachers and healers have dazzling successes because of their presence and intuitive powers.

The essence of this work is giving another the best of who we are. It means being in the moment with someone, whatever they bring to us. We do not have to be thrown off by the unpredictable, but open to whatever arises. Often we panic when we are confronted by an unfamiliar situation. We grasp onto whatever might help us and try to fix it. This takes us away from moment. Instead, we could go deeper into ourselves. Our own work with ourselves becomes a powerful tool for working with others. Then we are more available and can offer a helping hand. It might not be heard; it might be the wrong time for someone to hear it. Later, they might come up with something completely appropriate. Their intelligence is at play too.

Developing genuine relationships

There are four aspects or steps that we can use to deepen our understanding of interpersonal process. The first is cultivating a sense of presence, open and receptive. The second is being able to pick up on the energetic tone or quality of someone. The third step arises from that, an ability to see him or her clearly. Having entered their world, we are more likely to be able to communicate and even be helpful to them, which is the fourth step. The inseparability of these four, deepened by experience, is very powerful: when we are present, we experience another more intuitively, see them more clearly, and open communication is more possible.

The commitment to working with others and ourselves in this way can be a big leap. It goes beyond professionalism and beyond the safety of a one-up relationship. It aspires to a willingness to take on confusion and difficult situations. However, it can be immensely rewarding and mutually beneficial.

1. Being Present

Simply being present for someone is very powerful. Even if we did nothing else but be present in our relationships, they would improve remarkably. So cultivating a sense of simple presence is key. Our body is present, our mind is present and our speech and actions are attuned to each other. We are synchronized with ourselves. Sitting meditation cultivate this. We experience immediacy and nowness.

One day I was having a hard time and my daughter heard me crying. She came in to my bedroom and just sat on the bed with me, resting her hand on mind. She said nothing and neither did I. The storm cleared and we said a few things to each other. It was only later that I realized her simple presence was all that I needed.

With the help of sitting meditation, we learn to be in the moment, continually coming back to the present. We develop confidence in our sense of being, discovering that our sanity is natural to us. We have enough trust in ourselves to be open. It has a fearless quality so we are able to shed our protective defenses. As we cultivate a sense of personal openness, we transmit sanity just through being.

We try to cultivate a general sense of spaciousness, coming to the present moment over and over again by dropping our fixed agendas. We learn to trust in the intelligence that can come through if we slow down and allow ourselves to really feel the situation. If we are present in a spacious way, it suggests that others can be present in a spacious way as well. There is a gradual shift of allegiance from the content (agendas, business, and task at hand) to the process of being with someone. We are more able to be in the now.

Being present is openhearted; it invites people in. There is wakefulness and gentleness. Presence is intrinsically compassionate. When we begin to feel more gentleness in ourselves, we are able to feel compassionate towards others. It is the beginning of caring for others, not just ourselves. Each moment, each day, when we drop our own agenda, our "I," we make ourselves available to others. First we empty, then we engage. As the process deepens, our sense of being with a person deepens. The images or preconceptions we have of them do not bind us.

The power of simple presence is the essence of a genuine relationship. It is the language of the heart and communicates authenticity. From this ground of openness,

warmth and friendliness, arises the possibility of relating in a genuine way. Being genuinely present for someone is the best we can give them.

2. Energetic Exchange: Receiving

We can go further. The next step is called exchange, or energetic exchange, the direct intuitive experience of another. When we are open, exchange is a natural process, a merging or emotional identification. Our most vivid experience of this has probably been when we are in love, open with a strong intention of relating.

Exchange happens automatically, naturally, whether we are aware of it or not. It is a sharing of energy that is unobstructed: without interpretation, concepts, or projections. We have an inner feeling of being able to tune into the tone or quality of a person. We develop a somatic response to them. We also talk about it as empathy. The basic premise is that we can't relate with depth if there is not shared experience. When we drop our own story line and put ourselves in someone's shoes, we identify with them, resonate with their energy. We enter their world and see our interconnectedness.

Obstacles to exchange

The main obstacle to exchange is that we feel a barrier between others and ourselves. We habitually create a fortress of self-defense; we are "closed" rather than "open." We feel separate, not joined. We may even feel like we are open but the chances are we are projecting our version of them and not seeing who they are. We miss what is going on. We can't enter their world, unless we are somewhat free of our own self-absorption.

Walking my eight-year-old daughter to school one day she was jabbering away about this and that and I was silent. Then she turned to me and said, "You don't seem very chattative today, what's the mater?" I told her I was preoccupied. She has continued to be a very sensitive barometer to how present I am.

When we are not aware of exchange, projections and expectations confuse it. It clouds the interaction and becomes an obstacle to relationship. It is like pollution: a lot of stuff proliferating without a container. We wander in confusion and don't know if it is their story or our story that we find ourselves in. When we encounter someone who is a little crazy or confused, we get crazy and confused ourselves. We get caught and feel

“stuck in the exchange.” This happens because we regard certain people as difficult; we don’t feel comfortable when we are with them. I could have responded to my daughter by saying she was the one with the problem; she was talking too much. That would have increased the confusion.

Working with our obstacles to exchange is the same as working with our biases and overlays, our predisposed views. We become aware of the filters through which we see the world and how, from moment to moment, we block ourselves. We have our excuses for not opening, our strategies of avoidance. Our biggest obstacle is fear, which underlies all these attempts to protect us. We live in a perpetual state of feeling that someone or something is threatening. We can work with our fear by becoming aware of how it is triggered. Then we are not caught by surprise.

Here are some ways we keep our distance. We could take a stance of professionalism, choosing to judge and criticize, interpret and analyze. We could feel overwhelmed and inadequate and discount our own intelligence. We could be so emotionally absorbed that anyone else’s pain feels like too much and makes us irritable. Caught up in our own speed, we could feel that we simply don’t have the time for someone and get impatient. Or, we could just feel separate, get distracted, and space out.

When we are not in exchange, we are not connected. We feel ineffectual and that trying to relate to someone is drudgery, a “job.” We can train ourselves to be aware of when we get lost or more concerned with our own needs. It is a matter of bringing ourselves back, time and time again. When we are able to reengage, inspiration returns.

Training ourselves to be a sensitive tool

Working with exchange deepens our sense of being present. We use ourselves as a tool to sense the emotional atmosphere. We become a psychophysical barometer for the climate of mind states in the room and are highly sensitive to the oscillation of energy between self and other. When we take on the task of consciously relating to others, we enter another person’s life. As well, they also enter ours.

When we are aware of the exchange, it becomes a useful tool and the very key to healthy relationships. It is the highlight or hallmark of intimate relationships. It is mutually healing and nurturing as well as delightful and joyous. Being in exchange has the flavor of being in love; you love someone unconditionally, no matter who they

are and what they do. So exchange takes into account the full range of a person. We get more of a flavor of someone's world.

Exchange does not mean losing oneself in another. For instance, in the presence of craziness, we are able to see it for what it is: intensified energy. We can feel grounded and hold our seat. There is a sense of connection, and yet we are still who we are. We can also experience the tendency to avoid the intensity and close off, either in them or ourselves. We can gauge our mutual ability to tolerate what is coming up. The more intensity in our interaction with others, the more there is capacity for intimacy. This is why a relationship like a marriage, if a conscious one, is a powerful learning experience.

Sense of equality and shared experience

Exchange cuts through our sense of personal identity and opens us to the possibility of shared experience. Rather than feeling a need to be proactive, we can just see that things are happening: we are happening; they are happening. Whatever is happening is happening. We can let go of our struggle and relax. When we have a sense of "big mind" and not get caught up with the discursiveness that arises in confusing situations, we are able to be spaciousness. Then we experience the basic sanity that is always available.

Exchange involves having a sense of touch and go. Touching is connecting fully. We first learn how to genuinely tolerate touch and work with our tendency to avoid intense feelings. But then we need to let go. Otherwise we become enmeshed, trapped. We might think we are being compassionate, but it is stupid, we are just wallowing in their suffering; it is "idiot compassion." We are so eager to share our love and experience but we find that it is merely in order to confirm ourselves. So we learn at what point to let go. When we practice touch and go we create openness. When we let ourselves open, we "catch" the feeling of another person.

Beginning to break down the barriers between self and other is key. We get in touch with our permeable nature: when we dissolve the barriers between self and other, the distinction between self and other gets blurred. We merge: their confusion becomes our confusion; their joy becomes our joy. Because it is a shared experience, it restores both the other and ourselves simultaneously.

3. Seeing Clearly; Seeing Them: Reading

Presence and exchange are very powerful, but they need the intelligence of clear seeing, just as intelligence needs the openness of presence; they work together. Clear seeing enables us to see someone more accurately. Clear seeing is insight, precise and intelligent. When we have insight into anyone or any situation, we experience it as tangible, a physical sensation of "clicking in."

Clear seeing joins mind and heart, intellect and intuition. It has a sharp quality; we are able to penetrate and reveal situations. We look and then we see, like a reflecting mirror. We discriminate rather than analyze, are aware rather than interpret. Insight is sensing the energy of the situation and letting it be in its own state.

We could also think of it as inspiration. It comes to us; we don't have to figure it out. We often get caught in the "figuring out" capacity of mind. Insight seems to come from nowhere, an "aha." It pops up in the midst of our oceans of rambling thoughts like an island of clarity. It comes to us as a small moment of wakefulness or spontaneous flash. We are suddenly free from preoccupation. Clear seeing brings us back, connects us to reality.

Using clear seeing as a tool

The environment of presence and clear seeing creates a situation for accurate communication. When we open to the atmosphere of a situation and specific highlights within it, we are aware not only of what people are saying, but also of their tone of being. Their actual words or smile represent a small fraction of their communication; equally important is the quality of their presence, their energy. Clearly seeing someone goes below what they might be saying to the heart of the matter, the meaning at a deeper level. It draws the covert out of the overt, the unknown out of the known.

Clear seeing enables us to be with person as a human being rather than seeing someone as a set of problems or with a opposing opinion. We can cut through our sense of professionalism or expertise, our tendency to lay our idea about what is right. We can also cut through an itch scratch mentality toward problems, a defensive response like jumping in to fix it.

When we relate in a human way rather than problem-oriented way, we get to the point of the immediacy of human contact. It takes a lot of bravery to let go who we think we are, and who the other person is. We can just respond in the moment, being there.

Projection is the primary obstacle to clear seeing

We all carry around our own version of reality. When we are absorbed in our own version, we project it onto others and situations rather than perceiving them accurately. We tend to see people and events in terms of our own interpretations. So we often relate to our version of someone rather than with who they really are. We then develop expectations based on how we think things are. We also have emotional reactions to what we perceive to be real. So it becomes very confusing. When we don't practice exchange, everything is a projection. It is easy to get caught up in projections. They can become very convincing and solid. We create a world in which projections are bouncing all over the place. The world becomes polluted with projections.

When we are able to step back from this, we see how we project and solidify. We see how, collectively, we create an environment that is heavy and intense, as if polluted. What we are actually seeing is the energy in the space. Working with the Five Energies (Rockwell 2002) we see that it is polluted with red projections or green projections. When mind is more spacious and we practice exchange, we see things for what they are. We are more likely to see someone's energetic being.

Clear seeing as a further refinement to genuine relationship

Clear seeing is quite rare. Sometimes when it does happen, it is so fleeting that we hardly notice. If we are too eager in wanting to understand, there is no space for natural intelligence to arise. We only see what we want to see. We may never know who the person really is. With the spaciousness of presence we can support the other person's true self, not who we would like him or her to be.

When we experience clear seeing, it is a meaningful moment. It is a moment when we feel completely touched by someone. Something comes into focus in a heartfelt/ mind penetrating way. Those moments have a wakeful quality and resonate over time. It can be heartbreakingly touching.

4. Meaningful Communication: Responding

Presence, exchange, and clear seeing lay the ground for open and meaningful communication. With this approach, our actions are continually informed by a sense of genuine path grounded in openness. We cultivate a sense of understanding or knowing rather than having a set of beliefs. It is a willingness to experience whatever arises, staying with the uncertainty, and not knowing the outcome. Genuine path allows us to relate to the particular situation and feel it rather than impose: "I know what's right."

Our primary obstacles to genuine communication and our ability to be helpful arise from either having too much enthusiasm, too much aggression, or too much simple-mindedness. Generally we are unaware of these tendencies in ourselves. When we are too enthusiastic, we get into trying to rescue someone or take over the situation. We see ourselves as the savior. Taking an aggressive stance means that we want to find the quick fix and change someone or something. Simple-mindedness is withdrawing into a cloud of denial with a sense of professionalism. So, again, working with ourselves is key to communication.

When we share a common ground of experience, we are more intuitively aware. Then what we say and do arises out of the shared experience. Being helpful happens spontaneously in response to communicating openly. We could also intervene to move the process forward but there is no need to convince someone with logic. The intelligence becomes self-evident. Everyone looks honestly at what is happening without trying to change it. If we try to change the situation, it is not appreciating it. When we appreciate it, we connect with the intelligence present.

Being helpful

Having cultivated a sense of genuine path ourselves, we become people who help to bring out the best in others. We become aides in uncovering well being, seeing that negative emotion is not an enemy, and that a particular situation is workable. Rather than being critical of their weaknesses, we could support their strengths. We could encourage people to be less critical of themselves and appreciate their own good qualities. Connecting to their goodness and intelligence is more important than giving them a solutions for battling their problems. Instead, we could encourage them to connect with what they fell passionate about. Working with the Five Wisdoms enhances this.

We can also encourage people to let go of what is no longer working for them or to look at a situation differently. We could point out how they are obstructing their own good intentions. We could make people aware that they have possibilities and options. They don't have to feel stuck. This can be challenging both to say and to hear but if we are clear, it can be very helpful. They could experience a sense of relief at being able to let go of something. They could experience inspiration, a sense of making a fresh start. Ultimately, we could inspire someone to be fully who they are. We could model that life is a learning journey and encourage them to create a wholesome, creative life.

The process of relating and communicating requires patience and has many ups and downs. We need to embrace a nonjudgmental openness and not get discouraged by our seeming failures. By doing this we stay open to the situation and transmit a sense of confidence and ease.

Over time we can gain familiarity with these four aspects. We can cycle through them continually, whether in a few moments or in broad strokes over years. We can continually re-engage, feel the particular situation and communicate. The more we rely on intuition, the more creative and appropriate our responses will be. We might think that this kind of relationship would drain our energy. In fact it recharges us. It allows us to be in touch with our own sense of abundance.

References

Rockwell, Irini, *The Five Wisdom Energies, A Buddhist Way of Understanding Personality, Emotions, and Relationships*, Shambhala Publications, 2002