“A Bigger Container”
from *Everyday Zen: Love & Work*
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At the age of ninety-five Genpo Roshi, one of the great Zen masters of modern times, was speaking of the “gateless gate,” and he pointed out that there truly is no gate through which we must pass in order to realize what our life is. Still, he said, from the standpoint of practice we must go through a gate, the gate of our own pride. And every one of us here, since the time we got up this morning, has in some way or another met our pride—every one of us. To go through this gate that is not a gate we have to go through the gate of our own pride.

Now the child of pride is anger. By anger I mean all kinds of frustration, including irritation, resentment, jealousy. I talk so much about anger and how to work with it because to understand how to practice with anger is to understand how to approach the “gateless gate.”

In daily life we know what it means to stand back from a problem. For example, I’ve watched Laura make a beautiful flower arrangement: she’ll fuss and fiddle with the flowers, then at some point she’ll stand back and look, to see what she has done and how it balances out. If you’re sewing a dress, at first you cut and arrange and sew, but finally you get in front of the mirror to see how it looks. Does it hang on the shoulders? How’s the hem? Is it becoming? Is it a suitable dress? You stand back. Likewise, in order to put our lives in perspective, we stand back and take a look.

Now Zen practice is to do this. It develops the ability to stand back and look. Let’s take a practical example, a quarrel. The over-riding quality in any quarrel is pride. Suppose I’m married and I have a quarrel with my husband. He’s done something that I don’t like—perhaps he has spent the family savings on a new car—and I think our present car is fine. And I think—in fact I know—that I am right. I am angry, furious. I want to scream. Now what can I do with my anger? What is the fruitful thing to do? First of all I think it’s a good idea just to back away: to do and say as little as possible. As I retreat for a bit, I can remind myself that what I really want is to be what might be called A Bigger Container. (In other words, I must practice my ABCs.) To do this is to step into another dimension—the spiritual dimension, if we must give it a name.

Let’s look at a series of practice steps, realizing that in the heat of anger it’s impossible for most of us to practice as the drama occurs. But do try to step back; do and say very little; remove yourself. Then, when you’re alone, just sit and observe. What do I mean by “observe”? Observe the soap opera going on in the mind: what he said, what he did, what I have to say about all that, what I should do about it . . . these are all a fantasy. They are not the reality of what’s happening. If we can (it’s difficult to do when angry), label these thoughts. Why is it difficult? When we’re angry there’s a huge block that stands in the way of practice: the fact that we don’t want to practice—we prefer to cherish our pride, to be “right” about the argument, the issue. (“Do not seek the Truth—only cease to cherish opinions.”) And that’s why the first step is to back away, say little. It may take weeks of hard practice before we can see that what we want is not to be right, but to be A Bigger Container, ABC. Step back and observe. Label the thoughts of the drama: yes, he shouldn’t do that; yes, I can’t stand what he’s doing; yes, I’ll find some way to get even—all of which may be so on a superficial level, but still it is just a soap opera.
If we truly step back and observe—and, as I said, it’s extremely difficult to do when angry—we will be capable in time of seeing our thoughts as thoughts (unreal) and not as the truth. Sometimes I’ve gone through this process ten, twenty, thirty times before the thoughts finally subside. When they do I am left with what? I am left with the direct experience of the physical reaction in my body, the residue, so to speak. When I directly experience this residue (as tension, contraction), since there is no duality in direct experience, I will slowly enter the dimension (samadhi) which knows what to do, what action to take. It knows what is the best action, not just for me but for the other as well. In making A Bigger Container, I taste “oneness” in a direct way.

We can talk about “oneness” until the cows come home. But how do we actually separate ourselves from others? How? The pride out of which anger is born is what separates us. And the solution is a practice in which we experience this separating emotion as a definite bodily state. When we do, A Bigger Container is created.

What is created, what grows, is the amount of life I can hold without it upsetting me, dominating me. At first this space is quite restricted, then it’s a bit bigger, and then it’s bigger still. It need never cease to grow. And the enlightened state is that enormous and compassionate space. But as long as we live we find there is a limit to our container’s size and it is at that point that we must practice. And how do we know where this cut-off point is? We are at that point when we feel any degree of upset, of anger. It’s no mystery at all. And the strength of our practice is how big that container gets.

As we do this practice we need to be charitable with ourselves. We need to recognize when we’re unwilling to do it. No one is willing all the time. And it’s not bad when we don’t do it. We always do what we’re ready to do.

This practice of making A Bigger Container is essentially spiritual because it is essentially nothing at all. A Bigger Container isn’t a thing; awareness is not a thing; the witness is not a thing or person. There is not somebody witnessing. Nevertheless that which can witness my mind and body must be other than my mind and body. If I can observe my mind and body in an angry state, who is this “I” who observes? It shows me that I am other than my anger, bigger than my anger, and this knowledge enables me to build A Bigger Container, to grow. So what must be increased is the ability to observe. What we observe is always secondary. It isn’t important that we are upset; what is important is the ability to observe the upset.

As the ability grows first to observe, and second to experience, two factors simultaneously increase: wisdom, the ability to see life as it is (not the way I want it to be) and compassion, the natural action which comes from seeing life as it is. We can’t have compassion for anyone or anything if our encounter with them is ensnarled in pride and anger; it’s impossible. Compassion grows as we create A Bigger Container.

When we practice we’re cutting deep into our life as we’ve known it, and the way this process unfolds varies from person to person. For some people, depending on their personal conditioning and history, this process may go smoothly, and the release is slow. For others it comes in waves, enormous emotional waves. It’s like a dam that bursts. We fear being flooded and overwhelmed. It’s as though we’ve walled off part of the ocean, and when the dam breaks the water just rejoins that which it truly is; and it’s relieved because now it can flow with the currents and the vastness of the ocean.

Nevertheless I think that it’s important for the process not to go too fast. If it’s going too fast I think it should be slowed down. Crying, shaking, upset, are not undesirable
things. That dam is beginning to break. But it’s not necessary that it break too fast. Better to slow it down, and if it breaks rapidly, that’s also OK—it’s just that it doesn’t have to be done that way. We think we’re all the same; but probably the more repressive and difficult the childhood has been, the more important it is for the dam to give way slowly. But no matter how smooth our life may have been, there’s always a dam that has to burst at some point.

Remember also that a little humor about all this isn’t a bad idea. Essentially we never get rid of anything. We don’t have to get rid of all our neurotic tendencies; what we do is begin to see how funny they are, and then they’re just part of the fun of life, the fun with living with other people. They’re all crazy. And so are we, of course. But we never really see that we’re crazy; that’s our pride. Of course I’m not crazy—after all, I’m the teacher!