

Darkness and Light: Nondiscrimination and Discrimination

(from "Living by Vow: A Practical Introduction to Eight Essential Zen Chants and Texts" chapter 7, Shohaku Okumura, Dave Ellison)

Shitou goes on to say, “‘Darkness’ is a word for merging upper and lower (the dark makes all words one); ‘Light’ is an expression for distinguishing pure and defiled” (The brightness distinguishes good and bad phrases).

This is the same principle as *ji* and *ri*. *Ji*, it will be recalled, is the aspect of independence; each thing has its own characteristics. *Ri* is the aspect of universality or unity. For example, a hand is made up of five independent fingers, each with a different shape, function, and name. We cannot separate the fingers from the hand, and we cannot separate the fingers from the billions of cells that make them up. A cell is a collection of billions of atoms that cannot be separated. Each atom is also a collection of smaller particles. This one hand is a part of my body, which is a part of the human society, which is a part of the larger ecology of the earth. Earth is a small part of the whole universe. Nothing is fixed and yet each thing is really independent. This is really a

wondrous way of being. This is what is meant in the Heart Sutra when it says, “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” Nothing is fixed, yet this hand is this hand. I am I, but this “I” doesn’t exist independently. I can exist as a part of something or as a collection of things.

Darkness, or ri, is the universal aspect of our life. Light, ji, is the individual, independent aspect of our life. In the dark, colors are indistinguishable. In the light, everything becomes clear. We can distinguish between red and blue, north and south, grass and water. We should see our life and world from both perspectives, light and darkness, differentiation and non-differentiation. We usually see ourselves as individuals, distinct from other people. I say this is me, and this is my opinion. I like this, I hate that. If someone else has a different opinion we may feel angry or sad. Many conflicts and problems arise from this difference. Yet when we see oneness or universality, we understand that we are living out the same life, supported by all beings. We realize that without others we cannot live. When we clearly, deeply understand this, many problems disappear natural life.

Nondiscrimination Is Not Enlightenment

Because of our upbringing, we can easily see our individuality. So the first thing we have to learn is to see the universality of our life. We need to be able to see that we share our life with other people, with all beings in the whole universe. That is the meaning of interdependence, one of the main teachings of the Buddha. But if we cling to that perspective and call it enlightenment, it’s a mistake. The Buddha taught that we must see the reality of our life from both sides...this is the Middle Way...

“We have to try to find the Middle Way. This is one of the most important concepts in Buddhism. We find the Middle Way when we sacrifice neither the individual nor the community. In Shōbōgenzō “Bodaisatta Shishōbō” (Bodhisattva’s Four Embracing Dharmas), Dōgen Zenji said, “Identity-action means not to be different—neither different from self nor from others.” This means we have to find a way for both self and others to be peaceful, harmonious, and beneficial as a whole. This is called compassion. It doesn’t mean that I sacrifice myself for the sake of the community but that the community should include this self. We have to find a way that this community can include this individual self and be healthy. This is the bodhisattva Way.”