

DRAFT

“Self Esteem or Healthy Self: Does it Contradict the Buddhist Teaching of Non-Self?”

Oregon Buddhist Temple

Seminar

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Kenneth Kenshin Tanaka

Prof. Emeritus, Musashino Univ.; Chair, BDK English Translation Project of the Buddhist Canon;
former BCA. minister and former IBS Assoc. Professor and Assist. Dean

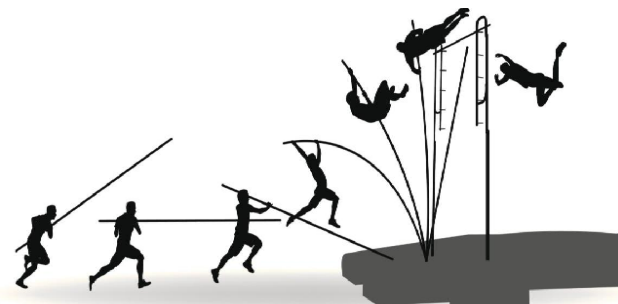
Aim of the Seminar

We are taught that one of the core Buddhist teachings is “non-self.” For many American Buddhists, that seems to go against our spirit of “individualism,” self-esteem, and “pulling yourself up by your bootstraps.” Some, therefore, think Buddhism is *too* pessimistic and passive. Also most people consider self-esteem to be a good thing, so we try to nurture it in our children. How, then, should we think about these seeming contradictions? This seminar will attempt to answer these pressing questions as Buddhism continues to make inroads into contemporary American society.

Foundational Passage

“Oh, how happy I am. My mind and heart are planted in the soil of Universal Vow [of Amida], and I allow my thoughts and aspirations to flow in the Inconceivable Dharma Ocean.” (Shinran Shōnin)

1. The Big Picture: The “Pole vaulting” Metaphor



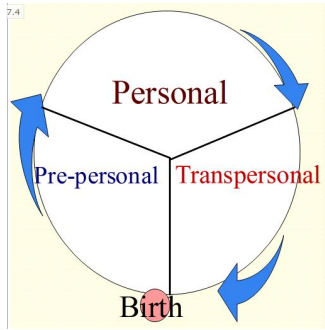
2. The *ultimate* goal of Buddhism:

- a. It is Awakening (realizing buddhahood, nirvana, *bodhi*, *shinjin*, *kenshō*, stream-enterer, etc.)
 1. Buddhism is a “Religion of Awakening”
 2. Awaken to the truth expressed in the metaphor of the “Wave and



the Ocean.”

- b. Traditional presentation fails to place the role of Buddhism within the overall framework of *the lives of contemporary people*. What has changed since ancient, medieval, and even pre-modern periods?
 1. The prominence of the *self* or the *individual*
 2. The reasons:
 - a. Longer life expectancy
 - b. Greater economic affluence
 - c. Better educated
 - d. Democratic values and individual rights
3. The emergence of psychology has given us a better understanding of our mental dimensions, especially with regard to human development.
 - a. Developmental psychology: Jean Piaget, Erik Erikson, Abraham Maslow, etc.
 - b. Pre-personal → Personal → Trans-personal: “Trans-personal”, which is preceded by the “Pre-personal” (infants, children) and the “Personal.”



Moriya Okano, *Jiga to Muga* (self and non-self), based on

Jean Piaget (Okano Sensei is a colleague with whom I co-founded an academic of Buddhism and Psychology in 2008; he is now suffering from Parkinson disease, so wish to dedicate my talk today to Okano Sensei, who enhanced my interest in the relationship between Buddhism and Psychology.)

- c. Awakening in Buddhism corresponds to the Trans-personal phase.
- d. Psychology deals primarily with the Pre-personal and the Personal phases
 1. Three kinds of Psychology: Behavioral, Psychoanalysis, and Humanistic (or Trans-personal).
 2. Psychology and the various therapies and counseling are concerned with helping us to function effectively as members of a society.
- e. Self-esteem or healthy self is needed for our wellbeing.
 1. Self-love or self-esteem is needed to function well in life, especially social life.
 2. “Individuation” – a psychological process whereby a child develops a a distinct identity and sense of self. (Carl Jung)
 3. Better able to cope with adversity. Have a more positive outlook on life.
 4. Without it, a person struggles with feelings of inadequacy, lack of confidence, and even self-hatred. Narcissistic persons suffers from low self-esteem.

4. Basic difference between Buddhism and Psychology

- a. An interesting “happening” at the founding of the Japanese Association for the Study of Buddhism and Psychology in 2008.
 - b. “Attachment”
 - 1. Psychology has a positive meaning.
Attachment nurtures self-love or self-esteem in the infant/child.
 - 2. Buddhism has a negative meaning
Attachment (= Three Poisons or G.A.S.) leads to suffering.
@No attachments!
5. The teaching of “non-self” or “no self” in Buddhism is meant to foster *non-attachment to the self or ego*. This can be seen in the phrase, “Not taking ourselves too seriously.”
- a. “Non-self” or “no self” does not mean that the self *doesn't exist* in the *ordinary, everyday, conventional* sense.
 - 1. My initial misunderstanding about this teaching during my early high school years, when I went around thinking “Ken Tanaka doesn't exist”!
 - 2. The Buddha in his last sermon admonished us to “Make yourself the Lamp and make the Dharma the Lamp.”
 - 3. Virtually all Buddhist sutras begin with the phrase, “Thus, I have heard.”
 - b. “Non-self” (*anātman*) means that I am *not* a completely autonomous and an unchanging self (*ātman*). Instead, we are conditional since we are sustained by conditioned that involve others: people, other beings, and inanimate things in nature. Further, we are constantly changing physically and mentally. We are like a wave in the ocean!
 - 1. The wave cannot exist separate from the ocean.
 - 2. The wave is constantly changing.
 - c. This means that we experience suffering because we cannot *fully control* what happens to us. While a healthy self or self-esteem is needed to function as a social being, it contains suffering because the self becomes old, gets sick, and inevitably dies.
 - 1. And healthy self or self-esteem does, indeed, involve pride (*māna*),

which is one of the blind passions along with the Three Poisons that Buddhism rejects as obstacles of Awakening.

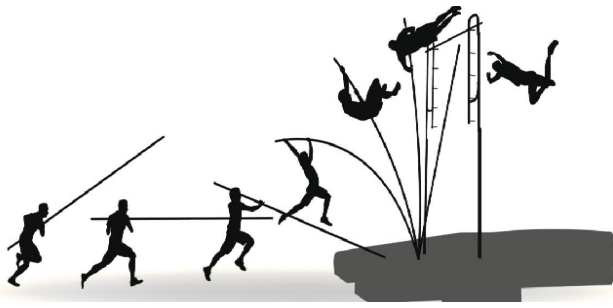
@ G.A.S. + P. (=pride) → G.A.S.P.

2. Shakyamuni Buddha and Shinran Shōnin experienced this suffering to an enormous degree.
 3. So, they began to search for solutions to overcome their suffering.
- d. When they finally realized their answer, it included our need to “let go of the self” or “let go of the ego.”
1. In our Pole vaulting metaphor. This is essential in order to go over the bar, which represents Awakening.
 2. If the pole represents our attachment to the ego, one must let go of the pole.

6. Metaphor of “Pole vaulting”

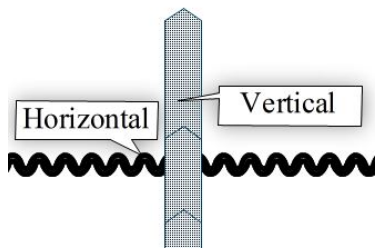
- a. Dashing with the pole = Pre-personal and Personal phases
The importance of a healthy self is likened to a pole vaulter dashing and utilizing the pole. This is the Personal stage.
- b. Awakening in Buddhism is likened to completing the effort to go over the bar. (The 3rd Trans-personal stage).
- c. Not everyone seeks or succeeds in going over the high bar.
 1. Some of them strive to go over *lower* bars in keeping with their interests and abilities.
 2. And still others do not go over any bar but simply proceed forward *under* the bar.
 3. Buddhist temples include members who are all of the above, so need to keep that in mind when running the organization.

@B-Buddhists



7. Without a healthy self or self-esteem, one finds it difficult to correctly understand Buddhist teachings and even misuse them to cover up their inadequacy.
- a. “Spiritual Bypassing”: Using religious or *spiritual* teachings to *bypass* or cover up their psychological inadequacies. For example, those with weak self-esteem use the teaching of “non-self” to go to the extreme in serving others while forgetting one’s own needs.
 - b. If a person suffers from mental “issues” stemming from childhood abuse, narcissism, and self-hatred they would have a more difficult time.
 1. Buddhist psychologist John Welwood’s client who suffered from childhood abuse.
 2. The client needed therapy *before* pursuing her Buddhist practice.
 - c. During Second World War some Buddhists in Japan purposely misappropriated the “non-self” teaching to promote the idea of “destroying the self to serve the nation” (*messhi hōkō*).
 - d. “Must have the self in order to get rid of the self.” A view of many American Buddhist psychologists.
 1. Thus, what I see as the traditional Buddhist attitude of negating even the “healthy self” needs to be placed in the context of understanding the importance of healthy self or self-esteem.
 2. Placing this in the context of our metaphor, we need a healthy self or self-esteem to give us that *velocity* to climb up. The velocity generated by the dash and the strong pole represents the healthy self, which facilitates our ability to go over the bar.

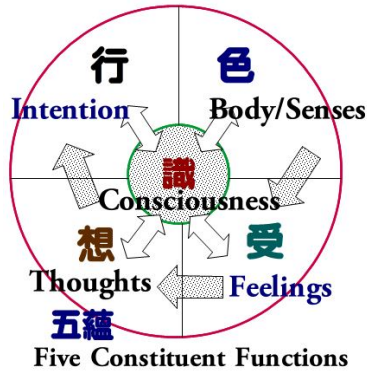
8. Nevertheless, the Buddhist teachings can also support us in the developing of healthy self or self-esteem. In fact, this is the premise of our Dharma school and the existing of our temples. This is especially true in the U.S., which differs somewhat from Japan.
- a. Moral and ethical teachings: Example, “Golden Chain” and the “Six Paramita or Perfections.”
 - b. Teachings that help us to live more in accord with the realities of life: impermanence and interdependence.
 - c. The metaphor of the “Wave and Ocean”
9. The difference between difficulties and suffering.
- a. Basic premise of Buddhism
 - b. Horizontal: the objective world; what happens to us
 - c. Vertical: the subjective realm; workings of my mind; how I receive and respond to what happens on the horizontal level



“Difficulties are mandatory, but suffering is optional.”

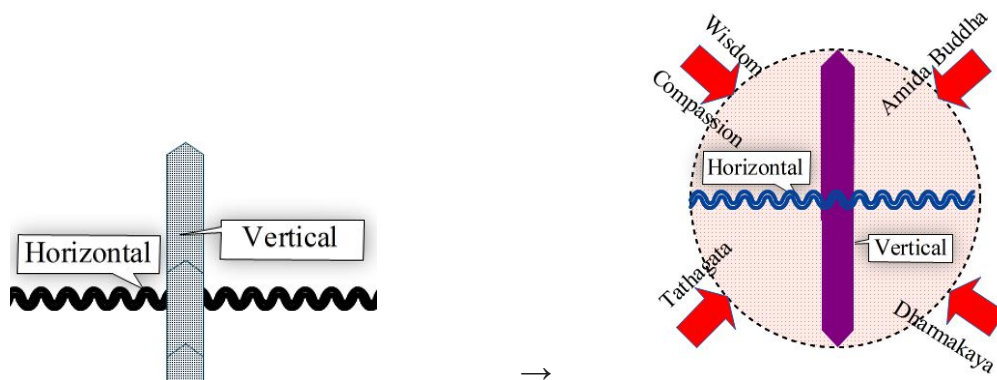
@ “Sacred” words from a graffiti in a public toilet wall!

10. The Five Constituent Mental or Subjective Functions (*skandhas* or aggregates)
- Being more aware of my mind fosters wellbeing.
 - Letting go of ego-centered feelings, thoughts, and intentions to lessen suffering for myself.



11. Amida Buddha, Other Power, or the Vow Power

- Being ordinary foolish beings (*bombu*), we are unable to *fully* (sometimes, not even a little) live up to the Buddhist ideals.
- In Shin Buddhism, our Awakening (*shinjin*) is guaranteed for we are already within the realm of Amida's Vow Power.
- If the Ocean is Amida's Vow Power, we are *already* embraced by the Ocean and will continue to be part of the Ocean even after the wave disappears to help produce new waves!



12. In Closing

- Self-esteem or healthy self that Psychology recognizes does *not contradict* the teaching of “non-self” or “letting go of the self” that Buddhism advocates. They

are qualities found at *two different stages* of human development toward flourishing and wellbeing. They, in fact, can be seen to form an *integral set*.

- b. The two represent the ingredients for human mental flourishing and spiritual wellbeing. In the Pole vaulting metaphor, self-esteem or healthy self *is needed* in one's dash – carrying the pole – towards the bar, while *letting go* of the attachment to the self is needed to go over the bar. So, the healthy self is important in order to clear the bar.
- c. While self-esteem or healthy ego are necessary to function well *socially in the world*, it is limited for it cannot deal with the difficulties and suffering that come from changes, such as those of illness, aging, and death.
- d. This leads some people to seriously seek a resolution through Buddhism, as we saw with Shakyamuni Buddha and Shinran Shōnin. They become *models* for us Buddhists as we seek to emulate what they accomplished.
- e. However, there are people, even among Buddhists, who do not feel the extreme suffering and, thus, not feel the urgency or need to go over the bar. They may very well make the dash but just continue to run *under the bar* while still leading a Buddhist life focused on morality and ethics as represented by the “Golden Chain.” They should continue to be encouraged to clear the bar, but such people should be included as valuable for our Sangha.
- f. The failure to nurture a self-esteem or healthy self can make it difficult to *correctly or sufficiently understand and appreciate* the Buddhist teachings.
- g. Even if Awakening in Buddhism represents the “higher” stage in human wellbeing, the Buddhist teachings can foster and enhance the quality of the Personal stage and, thus, one's self-esteem and healthy self. It can also nurture a greater desire for Awakening at the next stage.

- h. At the Personal stage, we can benefit from the Buddhist teachings, such as impermanence, interdependence, and compassion. As tangible examples of such teachings, we focused today on 1) the metaphor of the “Wave and the Ocean,” 2) the difference between difficulties and suffering, 3) observing the mind using the framework of Five Aggregates, and 4) the workings of compassion, which we call “Amida’s Vow”

“Oh, how happy I am. My mind and heart are planted in the soil of Universal Vow [of Amida], and I allow my thoughts and aspirations to flow in the Inconceivable Dharma Ocean.”