

## Seeing the Good in Others: A Buddhist Perspective

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## Seeing the Good in Others: A Buddhist Perspective

Francis Brassard

本論は教育学を専門とする一教授の問いに端を発してなったもので、この教授は「教師自らとは文化的背景を異にする学生たちに善なるものを認めることが果して可能か」という問いに、仏教徒である学生がいかに応えるか、ということを知りたかったのである。この問いはそもそも仏教が人間に普遍的な性質・価値を認めているのか、と言い換えることができる。本論が先ず明らかにしようとしたのは、欧米人が見るほどこの問題が仏教徒に直ちに関わるものではないということである。それ故ここには仏教の人間観が見られると考えられる。この前提に立てば、そこから仏教徒が人に善なるものをみとめるありかたも見えてくる。これは仏教の教える方便の適用から直ちに発生する結果であって、この教えは、文化的差異は問わず、精神的解放を求めて努める人を助ける目的で仏教徒が長く育んできたものである。

This article is the result of a request from a Professor of Education who was interested in the Buddhist response to the question as to whether it is possible to see the good in students who have a cultural background different from that of their teachers. In more general terms, he wanted to know whether Buddhism recognizes the existence of universal qualities or values in people. The response provided in this article is first of all an attempt to show that the problem raised is not as straightforward for Buddhists as it appears for Westerners. As such, it reveals the Buddhist presuppositions about human nature. Once these assumptions are recognized, it then suggests a way Buddhists would "see" the good in people. This Buddhist way is a direct consequence of the application of the doctrine of Skillful Means. This doctrine has been developed by Buddhists to help people attain spiritual emancipation whatever their cultural background might be.

### Introduction

**I**t has become fashionable nowadays to ask the Buddhist "expert" for his or her opinion on a variety of subjects and issues. For example, what would be the Buddhist stance on abortion or how would they respond to the present ecological crisis? As mentioned in a previous article<sup>1</sup>, such responses are not without problems. Firstly, if one searches through the classical literature of Buddhism, one rarely finds direct or explicit answers to the issues raised. Secondly, when contemporary Buddhists do respond, one is not certain whether their contribution is typically Buddhist or not. Their religious or philosophical affiliation is one among many possible influences that shape their opinions. Despite these difficulties, I believe that it is still possible to allow Buddhism to join any debate that is of interest today. Any attempt by either Buddhist scholars or believers to analyze an issue or to provide a solution to a given problem is likely to reveal their respective values and presuppositions. In other words, requesting a Buddhist response does not only instruct us on what they think about a given issue but also on how they think about it

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<sup>1</sup> Brassard (2001): 71.

The present article is the result of a request from a former colleague<sup>2</sup> who was interested in finding out whether it is possible to see the good in people who may be culturally and linguistically different. The main reason for such an interest was quite practical: being a professional in the field of education, he wanted to provide the coming generation of educators with skills that would allow them to be more efficient in the increasingly multicultural and cross-lingual teaching environment they were likely to find themselves in while exercising their profession. Here is what I believe could be a Buddhist response to the problem raised by my colleague.

A Chinese lord once asked Confucius how could one recognize an honest man from a deceitful one. Confucius bluntly replied: "Be honest yourself."<sup>3</sup> This response illustrates in part the Buddhist perspective with regard to one's ability to identify virtues or qualities in people. What you see in others is what you are. Conversely, one cannot see a virtue such as honesty in a person if one does not possess that virtue. Some Buddhist schools<sup>4</sup> go even further in the application of this principle: the entire world, that is, the world that makes sense to us, is a projection of our innermost desires and fears. If this is how the world is shaped, then there should be no objective reality to be seen at all and consequently, seeing the good in others would just be to see a reflection of oneself! This would likely nip in the bud any attempt to find an answer to my colleague's question!

Buddhist philosophers did not speculate about the nature of this world for the sake of speculation. They did it with the specific purpose of changing the conditions that makes one feel dissatisfied with it. At this point, one may find it somewhat paradoxical to say that the way to change the world is by negating its existence. It is a paradox because of the assumption that an agent can affect only real things. What is the product of imagination is not worth any consideration. Buddhists, on the other hand, do not seem to be bothered at all by this paradox. Indeed, a bodhisattva<sup>5</sup> dedicates his or her entire life to relieving people from suffering knowing that there is, in reality, no one to be relieved at all! What then are the Buddhist presuppositions or beliefs that make such dedication possible? I believe that it is through the Buddhist approach to personal transformation that one can understand the presuppositions about the interconnection between "reality" and action. Such presuppositions would then allow us to better appreciate what it means, for a Buddhist, to see the good in people.

## Two Models of Personal Transformation

The two dominant models that are used in the West as well as in the East<sup>6</sup> to conceptualize the process of personal transformation are the Self-Development

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<sup>2</sup> Wayne Carpenter, Professor of Education at Berry College, (Georgia, US).

<sup>3</sup> *Confucius words of wisdom*. Film produced by Film Roos (Steven R. Talley, producer). A&E Biography, 1996.

<sup>4</sup> The Mind-Only (Cittamātra) school of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in particular.

<sup>5</sup> In Mahāyāna Buddhism, a bodhisattva is a person who has made the vow, out of compassion, to save all human beings from their lives of suffering and miserable destinies.

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, the thoughts of Mencius (390-305 BCE) are often contrasted with that of Hsün-Tsu (298-238 BCE).

model and the Self-Discovery model<sup>7</sup>. The first model or approach presupposes that one has to acquire some qualities or virtues to become a better human being. This approach emphasizes the importance of the environment as the transforming factor. To use a metaphor, men are like small trees that need a stake to grow straight. Here, one would say that a child raised in a deceitful and violent environment is unlikely to be honest and peaceful or that a child who is not loved may find it difficult to love others. According to this model, the type of education to be provided depends on which qualities and virtues are to be imparted. If one aims at teaching self-discipline and endurance, for example, the methods used are likely to be severe. Someone who underwent such training will probably have more success in imposing it on others (as in the case of learning to play a musical instrument, for instance), but it is not a necessary condition: it could be an impersonal system of education with its rules and laws to be followed (an army training camp would be a good example of such system). In both cases, an environment that provides the objectives to be attained, usually through specific efforts, is the decisive factor in personal transformation.

On the other hand, the Self-Discovery model assumes that we are born with innate virtues, although not with a clean slate, and that these virtues have to be revealed or actualized. This approach focuses on the individual rather than on the environment. It assumes that the latter is not a determining factor, that one can beat the system to live what is one's true destiny. In Eastern religions and philosophies, the image that is used to illustrate this approach is often that of the dusted mirror: the mirror is our true Self and the dust has to be cleaned away to reveal it. In a less allegorical sense, it means that there are universal virtues that transcend cultural differences. These virtues can be transmitted to one another irrespective of one's ethnicity and culture because there already exists something in each human being that enables their realization. Although this model appears more appealing, it is usually more difficult to implement than the previous one. The main reason is probably that the objectives are not straightforward: first one has to identify these universal virtues, then imagine a way to nurture them. In other words, it is difficult to elaborate a practical system of education, with clear objectives and instruments to assess their realization, based exclusively on the Self-Discovery model. That is why, in the context of Buddhist spirituality, these two models are usually not set as opposite but rather as complementary. Although certain religious traditions clearly emphasize one approach over the other, they never advocate an exclusive endorsement of one because it would eventually be counter-productive.

### **A Synthesis Between the Self-Development and the Self-Discovery Models**

To illustrate the last point, let's give an example taken from Buddhism. In this religion or philosophy, it is sometimes said that desire is the cause of rebirth in the world of suffering. This world is called *samsâra*. It is also a world of illusions. As mentioned above, the illusions pertain to the way we make sense of reality. Contrary to what is often understood in the West, the Buddhist tradition does not say that the world is like a mirage, that is, totally nonexistent, but rather that the way we view it is off the mark, like a nonfactual preconceived idea. This distinction is important to understand the Buddhist approach to spiritual transformation.

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<sup>7</sup> See Hori (1994), p. 27.

To free oneself from *samsâra*, one has to follow the Eightfold Path, a path consisting of strict ethical discipline, acquisition of knowledge, and meditative practices. The state this Eightfold Path is meant to lead one to is a spiritual goal called *nirvâna*, which means, "blowing out." *Nirvâna* is therefore simply a state where the fuel that causes suffering, that is, desire, has been blown out or extinguished. (According to the physics taught at the time of the Buddha, a burning fire seizes or adheres to its fuel; when extinguished, it is unbound.) Consequently, this path presupposes that one is in a certain state, *samsâra*, and that one has to reach another state, *nirvâna*. Between *samsâra* and *nirvâna* there are other spiritual states or stages that can be attained. Viewed in this way, the Eightfold Path is a clear example of the Self-Development approach.

At first sight, this model of spiritual transformation appears quite legitimate. However, very early on, some Buddhists considered it flawed. The problem with this approach is as follows: if one is pursuing a path leading to a specific spiritual state, one is necessarily aware of the fact that the desired spiritual state has not been attained. This awareness becomes then the main obstacle to one's spiritual transformation. In other words, because one believes that one is in the state of spiritual imperfection, one remains in this state. What is presupposed here is that one's beliefs about reality, or one's interpretation of it, determine what this reality will be. In this context, spiritual practices are counter-productive because they reinforce the belief in one's spiritual imperfection. To use an analogy, we are stuck in quicksand: our efforts to come out can only make us sink because these efforts give power to the very thing that is keeping us captive. To offset this problem, it was thought that what we view as *samsâra* is indeed *nirvâna*. There is no essential difference between these two states. To put it bluntly: "Salvation is here and now. Do not look for it elsewhere!"

This solution is in fact a criticism of the Self-Development model from the perspective of the Self-Discovery model. It assumes that we are already what we aspire to be. This assumption is, however, problematical as well. In the controlled environment of a religious community, where each member adheres to a strict code of discipline, the idea that all our actions are expressions of one true state of being is spiritually productive. But as soon as it is applied outside this environment, it becomes very dangerous. In effect, it justifies all types of behavior because this idea undermines the foundations of all ethical systems. With such an idea, there are no more distinctions between true and false, between good and evil.<sup>8</sup> A Buddhist monk once told me that the idea that *samsâra* is *nirvâna* is not taught to novices because they are not considered ready to understand its beneficial implications, that is, to use the idea in a spiritually productive way.<sup>9</sup> In more practical terms, this assumption, taken literally, does not provide any justification to bring about change nor does it even promote or instigate a desire to make a difference. This would be its most counter-productive implication.

At this point, one may consider that the optimal approach to personal transformation is a synthesis between these two models. This synthesis should not, however, be a compromise in which one has to do some kind of action to reveal one's true nature—this would only be a variation of the Self-Development model—

<sup>8</sup> The idea that everyone, even the most wicked person, is already saved by the grace of the Buddha Amida gave Shinran, the founder of the Jôdo Shin sect, some problems with his disciples who misinterpreted this doctrine and thought that social rules could now be broken.

<sup>9</sup> Private conversation with Tong Ba Mai, a Mahâyâna Buddhist monk from Vietnam.

but rather a type of complement that would allow the recognition and acceptance of the two models at the same time, with their respective sets of assumptions. This position may appear contradictory: one has intrinsic qualities (Self-Discovery) or one does not have them (Self-Development); one cannot have these qualities and not have them at the same time. A more puzzling consequence of this position is to say that one has to make efforts to reach a place or a state where one already finds himself. This is logically and conceptually impossible. This is true, but only for people who are used to thinking in terms of the Western philosophical categories. In Eastern philosophies, especially in Buddhism, the above position is not impossible. To understand why, one very important concept of Buddhism has to be introduced: the concept of Skillful Means.

## **The Buddhist concept of Skillful Means**

According to the concept or the doctrine of Skillful Means, spiritual teachings are imparted in accordance with the spiritual, psychological, moral, and intellectual level of the individual. It assumes that people are unique in their spiritual development. Not only are they at different stages of psychological and spiritual maturity, but they are also likely to take entirely different means to arrive at the desired destination. To give a simple example, the directions to reach the city of Miyazaki in Japan will vary depending on where one is located. The means of transportation will also be different. If someone is coming from Canada, it will make no sense to tell her to drive a car all the way to Miyazaki; on the other hand, this instruction will make perfect sense for someone coming from Nagasaki. If Buddhism is very diverse today, in its practices as well as in its beliefs, this is no accident. It is the result of Skillful Means.

One major assumption of this doctrine is to say that what is true is what works. This position would correspond to a pragmatic theory of truth. There is a story, taken from the Lotus Sutra, a Buddhist text of the Mahāyāna tradition, that illustrates this point:

A rich man had many children. They were playing in his house while it caught fire. The father tried to warn them of the danger, but the children did not respond; they were too busy playing. Then the father thought, "If I and my children do not get out at once, we shall certainly be burned. Let me now, by some skillful means, cause my children to escape this disaster." Knowing that to which each of his children was predisposed, the father told them, "Here are rare and precious things for your amusement, if you do not come and get them, you will be sorry for it afterwards. So many carts are now outside the gate to play with." Thereupon, the children, hearing their father, rushed out of the burning house. Then the father, seeing that his children had safely escaped, sat down in the open with a mind at ease with ecstatic joy.

The story continues by saying that there were no promised carts outside. Were the children then deceived by their father? From the point of view of the promises made, yes they were, but from the point of view of the results achieved, they were not. Without the beneficial trick of the father, the children would not have been saved.

Thus, the doctrine of Skillful Means introduces us to a kind of logic where reality, that which truly exists, is not an issue. In fact, reality may even be counter-productive, as attested by a Tibetan Buddhist monk who once said, upon being asked why it was possible for him given the fact that the Tibetan Buddhists have developed a very sophisticated understanding of the human psyche, to believe that the sun is going around the earth, an idea that science disproved centuries ago:

"Despite the fact that the knowledge that the earth goes round the sun might be a scientific truth useful for the development of modern techniques, it was not useful for the inward belief, for the realization of the Ultimate Truth."<sup>10</sup> With this statement, the Tibetan Buddhist monk wanted to emphasize the importance of the goal above everything else. In a way, he was saying that the goal justifies the means. Consequently, when looking at Buddhist religious and philosophical traditions as a whole, this kind of logic means that everything produced by these traditions is likely to be a Skillful Means, even the most fundamental beliefs such as that of rebirth, that is the doctrine that says that one is reborn from life to life until one reaches final liberation. In other words, the doctrine of rebirth is not a scientific truth, or more precisely, it does not need to be one, but rather a spiritual truth, a truth which, if accepted as such, brings about spiritual and psychological transformation.

### One example of Skillful Means

There is a meditation used in Buddhism to produce a feeling or an attitude of equanimity towards all sentient beings whether they are friends, enemies, or indifferent to us. This meditation is in fact a sort of intense reflection, which I have called the "cultivation of awareness"<sup>11</sup> and whose workings and implications will be discussed in greater details later. Based on the logic of the doctrine of rebirth, it can be claimed that we have been reborn an indefinite number of times so that the people who are our friends today could have been our enemies in previous lives and vice versa. The attributes or characteristics of what makes a person a friend or an enemy are therefore impermanent and consequently not inherently real. However, throughout this endless series of rebirths something must have been there so that these various characteristics could have been taken on. As this "something" transcends all characteristics, it cannot be imagined; it is beyond conceptualization. Who are we then? Instead of preoccupying oneself with this question—from a Buddhist point of view, this would be a sheer waste of time—let's use this state of uncertainty to our advantage.

Since (still according to the logic of the doctrine of rebirth) we have experienced all types of relationships with almost everyone in this world, let's choose one that is most likely to bring out the best in us. In the traditional Buddhist countries, one decided to view each and every one as one's own mother, a person who has been immensely kind to us and who most certainly underwent great sufferings and trouble for our sake. In the East, the type of relationship that is most binding is probably that of gratitude and indebtedness. This is why the image of the mother, to whom one owes life itself, is a very powerful one. In the West, the most engaging type of relationship is probably that of unselfish love, a love for the sake of which one is ready to give up everything even one's own life. The love of Tristan for Iseult or that of Romeo for Juliet is often viewed as the model of such love. Popular literature with this theme usually sells well. In this context, the model of relationship with one's own mother would not be the most meaningful. The point I wish to make here is to say that the type of relationship we decide to imagine is not important in the universal sense; what really matters is how engaging it is for us personally. The more engaging it is the easier the process of transformation will be. One will be able

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<sup>10</sup> Desjardins (1969), p. 24. With such an understanding of Buddhism it is difficult to take seriously the attempts to compare its main ideas with that of modern science. Both are operating on entirely different sets of presuppositions and any similarity between the two can only be based on circumstances.

<sup>11</sup> Brassard (2000).

to draw from one's own experience the inspiration that allows us to better visualize and eventually feel the relationship one tries to establish with all of humanity. This is what Skillful Means is all about: it is using ideas that need not be scientifically true as tools to transform one's perception of and attitudes toward others. However, for Skillful Means to work—this is paradoxical—what is imagined has to be considered as true, scientifically or otherwise. In other words, it takes an act of faith in which the particular Skillful Means is viewed as the only true reality, that is, not as Skillful Means. If one puts oneself at a distance by saying, for example, "let's imagine that every person were at one time my mother," the idea "Every person were at one time my mother" that is now used as Skillful Means will not work.

Luckily, in this age of skepticism, faith is still possible if that which is to be believed is realistically plausible. It is interesting to note that a religious belief, such as that of rebirth, falls somehow in a gray zone. Scientifically speaking, it cannot be proven that this phenomena exists, but it cannot be refuted either. The case remains undecided. Eventually, one will have to decide, on the basis of faith alone, whether there is such a thing as rebirth or not. Even the zero hypothesis of the scientific method, that is, if no evidence, then no existence, is an act of faith. A beneficial act of faith for scientists, but still an act of faith. In the end, what makes a difference is just the decision to believe.

Let me recapitulate and further discuss the implications of the Buddhist doctrine of Skillful Means. The most important idea to understand is that we cannot see the good in others if it implies that there is really something to be seen. The Self-Discovery model is therefore not fully appropriate. What we are is most probably inscrutable; there is nothing in us to be discovered. This situation, however, should not discourage us. On the contrary, it gives us the freedom and even the power to visualize others in a way that will transform our attitude towards them. This visualization could not be seen as an example of the Self-Development model either, because true transformation will not come as the results of one's actions or training but rather of the way one views others. The way one views other people will eventually determine one's behavior towards them. Let me clarify this statement with a concrete and modern application of this approach.

### **Naikan: Psychoanalysis Buddhist style**

There is a form of therapy that is becoming increasingly popular in Japan and abroad called Naikan. This term is usually translated in English as Inner (*nai*) Observation (*kan*). It was developed in the fifties by the Japanese businessman Ishin Yoshimoto to help employees to work better together by enhancing their sense of unity and interdependence. The basic principle of the therapy is to remember the events of one's past and reinterpret their meaning. This is accomplished by focusing on three simple questions: 1. How much did I receive from a particular person in my life? 2. How much did I return to that person? and 3. How much trouble and worry and difficulties did I cause that person? At first, one usually looks at oneself in relationship to one's mother. As one progresses in the therapy one may switch to other people, such as one's siblings, teachers, friends, colleagues, and so forth.

In contrast to the Freudian psychoanalytic approach, where one is asked first to report freely what comes to mind, the Naikan approach is much more directive: one has to rack one's memory to find examples, events that will help one answer the above questions. The role of the therapist is also different. In the Freudian context, his or her job is to interpret the free memories or association of the patient. Like a soothsayer interpreting dreams, he or she is the key to the meaning of one's past experiences. A good psychoanalyst is indeed capable of seeing beneath the inextricable maze of memories the problem that is affecting his or her patient's life.



In the context of Naikan therapy, the therapist assumes more the role of guide. His main responsibility is to make sure one is following the therapy correctly, that one is not sidetracked from the task of investigating the three questions mentioned above.

During the Naikan therapy—in most cases, it consists of a week long solitary confinement—the patient, while remembering the past events of his or her life, can easily develop a feeling of resentment towards some of the people who had a major role in shaping their life. It is indeed easy for a person to remember his or her drinking or gambling father as someone who was selfish and who did not care less for his children. Such thoughts and feelings, again contrary to the Freudian psychoanalytical approach, are to be proscribed. One should, so to speak, deconstruct such interpretations of the past by focusing on the events, however insignificant they may appear, that are bringing about the recognition or the awareness of troubles people went through for one's sake. In other words, one should cultivate a state of mind that would make us feel naturally and spontaneously grateful towards other people. The feeling of gratefulness and its corresponding responses is the end goal of the Naikan therapy.

It may be argued that the Naikan therapy is free from religious content, but it is not without antecedents in the Buddhist religious tradition. Its founder, Ishin Yoshimoto, was a devout Buddhist of the Jōdo Shin (Pure Land) sect. The three questions that the patient is asked to investigate are directly inspired by a well-known Buddhist story.<sup>12</sup> The story goes as follows:

Ajātashatru, a figure who appears in many Buddhist stories, was the crown prince of an ancient Indian kingdom called Magadha. His story is often used as an example of the bad person turned good because of the Buddha's intervention. Already before his birth Ajātashatru was predestined to have a difficult path to follow. One account says that his mother, Vaidehī, who did not have a child even after many years of marriage with King Bimbisāra, fearing that her husband would lose interest in her, consulted a fortuneteller. The fortuneteller told her that a sage living in the forest would die in three years and will be reincarnated as her son. However, Vaidehī, who was impatient, did not wait for the three years to lapse and ordered the sage to be killed. Soon she conceived Ajātashatru whose name means "the unborn enemy" or "an enemy before birth." Thus, Ajātashatru, the reborn sage, from the early beginning had a reason to hate and resent his mother, a person who acted out of self-interest and selfishness. His reason was reinforced by the fact that during her pregnancy, Vaidehī, fearing the curse of the dead sage, tried to kill him again by inducing a miscarriage.

The feelings of hatred, resentment and even betrayal are in fact the major signs of disunity between two persons. According to Heisaku Kosawa (1897-1968), one of Japan's pioneering psychoanalysts, Ajātashatru's story served as a model for the basic structure of the typical Japanese mother-child experience and eventually, for that of the individual towards others in general. Kosawa called it "the Ajase complex" (Ajase being the Japanese pronunciation of the Sanskrit Ajātashatru). He believed it to be the equivalent of the Freudian "Oedipus complex," where the conflict between the son and the father is the influencing factor in one's social relationships.

Ajātashatru, however, knew nothing of the circumstances preceding his birth. He spent a happy childhood loved by both his parents. It is only later, when Devadatta, a close relative of the Buddha, also envious of his notoriety and authority, revealed the story of his birth, that Ajātashatru became disillusioned with the idealized image of his mother and started to hate her for what she did to him.

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<sup>12</sup> It is found, among other Buddhist sources, in The Sūtra on Contemplation of Amitayus, one of the most important Pure Land texts.

This passage is quite important to understand the major presupposition of Naikan in particular and of Buddhist ideas regarding personal transformation in general. As mentioned earlier, this is how one views others that determines one's reactions and eventually one's behavior towards them.

Ajātashatru's hatred for his mother became so great—she also became an obstacle to his political ambition—that he decided to kill her with his own sword. He was stopped at the last instant by his ministers who reminded him that no one before him, even wicked men who killed their own fathers or children, ever killed his own mother, that such an act was the most reprehensible sin and that if he were to commit such murder, they would have nothing to do with him anymore. One account of the story<sup>13</sup> says that on hearing this, Ajātashatru was overcome by guilt feelings and became afflicted with a severe disease characterized by suppurating sores and an odor so offensive that no one would approach him. Only his mother stood by him and cared for him. Vaidehî forgave him for his attempt to kill her<sup>14</sup> and he finally threw off his grudge against her. According to Okonogi, "Through this tragedy of love and hatred, mother and son recovered a sense of unity."<sup>15</sup> Heisaku Kosawa, the Japanese psychoanalyst mentioned earlier, reported a similar story involving Shinran, the founder of the True Pure Land school (Jōdo Shin) and his disciple Myōhōbō. The latter finally obtained the long-awaited opportunity to kill Shinran. But as soon as he encountered Shinran's magnanimity, "his evil intent disappeared and he could not restrain his tears of repentance."<sup>16</sup> Myōhōbō then confessed his long-harbored resentment to Shinran and became his disciple.

The transition from a feeling of separation to a sense of unity is at the heart of the Naikan therapy. This feeling of reconciliation is also the way to express or describe the ultimate experience of the Pure Land faith. Here it is the compassion of the Buddha Amida that is experienced only after one has fully confessed one's sins. In the context of Naikan, the confession is replaced or transformed by a reinterpretation of the significance of the events that affected one's life. This reinterpretation is possible only when the previous interpretation, that which causes disunity, is given up. The purpose of the three questions is just to enable this passage from a disruptive interpretation of reality to one that would facilitate an harmonious integration into the social environment.

It can also be argued that Naikan therapy has even deeper roots within the Buddhist tradition. Centuries before the different Pure Land schools appeared, with their particular approach to spiritual transformation, there existed in early Indian Buddhism a practice called *buddhānusmṛti* (recollection of the Buddha). As its name indicates, this practice was based on the recollection of the Buddha and his qualities. As such, it combined the power of concentration and that of imagination. Contrary to many meditative practices whose aim are to focus one's mind on a single point, that is, by trying to bring the mind to a standstill, the practice of *buddhānusmṛti* required the mind to be active. Indeed, the Buddha has many appearances and many qualities so it is possible to mentally jump from one to the other, in a way similar to how a person would remember a pleasant experience or person. This

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13 Okonogi (1978), p. 92.

14 In the account reported in the The Sūtra on Contemplation of Amitayus, Ajātashatru, on hearing the ministers' warning, repented and sought mercy and at once laid down his sword and did not hurt his mother. However, instead of killing her, he imprisoned her.

15 Okonogi (1978), p. 92.

16 Quoted from Okonogi (1978), p. 104.

practice could probably be traced back to the story, reported in one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures<sup>17</sup>, of Pindiya, who was a lay contemporary of the Buddha. Once he was asked, as the Buddha was touring his area, why he would not go and meet him? To this Pindiya answered. "I do not spend one moment away from him. With constant and careful vigilance it is possible for me to see him with my mind as clearly as with my eyes, at night as well during the day. And since I spend my nights revering him, there is not, to my mind, a single moment spent away from him."<sup>18</sup> In other words, Pindiya was using his power of concentration and imagination to create a reality, here, the constant presence of the Buddha, that was as powerful, spiritually speaking, as the actual presence of the Buddha. This practice, which combines concentration and imagination, is the basis of the contemplation of awareness, which I believe underlies the structure of most types of Buddhist meditation and transformation techniques, including Naikan. In the remaining part of this article, I would like to make more explicit this cultivation of awareness.

### An example of the cultivation of awareness

In a text of the Mahâyâna Buddhist tradition<sup>19</sup>, it is asked why a magician, who has created an illusory woman, can still fall in love with his own creation? (In ancient India, it was believed that magicians could make objects as big as an elephant appear.) The answer is that the magician, probably because of unfulfilled desires, has still the tendency to view the illusory woman as truly existing. To neutralize this tendency, he has to remember that the woman is just a creation. To use a Buddhist technical term, that it is empty of intrinsic reality (*svabhâva*) and that it cannot exist by itself. It is further argued that, because the wrong tendency has been caused by successively acknowledging the idea that things in this world truly exist, the antidote prescribed is to develop or cultivate the impression that things lack inherent existence by the constant practice of thinking that nothing is actually existent. In other words, by reinforcing the idea and impression of emptiness, the tendency, which causes the belief in the women's existence, will be abandoned. This practice, however, is not characterized by fixing one's mind on the idea that nothing exists, but rather, it is a kind of investigation involving on the one hand, a critical analysis of one's wrong understanding of reality and, on the other hand, an attempt to imagine or visualize what is the chosen or accepted reality, a reality that is believed to be spiritually beneficial.

To put this idea in the context of the present discussion, the cultivation of the awareness that every individual is fundamentally a good person would mean firstly to reject any ideas, impressions, etc., that lead us to believe that all or some people are not good and secondly, to imagine all the possible arguments reinforcing one's belief that all people are good. This exercise, if done seriously and assiduously, should lead one to realize (not just intellectually speaking) that all people are good and, based on this realization, to behave accordingly, that is, in ways that reveal one's realization that the others are fundamentally good. The content of one's awareness (in our case, the idea that everyone is good) is meant to be that which defines or gives meaning to all our perceptions of others. It is a sort of background onto which everyone and ultimately everything is projected.

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<sup>17</sup> The *Sutta Nipâta* (Sn) of the Theravâda school of Buddhism (Sri Lanka, Thailand, etc.).

<sup>18</sup> Sn, verses 1140-2 [E: Saddhatissa (1985), p. 132]

<sup>19</sup> Shântideva's *Bodhicaryâvatârah*, chap. IX, verses 31-35.

## Conclusion

Let me tell a story, taken from the Chinese Taoist scriptures<sup>20</sup>, that gives a good idea of the Buddhist approach to "seeing" the good in other people. A man lost his ax. He suspected his neighbor's son and began to observe him. He believed that, judging from his appearance, he was an ax thief; his facial expression was that of an ax thief; his way of talking was exactly that of an ax thief. All his movements, all his being distinctively expressed the fact that he was an ax thief. Some time afterward, digging in his garden, this man found his ax. When he saw his neighbor's son again, all his movements, all his being had nothing of an ax thief about them anymore. So when our man found his ax, his way of looking at his neighbor's son drastically changed.

Let us now imagine that he did not find his ax and that instead, one of his trustworthy friends had told him that his neighbor's son could not possibly have stolen the ax, so that it must have been lost or misplaced. Would he now be looking for a "stolen" ax, suspecting his neighbor's son? The moment he accepts his friend's testimony, he starts looking for a *lost* ax. This conviction will trigger an entirely different set of behavior. But maybe our man is not fully convinced. From time to time, he thinks that perhaps his neighbor's son has stolen the ax. If he maintained his old view, then he will come back to his previous behavior. Accepting this old view again, would, however, discredit the testimony of his trustworthy friend; let's suppose that this is something he does not want to do. So he decides to discard his old view again and keep on searching for the lost ax. Eventually, our man will find his ax.

Finally, let's imagine that the ax was found in his neighbor's son's backyard, which would imply that it had actually been stolen (or taken without permission). The fact that he never admitted that his neighbor's son was a thief will allow him to react in a way that would be more beneficial to him and to his relationship with his neighbor. He would say to his neighbor's son: "I am glad you found my ax," and the neighbor's son will have no choice if he does not want to lose face in the community, than to give it back, probably with some excuses for not having done it sooner.

What this story tells us is that our ways of experiencing the world are ultimately determined by how we view it. In this regard, Buddhism says that we can choose how to view this world; this is the basic assumption of the doctrine of Skillful Means. Our choice or decision, which very soon takes the shape of an act of faith, will modify our behavior but not without a struggle: once a new view of the world has been accepted, a battle is about to rage between it and the old views which are not ready to go. Eastern as well as Western spiritual literature is very rich in their descriptions of these mental and spiritual struggles. In the Christian context, these are called the temptations. In psychology, one might describe them as the forces of the ego. Whatever their names or descriptions, they all confirm that everything is played out and decided in the mind. Action, reactions or behavior are just the product of what is going in our imagination. Seeing the good in others, according to the Buddhist perspective, is therefore an invitation to use what we cherish most: creativity, courage and above all, freedom.

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<sup>20</sup> Lie- Tseu. *Le Vrai Classique du vide parfait*, VIII, XXXII (tr. By Liou Kia-Hway and Benedykt Grynepas).

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