

SELF NATURE

An Introduction to Zen Training Omori Sogen pp. 174-177

Our self-nature realized in enlightenment is neither splendid nor blessed. It is no-nature. That is to say, it is empty. Ayusmat Nagarjuna⁸ writes in his Madhyamikasastra to the effect that “things which come into being through the operation of Buddha Mind have no self-nature. Things without their own self-natures are empty. They are empty because of their no-self-nature.”

I am sorry if I seem to be imposing my personal opinions on you, but that is not my intent. What on earth is self-nature then? Self-nature is said to be a perpetually constant and unique controller, which is expressed by the following Japanese phrase, “joitsu shusai.” “Jo” of “joitsu” means “eternal constancy;” “itsu” means “only one and not two;” “shusai” is “to control and decide.” Thus, “joitsu shusai” should mean the “eternal, unchangeable, and unique ruler.”

What the term “no self-nature” suggests is that the true mind is free from any fixed idea of such an entity as self-nature. In other words, self-nature may not be found anywhere except in the perpetually changing and moving forms of things in which it is concretely embodied.

We are commonly apt to confine ourselves within the scope of our five-foot bodies and fifty-year life spans. But, in fact, our five-foot bodies and fifty-year life spans are supported by an innumerable number of lives. In a very commonsense way of speaking, my parents gave birth to me, and their parents in turn gave birth to them. If I trace back my life to its very origin in this way, I have two parents, four grandparents, eight great-grandparents, and so on. If we assume that one human generation lasts twenty-five years, I may be viewed as the one hundred and twenty-first generation springing from a man and woman of three thousand years ago. If the number of my ancestors included in 121 generations is calculated, it amounts to the tremendously large number of 26,549 followed by 32 zeros.

It would seem impossible, even for a computer, to compute the overwhelmingly great number of the ancestors of all the human beings in this world dating back to their very origin. Supported by so many lives of human beings of the past, for the first time I exist here and now in “my five-foot body and fifty-year life span.” For this reason, I can safely say that the whole of the human race is embraced in this single life of me. What is true is that there is no “I” which is a purely independent ego that has a fixed self-nature. It is because of our attachment to our fixed self-recognition that “the other” antagonistically comes into being. And from our mutual opposition and antagonism stem various conflicts in the wretched life of ordinary men of the world.

However, if, in our quiet self-reflection, we turn our mind’s eye from the external world to the internal life to realize our true self-nature we will clearly understand that the true nature of our Self, which we thought up until now had a fixed, real existence, is in fact no self-nature. Because we have no self-nature, there is neither self nor other. In the absence of self and other, there cannot be such passions as joy, anger, sorrow, and pleasure, all of which arise from

the dualities of self and other. All things, just as they are in their very essence of no self-nature, function without any hindrance in freely flowing transformation.

This is the true condition of life and the reality beyond dualism. But dualism as such, even if it is originally the same as theorization, suggests nothing but the division of the whole. Therefore, it is natural that dualism is connected with analysis and abstraction that result in the death of living things. I think that what Master Hakuin means by his words “beyond dualism” is that it is not only we, who transcend such playful dualism, but also all other things in their own no self-nature that are in operation according to their selfless essence.

The gate of the oneness of cause and effect is opened. The Way is straight, Being neither two nor three.

In the form of no-form, we go and return

Nowhere but here.

In the thought of no-thought, we sing and dance
To the voice of Dharma.
The sky of boundless samadhi is vast!
The illuminating full moon of the Fourfold Wisdom will shine. What then should we see?

Now that Nirvana is realized here and now,
This place is none other than the land of Lotus Flowers. This body is none other than a Buddha.

In connection with discipline and proof of enlightenment, people in general believe mistakenly that discipline (cause) precedes enlightenment (effect). However, upon sincere contemplation we come to realize that the effect called enlightenment, even if it infinitely varies in degree, is inconceivable apart from the cause called discipline. I cannot help but say that the accumulation of causes as such is the effect. To speak more precisely, this is so because our very wish for spiritual discipline contains the essence of our original Buddhahood. Looking at it essentially, cause is none other than effect.

It must be in the samadhi of Mahayana Buddhism that the oneness of cause and effect, as well as the oneness of discipline and proof, is unmistakably realized. This is because when we are in

samadhi, we transcend the distinction between the cause called discipline coming before in time and the effect called enlightenment coming after. Cause and effect are thus brought into one, as in the saying that if we sit for one moment we are Buddhas for one moment, and if we sit for one minute we are Buddhas for one minute.

Thus, the realization of our own true self-nature does not mean the acquisition of hitherto unknown knowledge of ourselves, but the renunciation of the hardened mass of delusion called our egos which we have borne so tenaciously up until now until we could hardly stand its weight. If satori is the experience we have the moment we renounce our egos and become one with the universe, that moment, needless to say, is when cause and effect are brought into one.

This state of being is termed the dropping of body and mind. As long as we are well integrated and liberated from body and mind in our everyday actions, each of our actions, however trivial it may be, will

fully reveal the original nature of ourselves. “The clear wind arising in every step of our feet” directly alludes to the Absolute. Hence, it must be said that the Way is straight, being neither two nor three.” Body and mind, liberated from tenacious delusions, still retains the same body limited to “five feet” in height. However, this body reveals the Buddha-nature, being the concrete embodiment of the Absolute. It has the form without form. In other words, it is “in the form of no-form.” It is exactly what Master Dogen means by the following poem:

The colors of the mountain,
The echoes of the valleys,
As naturally as all other things,
All embody the voice and the form Of our Shakyamuni.