

The Dharma Breeze

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What Is the True Self?

—Shakyamuni Buddha and the Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss the Buddhist view of the True Self. Buddhism is nothing but a teaching about self-examination. Knowing the True Self is the most important issue in our lives. The one crucial question we must ask in Buddhism is “What am I?” or “What is the True Self?”

Knowing the True Self is not only the most important issue, but also the most difficult issue in our lives. The difficulty is due to the fact that we think we already know the True Self and don’t feel any need to examine it. Shakyamuni, however, teaches us that although we think we know the True Self, we are totally ignorant of it. He tells us if we do not have an accurate view of the Self, we will not be able to live our lives in a truly meaningful way.

In this essay I will discuss how two historical individuals, Shakyamuni Buddha and the Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (1863-1903), a modern Japanese Shin teacher, examined the self, saw the emptiness of it, and discovered the True Self. Having recognized the True Self, they lived their lives in a truly meaningful and fulfilling way.

These two teachers teach us that there are two ways of viewing the self. The first way is viewing the self on the basis of “what we think we are”; and the second way is viewing it on the basis of “what we truly are.” They teach us that the former is the wrong view and the latter is the right view. They say that we must move from the first view to the second view—from “what we think we are” to “what we truly are.”

Shakyamuni’s View of the True Self

First, let me talk about how Shakyamuni examined the self and moved from the wrong view of the self to the right view. When Shakyamuni lived in a palace, he realized that his life was full of difficulties. When he learned that difficulties such as aging and death were beyond his control, he became frustrated and depressed. Having decided to find the way to overcome those difficulties, he renounced his householder’s life and became a seeker. Then, he engaged in all kinds of practices. But, after having spent six years in those practices, he came to the conclusion that practices could not solve his problems.

Thus, as the last resort, Shakyamuni sat under a tree and meditated. He was asking, “Why do I have to suffer? What is the cause of the difficulties I am experiencing?” Then he realized that ignorance of the True Self was the basic cause of the difficulties in his life. He thought unless he had the right view of the Self, there was no basic solution to his problems. Therefore he undertook the process of methodically examining what truly constituted the True Self.

At the age of thirty-five, not long after Shakyamuni started to examine the self, he attained enlightenment. What did this enlightenment entail? It was his discovery of the Dharma (truth) of “conditional arising” and becoming one with that truth. He later said, “Those who see me in me do not see me. Those who see the Dharma (i.e., the truth of conditional arising) in me see me.”

The truth of “conditional arising” is that all things in the world exist because of causes and conditions. This truth challenged Shakyamuni’s view of the self as something permanent, independent, and autonomous—the view that he held before his enlightenment. It made him recognize that the self that he thought he had was a grandiose delusion pretending to be an eternal reality.

Shakyamuni now realized that his entire being, his body and mind, was nothing but a collection of causes and conditions. He realized that the body consisted of myriad causes and conditions. It consisted of air, water, and all kinds of food he had eaten. All kinds of things outside his body happened to come together and form his body. Apart from myriad conditions, there was nothing to be called his body. His body could not exist even for a few minutes if air or the heat of the sun had not existed.

Further, he asked himself, “Does my mind not consist of conditions that came from outside me?” Then he realized that his mind was nothing but a collection of myriad ideas given to him by the people he had met in his life. If those people had not existed, his mind could not have existed. Hence, he realized that multifarious things and people were forming his body and mind.

In this way, Shakyamuni gained the right view of the Self. According to him, the True Self is “conditionally arisen” and does not have anything permanent, independent, and autonomous. Shakyamuni teaches us that human beings do not have any permanent, independent, and autonomous substance called a “spirit” or a “soul.” Here we can see a crucial difference between Buddhism and other religions such as Christianity and Hinduism. Although other religions teach us that human beings have an eternal spiritual substance called a “spirit” or a “soul,” Buddhism does not talk about it.

The Buddhist concept of emptiness (or selflessness) means the absence of any permanent, independent and autonomous substance. Although many people think that they have something permanent, independent, and autonomous in the self, Shakyamuni taught that it did not exist.

There are two kinds of self, the false self to which we are attached and the True Self of which we are ignorant. Shakyamuni taught that the false self that we love and hold onto for dear life is always already lost. Our fragile precious teacup is already broken. Only the True Self can never be lost because emptiness is the essential nature of its being. The false self is an important “thing,” but the True Self is an ever dynamic and changing “process.” Shakyamuni learned to empty himself of the “thing” so that he could find the True Self in the process of “conditional arising.”

The True Self

Now I have said that the truth of “conditional arising” totally negated the self that Shakyamuni considered permanent, independent, and autonomous. It taught him that such a self did not exist. This is the negative aspect of the truth of “conditional arising.” This truth, however, had another, positive, aspect. If we think that the truth of “conditional arising” was only a negative truth, we do not fully understand the truth. The truth of “conditional arising” not only negated Shakyamuni’s wrong view of the self, it also gave him the right view of the Self. The truth made him recognize the unreality of the autonomous self that he thought he had; and at the same time it made him recognize the True Self, the Self as it is, as a collection of causes and conditions.

Shakyamuni realized that the True Self consisted of myriad conditions, things and people, in this world. Thus he learned that so-called subjective reality and objective reality were not two separate entities. He learned that the True Self did not have a subject-object relationship with things and people. There was oneness between the Self and others. He realized, “I am they and they are me.” The truth made him understand not only the emptiness of the self that he thought he had, but also the richness of the True Self that was one with all things. In this way, he moved from the wrong view of the self to the right view of the Self—from what he thought he was to what he truly was.

We can say that Shakyamuni’s enlightenment was a humbling experience for him because the truth negated the self that he had considered permanent, independent, and autonomous. The truth negated all the fixed ideas, opinions, and assertions that he had cherished. In short, the Dharma challenged his self-pride and humbled him. He now realized that it was a mistake to be attached to fixed values in the self.

But this humbling experience was simultaneously a liberating experience, a delightful experience, for him. Now, having gained the right view of the Self, Shakyamuni saw things and people from a new perspective, as part of himself. He could feel oneness with all of them; he could feel that they were indispensable components of his being.

The truth of “conditional arising” means that this world consists of causes and conditions that are dynamically moving, changing, and flowing. This world is a gigantic flow of life. Nothing stays the same; nothing is fixed or stagnant. Everything in the world is constantly new and fresh. This is a creative world. Shakyamuni now realized that he was a creative component of a creative world. All existing things and people were fellow-components of the gigantic flow of life.

Shakyamuni was no longer attached to any fixed ideas, opinions, labels, and identities. He was totally liberated from them. Although we commonly say that Shakyamuni was a teacher, he denied it. He said, “I have nothing to teach. I don’t have any opinion, any viewpoint, or any assertion. I have nothing to teach.” He was totally one with the flow of life. If we were to describe him with a label, the only one that we can think of is that he was “a humble and dynamic seeker.” Having recognized the fact that he had no independent and autonomous substance in his being and become one with the universal flow of life, he lived a very dynamic and creative life.

Rev. Kiyozawa’s View of the True Self

Now let me talk about how Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa examined the self and understood the True Self. Rev. Kiyozawa was one of the most important Buddhist teachers in modern Japan. Some people even refer to him as “the Shinran Shonin of modern Japan.”

Some time ago, one of the major publishers in Japan published a series of books written by Japanese Buddhists of all ages. Two individuals who represent modern Japanese Buddhism were selected: Dr. D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) and the Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa. Dr. Suzuki represented the Zen tradition; and Rev. Kiyozawa represented the Shin Buddhist tradition. Dr. Suzuki lived to the age of ninety-four; but Rev. Kiyozawa died at the young age of forty. Although Kiyozawa’s life was short, he had a tremendous influence upon the history of Shin Buddhism in Japan.

Rev. Kiyozawa was born in 1863, five years before the samurai government was replaced with the first modern government. His poor family could not afford his higher education. He was a good student, and fortunately, the Higashi Honganji, a Shin Buddhist sect, gave him a scholarship. He became a student at the Tokyo Imperial University (i.e., the present-day Tokyo University) and majored in Western philosophy. Since he was always at the top of his class, his classmates assumed he would become a professor at the university. Instead, at age twenty-five he gave up a brilliant future as a philosophy professor and became the principle of a high school that was run by the Higashi Honganji. Kiyozawa believed that he was obligated to work for the Shin sect because it had financed his education.

When Kiyozawa was twenty-seven years old, he contracted a severe case of tuberculosis. In those days tuberculosis was incurable. After two years of recuperation he engaged in a reformation movement—in activities to reform Shin Buddhist institutions. When he was thirty-four, this reformation movement failed. He was excommunicated from the Higashi Honganji and lost his teaching position at the high school.

Then Kiyozawa went back to his Buddhist temple. The year when he was thirty-five was the most important year as far as the establishment of his faith was concerned. But it was a very difficult year for him. Let me describe his situation. He had just failed in his attempts to reform Shin institutions and lost his teaching position. Earlier he had been adopted by a Buddhist temple family (the Kiyozawa family), and he started to work for that temple. However his father-in-law was chief minister there, and the temple did not need another minister. Kiyozawa soon became a burden to the temple. Furthermore, his father also moved into the temple and was not on good terms with the Kiyozawa family. The temple members did not welcome Kiyozawa. Many of them branded him a rebel against the Shin establishment and demanded that he leave. Some members refused his visits for their family memorial services. They complained that his talks were too difficult to understand. He was still sick and occasionally coughed up blood.

These problems motivated Kiyozawa to undertake deep self-examination. He tried to find the basic cause of the difficulties of his life and eventually came to the conclusion that it was ignorance of the True Self. He carefully examined the self and realized that it was something “conditionally arisen.” Like Shakyamuni he saw the emptiness of the self that he thought he had. He recognized the mistake in the idea that the self was something permanent, independent, and autonomous. He talks about his view of the True Self in this way:

It is not for us to determine where the self came from and where it is going. We are powerless not only with regard to things before our birth and after our death, but also with regard to the arising and vanishing of our thoughts in this very moment. We are absolutely within the hands of the Power Beyond Self. (*December Fan*, p. 26)

Here Kiyozawa says that we are absolutely in the hands of the Power Beyond Self (*tariki*). Here the Power Beyond Self means the truth of “conditional arising.” Although we usually think that our minds are functioning by themselves, independently and autonomously, the fact is that conditions are shaping our minds. Conditions are determining what we are thinking. If we think our minds can function independently and autonomously, that’s not true. By saying, “With regard to the arising and vanishing of our

thoughts in this very moment, we are absolutely within the hands of the Power Beyond Self,” Kiyozawa is saying that the self that we consider permanent, independent, and autonomous is an illusion, that it does not exist.

When Kiyozawa gained this insight into the nature of the True Self, he called himself “December Fan.” He used it as his pen name. “December Fan” means something useless or good-for-nothing. A fan is useful in summer but is useless in winter, in December. Then, what does it mean that Kiyozawa called himself a “December Fan”? It means that he realized that the self that he thought he had was actually empty and as useless as a fan in December. He realized that the substantial self that he thought he had was totally empty and useless.

In this way, the truth of “conditional arising” challenged his self-pride and made him recognize its futility. This was a very humbling experience for Kiyozawa, but it was simultaneously a tremendously liberating experience.

In one of his articles, Kiyozawa talks about his awakening experience:

Picture a little boy carrying food on a tray for a guest. His mother is worried that he might stumble, so she follows closely behind, supporting the tray. Although the boy is convinced that he is carrying the tray by himself, he happens to look back. He discovers that it is actually his mother that has been supporting the tray. When he is not aware of his mother’s help and thinks that he is the only one carrying the tray, he is worried about dropping it. He feels a sense of responsibility. But when he discovers that his mother is helping, he can forget about his self and his responsibility, and leave everything up to her. (December Fan, p. 41)

When a small boy sees family members treating a guest, he also desires to treat the guest. The small boy picks up a tray that is full of many dishes. Physically, it’s impossible for him to carry it. But believing that he can carry it, he tries to lift it. Seeing the boy’s action, his mother immediately stands behind him, lifts the tray, and follows him as he carries it. The boy does not notice that his mother is standing behind him and carrying the tray. He believes that he is carrying it all by himself. At this point, he feels a sense of responsibility and is very tense and nervous, thinking “I shouldn’t drop this tray.”

But when he realizes that his mother was actually carrying the tray, he is relieved of the sense of responsibility. Even if he releases his grips, the tray will not fall down. Before this realization he felt totally responsible for the tray. So he was tense and nervous. When he realizes that his mother is carrying it, he feels so relieved, so relaxed. He is liberated from his sense of responsibility.

Kiyozawa described his awakening experience this way. This awakening experience has two aspects, a negative aspect and a positive aspect, or a humbling aspect and a liberating aspect. First, the negative and humbling aspect means this. When the boy was carrying the tray, he was proud of himself, of his abilities. But when he realized that it was actually his mother who was carrying the tray, he was humbled. He had to recognize the emptiness and uselessness of his power, his abilities, which he was proud of. It was a negative and humbling experience.

Then, what is the positive and liberating aspect? When the boy saw that his mother was carrying the tray, he experienced a sense of relief and liberation. He was relieved of his sense of self-importance, of his sense of responsibility.

Here, if I were to use Shin Buddhist terminology, the boy’s power symbolizes self-power (*jiriki*) and the mother’s power symbolizes the Power Beyond Self (*tariki*), or the truth of conditional arising. With this story, Kiyozawa describes the easy and relaxed life he attained through his awakening experience.

Kiyozawa also described himself as a person who has fallen down to the ground and hit the dust. He described this with the Japanese term *rakuzai* that means, “I have dropped down and settled down at the bottom.” His difficulties that I discussed earlier and the guidance he received from his teachers shattered his sense of self-importance. In one of his essays, he says the following:

Both our anguish and grief exist because of our sense of self-importance. If we have already lost our sense of self-importance, we do not feel anguish and grief. If we have already lost it, we do not mind whether others despise or honor us, or whether they slight or respect us. We can do all things calmly, leaving others to respect or despise us as they like. (The Dharma Breeze, p. 152)

Kiyozawa says that if a person considers himself an important person, he must experience difficulties because of his sense of self-importance. However, if a person considers himself unimportant, he experiences fewer difficulties. The more important a person becomes, the more difficulties he experiences. The more self-attached a person becomes, the more he suffers.

Kiyozawa teaches us that human suffering is caused by a wrong view of the self. In Buddhism, no other people are responsible for the problems in our lives. How we view our self determines whether we live a life filled with difficulty or an easy and relaxed life filled with joy and gratitude.

Conclusion

I have first discussed the importance of self-examination. We must have the right view of the Self. Buddhism teaches us that the main cause of the difficulties in our lives is ignorance of the True Self. No other people are responsible for our difficulties. We are creating them ourselves. All our problems originally come from the fact that we are ignorant of the True Self.

I have discussed the differences between “what we think we are” and “what we truly are.” Shakyamuni teaches us that the True Self is “conditionally arisen” and that it is empty of anything permanent, independent and autonomous. This realization is a tremendously humbling experience and at the same time a tremendously liberating one.

We like to think we are important. But Buddhism teaches that all of us are not so important as we think we are. The True Self is not essentially good or inherently evil. A narcissistic pride in our “accomplishments” is no more warranted than an egotistical shame in our “evil” ways. Both pride and shame are deluded forms of self-love. Thus, Shinran Shonin said, “If certain conditions prompt us, we will take all kinds of actions” (*Tannisho*, Chap. 13).

Buddhism teaches us that we should know the reality of the self, the limitations of the self. It teaches us that if we know the truth of “conditional arising,” the truth of selflessness, of the emptiness of the self, we can experience tremendous liberation—liberation from our self-love.

Selflessness is certainly a negative truth, a cold and sobering truth. It is a truth that is difficult for us to take. And it is certainly a humbling experience to know the truth of selflessness--the emptiness of the self. But when we know the emptiness of the self, we can experience tremendous liberation. We can live our lives in an easy, relaxed, and peaceful way. We are liberated from overestimation of the self, from our sense of self-importance, and from our self-love.

A Ghost Story

—From “What We Think We Are” to “What We Truly Are”—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to talk about the importance of having the right view of the Self. Specifically, I want to talk about the difference between the wrong view of the self and the right view of the Self.

Buddhism is nothing but self-examination. It teaches us that having the right view of the Self is the most important thing in our lives. However, knowing the True Self is not an easy task. The difficulty exists because we think we already know the True Self and don't feel the need to examine it. But Shakyamuni teaches us that although we think we know the True Self, we are totally ignorant about it. He teaches us that if we do not have an accurate view of the Self, the entirety of our lives is deluded and in vain.

Shakyamuni teaches us that there are two ways of viewing the self. The first is based on “what we think we are”; and the second is based on “what we truly are.” He says that the first view is the wrong view of the self and the second view is the right one. Thus we must move from the first view to the second view—from what “we think we” are to “what we truly are.”

Shakyamuni teaches us that in the first view of the self, we think we have some permanent, independent, and autonomous substance within us. He says that we must examine the self and know that the True Self is nothing but a collection of causes and conditions, and that it is not permanent, independent, and autonomous.

In his Enlightenment Shakyamuni recognized the truth of “conditional arising.” Thus he realized that his entire being was “conditionally arisen,” that his body and mind were nothing but a collection of causes and conditions.

For example, I am standing here. I have my body and mind. My body (my physical existence) is nothing but a collection of causes and conditions. It consists of air, water,

and all kinds of food I have eaten. Am I not here because I have eaten things such as meat, fish, rice, and vegetables? Aren't those things forming my body? Myriad causes and conditions are forming my body. All kinds of things outside my body happen to come together here, forming what is called my body. Apart from those things outside myself, there is nothing called my body. My body could not exist even a few minutes if air or the heat of the sun did not exist.

Further, I can say the same thing about my mind. Is my mind nothing but a collection of causes and conditions that happen to come together here? Does it not consist of conditions that came from outside myself? My mind is nothing but a collection of myriad ideas given to me by my parents, teachers, friends, and books I have read. If those people and books had not existed, my mind as presently constituted would not exist.

Although we may consider our bodies and minds independent and autonomous, they are actually not so at all. All kinds of conditions, all kinds of things and people, are forming our bodies and minds. Our existence is totally dependent upon causes and conditions. This is the truth (Dharma) that Shakyamuni discovered when he attained Enlightenment. He teaches us that seeing the self as something "conditionally arisen," as a collection of myriad causes and conditions, is the right way of seeing it. Since we blindly love the self, we believe that there is some kind of independent and autonomous substance within it. But Shakyamuni tells us that it is wrong to think so and that the True Self is a collection of ever changing conditions.

Now I have explained how Shakyamuni moved from the wrong view of the self to the right view of the Self—from "what he thought he was" to "what he truly is."

A Ghost Story

Every time I hear Shakyamuni talk about the truth of "conditional arising," I think of a movie that I saw when I was a ten-year old boy. I was born in 1946, one year after the end of the Second World War. During the ten years after the war, the Japanese made some movies that were connected with the war. The movie that I want to talk about is one of those. It left such a strong impression on me that I still remember it. Although I have forgotten the title of the movie, it has stayed in my memory. It was about the ghosts of Japanese soldiers who died on an island in the South Pacific.

The story goes like this. Not long after the end of the war, the ghosts of dead soldiers get together and decide to go back to Japan. The movie starts with a scene of a ghost train traveling over the ocean toward Japan. Then, the train finally reaches the Tokyo station. The dead soldiers come out of the train. They are quite excited, because they have finally made it back home.

This movie consists of stories about the homecoming experience of several ghosts. I vividly remember one of them. This story is about a young soldier who died in the war. Let's call him Mr. A. Immediately before Mr. A went to war, he got married. So while he was fighting in the war, he was always thinking about his wife. Now the ghost of Mr. A is going home. He is so excited about his homecoming. Now he can see his wife!

When Mr. A arrives at his home, he enters the house. He finds things there that were familiar to him. Then, he discovers his wife in the house. He is so happy. He speaks to her, but she cannot hear his voice because he is a ghost.

Then gradually Mr. A notices something—that there are things in the house that he has not seen before. He sees a man's shoes, shirts, and trousers. He starts to think, "These shoes and shirts are not mine. Does a man live here with my wife?" Then a little later, a man enters the house. This is Mr. B. Mr. B was Mr. A's best friend when Mr. A was alive. Mr. A wonders, "What is Mr. B doing here in my house?" Mr. B enters the house without even knocking on the door. He directly goes to Mr. A's wife, who is in the kitchen. The woman says, "Well, Mr. B, honey, have you come back from your work?"

Now Mr. A realizes that his wife and Mr. B are married. This is a surprise—a tremendous surprise for Mr. A, because his wife used to hate Mr. B when Mr. A was alive. Mr. A wonders, "How come, how come she is married to Mr. B? When I was alive, every time I wanted to invite Mr. B to our house, she used to tell me, "Mr. A, don't invite Mr. B. I don't like him. I feel very uncomfortable with him. So, please don't invite Mr. B to our house."

Now, to Mr. A's surprise, his wife is married to Mr. B. And they seem to be a real nice couple. They are talking intimately. Then, Mr. A notices that his wife and Mr. B are talking about him, about Mr. A.

His wife says to Mr. B, "Mr. B, I love you very much. I am so happy to be married to you. I should not say something like this about a dead person. But, to tell you the truth, Mr. B, I did not love Mr. A so much when I was married to him. I was unhappy with him. Mr. B, even when I lived with Mr. A, I loved you more than I did Mr. A. I did not love him so much."

When Mr. A, the ghost, listens to what his wife is saying, he is so shocked, so upset. He is so disgusted. He says, “*Kuso!*” (which is a Japanese word for BS) and “*Kono-ama!*” (a Japanese word for “Bitch”). He wants to kill his wife, but since he is a ghost, he cannot exert any power over her. He wants to kill himself and die, but since he has already died, he cannot die again.

So, filled with anger, Mr. A rushes out of the house. He thinks, “Terrible, just terrible! I cannot stay here—in a place like this. I better go back to the ghost train.” Thinking this way, he goes back to the ghost train. Then, to his surprise, he notices that many ghosts have come back to the train. He asks other ghosts, “My friends, why are you here? Why do you look so sad and depressed? Haven’t you had a good time visiting your homes, your relatives?” Then, those ghosts answer, “No, Mr. A, we went back to our homes, but we have learned that all of our relatives have totally forgotten us. They are living their lives without us. They don’t need us any more. We have learned that we no longer have any place in their lives.”

Then all the ghosts agree that this world is no place for them to stay. They say to each other, “We better leave.” They enter the train and the train starts to move over the ocean again. The movie ends with the same scene with which it started.

My Comments on the Ghost Story

This movie is a comical one, but we cannot simply laugh at it. It gives me the chills, because it teaches us a scary truth—a cold and sobering truth. Are we any different from Mr. A? Are we existing in this world as something substantial, as something solid, as something independent and autonomous?

This movie shows us a truth that is deeply hidden in our existence: that although we believe that we have something permanent, independent, and autonomous within us, we don’t. Although we consider ourselves important and indispensable in this world, actually we are not.

This movie about ghosts makes me think of the experience I have every time I go back to Japan. In recent years I occasionally go back to Japan. Whenever I do, I feel as if I were Rip Van Winkle. Since I have been living here in the United States for the last forty years, Japan now seems to me like a foreign country.

I no longer have any established *place* in Japan. My relatives and friends are living their lives without me, without any direct connection with my life. I feel as if I were a ghost there; I feel like Mr. A in the movie. When I used to live in Japan over forty years ago, I thought I was important there. But now I cannot find my self that used to be there forty years ago. Some forty years ago, I had *my place* in Japan. But now I cannot find any of *my place* there.

When I realize that I no longer find my self and *my place* in Japan, I cannot help wondering, “Did I really have *my place* in Japan forty years ago? Was it not an illusion that I thought I was important and had a *place* there?”

The ghost in the movie was shocked to learn that he did not have any more *place* in this world. When Mr. A was alive, he thought he was an important and indispensable person for his wife. Now, after he died, he realized that he was not so important and indispensable as he thought he was. The importance that he thought he had was an illusion—all in his mind.

Having experienced the emptiness of my self in Japan, I cannot help wondering, “Although I have been living here in the United States for the last forty years, do I really have *my place* here? It is true that I am doing something that I consider important here. But is it not an illusion to think that I have a *place*, an established *place*, here? Am I seeing my self correctly as it is? Is my sense of self-importance not an illusion? Am I not over-estimating my self?” As far as the basic manner that we exist in this world goes, we are not so much different from Mr. A, the ghost. Although we are convinced that we are important and indispensable, we are not so important and indispensable as we think we are. The truth is that we do not have the permanent, independent, and autonomous self that we think we have.

This is certainly an awfully cold and terrible thing to say. But I believe that this is what Shakyamuni understood when he recognized what he truly was. He realized that the independent and autonomous self that he thought he had did not exist—it was his imagination. He clearly distinguished between imagined reality and true reality.

Shakyamuni described the true reality of his being with the word “selflessness.” He teaches us that the independent and autonomous self, or the important self, that we think we have is an illusion. He teaches us that there is nothing we can grasp and possess in this world. Although we are proud of our ability to control things and people, the fact is that conditions are enabling us to control things and people. We do not have any independent and autonomous power to control things and people. If we think we have

any independent and autonomous ability to do things, we are wrong. All the things we are doing are realized by causes and conditions. Although we like to take credit for all our good actions, we cannot do so. Most of the credit should go to the good conditions that enable us to do good actions. We can say the same thing about all the evil actions we take. Shakyamuni tells us that we cannot take so much credit for whatever we do. When Shinran said, “If certain conditions prompt us, we will take all kinds of actions,” he meant the same thing.

A Zen Saying, “A Mountain is a Mountain...”

Now I want to discuss three sentences that Zen teachers often discuss to explain Buddhism. They are as follows:

- (1) Before you study Buddhism, “A mountain is a mountain.”
- (2) When you study Buddhism, “A mountain is not a mountain.”
- (3) When you master Buddhism, “A mountain is again a mountain.”

I think I can rephrase these three sentences in this way:

- (1) Before you study Buddhism, “What I think I am is what I think I am.”
- (2) When you study Buddhism, “What I think I am is not what I truly am.”
- (3) When you master Buddhism, “What I truly am is what I truly am.”

The first sentence describes the common way we think of the self: we think we have some kind of independence and autonomy. We live our lives on the basis of that idea.

But when we start to study Buddhism, the common notion of the self is challenged. We are told that “what we think we are” is not “what we truly are.” Although we think we have some kind of permanence, independence, and autonomy, some kind of substance within us, Buddhism teaches us that we are nothing but conditionally arisen beings, a collection of causes and conditions. Apart from conditions, there is nothing to be called me. “I” (or my name “Haneda”) is a name temporarily given to a collection of conditions. I am empty of any permanent, independent, and autonomous substance. The substance that I think I have is nonexistent. I am devoid of any substance.

The second sentence challenges our common notion of the self as permanent, independent, and autonomous. Buddhism tells us, “‘What you think you are’ is not real. ‘What you think you are’ is different from ‘what you truly are.’ Awaken to ‘what you truly are!’”

Then, the third sentence, “A mountain is a mountain,” means that when we clearly understand “what we truly are,” we live our lives knowing “what we truly are.” We live our lives knowing that we are nothing but a collection of conditions, nothing more and nothing less. We live our lives knowing the limitation of our being, without overestimating the self.

Conclusion

I have said that we must have the right view of the Self. Buddhism teaches that the main cause of the difficulties in our lives comes from the fact that we are ignorant of the True Self. No other people are responsible for the difficulties we have in our lives. We are creating our own difficulties. All our difficulties originally come from the fact that we are ignorant of the True Self. We just don’t know “what we truly are.” We are overestimating our own abilities. We must know “what we truly are.” Knowledge of the True Self will eliminate the problems that we create in our lives.

I have talked about the difference between “what we think we are” and “what we truly are.” Shakyamuni teaches us that the True Self is “conditionally arisen” and that it is empty of any permanent, independent, and autonomous substance. He teaches us that we are not so important and indispensable as we think we are. He teaches us that if we know “what we truly are,” we can experience tremendous liberation. We can live our lives in a world of liberation and freedom.

If we know that the causes and conditions that form us are quickly moving and changing, we cannot be too serious about the Self. If we know that everything in us is temporal, changeable, and ephemeral, we cannot be too serious about the Self. If we know how we truly exist, we may be able to laugh at ourselves. We can be liberated from the idea that we are important. And we can live our lives in such a relaxed way, in such a liberated way.

For some of us, the idea that we are important is the basis of happiness. But insight into the emptiness of the self can give us much greater joy.

Selflessness is certainly a negative truth, a cold and sobering truth. It is a truth that is difficult for us to take. It is certainly a humbling experience to know selflessness--the emptiness of the self. But selflessness is a fact—it is undeniable reality. Shakyamuni just

teaches us what is true and what is not. If we know what is true, we can experience tremendous liberation. We can live our lives in a relaxed and peaceful way.

(April 8, 2013)

Notes:

On July 26 (Fri.)–28 (Sun.), 2013, we will hold the Maida Center summer retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. The two speakers, Dr. Nobuo Haneda and Rev. Patti H. Nakai, will speak on “A Danger in the Pure Land: Introduction to the *Kyogyoshinsho*.” The information and registration form are found on page 10 of this newsletter.

DVD sets of the Maida Center summer retreat of the last several years are now available. Each set is \$50 including handling/postage. CD sets are also available. Each set is \$20.

Every Saturday (2:00–5:00 pm) we hold a study class at the Maida Center. We are now studying Shinran’s *Shoshin-ge*. Everyone is welcome to attend. (T.H.)

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