

***Shinzo* – Ever-Intimate:
From Intimacy to Meaningfulness**

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What does it mean to be intimate with our life? In many ways, this is the essence of Zen or at least the essence of my understanding of both Zen and the key to leading a meaningful life.

Through Eihei Dogen, the founder of Soto Zen, I discovered the term *Shinzo* usually translated as “ever-intimate”. This term “ever-intimate” deeply moves me, sometimes to tears.

{Perhaps pause, and take a few moments to experience your felt-sense of “ever-intimate” in your inner world}.

For me, a warm vibration - something like the experience of hugging a baby, watching a horse run, gazing at a sunset or snow covered mountain- permeates each cell of my body. Most moments of intimacy have a similar effect.

Even unwanted moments can have *Shinzo*, when I am not pushing these experiences away. Hearing of a friend’s death or sensing a painful sensation without resistance can evoke this quality. These moments are deeply connecting to Life. *Shinzo* is not always joy-filled yet it most often generates a sense of meaningfulness.

Even when I am too distracted or self-absorbed to be intimate with my life, *Shinzo* is not far away. Through authentically acknowledging that I have been rejecting my experience - which is the opposite of intimacy – I am brought back to the path of *Shinzo*. In a moment of fighting “what-is”, even in moments of hatred or disgruntlement, I notice that telling the truth of my struggle, uncovering both acceptance and forgiveness for my limitations, evokes this “ever-intimate” feeling. For this, I am ever grateful.

Intimacy is directly connected to meaningfulness. All that I truly value in life- my wife, daughter, close friends, meditation, beauty, nature, connectivity, enjoyment, helping others – are experienced intimately. These are the sources for meaning and ultimately happiness in my life. The unique strategy of Zen is to suggest that deep meaning can come from practicing intimacy, rather than intimacy arising only from meaningful moments. It is a two way street. Becoming intimate with the water when doing the dishes or

with the knife and vegetables when cooking are good examples. Notice the reversal here – rather than uncovering intimacy only from those relationships that are intrinsically meaningful, we practice growing our capacity for intimacy. This strategy requires the quality of presence, a willingness to be present for ‘what is’.

Meditation is the most direct, though at times challenging, way to experience intimacy. “Just” this moment of sitting, “just” this breath can create a remarkable experience of “enough-ness”. In a very simple way nothing more is needed to feel whole, complete and, well, intimate with our life. The gestures that surround Zen meditation are also good examples. The hands coming together in a prayer position (*gassho*) or the tips of our thumbs gently touching in the “universal mudra” are surprisingly intimate moments, when we are “there” for them. A breath, when sensed without either distracted thoughts or effortful concentration is whole and complete, generating unexpected meaningfulness and, sometimes, even joy.

If we turn our attention toward intimacy with the living moment, *Shinzo*, we might find many meaningful moments in every day life. This practice, this orientation of attention includes forgetting and remembering, over and over for the rest of our lives.

***Shinzo* is another way of saying – let’s carry the intention to be present in and for our daily lives. When we give the gift of our presence to the present moment, we receive the gift of life in return.**