

The Mirrors of Mahayana

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THE MIRROR SYMBOL plays an important role in Mahayana Buddhism. In fact, Zen as we know it today started with a veritable battle about the meaning of the mirror as the master symbol of the enlightened Mind. It is the "Creation Story" of Zen, and as such never loses its freshness.

When the Fifth Patriarch of Chinese Zen, Hung-jen, felt that the time had come to look for a successor, he asked his disciples to compose a poem by which to judge who would be fit to become his Dharma heir. His chief monk Shen-hsiu wrote, after strenuous reflection and preparation on the temple wall:

The body is the Bodhi tree
The mind is like a mirror bright.
Take heed to keep it always clean
Let no speck of dust alight!

Hung-jen praised this *gāthā* highly but remarked that as proof of full enlightenment it was wanting. Unexpectedly the battle was joined, and won, by an illiterate young monk, Hui-neng, recently accepted by the Patriarch and put to work as a rice-pounder in the kitchen. The uncultivated youngster, listened to the verse being read, and at once dictated his response to a fellow monk, who wrote on the wall:

Originally: no Bodhi tree
Nor any mirror bright
Since all is Emptiness
Where could dust alight?

"From the first not a thing is. . . ." This crucial proclamation by Hui-neng was to revolutionize Zen. Fung Yu-lan, the great Chinese

historian, sees Shen-hsiu's first two lines as qualifying the First Principle, and ascribing attributes to that which transcends all attributes. Hui-neng not only contradicts this, but affirms radically its inexpressible character, and in the two final lines denies that realization can be attained by "doing something," by dust wiping, by the cultivation of particular virtues.

Hung-jen thereupon, be it secretly for the time being, entrusted his succession to Hui-neng, who became the Sixth Patriarch and founder of the Southern School of Sudden Enlightenment which flourished and survives to this day, while Shen-hsiu's Northern School of Gradual Enlightenment declined and disappeared.

The simile of the mirror was not new, but rooted in the grey Taoist past. Chuang-tzu, in the third or fourth century B.C. wrote: "The perfect man uses his mind as a mirror." Lao-tzu in Chapter 10 of the *Tao te ching* also compared the mind with a mirror. According to D. T. Suzuki, Shen-hsiu's dust wiping operation (in which dust stands for passions, thoughts and imagery) is apt to reduce meditation to sheer tranquilization, to mere temporary suspension of consciousness and at most to self-absorbed ecstatic states.

For Hui-neng, enlightenment demands the radical breakthrough of all rational, dualistic and discursive thinking to attain that "non-thinking-thinking" in which what he calls the "Unconscious" may be grasped, which is synonymous with *prajñā* as the intuitive penetration into one's own nature and thereby into Reality-Truth.

Interestingly, Thomas Merton is in full agreement with the Master of the Great Mirror, in whose "Unconscious," *prajñā*, he recognizes the Ultimate Mind as the openness to God's own light, to St. John's "Light that lighteneth every man come into the world."

Hui-neng's "sudden enlightenment" is therefore for Merton a "comprehensive experience of Being." He fully understands Hui-neng's declaration that it is useless to wipe the Mirror of Great Wisdom, and that the external objects reflected in it must not be repressed.

Sōkei-an Sasaki, one of the first two Zen masters, and perhaps the most impressive one, ever to settle in America—he founded the First Zen Institute of America—goes even further: "By meditating on the mirror, one becomes oneself a mirror. . . . Keep your eyes and ears open! Don't discriminate between outer and inner, so as not to remain locked up in your own mind!"

It is as if one heard echoes of Hui-neng's "The truth is not seen into by quietistic sitting," and of those others of his precious guidelines: "The Meaning of life is to See. . ." "One enlightened thought and you are a Buddha, one unenlightened one and you are a common fellow again!" and of Huang-po: "The original Mind is to be recognized along with the working of the senses; only it does not belong to them nor is it independent of them."

Huang-po was the disciple of the great master Ma-tsu about whom there is a charming mirror-wiping story.

Young Ma-tsu, who had been studying with one of the Fifth Patriarch's followers, was somewhat of a zazen fanatic. Hui-neng's disciple Huai-jang asked him one day what on earth he hoped to attain by his compulsive crosslegged sitting. "Buddhahood," said Ma-tsu. Thereupon Huai-jang sat down, took a brick and started to polish it assiduously. Ma-tsu looked at him nonplussed and asked what he was doing. "Oh," said Huai-jang, "I am making a mirror out of my brick." "You can polish it till doomsday," scoffed Ma-tsu, "you'll never make a mirror out of a brick!" "Aha!" smiled Huai-jang. "Maybe you are beginning to understand that you can sit until doomsday, it won't make you into a Buddha. If you cling to your sitting crosslegged, not only will you fail to attain the Mind, but you will murder the Buddha. . . . When conditions are ripe you will surely see the Tao."

In another mirror story ascribed to Master Shen-hui (not to be confused with chief monk Shen-hsiu) a great mirror is set up in which the Ten Thousand Things are reflected, "wonderfully" according to his students. But the Master says: "Nothing wonderful! The Ten Thousand Things may be illuminated by the mirror, they are not reflected as if they were Ten Thousand Things, for the Buddha Mind reflects them all with non-discriminating *prajñā*, not by the relative, discursive understanding of your everyday perception, your analytical acumen: From the first not a thing is. . . ."

How to move from ignorance to enlightenment, from *maya* to *satori*, from affectability to non-affectability is the great mystery of all religions, and here all how-to books have proven to be of little use ever since we ate from the Tree of Knowledge and thereby condemned ourselves to see the Real "through a glass darkly," as the Gospels express our predicament.

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The metaphor of the looking glass then is not limited to the Far East, but is universal. Henri Corbin, for instance, mentions how in Islamic mysticism the mirror is the “place of theophany” and how certain spiritual disciplines may open the heart into being “a perfect mirror.” In the Gnostic “Acts of Saint Andrew” the blessed “have heard the prophecies through which, as in a looking glass, they behold the secret of their own nature for which all things were created.” Looking into this mirror we see not only ourselves “but also the Lord, the spirit, the god who reflects the suffering of man, who must suffer as long as he is not fully initiated and remains narrowly human.”

In the “Acts of Saint John” (Third Century) “the resurrection which the participant in the initiation ritual experiences is his own mystical resurrection,” and in the round dance, part of the rite, it is the Christ who sings: “A torch I am to thee who perceives Me, Amen. . . . A mirror I am to thee who discerns Me, Amen.”

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Up to this point all the mirrors have been metaphorical, metaphysical and highly abstract ones. But our story would be incomplete without some very concrete and ordinary ones. The most endearing one of these is the six-foot mirror in the meditation hall of Tōkei-ji, a training temple for women founded by the nun Shidō in the sixteenth century. Shido made a marvellous discovery: by meditating in front of her mirror, she attained enlightenment, an experience certain to shock any Christian abbess out of her wits, for in convents of the Western tradition even the smallest pocket mirror was traditionally taboo. In Tōkei-ji, however, ever since, the nuns’ discipline has included the polishing of their six-foot mirror—Hui-neng notwithstanding—and meditating in front of it.

We might well learn something from the Tōkei-ji nuns meditational mirror-discipline, adapt it and use our first morning glance in the bathroom mirror as a brief, intense and not always painless contemplation of Reality . . . our own, subject as it is to constant change. . . .

The enlightenment verses that issued from the Tōkei-ji nunnery are surely touching and persuasive enough to support this view:

“The ‘I’ facing the mirror is forgotten . . .”

“If the mind does not rest on anything, there is no clouding and all this talk about polishing is fancy . . .”

“Every time one *sees*, there is a mirror reflecting all things in the heart . . .”

“From the very beginning unclouded, it is pure, this mirror . . .”

“When night falls no more reflecting in the mirror, and yet in the heart the reflections are darkly seen . . .”

There was also a nun who while polishing the mirror did not see her own reflection, but that of Amida Buddha. . . . The solutions of the mirror koan may well lead us to “Heaven and Earth and myself being of one root, the Ten Thousand Things and myself are of one body. . . .”
The Mystical Body . . . ?

Not only the humble nuns of Tōkei-ji play their mirror game with the Real. In swordsmanship, for instance, the graduation certificate of a qualified Master consists of a simple circle, supposed to represent the bright mirror of the Great Perfect Mirror Wisdom. The swordsman's mind must remain free from selfish calculations to do its work of no-mindness. It was also played on an imperial proscenium by the great sage of the Hua-yen or Kegon school, Fa-ts'ang (643-734). Kegon proclaims the interdependent arising, the mutual interpenetration of all phenomena in the Field which forms the unbroken continuum of the cosmic Whole. Asked by Empress Wu to elucidate the profundity of Kegon's *ji-ji-mu-ge*, this “summit of Buddhist thought” (D. T. Suzuki) in its simplest form, Fa-ts'ang placed in one of the halls of the palace ten mirrors at the eight points of the compass and one on the floor and ceiling. Placing a figurine of the Buddha in the center, he then demonstrated how each mirror not only reflected the Buddha image, but how, at the same time, each reflection was mirrored in all ten other mirrors so that anything affecting a single one of these endless reflections, affects the Totality. Kegon's conclusions are pithily compressed as:

ONE IN ALL—ALL IN ALL—ALL IN ONE—ONE IN ALL

In the West Meister Eckhart said: “When is a man in mere understanding? When he sees one thing as separate from the other. And when is a man above mere understanding? When he sees All in All,

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then he stands beyond understanding.”

And more recently Alfred North Whitehead, who was unfamiliar with Kegon, spoke of a “mutual immanence” in which “each happening is a factor in the nature of every other happening. The whole antecedent world aspires to produce a new occasion. . . . We are in the world and the world is in us. . . . This vague, but imperative fact of observation is the foundation of the connexity of the world”

Wisdom, *prajñā*, seems to have intuited pre-scientifically the sublime conception of the interdependent relatedness of all phenomena in Kegon, almost a millenium and a half before our all too recent scientific perception of the oneness in diversity, of an all-encompassing ecological approach to earth and the beings that are its products.

There is another mirror image encompassing this Ultimate Oneness in the overwhelming grandeur of the Great-Ocean-Mirror Samadhi. Here, at the timeless moment of full enlightenment, when the accumulated illusions of our species contained in the *ālaya* or storehouse-consciousness are overcome, the innate Buddha Mind reflects as in a gigantic mirror—larger than all the oceans combined—all the phenomena of the vast firmament, of stars and galaxies, of entire continents including each of its inhabitants, of even the radiant raiments of angels and grimaces of demons. This oceanic mirror and our minds are not isolated, but reflect one another infinitely, for each and every monad in the cosmos is at once reflector and reflection, and thus the “non-obstruction of mutual containment” is viewed.

This mysterious simultaneous containment and reflection is elucidated by another ancient Chinese mirror parable: In a room, in front of a mirror, a monk is preaching the Dharma to his disciple. Mirror, monk and disciple represent True Mind, Buddha and Man. One can view this happening as if the monk within the mirror image of the disciple is preaching to the disciple in the reflection of the monk’s mirror. One can also see the disciple in the mirror of the monk as listening to the monk preaching the Dharma in the mirror of the disciple: For the Buddha in man’s mind ever preaches to the man in the Buddha’s mind, while the man who is in the Buddha’s mind, listens to the Buddha preaching in the man’s mind. What seems to be a two-way relationship, therefore, is in reality a four-way relationship.

I cannot resist the temptation to attempt a variation on this august theme:

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**The Christ who is in the man's spirit
preaches the word to the man who is in Christ's spirit.**

**The man who is in Christ's spirit
preaches the word to the Christ who is in the man's spirit.**