

The Wisdom in My Bones

After years of wrestling with the pain of racism and discrimination, **Zenju Earthlyn Manuel** discovers a deep tenderness within that points a way to liberation.

I was south of Tamil Nadu, India, dreaming. My bed was on fire and I was lying in it. Blue flames shot up around me and I became frightened that I would burn to death. I anticipated the pain and suffering. But I did not burn away. I did not feel any pain or suffering. The flame continued and I just lay there in the blue flames. The body had transformed from its material self into an existence beyond.

Going beyond into another existence was not the spiritual awakening. The body coming through the fire and not around it was the awakening for me.





WE MUST COME through the fire of our lives to experience awakening. We are all tender and sore from the hatred no matter where we fall on the continua within race, sexuality, and gender. We are tender in a raw sense, and not necessarily in a soft and gentle way. This tenderness is of a wounded nature. Our tenderness is our aching, sensitivity, and ultimately, our vulnerability. Can we be tender in the raw sense and still actively walk the path of liberation?

When I was ordained as a Zen priest, I was given the dharma name Ekai Zenju, which translates as Wisdom Ocean (Ekai), Complete Tenderness (Zenju). I could not swim in the ocean, nor did I see myself as tender in the sense of being soft or gentle. I felt the raw and wounded kind of tenderness. For that reason, at first I embraced the name Ekai because I loved the ocean and visions of it were conjured in the name Ekai. But my teacher told me that the second name is given as the path one is to explore, so I began to call myself Zenju in a quest to discover a lived experience of the name's essence. What is complete tenderness?

It was clear at the beginning of my exploration that I had been hardened by the physical violence leveled against me as a young child and by the poverty with which my parents had to struggle as Louisiana migrants raising three daughters in the wilds of Los Angeles. I had been hurt as a child when I discovered that others saw my dark body as ugly. And as I aged and moved away from romantic relationships with men, I lived in fear of being annihilated for taking a woman as a lover and partner in life. I had grown bound to feelings of injustice, rage, and resentment. I held my life tight in my chest, and my body ached with its pain for many years. Depression, unhealthy relationships, dependency on substances to numb the pain, and thoughts of suicide were my responses to the tension. I felt tension between what was imposed upon me and the true nature of life in all of its beauty and perfection.

So how does someone who has experienced deep hatred, from within as well as without, become Zenju, Complete Tenderness—a liberated tenderness that is not a wound but complete liberation from the rage that hatred breeds?

ZENJU EARTHLYN MANUEL is a Zen priest in the lineage of Suzuki Roshi. This article is adapted from her new book, *The Way of Tenderness*, published by Wisdom, 2015.

I listened to Zen teachers address suffering with Buddha's teachings. I listened for what might help me face rage and develop a liberated tenderness. Some suggested that if I "just dropped the labels" I would "be liberated." Some said, "We are delusional; there is no self." Others said, "We are attached to some idea of ourselves." If I could "just let go of being this and that, my life would be freed from pain." I thought for a time that perhaps I was holding on to my identity too tightly. Perhaps, I thought, if I "empty" my mind, the pain in my heart will dissolve. What I found is that flat, simplified, and diluted ideas could not shake me from my pain. I needed to bring the validity of my unique, individual, and collective background to the practice of dharma. "I am not invisible!" I wanted to shout.

Although my teachers taught us the absolute truths of Zen practice, they seemed to negate identity without considering the implications that identity can have for oppressed groups of people. The critique of identity overlooks the emotional, empowering, and positive effects of identity on those who are socially and politically objectified. My own powerful sense of identity and of connection with my ancestors, developed in the Civil Rights and Pan-African movements of the 1970s, came through identifying with black people. Leah Kalmanson, a Drake University professor, philosopher, and author, has written, "If this emotional dimension is not brought to the foreground, it threatens to sabotage the practice of identity critique by preventing a person from taking a hard and honest look at herself." Dogen Zenji, founder of the Soto Zen tradition, said, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self." In order to forget the self, we must study it. We must look at the identities that the self is emotionally attached to. This is a lifelong practice because identity is ever evolving.

Eventually, I accepted that I would have to unearth complete tenderness in the midst of the hatred and rage that I felt. So, while participating in a silent seven-day meditation retreat, I began to practice leaving everything—or at least leaving my obsession with things: leaving my aspirations, hopes, dreams, identity, all notions of being this or that, of doing this, that, and the other. I was to say goodbye to these things for seven days. I sat for hours simply breathing in and out. As things came up I would say good-bye, bowing dutifully at the parade of passing thoughts.

During one of the hours of meditation, my deceased mother came to mind. It was as if she had

come to silently sit with me. I could not tell her to leave. I immediately began to cry. In that moment I couldn't tell the reason for the tears. It was an upsurge of old pain, harbored from the time of our difficult relationship. How could I be tender given my violent past with her?

I kept breathing and crying, sitting with this vision of my mother. Her face was sweet. She was smiling. She did not appear as the rage-filled, yet beautiful, person who had frightened me when I was young. I opened my eyes to wipe the water pooling under my eyelids. I looked around the room and realized that I had separated from everyone in the room for that moment. I felt they could not possibly be sitting with as much pain as I was. They seemed to be calm and composed. I was not like them. I was a volcano waiting to erupt. I recognized in that moment that old wounds had kept me from fully engaging with folks my entire life. I could be polite or kind to others, but I was unwilling and afraid to experience the wounded tenderness that would have eventually opened into a complete and liberated tenderness. I was unwilling to allow others completely into my heart.

I cried more as the room seemed to darken, and I fused with the darkness. We were all in the dark. In the darkness I was a part of everyone and everything, whether I accepted it or not. Everyone else in the room was as invisible as I was. "I am invisible," I whispered to myself.

In the dark I recognized life without all of the things we impose upon it, and upon each other. As I continued to breathe, I felt a warm breeze near my face, but it was cold and raining outside and there were no open windows or doors. I thought perhaps it was the spirit of my mother. And then I thought, no, perhaps this is how complete tenderness feels when it arrives, having sloughed off rage. When I turned toward the hurt in the silence, I entered a kind of tenderness that was not sore, not wounded, but rather powerfully present. I sat up straight. The silence had tilled hard ground into soft soil. I sank deep into the soft ground, where the source of life was revealed—wordless, nameless, without form, completely indescribable. And then—I dare to say it—I was "completely tender."

To ease below the surface of my embodiment—my face, my flesh, my skin, my name—I needed to first see it reflected back at me. I had to look at it long enough to see the soft patches, the openings, the soft, tender ground. Would I survive the namelessness—without my body, without my

heart—while engaging the beautiful, floral exterior of my life? Fear and caution were attempting to shut down the experience of uncoupling my heart from mistreatment and discrimination—from the disregard, hurt, and separation that I experienced and accepted as my one-sided life. I was going back to the moment before I was born, when I was connected to something other than my parents or my people. The uncoupling from hatred within and without squeezed my chest, restricting blood flow in my neck. It felt as though I were having a heart attack. Even namelessness requires breathing. I could not remain in that vastness without inhaling and exhaling. So I breathed hard and deep for some time, and eventually I was escorted to the emergency room to see if, in fact, I was having a heart attack.

The wisdom in my bones says that we need this particular body, with its unique color, shape, and sex, for liberation to unfold.

Complete tenderness almost wiped me out. And perhaps it does wipe "you" out—that "you" that suffers so. Still, what does liberation mean when I have incarnated in a particular body, with a particular shape, color, and sex, which can be superficially viewed as an undesirable, unacceptable, or ugly image of human life? Enlightenment, as it has for sages and prophets down through the ages, emerges through bodies. Our bodies make us visible, even though many strive toward a spiritual transcendence in which we imagine we will become invisible. For me, that brief experience of invisibility attained deep in meditation was but a moment of awakening to the beauty of life, and it existed right within my extremely visible self. When recognition and awareness always occur within bodies, how can we ignore race, sexuality, and gender?

In the *Dhammapada*, the Buddha says,

Mind precedes all mental states.
Mind is their chief; they are all mind-wrought.

Tenderness does not erase the inequities we face. On the way of tenderness, we allow rage and anger to flow in and out again and again instead of holding on to it as proof of being human.

Although Buddha was addressing his monks with these lines, we can easily read his words in reference to the collective mind of our society as it views race, sexuality, and gender. When individuals in our society speak or act out of hatred against a whole group of people based solely on superficial appearance, it is a reflection of the mental state of our whole society. We don't escape because we are not the ones hating. When whole groups of people are subject to genocide, massacre, slavery, or other atrocities based on perceived unacceptable differences, we see a society cracking and crumbling. We can recognize this in our personal lives. We ourselves fall into hatred when, because of someone's appearance, we seek to render them or the group to which we feel they belong invisible. It is also an act of hatred to grant privilege, superiority, and favor to a person or group of people because of their embodiment.

We see hatred working in the heart of our society when a sixteen-year-old black male is shot to death—with eleven rounds fired by six white officers—because the police say he was adjusting the waistband of his pants in a “suspicious way.” We see hatred working in the heart of our society when a gang of black males murder a black transgender rapper and dump the body in a landfill. We see hatred working in the heart of our society when women are gang-raped simply because they are women. We see hatred working in the heart of our society when the homeless are stabbed on the street because they are ugly, destitute, and unpleasant to look at. Fear of particular bodies breeds hatred, and hatred breeds monstrous acts. This is the mind of a society that breeds hatred.

How could a path to spiritual liberation possibly unfold if we turn away from the realities that particular embodiments bring? To confront hatred with spirituality is to confront the way we view race, sexuality, gender, or whatever form of embodiment we are as living beings. To provide a meaningful path to spiritual liberation, spirituality must acknowledge the body and the denigration of certain types

of bodies in the world. We cannot close our eyes to these phenomena if we really want to be awake and aware.

Many people believe that spiritual paths should tend toward the invisible, the unseen. With this view, it is easy to mistake a favorable blindness—not seeing skin color, gender, and so on—for seeing an invisible truth of life. We may even consider this blindness to be a higher state of being. But the wisdom in my bones says that we need this particular body, with its unique color, shape, and sex, for liberation to unfold. There is no experience of emptiness without interrelationship. We must look our embodiment in the face in order to attend to the challenge it presents. Only then will we come to engage each other with all of what we are—both the relative and the absolute, the physical and the formless.

The way of tenderness appears on its own, rising up as an experience void of hatred—for oneself or others. It comes when the events of your life have rendered you silent and sat you in the corner, and there is nothing left to do but sit until the mental distress or confusion about who you are or who you are not passes. The way of tenderness may present itself when rage is so palpable that you are dizzy with it. It may come as a lion's roar. The way of tenderness comes even when failing to fight for our lives is what we fear the most. Complete tenderness arrives even if we have no desire to sink beneath the appearance of things, including our own identities and aspirations.

The way of tenderness is an experiential, nonintellectual, heartfelt acknowledgement of all embodied difference. It is a flexibility of perception, rather than a settling into belief. It brings affirmation of life, rather than of suffering, center stage. It keeps alive the vow not to kill in a way that has nothing to do with being vegetarian or not. It is social action. It is a way to overcome what feels much stronger than us, and what seems to pull us apart so that we are not well. It is an acknowledgement of the unfolding

experience of life that is effortlessly ever present in all living beings, and yet it does not deny the uniqueness or similarities of our embodiment. It simply arises along the path of life, if we allow it.

The tenderness that arose in my life brought with it a liberated and full-hearted engagement with life; it was a transformation of pent-up anger, rage, and disappointment. Instead of sinking into pain and separation, I did a very scary thing. I allowed tenderness—a gentle opening, a softness of mind and body—to surface. I followed that opening until the way of tenderness unearthed itself as a liberated path. It is a natural, organic, innate medicine or teaching within the body itself. I used to be afraid of being seen in this softness, afraid of being viewed as “soft.” How could I be tender in the liberated sense and also be strong and safe? How could I meet disrespect or disregard with tenderness? How could I trust it?

When I contemplated being tender in this way, I realized that it did not equal quiescence. It did not mean that fiery emotions would disappear. It did not render it acceptable that anyone could hurt or abuse life. Tenderness does not erase the inequities we face in our relative and tangible world. I am not encouraging a spiritual bypass of the palpable feelings that we experience. The way of tenderness is an intangible elixir for the clogged arteries in the heart of our world. Complete tenderness is an experience of life that trusts the fluidity of our life energy and its extension into those around us. On the way of tenderness we allow rage and anger to flow in and out again and again instead of holding on to it as proof of being human. We can let go of stockpiling our rage for fear that our suffering might go unrecognized or that we’ll appear apathetic or naive. A liberated tenderness is a way of lessening and finally removing the potency of our tragic pasts as sentient beings. It is what will change that which leads us to annihilate the unacceptable differences between us.

I remember when I was a child, my father tipped his hat to strangers on the path. I would smile and nod along with him, and the strangers would nod back. What I received in the nod back from the strangers was recognition that we were living beings. It meant that my undeniable difference was nonetheless seen as part of the landscape of life. To be recognized as a living being without so much as a spoken word was to acknowledge a life that

cannot be seen in a mirror but rather is seen only in each other.

The way of tenderness is acknowledgement—acknowledging and honoring all life and all that is in the world, fully, with heart and body. This acknowledgement is wordless and expressed in a deeply felt nod to everything and everyone—an inner bow to life, so to speak. The way of tenderness is a response from below the surface of what appears to us when we are seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, or thinking. It is a response beyond the mind but of the body. It rises up quite naturally, without preconception, without our knowing the reason for the tears, fierce anger, or laughter that come with it. With the welling up of tenderness, we are like newborn babies simply experiencing the sensations of being alive. It is our own unique experience.

The way of tenderness is not a method for how to behave, how to be kind, or how to transform our behavior with each other. By this point, we have grown past formulas, techniques, and strategies that teach us how to honor life. It is time to recognize that we already know something of ourselves. The question is, can we integrate the heavens that our hands reach up toward and the earth our feet are planted in? There is far too much hate in the world, and far too many lives are snuffed out because of it. When we fully know in our hearts who we are as living beings, we can share a deeply felt, visceral acknowledgement of each other. We can submit our interrelationship to the blue flames, unafraid of being burned away.

We have bodies so we can engage life. We need our bodies to experience our hearts and minds. Most of us will not transcend them until death. If the body can withstand the arising and ceasing of pain and suffering, there is no need to transcend it. We need to transcend, instead, our belief that spirituality does not include the body. Given the deep relationship between awakening and the body, we must explore the surfaces of this body—its race, sexuality, and gender—in relation to awakening at its heart. **BD**

