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Priorities in Life

—The Teachings of Tolstoy, Dogen, and Kiyozawa—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss the importance of setting the right priorities in our lives. Buddhism teaches us that all human beings have the aspiration to seek truth, to seek the meaning of life, and that the most important thing in life is to have this aspiration awakened within us. If we awaken it and live our lives with the sole objective of fulfilling it, then we have found the greatest way to live.

Buddhism teaches us that the aspiration to seek truth, or the meaning of life, is the desire to live in the world of truth, transcending the pettiness of one's being. But this is not easy to do because our concerns with small everyday matters overshadow this great aspiration.

So how is it possible to awaken this aspiration? It can be done in the following manner. First, we must gain insight into the truth of impermanence and the transience of life. If we gain this insight, we become serious about seeking truth, the true meaning of life. If we become serious about seeking truth, we have the chance to meet true teachers, individuals who have fulfilled the aspiration, and hear their words. If we meet true teachers and hear their words, they awaken the aspiration within us. I don't think we can awaken it by our own efforts, because our own efforts to awaken the aspiration to transcend the petty self are based upon the same petty self that must be transcended. Our teachers' words alone can help us to awaken the aspiration.

Although people know that the aspiration to seek truth is important in their lives, many of them don't think that it is *the* most important matter. They think that many other concerns, such as their families, work, and social obligations, are equally or more important. There is no denying that those other matters are important, but the importance of seeking truth must be the paramount concern.

Our teachers are constantly telling us that since life is very short, we should not waste our time and should focus our attention on seeking truth. But, many people do not listen to them. They come up with all kinds of excuses for not doing so. Some say, "I am now busy with my work. When I retire, I will have more time and will study the Dharma." Others say, "I am now busy taking care of my family. If I get less busy in the future, I will study the Dharma." However, very few of them actually study the Dharma even if they are relieved of those responsibilities. To my sadness, I have met many people who, facing their imminent deaths, said, "What is the use of all the things I have been doing? What is the true meaning of my life?" or "I don't know why I did not study the Dharma more seriously. I should have listened to the Dharma more often." Saying words like these on one's deathbed seems to me the greatest tragedy in life.

If we are serious about Buddhism as well as about our lives, we must set our priorities right. We must focus on seeking truth. The Bible says, "First, seek the righteousness of God, and other things will be added to you." If I rephrase this sentence in a Buddhist way, it is "First, examine the self by hearing the Dharma, and all of your problems will be solved."

In this essay I will discuss three teachers, Leo Tolstoy (a Russian novelist, 1828-1910), Dogen (a Japanese Zen master, 1200-1253), and Manshi Kiyozawa (a Japanese Shin teacher, 1863-1903). Each taught the importance of setting the priorities right in our lives. They all had deep insight into the shortness of their own lives, seriously studied under their teachers, and fulfilled their aspiration to seek truth, the meaning of life. They teach us that seeking truth is the most important thing in life and we must devote our entire lives to it.

Leo Tolstoy

Before I discuss Tolstoy's life and religious ideas, let me talk about how I started to read his books. When I was a high school student, I attended a Christian church. One day, I attended a study class for young adults in the church. There were several high school boys and girls. During this class, a cute girl asked me, "Mr. Haneda, what novelist do you like best?" This was a tough question for me, because in those days I was interested only in baseball and fishing. I was not academically inclined at all; I had not read any significant books. But a really cute girl was asking me the question. I had to impress her. So, I seriously thought, "What have I read, what have I read?" Then, I remembered that I had read one short story by Leo Tolstoy. So, I told her, "I, of course, like Leo Tolstoy. He wrote *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*." (Although I had never read these novels, I knew he wrote them.) She was very much impressed. So it was okay at that time. But it was not okay after that, because she thought I was a specialist on Tolstoy and started asking me questions about him. So, I had to read Tolstoy. Initially I forced myself to read him. But, I gradually started to love him. So after one year had passed, I was more in love with Tolstoy than with that girl. So, in college I chose Russian as my major. I wanted to become a translator of Tolstoy.

Tolstoy is generally known as a novelist, but it is less known that he was a deeply religious person. Many people respect Tolstoy as one of the greatest spiritual leaders of the world. Here let me give an outline of Tolstoy's life. His life could be divided into two periods. I call the first period, his life before age fifty, "the artistic period" and the second period, his life after age fifty, "the religious period."

The first period is the time in which Tolstoy wrote many books as a novelist. In his late thirties he wrote *War and Peace*; in his late forties he wrote *Anna Karenina*. The second period is the time in which he seriously studied the various religions of the world and wrote many religious works. Let me discuss how Tolstoy moved from the first period to the second. In his late forties, particularly when he was writing *Anna Karenina*, he started to have doubts about his life as an artist and about the way he had been living. This resulted in a spiritual crisis. When he was around fifty, he experienced a spiritual conversion. When he was fifty-one, he wrote *My Confession*, in which he talks about the spiritual crisis he experienced in his late forties and his subsequent conversion to religion. Thus the writing of *My Confession* marks the beginning of his second periods.

In this second period, Tolstoy's religion was mainly based on the Bible. Thus many people consider him a Christian. But he was not a Christian in the normal sense of the word. During a couple of years in his mid-fifties (which were the prime time of his life) he devoted himself to serious study of the different early versions of the Bible that were written in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Then, he came to the conclusion that so-called Christian theology was a total deviation from the original teaching of Jesus. He claimed that people added "church" doctrine to Jesus' original teaching. Tolstoy wrote a voluminous work entitled *Criticism of Christian Theology*. In consequence, he was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church. He considered Jesus a human teacher, not a divine savior. He did not believe in any of the miracles or sacraments that the church fathers taught. He believed that all major religions of the world taught the same truth. He hated religious labels and studied from all great spiritual teachers.

Now let me discuss the contents of *My Confession*, in which Tolstoy talks about his spiritual crisis and subsequent conversion to religion. In his forties Tolstoy had almost everything a human being could hope to have. He had strong physical and mental stamina. He was a count, one of the highest ranks in the Russian aristocracy. He had a good family, a loving wife and many children. He had tremendous wealth and fame. As I said earlier, he had already written *War and Peace*. But when he encountered the deaths of his close relatives in his forties, he started to tremble before the prospect of his own death. He felt the emptiness and meaninglessness of his life. He could not find any significance in what he had been doing. He says in *My Confession*,

In the middle of my concern with the household, which at the time kept me quite busy, a question would suddenly come into my head: "Very well, you will have 16,200 acres in the Samara province, as well as 300 horses; what then?" And I was completely taken aback and did not know what else to think... Or in the middle of thinking about the fame

that my works were bringing me I would say to myself, “Very well, you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Moliere, more famous than all the writers in the world—so what?” And I could find absolutely no reply... If not today, then tomorrow sickness and death will come (indeed, they were already approaching) to everyone, to me, and nothing will remain except the stench and the worms. My deeds, whatever they may be, will be forgotten sooner or later, and I myself will be no more. Why, then, do anything? How can anyone fail to see this and live? That’s what is amazing! It is possible to live only as long as life intoxicates us; once we are sober we cannot help seeing that it is all a delusion, a stupid delusion! Nor is there anything funny or witty about it; it is only cruel and stupid.

(*Confession* Leo Tolstoy, trans. David Patterson, pp. 27-30.)

Faced with the reality of his own inevitable death, worldly goods like wealth and fame for which he had been living his life up to that time became totally meaningless. He no longer could enjoy anything he used to enjoy. He even thought about committing suicide. One of the most memorable parts of this work is an old Eastern fable he describes. He compares himself to the traveler in the fable, who gets into an impossible predicament. He writes,

There is an old Eastern fable about a traveler who was taken by surprise in the steppes by a raging wild beast. Trying to save himself from the beast, the traveler jumps into a dried-up well; but at the bottom of the well he sees a dragon with its jaws open wide, waiting to devour him. The unhappy man does not dare climb out for fear of being killed by the wild beast, and he does not dare jump to the bottom of the well for fear of being devoured by the dragon. So he grabs hold of a branch of a wild bush growing in the crevices of the well and clings to it. His arms grow weak, and he feels that soon he must fall prey to the death that awaits him on either side. Yet he still holds on, and while he is clinging to the branch he looks up to see two mice, one black and one white, evenly working their way around the branch of the bush he is hanging from, gnawing on it. Soon the bush will give way and break off, and he will fall into the jaws of the dragon. The traveler sees this and knows that he will surely die. But while he is still hanging there he looks around and sees some drops of honey on the leaves of the bush, and he stretches out his tongue and licks them.

Thus I cling to the branch of life, knowing that inevitably the dragon of death is waiting, ready to tear me to pieces; and I cannot understand why this torment has befallen me. I try to suck the honey that once consoled me, but the honey is no longer sweet. Day and night the black mouse and the white mouse gnaw at the branch to which I cling. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey has lost all its sweetness. I see only the inescapable dragon and the mice, and I cannot turn my eyes from them. This is no fairy tale but truth, irrefutable and understood by all.

The former delusion of the happiness of life that had concealed from me the horror of the dragon no longer deceives me. No matter how much I tell myself that I cannot understand the meaning of life, that I should live without thinking about it, I cannot do this because I have done it for too long already. Now I cannot help seeing the days and nights rushing toward me and leading me to death. I see only this, and this alone is truth. Everything else is a lie.

The two drops of honey which more than anything else had diverted my eyes from the cruel truth were my love for my family and my writing, which I referred to as art; yet this honey had lost its sweetness for me. (pp. 30-31)

Tolstoy identifies himself with the miserable traveler who is in a totally helpless predicament. In *My Confession* he honestly describes his uneasiness, confusion, and depression. He describes the agony of finding no meaning in his life. He admits that he has been living his life in the wrong way. He says that although he has behaved like a teacher of humanity by writing books like *War and Peace*, he actually did not know anything.

In *My Confession* Tolstoy does not talk about any conclusion or answer he has reached. He honestly admits that he cannot find any answer to the question of the meaning of life. But, we can feel that he is standing on the threshold of a new life. We can feel that a new Tolstoy, a person who embodies the spirit of a true student and seeker, is being born. Although I cannot remember the source of the following statement, he said, “Although I cannot say what God is, I can say that I am truly alive when I am seeking God or the meaning of my life.”

One of my favorite works of Tolstoy is entitled *The Path of Life (puti jizni)*. It consists of many quotes from the writings of dozens of the world’s great thinkers. After his conversion, Tolstoy studied many great religious thinkers. Collecting many passages from the writings of those teachers, which he considered important, he classified them into categories such as “God,” “Love,” “True Religion,” and “False Religion.”

The Path of Life was not published until after his death. It was not designed for the public, but for his self-reflection. This work shows that he lived his life as a constant seeker, as a humble student. He kept on endlessly hearing the words of great teachers of the world. *The Path of Life* reminds me of the *Kyogyoshinsho*, the main writing of Shinran. The *Kyogyoshinsho* also consists of many quoted passages from Buddhist scriptures and from the writings of Shinran's predecessors. It was not designed for the public, but for Shinran's self-reflection. It was his study notebook, or a record of his learning. It shows that Shinran was nothing but a constant seeker, a humble student.

Tolstoy taught me that since life was short and could end at any moment, I had to set my priorities right in my life. He taught me that I must recognize the meaninglessness of many things that I was doing and focus my attention on the one important issue of seeking the meaning of life. He also taught me the importance of learning from many of the world's religious teachers.

When I read Tolstoy's religious works, I was deeply shaken by them. I could no longer enjoy the things I used to enjoy, things such as watching movies and television programs and playing sports. Although I still enjoyed studying subjects such as history and English, I totally lost interest in scientific subjects such as math, chemistry, and biology. The latter seemed quite dry and lifeless. At my high school, I organized a small group that studied Tolstoy's religious ideas. At the Christian church I was attending, I criticized the resident Christian minister on the basis of Tolstoy's religious ideas. In retrospect, I cannot help smiling at how I was a passionate "Tolstoyian" in those days. Such a great teacher, he was my first love. I am deeply grateful to him for guiding me in the early years of my religious quest.

The Zen Master Dogen

Next, let us quote the Zen Master Dogen's work entitled *A Primer of Soto Zen (Shobogenzo Zuimonki)*, a record of Dogen's words by Ejo, his disciple. In this work, the Zen master gives many wonderful instructions to Buddhist beginners. I have found the following instruction especially meaningful:

Our teachers frequently warn: "Do not spend time wastefully" and "do not pass your time in vain." Students today should grudge every moment of time. This dewlike life fades away; time speeds swiftly. In this short life of ours, avoid involvement in superfluous things and just study the Way.

People nowadays say: "It is difficult to discard my obligations to my parents," or "It is difficult to disobey the orders of my master," or "It is difficult to part from my wife, children, and relatives"... Thinking in this way, they join the worldly pursuit of wealth and property, without separating from masters or parents and without severing their ties with their wives, children, and relatives. With their whole lives wasted, they will have only regrets when they face the end.

Sit calmly and consider the principles of Buddhism; and quickly determine to arouse the mind that seeks the Way. Masters and parents cannot give you enlightenment. Wives, children, and relatives cannot save you from suffering. Wealth and property cannot free you from the cycle of birth and death. The ordinary people of the world cannot help you. If you do not practice now, claiming you are without the capacity, when will you ever be able to attain the Way? Single-mindedly study the Way without giving thought to the myriad things. Don't put it off until later. (*A Primer of Soto Zen*, pp. 83-4, with modification by N. H.)

Here Dogen talks about the importance of gaining insight into the truth of impermanence and the shortness of life. He says that if we have clear insight into the shortness of life, we will certainly start to seek the Way. He tells us that there is only one crucial matter in life; it is seeking the Way, seeking the meaning of life. Compared with it, all other things are of no consequence.

Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa

To further show the importance of establishing the right priorities in our lives, let me cite Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa's words from his "Indispensable Conditions for Religious Conviction." In this article he discusses what we should bear in mind when we embark on the religious path. He says,

What is religious conviction? Although it can be described in many ways, religious conviction is the inner peace gained by relying on that which transcends man. An awakening of religious concern in a person who has hitherto been indifferent to religion is an expression of disenchantment with the mere world of man. Such a person is of two minds. He is disenchanted with the world, yet inevitably bound up with it. It is as if he

were trying to step forward while stepping backward. How can he manage to stand firm?

Religion is not a path to follow to become a good man in this world. It is a path reaching beyond man. To proceed along the path one must become independent of worldly things. Those who have actually traveled along the path of religion would never say that we can attain religious conviction while being dependent on this world. To say so is a gross contradiction. Hence, I recommend that anyone who is sincere about religious conviction should completely detach himself from all forms of dependence...

It does not matter where we are physically—at home or in the mountains, working in a store, going fishing or hunting, studying in school, or serving in the military. The only crucial matter is that we, *in our minds* (emphasis by N. Haneda), should be independent of our homes, jobs, families, friends, country, education, and knowledge, and single-mindedly take refuge in the spirit of the Buddha. It is fine if we marry, eat fish, have wealth, and enjoy prestige and knowledge. It is also fine if we do not. It is fine to be at home or in the mountains. The only important thing is that the true seeker of religion should not be distracted or disturbed by such concerns. He should be reliant solely upon the spirit of the Buddha.

(*December Fan*, pp. 20-23)

In many places in his writings, Rev. Kiyozawa says that Buddhism is nothing but a teaching of self-examination. The true starting point in Buddhism must mean focusing exclusively on taking refuge in the spirit of the Buddha. After hearing the Buddha's words as transmitted through our teachers, we are able to begin the process of true self-examination.

Kiyozawa explains the essence of Buddhism, saying, "Religion is not a path to follow to become a good man in this world. It is a path reaching beyond man." He also emphasizes that one must first separate oneself from matters of secondary importance. He says that this separation is not so much physical separation from things such as homes, jobs, and families as mental separation from them. He says, "The only crucial matter is that we, *in our minds*, should be independent of our homes, jobs, families..."

Kiyozawa describes "the indispensable conditions" for one's becoming a true seeker of the path. He says that one must move from a life with sundry objectives to a life with one objective.

Conclusion

We are deeply immersed in our daily lives. We are living in a dreamland that we have created on the basis of our desires and attachments and our fears and aversions. Without being able to distinguish between the real and the false, we are thinking that our dreamland is real. Living complacently in it, we do not question it. Although in reality our death could take place any moment, we are living our lives in complete denial of this fact.

Buddhism teaches that we all have the aspiration to seek life's truth, meaning, and fulfillment. It also teaches us that although we all have this aspiration, we are not even aware that we have it because it is so deeply hidden within us. Although it is very difficult to awaken this aspiration, it can indeed be awakened. If we gain insight into the shortness of life, we readjust our priorities and for the first time become serious about our lives. If we become serious about our lives, we increase the likelihood of meeting, recognizing, and appreciating true teachers. We are able to hear their words and know that they are meant for us. If we meet teachers and hear their words, these words will awaken the aspiration within us. We cannot help realizing that the most important thing in our lives is seeking truth, the meaning of life. Then, we cannot complacently stay in our lukewarm way of living. We start to travel the path of seeking truth.

Until the deepest aspiration is awakened within us, we cannot feel at ease. Until we start to travel the path of truth seeking, we cannot experience the deepest joy. When we experience uneasiness, anxiety, and depression, we hate them. But, these same negative feelings could be a sign of birth pangs, a sign indicating that our deepest aspiration is struggling to be born. These feelings could be the start of a process leading us from our deluded and dreamlike world to the true and real world. They could be showing us the process by which we transcend the pettiness of the self and realize the dynamic and creative life of a constant student, a constant seeker.

I have talked about three teachers, Tolstoy, Dogen, and Kiyozawa, all of whom teach us to set the priorities right in our lives. They all recognized the shortness of their own lives and taught us the importance of whole-heartedly seeking the meaning of life.

To Criticize Or Not to Criticize?

—The Buddhist View of Criticism—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss the Buddhist view of criticism. First, I pose a question, “Is it proper for Buddhists to criticize others?” I answer: “Not only is criticism proper for Buddhism, it is essential to it. We should not be afraid of criticizing others. And we should not be afraid of being criticized by others, in return.” The saying goes: “You cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs.” Likewise you cannot reach the world of wisdom without first critically cracking the hard shell of the delusion of the self and others.

Some people may contradict me, saying, “We should not criticize others in Buddhism. Buddhism talks about peace and harmony. Criticizing others is a negative action that disturbs peace. We should avoid such disruptive practices.” This view may sound plausible, but our Buddhist teachers do not support it. Our teachers lived in a world of peace, but they attained peace only as a result of serious criticism and negation of the self and others. If people think they attained peace without going through that process, they are wrong. Peace that is attained without going through a critical and negative process is not deep Buddhist peace but a false and superficial denial of our innermost contradictions. Without criticism we are merely putting a Band-Aid on the deep wound of human existential suffering.

All great spiritual teachers considered criticism of the self and others extremely important. For example, Shakyamuni taught us that all people are full of deep ignorance. Because of this ignorance, everything in human life, be it happiness or unhappiness, peace or chaos, is a form of difficulty or suffering (*duhkha*). He said that unless this basic ignorance, the cause of difficulty, is identified and eliminated, there is no solution to human suffering. Thus he taught us that we should examine the self and recognize the mistake we are making. He also taught us that it was only after this serious examination, criticism, and negation of the self that perfect peace (nirvana) could be attained. Thus he harshly criticized those who lived in lukewarm peace or complacency without recognizing and eliminating their ignorance.

In the Bible, Jesus also criticizes the lukewarm peace or complacency that people desire to maintain in their lives. He said, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law.” (Matthew; 10:34-5, *Revised Standard Version*) Jesus is called the prince of peace. But the prince of peace said that he did not come to bring peace to this world, but a sword. In many places in the Bible, Jesus harshly criticizes people such as scribes and Pharisees. Thus Jesus, too, taught people that they could attain true peace by using criticism to negate delusion. Delusion must be challenged, not simply placated. Further, Buddhist thinkers, such as Nagarjuna, Shan-*tao*, Shinran, and Dogen, and western philosophers, such as Socrates, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, were all harsh critics of their contemporaries.

The idea that criticism is no good because it disturbs peace is a shallow idea. Here is an example: A chick that desires to stay in the warmth of its eggshell would say, “Here in my eggshell, I find peace and comfort. No one should break it. Destroying it is a negative thing to do. Peace is precious, so no one should destroy my eggshell.” If the chick thinks this way, it will never experience birth; it will never grow to be an adult bird.

If we think like this chick, we are committing spiritual suicide. We will never be able to experience spiritual birth in the wonderful world of the Dharma. Just like our physical birth, our spiritual birth is accompanied by the birth pangs that come from the destruction of established values. If we desire to experience spiritual birth, we must go through profound examination, criticism, and negation of the self. We must doubt and examine our established values. If we are afraid of criticism and negation of the established self, we will never be able to experience the birth of the new self—birth in a new spiritual world.

Two Types of Criticism: Non-Buddhist Criticism (One-Way Criticism) and Buddhist Criticism (Two-Way Criticism)

I have said that criticism is very important in Buddhism. Now I want to point out that there are two types of criticism: non-Buddhist criticism and Buddhist criticism. I call non-Buddhist criticism “one-way criticism” and Buddhist criticism “two-way criticism.” Let me explain.

In non-Buddhist criticism (one-way criticism), the criticizer criticizes only others, never his own self. He has a “right” position to which he is attached. If he perceives that the position of others is different from his own, he judges them to be wrong. Looking down on others from a privileged position, he evaluates and criticizes them.

On the other hand, in Buddhist criticism (two-way criticism), the criticizer criticizes not only others but also his own self. Here the criticizer is not attached to his own absolutely “right” position from which he can evaluate and criticize others. The basis of his criticism is not his own “right” position but the Dharma (the universal truth of impermanence, the truth that everything is constantly moving, changing, and flowing). This insight into the Dharma enables him to see the mistake that all human beings, including him, are making. He knows that the Dharma equally criticizes and negates the mistakes of all human beings. He totally bows his head before the Dharma. This is Buddhist criticism (two-way criticism), in which the criticizer criticizes both the self and others on the basis of the Dharma. In daily life we either fail to judge at all or falsely make ourselves into the final judge. In the court of Buddhism both the self and others are defendants and only the Dharma is the true judge.

When people criticize others, their criticism is usually the first type of criticism. They have their own justified positions on the basis of which they judge and criticize others. We seldom see people practicing Buddhist criticism, in which the criticizer criticizes not only others but also his own self.

An Illustration That Shows the Difference between the Two Types of Criticism

Here is a further illustration of the difference between non-Buddhist and Buddhist criticism:

Imagine there are four circles, A, B, C, and D. They contain different shades of grey. A is 20% grey, B, 40% grey, C, 60% grey, and D, 80% grey. Assume that these four grey circles symbolize four types of human beings. Circle A symbolizes a person who is 20% defiled, circle B a person who is 40% defiled, circle C a person who is 60% defiled, and circle D a person who is 80% defiled.

First let’s look at it from the perspective of non-Buddhist (one-way) criticism. Mr. A looks at the other three people, Mr. B, Mr. C, and Mr. D. Mr. A believes that he is totally clean. On the basis of the idea that he is clean, he compares himself with the others. Then he criticizes the others, saying, “You guys are so dirty. Why don’t you recognize your defilement and clean it?” Although Mr. A also is defiled, he does not see it and criticizes only the defilement of others. Since he is criticizing others one-sidedly, I call his criticism one-way criticism.

Now let me talk about Buddhist criticism, two-way criticism. Suppose Mr. D meets with Mr. X, a person who is not defiled at all. Since Mr. D has met Mr. X, he gains insight into total cleanliness or purity. Mr. X’s cleanliness enables Mr. D to clearly see the defilement of all four people. This is like four grey circles being placed on a completely white paper. The whiteness clearly shows the greyness of all four circles.

Having encountered Mr. X’s whiteness, Mr. D recognizes his own defilement. He becomes ashamed of it. At the same time, he knows that the other three people share the same defilement. So he tells them, “You are thinking that you are clean, but you aren’t. You must recognize your own defilement.” Here Mr. D is not judging others with the idea that he is clean—from a self-righteous position. He is not comparing himself with others and saying that he is clean and others are defiled. He is saying that Mr. X’s whiteness is challenging and criticizing the defilement of all four people. This is two-way criticism, in which Mr. D criticizes not only others, but also himself.

The “White Background” That Shows Human Defilement

Here the crucial issue is whether we gain insight into the Dharma, the white background, that clearly shows our defilement. Without having the white background, our criticism will be non-Buddhist criticism, one-way criticism. When we have the white background, we can see the defilement of both the self and others. And we can examine and criticize it. So exactly what does the white background represent in Shin Buddhism? In Shin Buddhism the white background is called Dharmakara’s spirit or the Innermost Aspiration (Hongan). Dharmakara’s spirit symbolizes the Dharma, the truth of impermanence. Encountering this spirit is the most important thing in Shin Buddhism. It makes possible our liberation.

The *Larger Sutra*, the textual basis of Shin Buddhism, describes Dharmakara’s spirit. It says that Dharmakara initially meets his teacher and awakens aspiration to become a Buddha. Having received from his teacher instruction to continuously seek the Dharma, Dharmakara takes up the practice called “eternal practice” in which he visits innumerable Buddhas and learns the Dharma under them. He endlessly deepens his respect for those Buddhas. When he perfects the spirit of a humble and dynamic student, he becomes a

Buddha by the name of Amitabha (“Limitless Light [or Wisdom]”). This name means that Dharmakara has become a perfect student who can seek light (or wisdom) limitlessly.

Dharmakara symbolizes perfect studentship, an endlessly seeking and learning spirit. In other words, he embodies the Dharma, the truth of impermanence, which means the dynamic and creative flow of life. His perfect studentship, his humble and dynamic spirit, is the personification of the truth of impermanence. The sutra presents his spirit as something totally pure and undefiled as well as being totally true and sincere. This spirit is the white background that clearly shows all human defilement. When we encounter it, we cannot help recognizing our own defilement. This way, we experience total negation of the self.

Now let me talk about how Shinran experienced liberation by meeting the white background. When Shinran was twenty-nine, he met his teacher Honen. In this meeting he encountered Dharmakara’s spirit, the white background, which Honen embodied. Dharmakara’s spirit that he saw in Honen showed him all the impurity within him.

Shinran talks about the importance of having the white background that challenges and negates his good and pure religious self. In his *Kyogyoshinsho* Shinran quotes the following passage from Shan-tao’s writing,

I find that all beings, an ocean of multitudes, have since the beginningless past down to this day, this very moment, been evil and defiled, completely lacking the mind of purity. They have been false and deceitful, completely lacking the mind of truth and reality. Thus, when the Tathagata [i.e., Dharmakara], in profound compassion for the ocean of all sentient beings in pain and affliction, performed bodhisattva practices for inconceivable millions of measureless kalpas, there was not a moment, not an instant, when his practice in the three modes of action was not pure, or lacked this true mind. With this pure, true mind, the Tathagata brought to fulfillment the perfect, unhindered, inconceivable, indescribable and inexplicable supreme virtues. The Tathagata gives this sincere mind to all living things, an ocean of beings possessed of blind passions, karmic evil, and false wisdom. This mind manifests the true mind of benefiting others.

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 95)

By quoting this passage Shinran indicates that Dharmakara liberates human beings by giving his pure (or true) mind. By doing so, Dharmakara wants to negate the old self and realize a new self in human beings. In other words, by giving his pure mind, the white background, Dharmakara wants to make human beings recognize the deep defilement in their minds and the impossibility of saving themselves through their own efforts because of it. This is total negation of the old self. At the same time, when human beings totally lose their faith in their own capabilities, Dharmakara wants them to see his pure mind arising from behind their ego-consciousness. This is the birth of the new self, the Dharmakara self, in human beings.

Having encountered Dharmakara’s spirit in Honen, Shinran saw the deep defilement in his own mind. Before he encountered Dharmakara’s mind, Shinran thought he had something good and pure within himself. But now his faith in himself was totally shattered. Shinran said, “Since I am incapable of performing any religious practices [that enable me to eliminate my defilement], hell is my only home.” Shinran realized that he did not have any purity at all and felt deep shame. This was total negation of his good religious self.

However, Shinran’s recognition that he could not find any good religious self within himself immediately led him to his liberation. When he lost faith in himself, recognizing his religious consciousness as nothing but religious egoism, he could see a new awareness (or Dharmakara’s mind) arising from his latent consciousness—from behind his religious ego consciousness. Now Dharmakara’s mind occupied Shinran’s mind and started to guide him.

This is the shinjin (awakening) experience—the experience of spiritual death and rebirth—that Shinran experienced. He considered the shinjin experience the most important experience in Buddhism.

Shinran’s Criticism in His *Gutoku’s Hymns of Lament and Reflection*

I have discussed Shinran’s shinjin experience. This experience in which the white background clearly showed his deep defilement was the basis of his criticism of the self and others. Here in order to see a concrete example of this, let me discuss his work *Gutoku’s Hymns of Lament and Reflection* (*Gutoku-hitan-jikkai Wasan*). The word *hitan* that is translated here as “lament” literally means “sorrowful sigh or lament.” It connotes sympathetic criticism. It is not criticism in which Shinran takes a self-righteous position from which he judges and criticizes others, but criticism in which he criticizes both himself and others. Here Shinran is feeling sadness about the human weakness or fallibility that all human beings share. Thus in the first six of the sixteen hymns that form the work, Shinran criticizes himself, and in the remaining ten hymns, he criticizes his contemporaries.

Let me first cite the first three verses in which Shinran criticizes himself:

Although I have taken refuge in the true Pure Land way (*Jodo Shinshu*),
I do not have a true and sincere mind.
This self is false and insincere;
I completely lack a pure mind.

In outward bearing,
I make a show of being wise, good, and dedicated to everyone I meet.
But so great are my greed, anger, perversity, and deceit,
That I am filled with every kind of malice and cunning.

Extremely difficult is it to put an end to my evil nature;
My mind is like a venomous snake or scorpion.
My performance of good acts is also poisoned;
Hence, it is called false and empty practice.

Next, let me cite verses in which Shinran criticizes his fellow Buddhists:

As a mark of increase in the five defilements,
All monks and laypeople of this age
Behave outwardly like followers of the Buddhist teaching,
But in their inner thoughts, believe in non-Buddhist paths.

How lamentable it is that at present
All the monks and laypeople of Japan,
While pretending to follow Buddhist rules of conduct,
Venerate gods and spirits of the heavens and earth.

A mark of the evil of the five defilements
Is that the titles “monk” and “teacher of the Dharma”
Are used for the lowly and the vulgar
And have become derogatory terms.

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, pp. 421-423, with modification by N. H.)

Shinran concludes this work by saying, “The above sixteen hymns are my reflections, expressing my grief and lamentation. It is simply sad to see the monks of major temples and monasteries at present, whether high-ranking monks or ‘teachers of the Dharma.’”

This criticism of the contemporaries by Shinran is one of the harshest in Japanese Buddhist history. Here Shinran, having received total negation by the Dharma, Dharmakara’s spirit, first criticizes himself and then others. It is important to know that his self-criticism is the basis of his others-criticism; it comes before others-criticism.

Should We Criticize Ourselves Alone?

If I say that we should criticize both ourselves and others, some people may contradict me and say, “Mr. Haneda, I agree with you that criticism of the self is important. But I don’t agree that criticism of others is important. Don’t you think that we should criticize ourselves alone and not criticize others?” This view appears plausible, but I do not think it right. As I said earlier, great thinkers of the world criticized the human delusions in both themselves and others. The authentic Buddhist path is not a narrow individualistic path. It is a path that we all travel together. That is why we say, “*together with all sentient beings* I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, the Buddha, and Sangha” when we recite the Three Refuges. True self-examination is true others-examination, and vice versa.

When we become Buddhists, we become members of the Sangha. We grow together as a group. Buddhist learning is a collaborative effort. I do not believe that those who study the Dharma all by themselves, engaging in meditation or reading books without having any Dharma friends, can understand the true Dharma. Their understanding is too subjective.

As a member of the Sangha, we should not be afraid of criticizing each other. If we see a mistake in our friends, we should point it out for them. At the same time, we should not be afraid of being criticized by others. Criticism of others is really but another and even deeper kind of self-examination. However the basis of this criticism must not be a narcissistic self-justified stance, but the Dharma, or the white background. The Dharma challenges and criticizes the self and others. Being a member of the Sangha should not mean that we are constantly praising each other. We should forget about the flattery and compliments that are usually exchanged by secular people. If secular values control a Sangha, it is no longer the true Sangha; it is an extension of the secular world. If we always try to be polite and cordial to each other and do not challenge each other, we will just remain in a state of ignorance or delusion. We will never be able to transcend it.

Great spiritual teachers welcomed other people’s criticism. For example the Rev. Kanzo Uchimura (1861-1930, a Japanese Christian thinker) said, “Those who praise me are my enemies. Those who criticize me are my friends.” Rennyō Shōnin (1415-1499, the

eighth Shin abbot) said, “If you cannot criticize me to my face, please criticize me behind my back. Your criticism will eventually reach me.” These two teachers welcomed other people’s criticism as important teachings that enabled them to grow.

Conclusion

In this essay I have first discussed that some people think that since criticism is negative and destroys peace, Buddhists should never criticize each other. But we should not confuse the lukewarm peace of the secular world with the true peace that Buddhism teaches. True Buddhist peace is attained only as a result of serious self-doubt and self-criticism.

Next, I have discussed the two types of criticism—non-Buddhist criticism (one-way criticism) and Buddhist criticism (two-way criticism). I said that in non-Buddhist criticism, the criticizer criticizes only others. The basis of his criticism is his “right” position. But in Buddhist criticism, the criticizer criticizes both himself and others. It is the Dharma that criticizes all human beings and we are not allowed to possess our own “right” position from which we can criticize others.

Then I have discussed the importance of having the Dharma, the white background, as the basis of Buddhist criticism. In Shin Buddhism the Dharma, the white background, is Dharmakara’s spirit. When Shinran encountered it in his meeting with his teacher Honen, he experienced shinjin, the death of the old self and the birth of the new self. It was this shinjin experience that was the basis of his criticism. I have discussed Shinran’s criticism of himself and others, which we can see in one of his works.

Lastly, I have said that criticism of others is important because learning Buddhism is a collaborative effort. I emphasized the importance of becoming part of a Sangha in which we can welcome each other’s criticisms. The true Sangha is a place where we critically examine the self and others. It is a crucible in which we are challenged by the Dharma, and in which we experience serious self-doubt, self-examination, self-criticism, and self-negation. The true Sangha is not a place that is only designed for the enjoyment of warmth, comfort, and peace.

When we have a life threatening medical condition, we want our surgeon to use his medical wisdom and his scalpel, not just a kindly bedside manner and a Band-Aid. In Buddhism we talk about two forms of compassion: The first is the superficial and comfortable compassion of the Band-Aid. The other is the truly deep compassion of the critical scalpel. The first may feel good. The other is good.

Notes:

In 2014, we will hold the Maida Center summer retreat on July 25-27 at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. The speakers will be Dr. Nobuo Haneda and Rev. Patti H. Nakai.

On July 26–28, 2013, we held the Maida Center summer retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center.

The two speakers, Dr. Haneda and Rev. Nakai, spoke on “A Danger in the Pure Land: Introduction to the *Kyogyoshinsho*.” Forty-eight people attended it.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to the following individuals:

Mr. and Mrs. Roy Nakahara for creating DVDs and CDs of Dr. Haneda’s lectures.

Mr. Donald Bender, Mr. Steve Kaufman, and Mr. Paul Vielle for valuable suggestions concerning the two articles in 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 \$25.

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. We hope you welcome a wonderful new year. (T.H.)

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