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Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasambuddhassa

Summary

This short article, a speech delivered on the opening of a Ch'an Painting exhibition, is about the Way of Ch'an (the Way of the Brush) and Way of the Scholar and the considerable benefits to be attained for the Ch'an practitioner, who maintains their practice with the right attitude, the right detachment. As a life process it is one that generates compassion for self and others, of refinement through cultivating the path of purity. To practice and cultivate the Ch'an detachment, ultimately brings one to full enlightenment and the sincere appreciation of many persons.

A THANKLESS JOB – Chan Painting

The Chinese have a saying:

K da gu niang sheng hai zi : fei li bu tao hao. 1.

One possible translation could be:

'When a young unmarried girl gives birth to a baby, it means hard labour and pain for her, yet this is not appreciated by anybody.'

If this attitude could be taken to the Way of Ch'an (the Way of the Brush) and the Way of the Scholar, there would be considerable benefits to those who can maintain practice with such an attitude.

The word 'detachment' in the sense of disengaging oneself or standing aloof from objects or circumstances may be a starting point to describe the Ch'an Way. However, the right Ch'an detachment must be clear.

There is a detachment, which leads to alienation. Alienation means, in the literal sense, to regard the thing as alien, as 'not-me'.

Most people make a remarkably clear distinction between what they regard as 'me' and what they regard as 'not-me', I am grateful to Eric Klinger for the following example: Gordon Allport used to shock his introductory students with the following thought experiment:

'First, recognise that your mouth continuously accumulates saliva. Every few seconds you swallow some. Although you are usually unaware of swallowing, you are not put off by becoming aware of it. Now imagine instead of swallowing, you spit the saliva into a glass. When you have accumulated a glassful, you drink it. Disgusting thought? Of course. But is that not remarkable? What a few minutes earlier seemed part of 'me' and seemed a perfectly acceptable thing now seems decidedly 'not-me' and becomes a nauseating thing to contemplate.'

To summarise, it may be that alienation represents a particular affect or cluster of affects that people feel towards objects, other people, or institutions from whom they once expected help or pleasure, but who let them down in some major respect. In other words, alienation pre-supposes disillusionment with something.

The correct Ch'an detachment does not lead to alienation, but surprisingly to compassion for other beings and yourself. If painters or scholars were to become alienated from their chosen field they would become prone to distorted judgements, and the Public interest always suffers in such cases. The correct attitude is needed. If the correct Ch'an detachment was taught to painters and scholars their productivity would be maintained endlessly.

So, with the correct detachment, even if they were not appreciated by anybody, they could maintain their wise choice of worthy goals and be productive.

Although it is not generally known whether dissatisfaction with work, pleasure and sleep is really more rampant today than in past periods of history, it is possible that today's emphasis - especially among the educated - of finding intrinsic satisfaction in work, pleasure and sleep may sometimes operate to promote dissatisfaction.

The key trumpeted demand that 'work be interesting' is only an attitude; nothing but an attitude.

Attitudes can be changed for some persons, but (alas) for others, the required processes seem unlikely to be attempted.

The process is to cultivate the Ch'an detachment.

The blind demand that everyone appreciates your efforts is vulgar. Refinement consists in cultivating the path of purity and avoiding the processes that lead to self-annihilation, either by drugs or suicide.

Durkheim found in 19th Century Europe the suicide rates of several countries dipped during revolutions, election cries and wars that excited people's passions.

How do we account for these findings? Simple. It is that nations at war become better integrated societies; but nations in the throes of rapid progress weaken their traditions and disorder their social fabric. War has its strange blessings. I am sure you are clear that I am not suggesting war as a desirable way of life.

Ch'an detachment is not separate from life's processes any more than having enough to eat or cleaning the floor is separate from such life processes. It is not callous or susceptible to other persons' mass modes. It is not 'irrational' and does not seek to avoid appreciation from others. NOR is it 'cold'. This detachment does not become cynical of others' efforts to be appreciated.

So, one of the noble qualities taught and encouraged at this Ch'an Academy is correct detachment as a life process for painters and scholars. At the beginning of the process, appreciated by nobody, detachment is learnt by hard labour and pain like the young unmarried girl. In the middle of the process, right detachment brings you peace of mind and the warm appreciation of a few persons. At the end of the process, it brings full enlightenment and the sincere appreciation of many persons.

May all true painters and true scholars come to be appreciated. Ch'an had its origins in China. May the merit made by me here today be shared with all the Chinese people and Chinese Buddhists. May all beings be well and happy and appreciated by others. I now declare this exhibition open. Thank you very much for your attendance and good wishes.

This article (Circa 1990's) was written and edited by John D. Hughes Dip. App.Chem., T.T.T.C., and Dorothy J. Sadler.

References

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