

Realizing Buddhist personhood: An ethnographic point of view

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“Why do Buddhists meditate?” was one of the questions that occurred to me the first time I took part in a Zen meditation retreat in 1995. Probably because I grew up in a Presbyterian family, I was curious about rather basic questions, for example, how does sitting cross-legged in a meditative manner relate to the realization of religious ideas, and even enlightenment? And if entering a heightened state of concentration is the goal of meditation, why would that altered state of consciousness lead to a religious realization?

From an ethnographic perspective, I also wondered how one actually experiences meditation. If meditation leads to enlightenment, as is often said, how does that happen? Are the experiences and achievements of meditation connected to meditative technique, teachings, and retreat design? How do the realizations that occur in meditative states contribute to a person’s daily life, so that we can claim meditation has an effect there and is a reliable form of religious cultivation?

I also wondered how this Buddhist self-cultivation practice relates to our understanding of personhood? It is said that Buddhist teaching aims at letting people realize who they really are, not in terms of what a human person is or ought to be, but in terms of apprehending the fact that they are by nature a Buddha, that they possess the Buddha nature. As a Presbyterian, I find that this concept of personhood poses a sharp contrast to the Christian idea, which stresses that human persons have the capacity to share in God’s divine nature but cannot possess it, because there is only one Divine Intellect and Will. Hence I also wondered whether meditation plays a role in comprehending and even actualizing this distinctively Buddhist personhood. I hope that this ethnographic study of a Taiwanese Zen Buddhist group, which I call Merciful Creek, may shed some light on these questions.

Before getting into details of the ethnography, I would like to begin with a brief explanation of an anthropological perspective on senses and perception. Our common knowledge of the senses states that we have five senses, corresponding to five sense organs; this common understanding can be traced back to Aristotle and has been accepted in various parts of the world for two thousand years. But whether sensory experiences are based only on the five senses, or whether there are other channels of perception, has been subject to serious discussion. Aristotle’s teacher, Plato, included some of what we would categorize as emotions—e.g., desire and fright—among the senses. Today scientists also challenge this five-senses model. For example, some (Vannini, Waskul, and Gosttschalk 2012) suggest that we should divide the outer and inner senses; the former would include our traditional division of five senses, and the latter the feelings of pain, thirst, hunger, balance, motion, and body temperature. In the book, *The Sixth Sense Reader*, authors write about instinct and mystical experiences as examples of a sixth sense, which they define as “senses having no

corresponding organs” (Howes ed. 2009).

These examples tell us that the senses present a complicated issue, and just what is considered to be “the senses” is very much subject to the differing knowledge of specific historical eras and the ways phenomena are categorized. Today we tend to exclude emotions from the senses and study the latter in the field of physiology, while the former are the subject of the field of psychology. Furthermore, if we are happy to consider “the sixth sense” in terms of the definition “sense without corresponding organ,” then how many “sixth senses” are there, and which are considered mystical and which are not? These are all questions related to culture-based categorizations.

I should point out that our biomedical knowledge of perception, which is often assumed to be objective and scientific, may in fact be rather cultural and historical. It is clearly based in a system of customary categorizations of bodily and mental phenomena that are distinguished into senses, perceptions, emotions, consciousness, cognitions, personalities, and moralities, which although not mutually exclusive are nonetheless considered different phenomena. Different cultures have different categories and theories, which allow their members to perceive the world from divergent perspectives. Here, I would like to present the notion that the conceptualization of personhood is very much related to cultural categorizations of bodily and mental phenomena and cultural theories of perception.

The Buddhist theory of perception relates the senses to our reasoning, disposition, and consciousness. It links the five sense organs with the mind—thus, we have six sense faculties or sense organs, eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. When our six sense organs function to comprehend the outside world, form, sound, smell, taste, touch and symbols are attained in our acts of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting touching and knowing. In other words, the Buddhist theory of perception considers perception to be an “action”—involving awareness, intentionality and intellect, rather than merely the passive reception and interpretation of information imported from the first five sense organs. Hence, what we see is often what we intend to see.

Since the mind is involved in the process of perception, from the Buddhist perspective, defilement results from our attachments and biases or from our yielding to the persisting attractions of the causes of pain and pleasure. All this leads to what Buddhist doctrine considers an erroneous mode of perception, by which we take the seeming for the real and apply value judgments to our sensory experiences, which in turn feeds our egoistic tendencies. Buddhist theory postulates that the dualism of our perception and its habitual engagement with emotions, desires and value judgments prevent us from seeing reality. In other words, from the Buddhist perspective, self-awareness is our own construction and a distortion brought about by our self-constructing within socio-cultural and historical contexts. This basic error in perception stops us from realizing our intrinsic Buddha nature or from actualizing the Buddhahood.

The goal of Buddhist cultivation then is to relieve the dualism deeply embedded within our perceptions and everyday practices; by this it would allow us to perceive the world as it really is, as one reality, as the universal Buddha nature.

In Taiwan, where I am from and conduct my fieldwork, this already complex Buddhist theory of perception is further complicated by the local conceptualization of a “vital energy-flowing body.” This notion of the body is widespread in Asian societies; in Taiwan and China, the term *qi* is used for this energy-flow. Qi is believed to flow inside our bodies, and it exists also in environments and material objects, such as foods and herbs. One’s *qi* state is related to one’s bodily and even mental condition, since *qi* is thought of not only as energy but as carrying messages or qualities of, for instance, illness, emotions, and personalities, whose nature can be “cultivated” via cultural programs like meditation, *qi-gong*, or other forms of bodily discipline. Since people are thought to exchange and communicate through *qi*, much like the way pheromones work, our bodily *qi* affects others and can be sensed by other people through close contact. The traditional Chinese medical doctor’s practice of “reading the pulse” is an example of this. In other words, *qi* can function like a sixth sense and involves not only sensations but also emotion, disposition, personality, and even morality.

The body’s *qi* state is also believed to affect one’s mind; an accumulation of bodily *qi* is thought to correlate to one’s state of consciousness. The theory of *qi*, then, extends to not only physiology but also medicine, science, the consumption of food, psychology, bodily cultivation practices, morality, and even religion. It is the very basis of traditional Chinese medicine and all kinds of cultivation programs prevalent in Chinese societies. Since it is such a bedrock concept in Asia, scientists in Taiwan, China and Japan have worked hard to prove *qi*’s existence and effects, but so far they have not achieved conclusive results.

Pertinent to our discussion here, the concept of *qi* is closely related to the Taiwanese/Chinese conceptualization of personhood—one’s personality, emotions, spirit, behavior, and bodily and mental states, can all be described and interpreted in terms of *qi*. Furthermore, with the *qi* concept present in almost every aspect of Taiwanese society, it has also become the conceptual and experiential basis for Taiwan’s Buddhist cultivation practices. It is the foundation of key concepts and theories that help lay practitioners interpret their bodily and mental states and comprehend Buddhist ideas of personhood.

In light of these two cultural theories let us now turn to my ethnographic study of one Chan (Zen in Japanese) Buddhist group in Taiwan.

Merciful Creek

When I first visited Merciful Creek (*cixi* 慈溪) in the summer of 1995, I had just finished my dissertation on Taiwan’s night markets and was looking for a fresh new project. I decided to try something rather different.

Merciful Creek is a Chan Buddhist group based in Northern Taiwan. It was established in the early 1980s by a lay practitioner. Unlike many Buddhist groups in Taiwan, especially the charities, which often strategically run publicity campaigns, Merciful Creek has made little effort to promote itself. Having religious cultivation as

its only emphasis makes it a unique Buddhist organization in Taiwan. Merciful Creek regularly offers free lectures and meditation retreats for the general public, and provides advanced courses for more dedicated practitioners.

Self-Cultivation in Buddhist Context

Buddhist doctrine does not regard the universe as God's creation, but as a result of the causal relations by which all realities are thought to have produced. Buddha teaches that everything in the world exists only because we see them in relation to other phenomena. Hence the relations between phenomena are false causal relations; their existence is the result of our false recognition. Right and wrong, life and death are such examples. According to Buddhism, it is simply because people continue to consider them realities, as having causal relations, *hetupratyaya* (or *yinyuan* 因緣), with each other, that bias and attachment continue to influence us, and *samsara*, the continuous cycle of the rebirth wheel keeps on rolling. In Buddhism salvation means getting free from *samsara* by cutting off the cycle with one's enlightenment, or with the ultimate goal of achieving Buddhahood. Buddhist salvation, thus, does not derive from an absolute authority, through whose kindness one obtains it. Buddhist salvation is achieved, not given, and requires that one seriously engage in self-cultivation.

In other words, from the very beginning, the Buddhist self-cultivation project poses a great challenge to some of the most basic principles of our usual conceptualization of this world, e.g., space and time, life and death, and the dualism embedded within our cultural values. It points out that our notions of order, the most taken-for-granted aspects of daily life, are our own constructions whose existence comes from our clinging to certain principles. However, to break away from our own misconceptions is not a matter of simply establishing a "correct" guideline agreeable to Buddhist concepts. Instead, the Buddhist ideal is to teach us that the dualist conceptualization of "right" versus "wrong" is the result of our insistence on what is in reality impermanent, and is merely another representation of our own biases. Only when we manage to transcend the dualist mode of thinking are we able to realize Buddhist personhood and become enlightened.

Putting the Buddhist project in anthropological terms, it asks every Buddhist to transcend the cultural habitus that is deeply rooted in all aspects of our daily practices. The following discussion will analyze how meditation plays an important role in this deconstruction process and how the interaction between religious ideas and the experience of the body during meditation provides a platform for the possibility of enlightenment, the realization of the Buddhahood.

Meditation as Body Technique

Sitting in meditation with the legs crossed is the typical posture assumed by Merciful Creek members. Unlike the "concentrative meditation" technique that asks meditators to sustain attention with some specific focus—a sound, chanting, a thought or counting—Merciful Creek leaders advises their members to practice

“receptive meditation,” which does not stress any such focus, but maintains a non-engaged stance towards outside and inside stimuli, especially the continuous intrusion of thoughts. Since it is impossible to intentionally tranquilize our minds or to prevent ideas from entering our minds, the technique Merciful Creek teaches to simply not engage with all of these forms of interference. That is, to allow ideas, and sensory stimuli to come in and phase out by themselves, without extending the mind to deal with them. Group leaders stress that one must differentiate the state of “non-engagement” from that of “disengagement;” the latter means raising the consciousness to endure, to tranquilize, or to deal with something, which is also a form of engagement. Hence whenever an idea, an illusion, or even an image of the Buddha appears, the key is not to stop it or seize it, but to adopt a non-engaging stance. Putting this in the words used by leaders of Merciful Creek, the correct meditation technique is to “forget” this technique. Only as meditators gradually come to understand the natural separation of consciousness from phenomena will they have a chance to enter into deep meditation.

The *Qi* Body and Meditative States

The accumulation of bodily *qi* during intensive meditation is a basic experience for Merciful Creek members. Within the first few days of the meditation retreat most meditators experience the flow of bodily *qi* and its intensification as they go deeper into intensive meditation. Members stress that when the mind is not wandering and the body is kept upright, bodily *qi* energy gradually builds up. Pain and soreness present the first challenges to most practitioners; even experienced and healthy meditators find that their crossed legs hurt badly after a certain period. Thus, the first lesson in Merciful Creek’s “non-engagement” technique is facing the continuous pain.

Members of Merciful Creek considers are taught that *qi* accumulation a prerequisite to entering an altered state of consciousness. Practitioners relate meditation to religious cultivation through the Buddhist worldview, “the ten *dharma*-worlds” (or realms of existence).

According to the Buddhist concept of rebirth, one’s accomplishment (in self-cultivation) is closely related to the state of existence one is to be born into. Figure 1 shows scheme of the ten *dharma*-worlds. One’s *karma* in this world determines one’s rebirth along the hierarchy of the *dharma*-worlds. Accumulating merit through charity or other forms of self-cultivation, like sutra chanting, is certainly one way to improve one’s *karma*. Meditation is another way. The aim of practicing meditation is not only the search for a tranquil mind but also the pursuit of enlightenment as indicated by the titles of these realms, and being reborn into a higher realm of existence. Merciful Creek members explain that entering altered states of consciousness to gain a closer affinity with the higher *dharma*-worlds increases the potential for one to be reborn into those worlds.

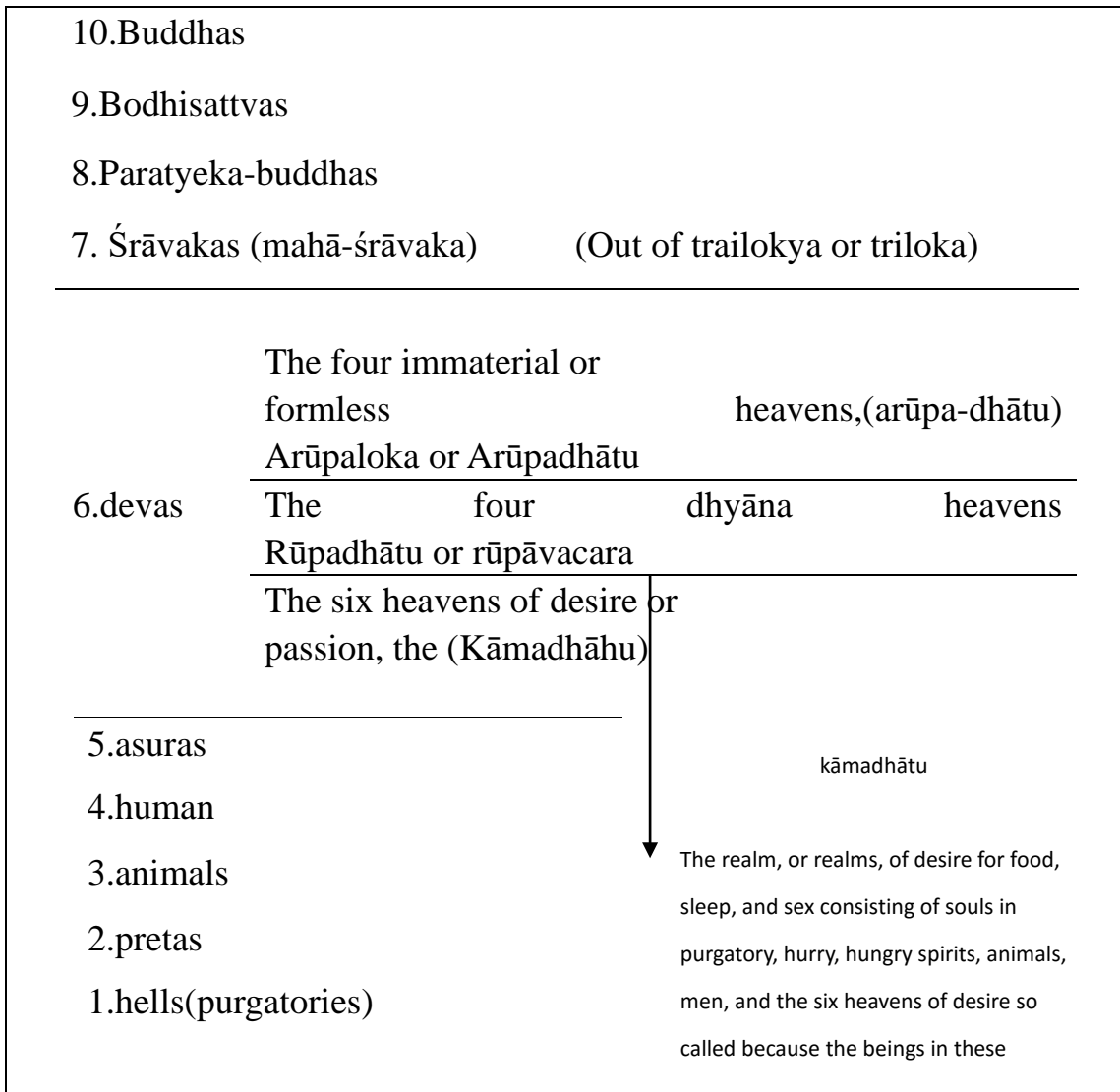


Fig 1. The ten *dharma*-worlds (or states of existence).

But why should intensive meditation allow self-cultivators to reach these *dharma*-worlds? Leaders of Merciful Creek use popular metaphoric terms like “energy” and “frequency” to answer this question. It is said that the ten *dharma*-worlds are co-existent in the universe, but because each world has its own “frequency,” we, living in this world, are not able to feel the existence of, or interact with, the other worlds. The co-existence of ten *dharma*-worlds is like ten movies being shown on the same screen: Each keeps on playing without interfering with the others. Only when one is able to change one’s own frequency, do other worlds become sensible. Through intensive meditation, one’s bodily energy keeps on building and one’s frequency elevates until he/she can enter a meditative state of communicating with the other *dharma*-world. Meditation is thus not merely a psychological or bodily exercise, but is an important form by which practitioners verify and actualize Buddhist reality.

Here, Buddhist cosmology and cultivation practices bring to our attention an

important idea concerning our discussion of personhood. Buddhist cosmology not only defines what a person is in the framework of the ten realms of existence. It also points out that only after fully enlightened, all sentient beings are trapped by their erroneous mode of perception, e.g., regarding right and wrong, or life and death, as two realities. In other words, the differences among these realms are not in kind but in degrees of being tainted by or liberating from our sentiency.

Meditation, Food Adjustments and the Retreat Schedule

Merciful Creek’s meditation retreat is designed to help participants elevate their bodily energy and increase the chances of entering ideal meditative states. Let’s take the seven-day retreat as an example. The first three days are called “building the foundation”, i.e., to activate the circulation and raise the level of bodily *qi* so that beginners can learn to overcome the difficulties of the beginning stages. THE Merciful Creek designs diet to help with the transformation of the body.

First, it is thought that increasing the intake of foods having certain qualities to help stimulate bodily *qi* flow and accelerate *qi* accumulation. Retreat participants find they are required to eat three formal and four snack meals a day (please see Table 1 for the retreat schedule).

	1 st day	2 nd day	3 rd day	4 th day	5 th day	6 th day	7 th day	8 th day	Food prepared
1:0 0					Snacks				Noodles
1:3 0					Meditati on				
4:0 0		Get up/snacks							Toast /cereals
4:3 0		Morning chanting							
5:3 0		Meditation						Ritual	
6:0 0		Breakfast							4 dish/congee
6:3 0		Cleaning							
7:3 0		Meditation						Ritual	
9:0 0									
9:3 0		Snacks							Bean soup or noodles
10:		Meditation						Roundta	

00						ble	
11:00						Noon Ritual	
12:00		Lunch					4 dish/soup/ric e
13:30	Regis tratio n	Lecture	Meditation		Returnin g home		
14:00	Orien tation						
15:30	Snacks					Bean soup or noodles	
16:00	Ritua l	Lecture	Meditation				
17:00	Evening chanting						
18:00	Dinner					4 dish/soup/ric e	
19:00	Lecture	Meditation	Lecture	Medi tation	Free time		
21:30	Snacks					Noodles	
22:00	Go to bed		Meditati on	Go to bed			

Table 1. Daily schedule of Merciful Creek’s meditation retreat

Also, what participants eat is closely regulated according to the Chinese concept of hot and cold foods. Hot foods are considered to have the effect of accelerating bodily *qi* flow, but if taken in too great a quantity, they may also cause constipation, a surge of emotions, sore throat, and other similar heat-related symptoms. Cold foods tend to slow down flow of *qi* and disperse it, but they may also help to moderate certain side-effects of hot foods and they calm the mind. The ideal is to allow meditators to quickly “build up a foundation” by increasing the frequency of food intake, especially foods with hot qualities in the first three days, and to use certain cold foods to balance the hot symptoms whenever necessary. Hence, participants find more moderately hot foods like potatoes, nuts, cabbage, and red beans (but not cucumbers, watermelons, or turnips which are considered strongly cold) appearing in their vegetarian meals and snacks. Fruits, Vitamin-C tablets, and herbal tea (*inchen*, or 茵陳) are prepared for those having hot symptoms. For those who are having

difficulty activating their bodies, they are provided a mouthful of ice cream, cheese, or pizza.

The other special feature of the program is an all-night meditation on the fifth night. The idea is that sleeping disperses *qi*-energy. If practitioners continue meditation without sleeping the fifth night, it may increase their chances of entering altered states of consciousness in the last two days.

Following Merciful Creek's program, most participants adapt to the frequency of food intake in one to two days, and begin to experience changes, especially in the intensity of their *qi* flow, when meditating. They stress that they can feel the *qi* intensity coordinating with food-intake schedule, going from strong to gradually weakened over the course of each two-hour meditation session. But on the whole, they also experience steady increases as the retreat progresses.

It is stressed that one needs a correct understanding of Buddhist ideas to allow the changes in the *qi* body to lead safely to the ideal meditative states. This is through the technique of "non-engagement."

Non-engagement

Program leaders stress that if any image, sound, or wandering thought touches the mind during meditation, participants must maintain a neutral distance between themselves and the stimuli, as if they were an observer watching outside phenomena occurring without getting involved or interacting with them. The program argues that if one intends to stop thoughts with yet some new thought, the mind remains engaged with the world and there is no way to make it tranquil. The best way is to let thoughts and sensations "flow in and out" without one using the mind to engage them. It is also important to give no judgment to one's own performance while observing the self from the side.

This technique should also be applied when one enters altered states of consciousness. There are different states and stages of altered consciousness. Daydreaming is a common kind. However, despite its common occurrence, daydreaming can only occur unintentionally. It is common knowledge that the more eager we are to force ourselves into daydreaming by force of will, the more difficult it is for us to achieve. Other deeper altered states are similar. There is no way to force entry to altered states by way of meditation; just daydreaming, it occurs "naturally" when body and mind are in the right condition.

Once one can "observe from the side," as one enters into an altered state without making judgment about one's condition or getting entangled in that meditative state, one then is able to move on to the next stage. Leaders of Merciful Creek use the metaphor of an elevator to illustrate the right technique. It goes like this: When meditation reaches floor 2 and the doors open, one should stay inside and not wander into the world of the second floor. Meditators should wait for the doors to close again and take them to the next floor ... and ultimately to enlightenment.

Non-engagement and Buddhist Ideals

The concepts of “impermanence,” “the impartial mind,” “the non-discriminating mind,” “non-attachment,” and “non-dualism” are familiar to most Buddhists, but how to realize their real meanings or to sense the states represented by these terms is not an easy task.

I would argue that Merciful Creek’s training for achieving non-engagement during meditation is a manifestation of this Buddhist ideal. Inside the meditating body another kind of training is taking place. Meditation is a process unending change. Practitioners’ accounts suggest that as bodily *qi* grows stronger after long hours of meditation, more transformations of the body-mind also tend to emerge and stronger emotional responses and attachments are also likely to occur. The emergence of images, sounds, and scenes from memory are merely common phenomena belonging to the shallow levels of meditative states. Informants also report that they find some of their body parts or even their entire body appears “missing” or “empty.” Some report voices from the other world trying to communicate with them. These deeper levels pose great challenges to the practice of non-engagement. One of the critical challenges is “stopping the breath,” i.e., meditators unintentionally enter a stage where they feel their breathing stops and taking a breath does not seem to be needed for a significant period of time. Many practitioners find it tremendously difficult to get past this stage, because it requires them to relax their habitual dualistic discrimination of life and death and the thought that life is related to breathing. According to Merciful Creek leaders, one has to follow closely the technique of non-engagement, i.e., observing him/herself entering a non-breathing condition and remaining as an observer watching from the side as though it is someone else’s experience; after all, this is a manifestation of “illusion,” not necessarily what really happens.

In anthropological terms, I would describe this as the “observing self” watching at the “participating self” without getting involved or being frightened. The successful adoption of non-engagement is, hence, also a practice of Buddhist ideals. In addition to providing an opportunity for participants to reason about the Buddhist teachings, meditation puts cultivators directly into their practice. Through their individual experiences in meditation, participants begin to find these concepts imminently comprehensible.

For Merciful Creek members, meditation allows them to treat their real life encounters as though direct exercises of the non-engagement technique, which lets them deeply understand how to maintain the separation of the constant observing self from the participating self. They can then apply this understanding to other circumstances. Meditation makes them believe that as long as they can master this technique both in meditation and in real life, transcendence and enlightenment will result.

In Retrospect

The ethnography of Merciful Creek training and experience reveals how truly complicated is the relationships among brain, body and personhood. On the surface

level, Buddhist doctrine seems rather abstract and idealistic. Its theory of perception focuses on the role of mind in giving subjectivity to our understanding of the world, and its cultivation goal is to transcend this “distorted” subjectivity manifested in the thoughts and value systems that are deeply rooted in our perceptions.

However, Buddhist cultivation practices and the idea of rebirth also tell us that body is an important factor. In order to be reborn as a human being, or to move up along the ten realms of existence, a person needs a body to “die” and a new one to be reborn into. One also needs to use this body to practice Buddhist teachings, including meditation to gain a close affinity with the higher *dharma*-worlds. In other words, one needs a body to be a Buddhist person.

The logic of rebirth points out that one, as a sentient being in this world, does not really “die”; he/she only changes bodies in each life. The problem is, according to Buddhist theory of karma, how one lives a life in this lifespan eventually informs what kind of body, e.g., animal, human, or god, one obtains and which realm one inhabits. What a person is does not come from having certain properties that distinguish human beings from other sentient beings, whether animal or in a heavenly existence, since these are said to differ not in kind but in degree (of enlightenment or unenlightenment). Buddhist doctrine states that it is how we work with this sentiency, e.g., erroneous perceptions, desires and negative emotions, that determines rebirth; also it is precisely from this sentiency that the Buddha nature may emerge, if one attends to the proper program of cultivation.

In Buddhist cosmology, the incorporeal component in living things that continues after death is depicted as a form of consciousness called the *ālaya* awareness. The *ālaya* awareness is also referred to as “stored consciousness” and is thought to function like a data bank that stores everything relating to a person in his/her lifespan. Although one becomes a new person after rebirth, this new person is not entirely pristine, since it is said to carry certain characteristics brought along with the *ālaya* awareness; that is, despite the characteristics one inherits, in genetic terms, from parents after rebirth, and despite the fact that these have no genetic connection to previous lives, one carries the seeds of potential, whether they are desires, biases, dispositions, or merits that are stored in the *ālaya* awareness. These work together with historical enculturation and socialization processes to form a “new” person in this life.

So, what do Taiwanese Buddhists think about the idea of “brainhood”? Is enlightenment or Buddhahood a state of “brainhood” or, put another way, can liberation from dualistic tendencies be the result of brain training? I believe my informants would say that because we do need a body to work toward actualizing our Buddha nature, but also because brain, mind, desire, emotions are only our habitual categorizations and impermanent, this very construct is only another of our illusions.

References

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