Dharma Reflection #2: Crying With
By Jim Lakey

The father is described as “convinced” that his son is on a bad path. It seems his mind is made up, and he doesn't have much flexibility in his point of view. From what I know of Japan then, positions in society and family were still largely governed by Confucian ideals, and generational roles were often well-defined to the point of almost being fixed. The father’s inflexible viewpoint is not surprising, in which case, and perhaps can't be so easily compared to attitudes today regarding personal freedom to choose one's life path. The father wants the priest to “talk some sense into” the son. Not to listen to, understand, or be with, but to convince the son that the father’s position is correct.

From the son’s perspective, knowing what led him to drink and gamble is hard. This information is from the dad’s point of view. Maybe the son did other things, like providing for the family, working, and helping out. But his dad only saw the parts troubling him — no acknowledgment of the full spectrum of who the son was.

The priest wanted to get a sense for himself of how both the father and son were. Through chit-chat, he could see how they interact, to get a feel for the dynamic of their relationship. Perhaps the priest was looking for an opening where he could start a reconciliation process between father and son. By inviting the father and son to the temple, the priest received them as guests, taking them out of the context of their home and the familiar dynamic established there. It seems like a physical equivalent to the open, non-reactive space that can be cultivated during meditation. A space that is better able to hold whatever arises.

It seems unlikely that the priest planned to cry. It was a natural response. It’s possible that the priest felt the son was indeed on a bad path and was saddened by this, or whether he was saddened by the state of the father-son relationship, or sad that he hadn’t been able to find a way to help them. In Zen, sometimes a “turning word” can make all the difference, and language can have a huge impact. But words can also be divisive and reinforce tensions and viewpoints. The priest could reach the son in a way the father couldn’t, as the positions of father and son had been established and entrenched. The open, caring heart of the priest was moved spontaneously. This cracked open the stalemate between father and son, opening up new possibilities.

The priest's tears cannot be taken out of context, though. A shift occurred in the son so that he changed his ways and became “respected” in the community. The tears were the turning point, but they broke open all the energy and emotional tension that had been building between the son and his father for what we can assume was a considerable amount of time. It feels like the tears were necessary to bridge father and son. What they offered that all the admonitions and encouragement that he had previously received had failed to offer was an unmistakable feeling of love and connection, of being seen and felt. To move a man to tears in a culture that valued
decorum so highly was probably not a common event. It may have been shocking. Not unlike some of the shouts, blows, etc. that in the Zen tradition have been known to bring students to awakening, the shock of feeling a tear fall on him was such an intimate moment that his heart broke open. Perhaps the priest was providing the tears that the father couldn’t — a physical expression of the love and grief that tormented the father.

I remember when I was at art school studying in the sculpture department. The head of the department was a sculptor, poet, and performance artist with a very strong and impressive presence. He wasn’t my tutor, so I didn’t know him that well. One day, he had parked his boat in the sculpture yard and was working on repainting the bow. As I passed through, he asked me my opinion on the color of the paint. I was surprised by the question as, in my mind, he was an accomplished artist, and I was a young student of little consequence. I answered, and as I did, he seemed to consider my answer. I had a profound experience of being seen, of being heard, of being valued, in a way that was not familiar to me. I didn’t typically value myself in that way. The question was trivial — the color of a boat — but how he asked me and listened to my response deeply moved me.

From the boy’s position, I feel that the priest’s tears moved him in the way that my interaction with the sculptor moved me. Some deep sense of connection — of being seen, heard, and valued — occurred. Being present and available for someone — to feel the impact of their situation — can be a priceless gift. This is one of the things that drew me to this chaplaincy training. I would like to live more in accord with my desire to be present for others in this way.

The story of the priest and the boy is familiar to me as that of Ryokan, an 18th-century Japanese priest, hermit, and poet. In the original story, several twists add complexity to the story. First, the boy in question is Umanosuke, Ryokan’s nephew, his brother’s son. Ryokan was the eldest son in the Tachibana clan and was expected to apprentice with his father as village chief and eventually take over. Ryokan did this for a year while studying Zen with a local lay practitioner. Then, he chose to enter the monastery and ordain, leaving the mantle of heir to his younger brother. His father later committed suicide and his brother took over but did not manage affairs well. Ryokan remained in contact with his family and knew of his clan’s decline and his role in it.

In one poem, Ryokan writes:

*When I was young, I abandoned my father
and ran off to other domains*

In Ryokan’s story, his sister-in-law asks him to intercede with the son’s unruly behavior. Ryokan is invited to stay at their home, which he does for three days. He remained speechless and “didn’t know what to say.” In this version of the story, words escape the priest. As someone who decided to walk his own path in life...
independent of his family duties, how can Ryokan preach filial piety to his nephew? Their lives were so intimately connected, Ryokan didn’t have the luxury of distance from which to preach. In his recorded letters are examples of him writing to the sons of other families he knew regarding a very similar issue and imporing the sons to listen to and reconcile with their family. So in a situation where he was more relationally distanced, he offered more predictable words. The tears that fell from Ryokan were of a more complex nature than those of the priest in the dharma story. Ryuchi Abe and Peter Haskel in the book, “Great Fool”, mention that Ryokan perhaps felt:

"varying shades of feeling — regret, bewilderment, tenderness, compunction, shame — that highlight his deep sense of commiseration ... Ryokan is no longer Umanosuke's superior urging him to rectify his behavior, but is rather his equal, a helpless being guilty of the same crime as Umanosuke, crying as if to ask for his nephew's forgiveness."

This reframing of the relationships in the story arrives at the same point — the tears reach the son in a way that nothing else had as “suddenly, Umanosuke recovered his senses.” But I appreciate the complex mix of emotions, and the dynamic between all the family members, which is less straightforward. It's not just the son that is “bad”. Each person in the story must bear the weight of their actions: Ryokan, his father, his brother, and Umanosuke. This version of the story reaches me more deeply as Ryokan is exposing his own vulnerability and his own regret. Their common bond, both in blood and in neglecting their familial duties, binds them effectively. The nephew ties Ryokan's sandals as he departs — perhaps a tradition in Japan at the time, but one that emphasizes, even more, the blurring of lines across identity as the hands of one reach out to help the feet of the other. The pain that Ryokan feels resonates deeply with the pain that Umanosuke feels through the exchange of the tear. This resonance has such power — the movement of multiple hearts as one.