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Zen Views on Views (*dr̥ṣṭi*): Are We Ever Rid of Them?

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The topic I am addressing here is something that I have wanted to dig into since I first entered into the field of Buddhist studies, since it is one that has deep philosophical roots in Buddhist literature and that also carries direct implications for personal practice. I saw my first opportunity to present an inquiry into the matter of views a couple of years ago, when I was asked to make a presentation at a conference in Seoul hosted by the Academy of Korean Studies that had the title of 'A World Without Walls,' and which assembled a group of scholars from a broad range of disciplines. Needing to make my own talk extend beyond the scope of standard Buddhology, I decided to compare Buddhist ideas of belief formation and resistance to those seen in other disciplines, mainly Western epistemology and behavioral psychology (Muller, 2011).

I seized on this idea after having finished reading the third in a series of books on belief and resistance by the eminent American literary critic and epistemologist Barbara Smith (of Duke University), and was able to crystallize my understanding of the general Buddhist take on the matter based on my own long study of the two hindrances, as well as with the help of Paul Fuller's excellent monograph, *The Notion of Diṭṭhi in Theravāda Buddhism*. I also found out that a good amount of work had been done in this area in the field of behavioral psychology, and thus ended up incorporating that perspective as well. The value of this kind of comparative effort is, I think, not only in opening up discourse with other disciplines, but also in enriching the vocabulary of Buddhist studies itself.

Does Buddhism Do Away With Views?

One issue left unresolved in that paper has gnawed at me since. After presenting the approaches of behavioral psychology, constructivist epistemology, and Buddhism, I finished by attempting to compare the models from these three areas to Zen Buddhism, and in so doing, began to get the sense that the Zen treatment of views extends somewhat beyond the understanding held by Fuller, who says that Buddhism never really attempts to do away with views—only the attachment to them. Zen, on the other hand, seems to advocate in many of its texts the utter eradication of view-making. This suggestion on my part drew a very strong counter-reaction from my respondent on that occasion, Mark Siderits, a well-known philosopher of Buddhism whose main focus is Madhyamaka. He insisted that nowhere in Buddhism does it say that views are to be eradicated, and further that it is impossible for the human psyche to function without views.

This is an objection not to be taken lightly, and when I reread Fuller's work, I realized that there may also be problems that remain to be worked out in his analysis of this same issue. Fuller seems to agree with Siderits in asserting that it is not views themselves that are to be gotten rid of—it is rather only the *attachment to views* that is to be done away with. And undoubtedly it is not only these two scholars who would tend to take this kind of position, but probably a majority of those whose training is in Buddhist philosophy, and especially from an Indo-Tibetan approach. But Fuller also argues that in the most important cases and senses, the notions of views (*dṛṣṭi*) and attachment (*grāha*) are basically synonymous. So in practical terms, one may well ask the question of how, exactly, one is supposed to get rid of the attachment to views, without getting rid of the views themselves? Finally, while I have the greatest respect for Fuller's work, and have learned much from it—and while I also think that most of what he says can also be applied to much of Mahāyāna Buddhism in addition to the Theravāda Buddhism that is subject to his work, I continue to suspect that Zen (in the general sense that includes Chan) may go beyond other forms of Buddhism in taking a more radical and focused stance in regard to views. That is to say, there is a significant sense in which Zen is about nothing other than the identification of, and removal of views (or, if you like, 'attachment to views').

Why Do We Cling to Views?

There is a fascinating degree of agreement in the understandings of psychologists, epistemologists, and Buddhists on the matter of what views are, how they are formed, and why they are difficult to get rid of. And between constructivist epistemologists and Buddhists there is almost perfect agreement, especially on the point that while average people tend to evaluate their own views as being based on, and correlated with objective truths, in fact,

the real reason people maintain beliefs and views usually has very little relationship with any objective facts, but rather, on whether or not they seem to 'work well'—if they are effective, skillful (*kuśala!*) and so forth. Therefore, if someone believes that his own views are working well, it will usually matter little if you present him a solid array of facts that run contrary to his beliefs. (I am like this with vitamin supplements. Even though scientific studies appear one after another declaring them to be either harmful or useless, I keep taking them.) And if we think about the way that *mithyā-dṛṣṭi* is understood in most cases, this follows well: Wrong views in Buddhism are wrong because their effects are *akuśala*—they bring about undesirable results. Wrong views are often simply the result of excessive attachment to a view that is in itself not problematic. For example, the approaches to healing taken by modern Western medicine, Chinese herbology, Ayurveda, or Chiropractic each have their merits, but rigid attachment to any single one of them can result in problems. And most people don't particularly mind hanging around with a Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, or Muslim, but when that person's beliefs go to extremes, problems tend to result.

We can also recognize in our daily life or in our meditation two general ways in which views are changed. The first is that wherein we are persuaded by an argument to accept a new view held by someone else, based perhaps on a set of facts deemed more accurate, or a more comprehensive and workable doctrine. The second is when we simply—and perhaps without conscious effort—let go of an old framework that we have recognized as having become unworkable, or at least less than optimal. In this case we are probably not expecting or looking for a new view to immediately replace it, but merely enjoying the temporary feeling of freedom that comes with being viewless for a time. These moments are perhaps for us small moments of enlightenment, and in fact perhaps not radically different from the enlightenment experiences described in the Buddhist literature, where we read of Zen masters whose world falls off, or is opened anew, at the cawing of a crow, or the tinkling of chimes—an event that usually does not occur during formal sitting meditation, even for serious practitioners.

When it comes to the analysis of views and their correction, Buddhism goes quite a bit beyond behavioral psychology and epistemology. To begin with, since Buddhism is a tradition that identifies the causes of suffering as originating in wrong views, its focus on trying to orient practitioners toward right views is pervasive, and worked out in detail at a range of levels and approaches. This is because Buddhism interprets the problem of views on two levels. The first is the conventional (*laukika*) level, wherein wrong views are indeed informed by wrong doctrines, such as the belief in a permanent self, or an unsupportable understanding of the operation of cause and effect. The wrong is always wrong, and the corrective doctrine (*anātman*, dependent arising, emptiness, Buddha-nature) is an eternal Buddhist truth—one of its 'seals.'

The second is the transmundane (*lokôttara*) level, where the wrongness of wrong views usually has little to do with what they claim, or even their primary effects. Rather, they are wrong simply because they are clung to, and this clinging becomes impedimentary, or even harmful in some way. In this case, the right view that should replace it is not any sort of set doctrine. Fuller describes the right view in this case as being 'no view' (but this seems to contradict his position that Buddhism does not advocate an absence of views). It seems to me that in this case the right view is quite often a *pratipakṣa* (antidote) which is only to be applied provisionally, and is to be discarded as soon as its corrective effect is complete. But to even call this a 'right view' would not be in accord with the understanding I get from the mainstream Zen discourse seen in the *gong-an* literature or the major East Asian sutras that Zen relies on, such as the *Sutra of Perfect Enlightenment* and the *Platform Sutra*. In passage after passage in these texts it is stated quite clearly that ultimately, the only acceptable state of mind—Perfect Enlightenment—is one where all views are eradicated and no further views are being constructed. That's what it says in many places, and that's all there is to it. The only question that remains, then, is what we are going to do with this pronouncement.

In fleshing out the types of wrong and right view into the two general categories described above, Buddhism provides another useful distinction in type of view, which is not identified as such in the works I have read in non-Buddhist examinations of views and beliefs (although I know that epistemologists like Smith would readily recognize this if presented with it). That is, there is a discernible difference in views as being (1) clearly articulated conceptual constructs and doctrines, or (2) barely recognized subconscious operations, which guide much of our daily activity largely without our awareness. Forming the basis for this second category in Buddhism is something known as *satkāya-dr̥ṣṭi*, probably best interpreted in English as 'identity-making' or 'reification.' It is this function that results in *ātma-dr̥ṣṭi* (although in some contexts, the two are virtually synonymous), bifurcation of self-and-other, attachment to dharmas (*dharma-grāha*), and so forth. Here, the Yogâcāra analysis is also helpful, in that the main function of *satkāya-dr̥ṣṭi*, along with the closely-related functions of self-delusion 我癡, self-view 我見, self-conceit 我慢, and self-love 我愛, originate in their function in the subconscious *manas*. Thus, it is recognized that a critical phase of view formation occurs at a subconscious level.

Zen Viewlessness

With this being the main (Mahāyāna) Buddhist framework for views, I would like now to return to the initial problem: Fuller and Siderits (at least, and probably many others) assert that Buddhism does not advocate the destruction of views. I understand this position, and in fact, the *Diamond*

Sutra contains nothing but passages that are exercises in nonabiding 無住, where the point is clearly made that the problem is not with the views themselves, but the clinging to the views: 'The view of self, view of person, view of sentient being, and view of life span, are actually not a view of self, view of person, view of sentient being, or view of life span. Therefore they are called view of self, view of person, view of sentient being, and view of life span' (T 235.8.752b16-21). And of course, the influence of this kind of thinking from the *Diamond Sutra* on Zen Buddhism is profound.

But as Chan and Zen develop further in the East Asian setting, the emphasis on identifying and removing views becomes central—perhaps even exclusive. What are the *kōans*, other than exercises in the removal of views? And in Chan sutras such as the *Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment*, almost every passage of every chapter is some sort of exercise in view eradication, with the clearly-stated goal of completely stopping all view-making. The approach of this sutra is also emblematic of Zen in the sense that in almost every case, the previous, unworkable views that are to be done away with are prior stages of enlightened experience, views based on awakening (知見, 知覺), which only serve their purpose momentarily, and are to be abandoned immediately in favor of continued attempts at the entry into viewlessness:

Good sons, if all bodhisattvas and sentient beings of the degenerate age would just desist from giving rise to false thoughts at all times, and when in false states of mind, not strive for cessation; when abiding in false conceptual realms, not try to impose a complete understanding; while lacking complete understanding, not try to analyze true reality. If these sentient beings, hearing this teaching, believe, understand, assimilate and remember it without being shocked or frightened by it, they are said to be 'according with the nature of enlightenment.' (T 842.17.917b9; HBJ 7.150b6)

Good sons, you should all be aware that these sentient beings have already made offerings to myriads of buddhas a quintillion times as numerous as the grains of sand in the Ganges River, and have cultivated their roots of virtue with as many great bodhisattvas. I call these people 'fully developed in omniscience.'

So does this mean that the sutra is ultimately advocating a 'viewless' state of mind? It would seem so. I can well understand the reasoning used by those who say that such a thing as a viewless state—an utter absence of conceptual frameworks—is impossible for human beings. In our own experience, how can we imagine functioning in such a state?

So then, is this move within Chan/Zen something qualitatively distinct from the rest of the Buddhist tradition? Or is it just a matter of rhetorical emphasis—the Zen masters say to eradicate views, but what they really mean is just don't be attached to them? And yet again, if we think about it in terms of actual practice, is it possible to really distinguish between the practice of 'eradicating views' and not being attached to them?

We might also look at the problem like this: Yes, it may be the case that human beings are unable to operate without the mental framework provided by views. But what about buddhas? Do they need them? If we take into account Yogācāra notions such as the mirrorlike cognition, which does not impose any constructions whatsoever on the world, but merely reflects it as it is, then it would seem that the buddhas are indeed able to operate in the world, view-free.

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