

Mirror Awareness, the True Host

by Kokyo Henkel

The true nature of mind is mirror-like awareness, always just reflecting what's happening, whether we notice this or not. It never shuts off or stops functioning, even when we're completely engrossed in conceptual thinking or strong emotions. A mirror just receives whatever object is placed before it, neutrally and naturally. It has no opinions about the object. The mirror doesn't prefer red over blue, it doesn't discriminate among these things, and yet it doesn't block them out, reject them, or alter them in any way. It is just open receptivity, without adding any commentary. The reflections on the mirror don't stick to the mirror, and the mirror doesn't have any lag time – when something is put in front of it and then taken away, the image doesn't stay there for a minute and then slowly leave. The mirror just immediately and spontaneously responds, effortlessly reflecting the next image without hesitation. It doesn't try to manipulate the situation, thinking, “Can we have just a little bit longer with that blue color?” When we look at a clear mirror directly, all we see are the reflections on its surface, which appear quite real. If there's a smudge or dust on the mirror, then maybe we can see a bit of the surface where the reflection lies, but a clear mirror can't itself be seen. If our eyes try to behold it, all they behold is the image on its surface, just a reflection, an illusory appearance.

All these qualities of the mirror are also qualities of the nature of mind, the naturally present open awareness of Buddha-Nature. This mirror awareness doesn't just reflect visual objects – when sounds come, it reflects those sounds. Smells, tastes, physical sensations, thoughts, emotions, and all kinds of mental activity are also reflected clearly on the surface of the mirror, without sticking to the mirror. Thoughts and emotions, which are reflected in mirror awareness, much more than sensory objects, really pull our attention away from noticing the mirror. We get so caught up in the reflections, the experience happening on the surface, that we forget the background awareness. One of the most wonderful qualities of mirror awareness, that a glass mirror doesn't have, is compassion. Buddha-Nature is naturally and effortlessly compassionate, openly receiving suffering without turning away in aversion.

When we're practicing zazen, whatever our specific practice might be – whether it's following the breath, mindfulness of the body or feelings, attention to thoughts arising, no thoughts arising – mirror awareness is always present, simply reflecting what's happening, including the object of meditation, such as the breath, and also the sense of ourselves as the meditator. A spacious, background awareness just observes, just receives what's happening. During zazen we can open to this receptive mirror awareness. If we try to look directly at it, try to grasp the mirror, we won't be able to; we will only get to see our ideas of it reflected in it. Therefore the practice is, rather than trying to see the mirror, simply to be the mirror. If we try to be the mirror and also try to figure out what the mirror is, then such figuring is simply reflections on the mirror. It seems quite challenging to just reflect like a mirror, since we are so accustomed to discriminating, preferring, assessing, and getting caught up in the objects placed before us. Though it is challenging, it is also very simple, almost too simple for us to accept.

One of the wonderful things about this mirror is that it isn't just functioning during zazen while we are on our cushion. We take the mirror wherever we go, we can't leave home without it. It's always available, even in the busiest, most chaotic situations. We always have the opportunity to step back, turn around and recognize the mirror in the background. Sometimes when we are really anxious, that moment might be what reminds us to look. And when we look, it's not that

we're seeing the mirror exactly, because it's not something that can be seen, but we can appreciate and embody that compassionate, spacious awareness that's holding our little anxious experience.

I remembered this today as I was rushing back from town on my bike to give this talk. I was experiencing some stress because I was late, and the thought arose to look for the mirror, and there it was – just reflecting the panting breath, the fast heartbeat, the concern about being late. And in that moment the question arose: Is this practice about being happy and relaxed, or is it about being free? Although I didn't feel totally happy and relaxed right then, there was some spacious freedom in the midst of the rushing anxiety, freedom from the constriction of fixation on little "me." I was still moving fast, but the experience was being held quite differently in the mirror awareness. It's so easy to focus on "good feelings" and think that our practice is all about creating more of them.

Here's another way of talking about this mirror – usually my activity is being "hosted" by me, as if my life is a talk show, and the host of the show is this sense of reified independent self, "me." The self is the commentator on the talk show called "My Experience." Sometimes very disturbing guests are invited onto the show, such as anxiety or anger. The host might start teasing them and trying to get them under control – this annoys the guests, and sometimes they even get up and start shouting or throwing things around the stage. The host easily gets exhausted from trying to keep all the wild guests in line. Sometimes the guest is quite well behaved, like someone giving a Dharma talk, but right in the middle of the Dharma talk the host might start commenting, "Your Dharma talk is really kind of boring; don't you think people will fall asleep soon?" The host has a hard time just being quiet, without adding lots of commentary, much of which is quite rude.

So, instead of having our small self "host" our day, we can let the mirror be the host. The mirror actually already IS the host, but we don't give it much credit. I like to take over my talk show, and when I do, the mirror is so gracious. It just says, "You can do that if you'd like." The mirror doesn't have any power trips. It says, "It's okay if you want to run the show, go right ahead. I'll just watch, from back here." During zazen, or in a moment of stress, at any time at all, we can stop and say, "Would you like to take over for a while, mirror awareness? You can host the rest of this period of zazen. Since I know you're already doing it anyway, I might as well let you. After all, it's really your show." Then the true host, mirror awareness, can invite any guests who would like to come on the show; it doesn't discriminate at all among them. Even if they are really obnoxious it treats them all equally. And it doesn't add any commentary, it just compassionately listens to all their long strange stories.

The host, mirror awareness, doesn't even mind "me" staying on stage and interacting with the guests, while I pretend to be in charge of the show. Today's guest may be the breath, and I can just be sitting with her, paying attention to her, but I still might feel like it's a bit of a chore to sit here and keep paying attention. At such a time, the mirror can be invited to host, and then I can still sit with the breath, but it's no longer a chore since I don't have the burden of feeling like the host. Sometimes I like a really lively show, so I can get into it with the guests and we can even throw things at each other and call each other names, but if I can remember that I'm not really the host, then I don't take all the rabble-rousing on my show quite as seriously. And if I'd like to take a break from all the commotion, I can just quietly sit down with the guests and let the mirror take over. Then nothing of much interest happens on the show, but it's quite relaxing, refreshing, and enjoyable!