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Forgetting the Self at a Party Full of Strangers

By Matthias Esho Birk

Since I could think, I have struggled with an intense fear of rejection. This fear can play out in a whole range of ways—and at times it takes on rather comic forms. For example, attending a party where I don't know anyone fills me with dread. Professional networking events, Super Bowl parties, holiday parties, birthday invites, you name it. I still go most of the time, maybe out of a sense of obligation or the belief that this time it will be easier.

Either way, when I do go, it often looks something like this: I arrive and immediately make a beeline for the bar. Everyone else standing around in small groups seems to know one another, and the last thing I want to do is “intrude.” After all, my fear of rejection leads me to think that none of these people will want to talk to me. The bar seems like a legitimate place to stand, but only until I receive my drink. I squeeze my glass of sparkling water tightly, not knowing where to go next. I reconsider the possibility of joining a group of strangers but reject that idea—it seems too high stakes. By now I feel ultra-self-conscious: I have been standing at the bar for what already seems like an eternity, all by myself. I am convinced now that everyone in the room has taken notice: “*Who is this weird loner at the bar that no one wants to talk to?*” Did I hear little murmurs? Seconds now feel like hours—*tick-tock*. All I want to do is disappear at the bar, maybe fall into a secret hole or something. There's usually no happy ending to this: I awkwardly stand around, make a few clumsy attempts at conversation, and then make for the nearest exit.

I have tried to work with this fear in different ways over the years, with some success. At a cognitive-behavioral training for therapists, I let the trainer convince me that I needed to do something he called “*shame-attacking*.” “By doing the very thing we feared most,” he explained, “we would realize that it wasn't ultimately that bad, and so overcome our fears.” He suggested I find a coffee shop, go in, and yell at the top of my lungs, “I feel very lonely. Is there anyone here that would like to go out with me?” which is precisely what I did. I was so scared that for a second it felt like my heart might stop beating. But after the tsunami of fear faded, I did feel a sense of relief—I was still alive. Still, this exercise didn't make my fear of rejection go away.

I have also worked with skilled therapists on understanding where this fear of rejection comes from: an old and deeply held belief that I am not OK. That being my full self would mean people would not love and accept me. And while those sessions helped me to cultivate greater empathy toward my fear and feel less ashamed of it, going to a party full of strangers still feels scary to this day.

I began practicing Zen in my teens (around the same time I started going to parties), partly in an attempt to deal with the pain of not feeling truly OK and the confusion around who I authentically was. One of the Zen sayings that stuck with me early on was by the 13th-century Zen master **Eihei Dogen**:

To know the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things. When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the body and mind of others drop away.

What did Dogen mean by the myriad things? “Actualize” means “make a reality of,” and the “myriad things” are nothing other than the very things in front of us right now. Whatever that may be at that moment. So making the very thing in front of us a reality is the same as forgetting ourselves. In Zen, “making something a reality” means

dedicating ourselves completely to that very thing. And by dedicating ourselves to it—by looking at it without any interfering thoughts, ideas, or concepts—we free it from the ideas we have about it, thereby making it a reality.

In **zazen**, this usually means dedicating ourselves to our breathing. We allow ourselves to be actualized by the breath by practicing to be 100 percent with the breath. A Zen saying goes: “When we completely hand ourselves over to the breath, nothing remains between heaven and earth except the weight of a flame.” When we manage to completely focus our attention on the breath, all sense of self drops away. Just breath remains, with no one breathing it. This is what Dogen is saying. Of course, the myriad things do not have to be the breath. Anything and everything can be the myriad things—the dirty dishes in your sink, the email in your inbox, your overbearing boss—but the practice remains the same. We surrender to what arises in the now, thereby releasing the constant notions we create about things and ourselves.

So what about the party guests? After nearly three decades of Zen practice, why do they still scare me instead of actualize me? Several months ago, I was invited to a professional mixer. When reading the email invite, I realized that I never thought to actually use these parties as a practice ground. It is easy to fall into the trap of thinking Zen is something we practice mainly on our cushion. In reality, every moment of our lives is an opportunity to practice, an invitation to awaken. But how do we practice at a party we dread, a meeting we fear, an encounter we try to avoid? How do we forget our self during those moments?

It starts with setting the intention to practice. We say to ourselves, “I am going to use this next thing as a practice ground.” That little shift in our approach already makes a big difference. Effectively, we are saying, my focus is on how I approach this situation, rather than the outcome of this situation. Instead of focusing on an imagined future, which is always an idea (“*They will think I’m intruding*”), my focus remains on the present moment (the very word a person says, the sensation of the handshake, and of course the ever-changing sensation of breath).

I usually feel a great amount of self-judgment and shame for my lack of self-confidence at a party. Through my practice, I can increasingly allow all of this to soften a bit by unconditionally accepting whatever is arising. *What is present right now? Fear of rejection. Where do I feel it? In my heart and gut—pressing and pounding. What else is there? Judgment. What does the judgment say? You are a joke, Matthias—it’s ridiculous that you feel like that during a party. All of it is OK. The fear is OK, as is the shame about the fear, as is the judgment. In Zen practice, we shift from a participant in the drama of our mind to a simple witness. The witness simply witnesses what is—it doesn’t control, interfere, or try for any particular outcome. It just shows up. And when our mind judges and controls, we witness that too.*

I can fast-forward to tell you that my attempt to apply my practice to the professional mixer wasn’t without its challenges. After the elevator doors to the event popped open, my intention to use the event as a practice ground and to accept whatever arose immediately vanished. *Nope!* I saw small groups of complete strangers scattered across a huge hall—my general nightmare. There was that deep fear of rejection rearing its head again. But one of the wonderful things about Zen practice is that every moment is an opportunity for a fresh start. So I took a deep breath, refocused on my posture, and simply walked up to the first small group I could see. I used the short walk toward the group to practice **walking meditation**, focusing my attention on each step (although I tried not to make it *look* like anything special—just mindful walking).

Once I arrived at the first group, I reached out my hand and said, “Hi, my name is Matthias. What is your name?” Another rush of fear showed up in that moment (“*They sure think I intruded on their conversation*”), but my conscious focus remained on the breath and the very act of reaching out my hand. “Jamal” was the answer from the first person. And then something wonderful happened. Just as our focus can be completely immersed in the breath during zazen, my focus was now completely immersed in Jamal’s words. I listened to him deeply and intimately, and for brief moments, there was only the present-moment experience of listening and talking. No Matthias left, no Jamal, no fear of rejection. There were brief moments when self-consciousness flashed up, like

when the time came to move on and meet a new group and I could hear my mind say, “*Oh, no, what do I do next?*” I thanked Jamal, took a deep breath and a few steps, and reached out my hand to the next group with the intention to pay complete and utter attention to whatever would arise.

Just as Dogen said, I forgot myself. I forgot myself by being actualized by the various party guests, the words, handshakes, looks, etc. In a way, you could say that for stretches of the experience, I was not there at all. No one was. It was free, unbound, intimate, and completely new.

Has the experience healed me from my fear of rejection? No. In fact, a few weeks later, I attended a holiday party, where, although I knew a few folks, I didn’t know most of the rest. I completely forgot about my intentions and fell right back into old patterns of feeling and thinking, wanting to leave the very moment I arrived. You don’t graduate in Zen. Sometimes practice can be pure grace: everything suddenly clears up and we are free. But often, Zen is simply grit, and we must remind ourselves to practice again and again and again in ever new domains and areas of our life. With the myriad things. Even when the myriad things are party guests.

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