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Seeing the Self in Its Entirety

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination. Our teachers, such as Shakyamuni and Shinran, devoted their entire lives to asking one question, “What am I?” Their teachings are nothing but answers to that question. What, then, is the goal of Buddhism? It is true self-examination. It is to attain awakening, a clear understanding of the self. This awakening is called enlightenment in Zen Buddhism and *shinjin* in Shin Buddhism.

Self-examination means seeing the self objectively in its entirety. But it is very difficult for us to see the self in its entirety because we are subjective and self-centered. Since we are deeply attached to the self, we cannot see it objectively. To see the self in its entirety, we must have an outside perspective. It is only by seeing the self through the Buddha’s or our teachers’ eyes that we are able to see the self in its entirety and transcend our narrow subjectivity. When we look at ourselves through our own eyes we see only the person that we want to see. This person may be an idealized good person or an idealized evil person, but it is never our entire self. It is only in the process of receiving the teachings of our teachers that we can glimpse the whole self.

In this essay I will first discuss the difficulty of seeing the self in its entirety and then give specific instances concerning how an outside perspective enables us to do so.

The Difficulty of Seeing the Self in Its Entirety

The difficulty of seeing the entire self can be compared to the difficulty of seeing our entire body. Can we see our entire body? No, we cannot. Although we can see parts of our body, such as our hands, arms, legs, and waists, we cannot see other parts, such as ears, necks, armpits, and backs. We cannot see our own eyes, either. Our eyes can see things and people outside ourselves, but they cannot see themselves.

We can say the same thing about our thinking. We can think about things and people outside ourselves, but it is not easy for us to think about our own thinking. Just as our eyes cannot see themselves seeing, our thoughts cannot think themselves thinking. At night a lighthouse gives forth bright illumination toward the ocean, but there is thick darkness at its base. Similarly there is darkness or a blind spot at the core of the thinking self.

Let me give you another example. Some time ago, I was driving my car at night. When I stopped at a red light, a pedestrian started tapping on the window of my car. Pointing his finger at the front part of my car, he told me, “One of your front lights is out.” After thanking him, I parked my car, went out, and looked at the front part of my car. Sure enough, one of the front headlights was off.

Then it occurred to me that all the while I was driving that night, the people outside my car knew that my light was off and I was the only person who did not know about it. Simply because I was inside the car, I could not see it. This incident taught me that the people outside me could see me better, more objectively, than I could see myself.

There is a story about three Zen monks, which teaches us the difficulty of seeing the self objectively.

One evening, three Zen monks decided to meditate together. They agreed that they would not speak a word during a two-hour meditation session. Then they started to meditate. About one hour later, a strong draft came into the room and blew out one of the

candles in the meditation hall. Having noticed it, one monk said, “Oh, the candle has gone out!”

Having heard this, another monk said, “Stupid! We are not supposed to talk!” Then, the third monk said, “Stupid, you guys spoke! I am the only person who has not spoken a word.” Thus all three monks could not keep their silence and could not recognize their own limitations as meditators. This story tells us that although we can see other people so well, we cannot easily see ourselves. We are so subjective and self-centered and so attached to the self that we cannot see ourselves objectively.

How Can We See the Self?

I have talked about the difficulty of seeing the self in its entirety. Then, the crucial question is “How can we see the self objectively in its entirety?” The answer is: we must have an *outside* perspective. So what does it mean to have an *outside* perspective?

Earlier I said we couldn’t see our entire bodies. Then, how can we see them? We can see them if we get a mirror, an *outside* perspective, which reflects our entire bodies including the parts that we cannot see simply by looking. Likewise, if we get “a spiritual mirror,” an *outside* perspective, which enables us to see the entire self, we can see the entire self. “The spiritual mirror” refers to our teachers’ teachings. It is only when we listen to our teachers’ words that show us what we truly are that we can see the entire self. Unless we go out of the self and take refuge in these teachings, it is impossible to see the self as an objective whole.

Our teachers were people who were awakened to the greatness of the Dharma and the pettiness of the self. When we receive their perspective and view the self from it, we also recognize the greatness of the Dharma and the pettiness of the self. The greater the Dharma becomes, the smaller the self becomes. This way, the process of self-examination endlessly deepens. The reality of the smallness of the self does not disappear; we recognize it more clearly. This deepening process is called transcendence of the self.

King David and Nathan

Here I want to discuss an Old Testament story about King David. I believe David could see his entire self through “a spiritual mirror” given to him by Nathan, a prophet.

When David became king, he had an affair with a beautiful woman by the name of Bathsheba. Bathsheba was the wife of Uriah, one of David’s generals. David had an affair with her while Uriah was off fighting in a war. When David learned that Bathsheba had conceived his baby, he ordered that Bathsheba’s husband be sent to the frontline of the fiercest battle. This was tantamount to giving him a death sentence. David felt no remorse for this. When Bathsheba heard about her husband’s death, she mourned for him. When the mourning was over, she became one of David’s many wives. But this selfish act of David greatly displeased God.

Consequently, God sent Nathan, a prophet, to David. The purpose of Nathan’s visit was to admonish the king. But initially Nathan did not challenge David directly. Instead, he told him a story. Nathan said:

There were two men in a city: the one rich, and the other poor. The rich man had many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb, which he had bought and nourished up; and it grew up with him. It was like a daughter to the poor man. One day a traveller came to the rich man. The rich man wanted to give a feast for the traveller. But he did not want to kill his own animal for the feast. So the rich man stole the poor man’s lamb, and killed it.

When Nathan told this story to David, the king became angry with the rich man. He said to Nathan, “That’s terrible. That rich man should be punished with death. He had no pity.” Then Nathan immediately said, “David, *you are the man!*” Nathan said, “You have killed Uriah and have taken his wife to be your wife.” Then, the king recognized the seriousness of the sin he had committed, and said, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

I think this Old Testament story demonstrates the importance of having “a spiritual mirror”—an outside perspective. If Nathan had admonished the king directly, saying, “David, you have committed a sin. You are foolish,” David could not have seen the self in its entirety and could not have recognized himself as a foolish sinner. If the prophet had directly challenged the king, the king would have become angry and defensive, saying, “Nathan, you may say so, but...” Still maintaining his self-pride and self-love, the king might not have been able to see the entire scope of his sin and foolishness. But the story of the rich man and the poor man enabled David to see himself clearly, objectively. Here “the

story” Nathan gave to David was “the spiritual mirror,” the outside perspective, which showed David his entire self.

A Businessman and a Zen Master

Here is another story that teaches us the importance of having an outside perspective. This is a story about a Japanese businessman and a Zen master.

One day a wealthy businessman visited a Zen master. Every time he had problems, he went to see the Zen master, who lived in a shabby mountain temple.

When the businessman arrived at the temple, he was led to the presence of the Zen master. As soon as he sat down before him, the businessman started to complain about his life. He said, “Oh, Zen master, please listen to me. My life is a mess. I have business problems. My workers are lazy, but they have organized a labor union and are constantly asking for wage hikes. My family is terrible, too. My wife is a compulsive buyer. She is wasting a lot of money. My children are totally spoiled. They do not respect me at all.” He kept on complaining and complaining. Twenty minutes, thirty minutes passed. He then said, “Oh, Zen master, I’m so unhappy. Please teach me how I can solve these problems. Please teach me how I can have peace in my life.”

Then the businessman raised his head and looked at the Zen master. The Zen master was not looking at him. He was not even listening to him. He was looking at a fly that was trapped in a frame of a *shoji* paper window. The fly was desperately trying to get out of the house through the paper window. But it kept on banging its head on the wooden frame of the window without finding any hole in it. The Zen master was intently watching it.

When the businessman realized that the Zen master was not listening to him, he was deeply disappointed. So, he somewhat sarcastically said to the Zen master, “Zen master, you really love watching that fly, don’t you? I’ve been talking about my problems, but you have not been listening—you have been watching a fly!”

Then, the Zen master responded, “Yes, poor fly! It’s desperately looking for a hole to get out of the paper window. But it cannot find it. It is struggling in a wooden frame, thinking it can find an exit in that particular frame. As you can see, this temple is poor and there are many holes in these window frames. But unfortunately the particular frame in which this fly is struggling does not have any hole. If this fly goes out of that frame and moves to other frames, it can easily find a way out. But it is firmly convinced that it can find a hole in that particular frame, so it keeps on banging its head on it. Poor thing! It has been doing this almost thirty minutes. If it keeps on doing this, it will die soon because it’s been hitting its head so hard. Don’t you think this fly is stupid and pathetic?”

Having listened to these words, the businessman said, “Yes, Zen master, you are quite right. What a stupid fly! It is firmly convinced that it can find a way out in that frame. But that’s impossible.” Then the Zen master immediately said, “Mr. Businessman, *you are the fly!*” When the Zen master said so, the businessman was astounded. Something hit him deeply. It is said that the businessman attained enlightenment at that very moment. That’s the end of the story.

Something wonderful happened to the businessman when the Zen master challenged him saying, “You are the fly!” At that moment, the businessman was able to see his self objectively in its entirety for the first time in his life. He was able to see his entire self thanks to “the spiritual mirror” that the Zen master held up before him.

The businessman was awakened to the fact that he was the fly that was struggling in the tiny exit-less window frame. He realized that he was seeking solutions to problems in a place where solutions did not exist—that he was seeking liberation in a place where liberation did not exist. He was seeking liberation in a world that he had created on the basis of his self-love. There was no way he could find liberation in such a self-centered world.

Thanks to the fly, thanks to “the spiritual mirror” of the Zen master, the businessman was able to see his self in its entirety. He was able to see objectively the folly of what he was doing and the pettiness of his self. He now learned his being able to view himself fully as a foolish, petty, and self-centered person was his liberation. It is called transcendence of the self.

The Encounter with My Teacher

Now let me talk about an experience I had when I was a senior at university. After I graduated from a high school in my hometown, Nagano, I entered a university in Tokyo. My life in Tokyo was quite depressing for several reasons. First, when I went to Tokyo, the city had serious pollution problems. Having come from Nagano, which was known as the Switzerland of Japan because of its natural beauty, I was repelled by the polluted air, dusty

trees, and dirty rivers of the big city. Second, I had come from a dysfunctional family. My father had gone through a couple of divorces when I was only a small child. This created some complicated family problems. Thinking about those problems made me depressed. Third, a girl whom I fell in love with when I was a sophomore committed suicide. It gave me a tremendous shock. Fourth, in 1969 when I was a senior, the Vietnam War was going on and the leftist student movement in Japan was at its peak. Radical students shut down our university for an entire year. There were many bloody confrontations between students and the police during that time.

I was supposed to graduate from college the following year. But, we did not know when the school would reopen. My classmates were saying, "Since our university is a national one, if the student strike lasts more than a year, the government might permanently close it down." It was a very confusing and chaotic time.

Since my university was closed and there were no classes for one whole year, I was stuck in my boardinghouse most of the time. I was like a worm secluded in a tiny cocoon. Inside the cocoon, I inhaled the same air that I had just exhaled. That air got stuffier and stuffier. The more I struggled to get out of the cocoon, the more suffocating the air became.

I felt nothing but self-pity. I was thinking only about myself. I kept saying to myself: "Poor me! Why must I suffer from such a miserable life?" I was so deeply immersed in my cocoon that I could not see myself from outside. I could not objectively see what I was doing. I was struggling to get out of the cocoon, but the very efforts I was making to get out of it made the cocoon thicker and thicker.

It was on one of those dark days that I went to a bookstore and found a commentary on Goethe's *Faust*. Shuichi Maida was the author of the book, but he was a total stranger to me. I bought the book simply because I wanted to know the outline of the story of *Faust*. When I read it, I was deeply moved not so much by the story of *Faust* as by what the commentator Maida had to say about it. To my surprise, he was interpreting *Faust* from a Buddhist standpoint. For the first time in my life, I became interested in Buddhism.

A new world suddenly opened up before my eyes. I still remember the refreshing and liberating feeling that I experienced. It is like a feeling that a person who has been looking down at the ground experiences when he suddenly recognizes the existence of the blue sky, the infinite space above him. I felt as if Maida were shouting at me, "Enough of your self-pity! Stop thinking about yourself, about your misery! Your cocoon is so stuffy and suffocating. Break out of it! You are seeking liberation in a world where liberation does not exist. Get out of such a tiny world!" I felt that Maida challenged and shattered my cocoon. In retrospect, I know that it was the turning point in my life.

Although I could not articulate at that time the quality of Maida's power that so challenged me, I can now say that it was the power of a humble seeker. Maida had deep respect for his teachers. He was bowing his head deeply before them, having recognized the pettiness of his being. He devoted his entire life to learning from them. It was his deep respect for his teachers that challenged me—a person who was consumed with self-love and self-pity. I now realize that from the time I encountered Maida, I have been studying his humble student spirit.

In meeting Maida, I gained an outside perspective from which I could see my entire self. When I was deeply immersed in my cocoon, I was not able to see its smallness and the pettiness of what I was doing. But Maida enabled me to see myself objectively. He was a mirror that reflected what I was doing. He showed me that I had been living in a cocoon that I had made on the basis of my self-love. I was desperately holding onto and identifying with a grain of sand instead of letting myself go to be one with a great beach.

I also realized that I was seeking liberation in a place where there was no liberation. We usually do not realize that the very world in which we live is the problem. We usually think that we have problems *inside* our world, and we attempt to solve them. But we do not realize that our world is itself the most serious problem.

If we seek solutions to problems within the wrong world, no matter what we may do, we will never succeed in solving them. No matter what efforts we may make, including discipline and meditation, we will never succeed in solving them. We are like a fisherman who is trying to catch a fish in a lake without fish. Unless we move from a lake without fish to one that does, we won't catch any fish. Unless we move from the world of our self-love to the world of the Buddha, we will never be able to experience liberation.

Conclusion

Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination, of seeing the self objectively in its entirety. Seeing the self objectively is very difficult. But it is not impossible. To see the self in its entirety, we must have an outside perspective, the Buddha's perspective. If we can see the

self objectively, we will recognize its pettiness. We will see the pettiness of the religious world that we have created on the basis of self-love. We will be able to laugh at it.

We must be awakened from our religious dream and from our attachment to the religious world of our making. Seen from the perspective of the Buddha, nothing in us is great. All our ideas about happiness, unhappiness, good, evil, right, and wrong are petty. If there is something wonderful and great, it is the Buddha's perspective or wisdom that shows us the reality of our being. Clearly seeing the self from that perspective is called transcendence of the self. It is called enlightenment in Zen and *shinjin* in Shin Buddhism.

We cannot thank our teachers too much for giving us their teachings. At the end of his *Shoshin-ge* verses, Shinran Shonin says, "Just entrust yourself to the words of these [seven] wonderful monks!" Shinran deeply knew that only the words of his teachers could save him. We also must listen to the words of our teachers very carefully.

A View from the Sky

Nobuo Haneda

Legend says that when Shakyamuni Buddha was born, he took seven steps and declared, "Above the heaven and below the heaven, I alone am most noble." Taking seven steps means transcending the realms of delusion. "The six steps" symbolize the six realms of delusion (i.e., the realms of [1] gods, [2] humans, [3] fighting spirits, [4] hungry demons, [5] animals, and [6] hell-dwellers). Thus staying within the six steps means staying within the realms of delusion and taking the seventh step means transcending them.

In short, the six realms symbolize our life that is based on self-love. Before we study Buddhism, we do not know that our life is based on self-love or self-centeredness. But as we listen to our teachers' words, we recognize that fact. This recognition, not elimination, of our self-love is called the transcendence of self-love.

Thus, by taking seven steps, the baby Buddha is telling us, "You must transcend the world of your self-love. Take a step out of that world and see it objectively. Then, you will recognize the smallness of the world you have created on the basis of your self-love."

Here let me talk about one incident that I experienced some time ago when my wife and I moved into a new house. When a married couple moves into a new house or apartment, they tend to have some arguments about the new place.

One morning, my wife and I argued about the things we should buy for the new residence. First, we argued about the color of the carpet. My wife said that we should get a brown carpet; I said that we should get a grey carpet. My wife thinks she has better taste than I do. So she told me, "You have bad taste. I have better taste than you." However, I believe I have better taste than she does. So I said, "Wow, I can't believe that you like such a color. You have bad taste." Then we argued about the color of the curtains. This was followed by a disagreement about the size of the table we wanted to have in the kitchen. She said she wanted to have a table that was smaller than the one I wanted. The more arguments we had, the more upset we became.

I was very much upset that morning. But I could not continue the argument, because I had to go to the San Francisco Airport to catch a plane. I was supposed to conduct a Buddhist seminar in Seattle on that day. So I rushed to the airport.

Then I went to the airport and got on an airplane. The plane started to take off. As the plane went up higher and higher, I looked down through the window. I could see the city of Berkeley. I could find the Berkeley university campus. Near the campus I could locate my house, which looked like a small dot. I thought, "Oh, I can see my house there." Then, I was suddenly hit by a strange feeling. I remembered my arguments with my wife. I said to myself, "What was I doing there in that house? Yes, I was arguing with my wife. About what? Yes, I was arguing about the colors of the carpet and curtains. I was really upset."

Now all those things, carpet, curtains, and furniture, which we were arguing about seemed so small and insignificant. All of our arguments about them seemed so ridiculous. They were important issues when I was in that house. But, now they seemed so small and insignificant. Now when I saw the house from the sky, the house looked so small. Everything in the house looked so small and unimportant.

Now I realized how selfish I was in that tiny house. I felt sorry about what I said to my wife. I thought, "It does not matter whether our carpet is brown or grey, whether our table is small or large." When I was in the house, I was in the world of self-love and self-centeredness. But I was not aware that I was in it. I thought, "Now I can see the pettiness of my world because I am outside of it. When I was in it, I could not see it. But since I am

outside of it now, I can see it clearly.”

Learning Buddhism means gaining an outside perspective, and the only perfect outside perspective is the Buddha’s perspective that allows us to see our self in all its grandiose pettiness. In practical terms, “an outside perspective” means the teachings of the Buddha and our teachers. It is only by listening to them that we can have a clear view of the self.

The fact that I live in a world of my self-love will never change as long as I live. I will never cease to argue with my wife because of my self-centered way of thinking as long as I live. But whether or not I have an outside perspective that enables me to see the pettiness of my self makes a tremendous difference. If I stay inside the self—the world of self-love—all the time, I cannot see it objectively. Inside the self, everything looks so precious and important. But if we receive Buddha’s perspective and see the self from outside, we can recognize the pettiness of the self. We can laugh at it. Recognition of the pettiness of the self is not only a sad experience but also a delightful one because we are receiving wonderful teachings of the Buddha and our teachers.

Victim or Perpetrator?

Nobuo Haneda

Shinran Shonin teaches us that we human beings are the same and that we share the same weakness and fallibility. In talking about the equality of humanity, he said, “We are like stones and pebbles” or “We are like weeds that grow vigorously from the ground.” These words mean that we are all ordinary people and no one is special. In talking about the human weakness and fallibility that we all share, he said, “If certain conditions are present, we will do all kinds of things.”

Although Shinran says so, it is difficult for us to think that all human beings are the same because we love ourselves and see other people from our self-centered perspective. We can easily see the terrible things other people are doing to us. But we cannot easily see the terrible things that we are doing to them. Even when we make the same mistakes as other people, we are lenient in judging ourselves and harsh in judging other people. We often consider ourselves victims and other people perpetrators. We seldom consider ourselves perpetrators and other people victims.

Thus Shinran Shonin would tell us, “All human beings are the same. We make the same mistakes. Don’t think that others are always doing terrible things to you and you seldom do those things to them. When you see others doing a terrible thing to you, look into yourself and learn that you are fully capable of doing the same thing to them.”

Here let me talk about a couple of incidents that made me think that I was not only a victim but also a perpetrator.

The first incident took place when I was invited to speak at a Buddhist retreat that was held some time ago in Hawaii. Everything at the retreat was wonderful. The retreat attendants were very friendly. They served delicious local food. The natural beauty that surrounded the retreat center was breathtaking.

But one thing made me wary. When night came, I was told that six Buddhist ministers including me were supposed to sleep in the same cottage. When I learned about this sleeping arrangement, a fear arose in my mind because I knew that there were some great snorers among Buddhist ministers. I was really worried about whether I could sleep well that night. For an invited speaker, having a good sleep before his lecture is very important. Anyway I had no choice and went to bed. A couple of young ministers climbed up on a bunk bed and slept over me. They looked like great snorers. Anyway I started to sleep, fearing that I might not be able to have a good sleep that night because of their snoring.

Next morning I woke up. I realized that I had a really wonderful sleep. I thanked Amida Buddha for it. With a pleasant feeling, I went out of the cottage to enjoy the nice fresh air. Then I saw two young ministers. They were the two ministers who had gone to sleep in the bunk bed over me on the previous night. They were coming out of their cars. I asked them, “You, guys, what are you doing there?” One of them told me, “Sensei, I hate to tell you this. But you are a great snorer. You snored so loudly that we could not sleep in our beds. So we slept in our cars.”

This incident taught me that although I was afraid of becoming a victim, a recipient of discomfort, I was actually a perpetrator, a giver of discomfort. Although we share the same humanity, we often consider ourselves victims and others perpetrators. This incident taught me that I was thinking of myself only as a victim; I never thought that I could be a perpetrator.

Let me talk about another episode. Once I was in an airplane sitting right behind a couple of mothers who were traveling with their babies. As soon as the plane took off, the two babies started to cry. I have heard that the sudden air pressure change in flight causes great pain in a baby's ears. At that time I was very tired and was hoping to sleep on the plane. However, the two babies were crying as if they were having a crying contest. They were crying and crying. So I could not sleep or rest at all. I felt sorry for myself. I felt that I was an unfortunate victim of crying.

Then I remembered the words that my parents said to me when I was a teenager. They told me that I used to be a terrible crybaby. This recollection made me think, "Now I think I am a victim of terrible baby-crying. But if I was a terrible crybaby, didn't I cause a lot of discomfort to those who wanted to have a quiet time on a bus or a train?" Then I realized that all human beings share the same karma. Although I never thought that I gave a bad time to others because of my crying, I must undoubtedly have done so. We human beings have reciprocal relationships. It is not right to think that we are always victims and others perpetrators. When we get the flu, we often say that I got this flu from such and such a person. But we seldom realize that we could be giving our flu to others. The fact is that just as we get the flu from others, we are equally giving it to others.

Conclusion

It is important to know that we are not only victims but also perpetrators. I have talked about two incidents concerning snoring and crying. I thought that I was always a victim of snoring and crying because I had never heard myself snoring or crying. But others could hear my snoring and crying. For them I was a full-fledged perpetrator.

Shinran Shonin was quite right in saying that all of us human beings are the same. We share the same human weakness and fallibility. We make the same mistakes. We cannot say that we are better than others. He teaches us that if we witness others' evil actions, we must know that we are fully capable of taking the same actions.

Notes:

We will hold the Maida Center summer retreat July 25 (Fri.) – 27 (Sun.), 2014, at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. The theme of the retreat is "Tradition and Creativity." The two speakers will be Dr. Nobuo Haneda and Rev. Patti H. Nakai. For the information and the registration form, see the last page of this newsletter.

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

Mrs. Kazuko Yakumo for donating many of her husband's books to our library.

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 three 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.