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# The Dharma Breeze

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## The True Self

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### Introduction

Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination, and the goal of self-examination is discovery and realization of the true self. The realization of the true self is the most important thing in Buddhism. In this essay I want to discuss the following four issues concerning the true self. First, I will discuss Shakyamuni's view of the true self. Second, I will explain the meaning of the true self in Shin Buddhism, in the teaching of Shinran Shonin. Third, I will emphasize the importance of realizing the true self in our lives. Fourth, I will discuss how the true self can be realized in our lives.

### Shakyamuni's View of the True Self

If I mention the words "true self," some people may wonder how I can reconcile it with "selflessness" (or the absence of a self) that Shakyamuni teaches. The concept of the true self and that of selflessness seem contradictory. But actually there is no contradiction.

Here it is important to know that Shakyamuni talks about two types of selves: the ego-self and the true self. When he teaches selflessness, he is talking about the absence (or non-reality) of the ego-self. The ego-self refers to the self that we mistakenly consider permanent, substantial, and autonomous because of our attachment to it, or because of our ignorance of the Dharma of impermanence (i.e., the truth that all things are constantly moving and changing). Shakyamuni, however, tells us that the true self—the self that is one with the Dharma of impermanence (i.e., the self that is constantly moving and changing)—does exist.

When Shakyamuni attained enlightenment, he clearly understood that all things were impermanent and the self that he thought permanent did not exist. He realized that his true self was part of the Dharma of impermanence—that it was nothing but a constantly moving and changing flow of life. Thus, having identified himself with the Dharma, he started to live his life as a constant seeker and learner. He realized that the dynamically seeking and learning self was the true self. Without being attached to any fixed values and without being complacent with whatever he attained, he kept on seeking new meanings in his life. It was because the people of his time saw a dynamic, powerful, and creative life in him that his teaching spread throughout India. Thus we can say that Buddhism is a teaching in which we see the non-reality of the ego-self and the reality of the true self.

Many Buddhist teachings refer to the true self. In the Ohana Matsuri (Flower Festival) Service, which commemorates the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha, we often talk about the legend that when the baby Buddha was born, he took seven steps and shouted, "Above heaven, below heaven, I alone am most noble." Here the "I" that is most noble is the true self. This statement may sound arrogant. But it isn't. Here the baby Buddha represents all humanity and is talking about the dignity of realizing the true self. By declaring, "I alone am



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We can see a similar teaching in Shakyamuni's words in the *Sutra of the Teaching Bequeathed by the Buddha*. As the final message of his life, Shakyamuni says, "Rely upon the self, not upon other things. Rely upon the Dharma, not upon human beings." His words, "Rely upon the self," mean that the most important thing that we should discover in our lives is the true self—the self that is one with the Dharma.

## The Shin Buddhist Meaning of the True Self

Different Buddhist traditions explain the true self in different ways. Here let me explain the Shin Buddhist meaning of the true self. In Shin Buddhism the term that is synonymous with the true self is shinjin. Shinran explains shinjin with various terms such as "sincere mind,"



“true mind,” “aspiration for birth,” “Buddha nature,” and “*bodhicitta* (aspiration for Buddhahood).” All these concepts are cited because Shinran identified shinjin with the spiritual qualities of Dharmakara, a bodhisattva who is described in the *Larger Sutra*.

Shinran considered the *Larger Sutra* the most important Buddhist text, and he systematized his doctrine on the basis of it. This text has a story in which a young seeker by the name of Dharmakara becomes Amida Buddha. Dharmakara symbolizes the true self, and Amida Buddha symbolizes the realization (or fulfillment) of the true self.

At the outset of the story, Dharmakara meets a Buddha and is deeply moved by him. Then he awakens an aspiration to realize Buddhahood. After praising his teacher in verses that are called “Praise of a Buddha,” he receives instruction from him and meditates for a long time. After his meditation he returns to his teacher and describes his aspiration for Buddhahood and a Buddha country in forty-eight vows.

Then in order to realize his vows, Dharmakara takes up various practices. The most important is the practice of visiting innumerable Buddhas in the ten quarters. In one of the verses in “Praise of a Buddha,” Dharmakara says, “Even though there are Buddhas as many as the sand grains of the Ganges River, I will visit all of them and study under them.” He indicates here that he will learn from a limitless number of Buddhas and deepen his wisdom.

In this visitation practice Dharmakara gradually loses his attachment to himself, to his own fixed ideas and opinions. He sees less importance in himself. At the same time, he deepens his respect for Buddhas. The number of Buddhas he respects increases limitlessly. This way, the wisdom he receives from Buddhas becomes greater and greater.

Here it is important to know the difference between human wisdom and the Buddha’s wisdom. What, then, is human wisdom? It is dualistic wisdom—the wisdom of two-ness. It divides things into two—into positive and negative, good and evil, pure and impure, and happiness and unhappiness. On the basis of this wisdom we always love the positive, considering it meaningful, and hate the negative, considering it meaningless.

In contrast to human wisdom that is the wisdom of two-ness, the Buddha’s wisdom is the wisdom of oneness. Dharmakara, who is seeking the Buddha’s wisdom, is not satisfied with loving only positive values and hating negative values. He is willing to discover new meaning in all things, not only in the positive but also in the negative. He discovers positive meaning even in extreme suffering. At the end of “Praise of a Buddha,” he says, “Even if I stay in the midst of extreme suffering, I will diligently keep seeking the Dharma and will never regret it.” Thus Dharmakara’s wisdom is called “the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive.” His wisdom is all-encompassing and all-appreciating wisdom.

Dharmakara’s entire being is permeated by the Dharma of impermanence—by the creative and dynamic flow of life. He is not complacent with whatever he has attained. He possesses a flexible mind and can immediately discover new meaning in all things.

Thus, Dharmakara perfects his practice and becomes a Buddha by the name of Amida (i.e., Amitabha [Limitless Light]). Since light is a symbol of wisdom, his name Limitless Light means Limitless Wisdom, i.e., the Buddha’s wisdom. This name means that Dharmakara has become a perfect student who can seek wisdom from a limitless number of Buddhas. It means that he has now become a perfect seeker, a perfect student, who keeps on endlessly learning from all things and people in this world. That’s why the *Larger Sutra* calls Dharmakara’s practice “the eternal practice.”

This way, the *Larger Sutra*, using the personal symbol of Dharmakara (or Amida Buddha), shows us the meaning of the true self. The true self is the self that is one with the Dharma of impermanence, or the dynamic and creative flow of life. It is the self that is not satisfied with any fixed meanings and keeps on endlessly discovering new meaning in all things. The *Larger Sutra* teaches us that the most important thing in our lives is to discover and realize the true self that Dharmakara symbolizes.

### **The Importance of Realizing the True Self: Two Types of Fire**



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### **The Importance of Realizing the True Self: Two Types of Fire**

Now let me give an illustration that shows the importance of realizing the true self in our lives. Suppose we go out and create two types of fire. One is a small candle flame and the other is a bonfire. Suppose a strong blast of wind blows on both.

First, what happens to the small candle flame when the blast of wind comes? Obviously the candle flame is immediately blown out. Then, what happens to the bonfire when the same blast of wind comes? The bonfire is not extinguished like the candle flame. On the contrary, it gets bigger and bigger because of the wind.

It's interesting that the same blast of wind extinguishes one fire and enhances the other. This means that the strong wind itself does not have any inherent role as an extinguisher or as an enhancer. Then, what makes the wind an extinguisher or an enhancer? What makes it a negative force or a positive force? It is the nature of the fire that determines the role of the wind. Whether a fire is small or large determines whether the wind becomes a negative force



or a positive force. If a fire is small, the wind becomes an extinguisher, a negative force. But if a fire is large, the wind becomes an enhancer, a positive force.

Here I am using two types of fire as symbols of the two types of selves, the ego-self and the true self. A candle flame symbolizes the ego-self and a bonfire symbolizes the true self. Just as the wind easily blows out a small fire, difficulties in our lives can easily overwhelm us if we have only the ego-self. But, just as the wind enhances a great fire, difficulties in our lives can nurture, grow, and strengthen us if we have the true self.

We have many unexpected events in our lives that seem very difficult to take. The strong wind symbolizes them. Those events, however, do not have any inherent meaning as something negative. We often consider them simply negative, but they are not necessarily so. If we have the ego-self, they are simply negative; they could easily overwhelm and even destroy us. But if we have the true self that Dharmakara symbolizes, we can discover something positive in them. We can be nurtured, grown, and strengthened by them. There is nothing in this world that is absolutely negative or meaningless. If we have the true self realized within us, everything can become a teacher.

### **How Can the True Self Be Realized in Our Lives?**

Now I have discussed the meaning of the true self and the importance of having it realized in our lives. Here let me discuss another important question: "How can the true self be realized in our lives?" Shinran answers this question by saying that the true self is realized within us when we meet historical individuals, living or dead, who embody the true self—Dharmakara's spirit. It is only by meeting them and having deep spiritual resonance or communion with them that we can have the true self realized in us.

Although people may think that they can realize the true self by themselves, I do not think they can do so. The true self is so deeply hidden within us that we can in no way awaken it. We are not even aware we have it in us. Even if we try hard to eliminate the ego-self and realize the true self within us through our own efforts, we cannot do so because our egos are so deep-rooted. Even our efforts to eliminate our egos are often based on our egos.

During his twenty years on Mt. Hiei, Shinran tried hard to eliminate his ego through religious practices such as self-discipline and meditation. But he realized that he could not do so because his efforts to eliminate his ego were based upon his ego. Thus when Shinran met with Honen, who embodied the spirit of Dharmakara, he was deeply shaken by him. Then, the new self, the true self (or shinjin) was awakened from the depths of his being.

Shinran said that the true self was realized by the power coming from the Buddha; it was a gift from the Buddha. Although the true self came out of his being, he said that he could not take credit for its arising. All our predecessors encountered such individuals and received the true self from them. Shinran received it from his teacher Honen. Honen received it from his teacher Shan-tao. Shan-tao received it from his teacher Tao-ch'o.

Shinran also said that when a person embodied the true self, he embarked on a very powerful and meaningful life filled with joy and gratitude; and when he passed away, his life was completed and fulfilled. Shinran called this the realization of supreme Buddhahood (or Amida Buddhahood).

### **Conclusion**

When Shinran said Amida Buddha liberated him, he meant that the true self, Dharmakara's dynamic spirit, liberated him. Amida's liberating him did not mean that he was saved by a divine savior, or by some kind of mysterious power. Buddhism is not a teaching of a dualistic faith, a faith between a superhuman savior and the saved.

Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination and self-realization. Buddhist liberation means the realization of the true self in us. It means that Dharmakara is born in us. Shinran teaches us that we can have the true self realized within us when we meet individuals, living or dead, who embody the true self. He says that since our ego consciousness cannot awaken



destroy us. But if we have the true self that Dharmakara symbolizes, we can discover something positive in them. We can be nurtured, grown, and strengthened by them. There is nothing in this world that is absolutely negative or meaningless. If we have the true self realized within us, everything can become a teacher.

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We must personally have Dharmakara realized in our own beings. When Dharmakara is born in us, our life becomes very meaningful, powerful, and creative. We cannot help dynamically advancing, listening, and learning, without grabbing at any conclusions and answers. Our whole being becomes an endless seeking and learning process. We cannot help tasting the deep, fresh taste of life that exists in the present moment. If we have the true self realized within us, all the things that have seemed meaningless in our lives, things such as mistakes, failures, sickness, accidents, frustration, and agony, start to have new meaning. We are liberated by the power of the true self (shinjin) that comes out of our beings.



veal to us the nature of impermanence. We have to nourish our insight into impermanence all day long.

When we look deeply into impermanence, we see that things change because causes and conditions change. When we look deeply into nonself, we see that the existence of every single thing is possible only because of the existence of everything else. We see that everything else is the cause and condition for its existence. We see that everything else is in it.

From the point of view of time, we say "impermanence," and from the point of view of space, we say "nonself." Things cannot remain themselves for two consecutive moments, therefore, there is nothing that can be called a permanent "self." Before you entered this room, you were different physically and mentally. Looking deeply at impermanence, you see nonself. Looking deeply at nonself, you see impermanence. We cannot say, "I can accept impermanence, but nonself is too difficult." They are the same.

Understanding impermanence can give us confidence, peace, and joy. Impermanence does not necessarily lead to suffering. Without impermanence, life could not be. Without impermanence, your daughter could not grow up into a beautiful young lady. Without impermanence, oppressive political regimes would never change. We think impermanence makes us suffer. The Buddha gave the example of a dog that was hit by a stone and got angry at the stone. It is not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not.

We need to learn to appreciate the value of impermanence. If we are in good health and are aware of impermanence, we will take good care of ourselves. When we know that the person we love is impermanent, we will cherish our beloved all the more. Impermanence teaches us to respect and value every moment and all the precious things around us and inside of us. When we practice mindfulness of impermanence, we become fresher and more loving.

Looking deeply can become a way of life. We can practice conscious breathing to help us be in touch with things and to look deeply at their impermanent nature. This practice will keep us from complaining that everything is impermanent and therefore not worth living for. Impermanence is what makes transformation possible. We should learn to say, "Long live impermanence." Thanks to impermanence, we can change suffering into joy.

If we practice the art of mindful living, when things change, we won't have any regrets. We can smile, because we have done our best to enjoy every moment of our life and to make others happy. When you get into an argument with someone you love, please close your eyes and visualize yourselves three hundred years from now. When you open your eyes, you will only want to take each other in your arms and acknowledge how precious each of you is. The teaching of impermanence helps us appreciate fully what is there, without attachment or forgetfulness.

We have to nourish our insight into impermanence every day. If we do, we will live more deeply, suffer less, and enjoy life much more. Living deeply, we will touch the foundation of reality, nirvana, the world of no-birth and no-death. Touching impermanence deeply, we touch the world beyond permanence and impermanence. We touch the ground of being and see that which we have called being and nonbeing are just notions. Nothing is ever lost. Nothing is ever gained.

The Second Dharma Seal is nonself. Nothing has a separate existence or a separate self. Everything has to inter-be with everything else.

The first time I tasted peanut butter cookies, I was at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in California, and I loved them! I learned that to make peanut butter cookies, you mix the ingredients to prepare the batter, and then you put each cookie onto a cookie sheet using a spoon. I imagined that the moment each cookie leaves the bowl of dough and is



placed onto the tray, it begins to think of itself as separate. You, the creator of the cookies, know better, and you have a lot of compassion for them. You know that they are originally all one, and that even now, the happiness of each cookie is still the happiness of all the other cookies. But they have developed "discriminative perception" (*vikalpa*), and suddenly they set up barriers between themselves. When you put them in the oven, they begin to talk to each other: "Get out of my way. I want to be in the middle." "I am brown and beautiful, and you are ugly!" "Can't you please spread a little in that direction?" We have the tendency to behave this way also, and it causes a lot of suffering. If we know how to touch our nondiscriminating mind, our happiness and the happiness of others will increase manifold.

We all have the capacity of living with nondiscriminating wisdom, but we have to train ourselves to see in that way, to see that the flower is us, the mountain is us, our parents and our children are all us. When we see that everyone and everything belongs to the same stream of life, our suffering will vanish. Nonself is not a doctrine or a philosophy. It is an insight that can help us live life more deeply, suffer less, and enjoy life much more. We need to live the insight of nonself.

Tolstoy wrote a story about two enemies. "A" suffered greatly because of "B," and his only motive in life was to eradicate "B." Every time he heard the name of B, every time he thought about B's image, he became enraged. Then one day A visited the hut of a sage. After listening to A deeply, the sage offered him a glass of refreshing water, and then he poured the same water onto A's head and washed him. When they sat down for tea, the sage told him, "Now you are B."

A was astonished! "That is the last thing I want to be! I am A, and he is B! There cannot be any connection."

"But you are B, whether you believe it or not," the sage said. Then he brought him a mirror, and sure enough when A looked in it, he saw B! Every time he moved, B in the mir-

ror did exactly the same. The sound of A's voice became the sound of B's. He began to have B's feelings and perceptions. A tried to come back to himself, but he couldn't. What a wonderful story!

We should practice so that we can see Muslims as Hindus and Hindus as Muslims. We should practice so that we can see Israelis as Palestinians and Palestinians as Israelis. We should practice until we can see that each person is us, that we are not separate from others. This will greatly reduce our suffering. We are like the cookies, thinking we are separate and opposing each other, when actually we are all of the same reality. We *are* what we perceive. This is the teaching of nonself, of interbeing.

When Avalokiteshvara declared that eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind are empty, he meant that they cannot be by themselves alone.<sup>2</sup> They have to inter-be with everything else. Our eyes would not be possible without non-eye elements. That is why he can say that our eyes have no separate existence. We have to see the nature of interbeing to really understand. It takes some training to look at things this way.

Nonself means that you are made of elements which are not you. During the past hour, different elements have entered you and other elements have flown out of you. Your happiness, in fact your existence, comes from things that are not you. Your mother is happy because you are happy. And you are happy because she is happy. Happiness is not an individual matter. The daughter should practice in a way that she can understand her mother better and her mother can understand her better. The daughter cannot find happiness by running away from home, because she carries her family in her. There is nothing she can leave behind. There is nothing she can get rid of, even if she runs away and tells no one

<sup>2</sup> See Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*.