

“Crying With” as a form of Compassion

There once was a Zen master who lived in a small village temple. Villagers would often come to him for help for both their spiritual and ordinary daily concerns.

One day a father of a teenage boy came to the priest to ask if he could somehow help with his son. His son had lost interest in everything but alcohol, gambling, and spending time with local thieves and scoundrels. The father had tried everything he could imagine to change his son's ways. Nothing made any difference. The father was convinced that the son was on a dangerous path.

After explaining all this, the father begged the Zen priest to do whatever he could to help his son; perhaps the priest could talk some sense into him. The priest agreed to meet the son and invited both the father and son to return the next afternoon for tea.

When they arrived at the temple the next day the priest graciously invited them into a small tea room that was used for receiving guests. The son, guessing why he had been brought there, remained somewhat withdrawn and ready to be defensive. The priest served tea and engaged both the father and son with simple conversation about the weather and recent events in the village. After a while the priest indicated that the visit was over.

Getting up to leave the father was quite confused and disappointed. He had placed his last hope on the priest being able to talk sense to his son. Perhaps the priest had seen that the son's situation was hopeless and so hadn't offered any advice or teachings for the young man.

The priest followed them out to the entry room where they were to put on their shoes. As the teenage boy knelt down to tie on his shoes he suddenly saw a few drops of water falling onto his shoe. He looked up to see the priest standing above him. His eyes met the pained eyes of the priest and saw that tears were running down the priest's cheeks. From that moment on the son was a changed person and soon became a respected member of the village community.

Adapted from the Japanese Zen tradition