

Which Moon is This?

by Kokyo Henkel

Concern about self-esteem and self-confidence is a really big issue for people, in our culture and in the world in general. We have a tendency to alternate between low self-esteem, even self-loathing, and overly inflated self-esteem or arrogance. It can be challenging to find the middle way where we don't fall into either of these extremes: aversion to our experience of the self or attachment to it. The middle is where we are not overly involved in the illusion of a separate independent self, a self which usually seems to be either not good enough or better than everyone else. Developing strong confidence in Dharma and in the practice is important, but this is not the same as confidence in the self.

We often try to build up a sense of self-esteem and self-confidence by engaging in various kinds of self-improvement projects, in order to temporarily relieve self-doubt. We may feel unsure what we're doing in this life, or if what we're doing is right; we may have doubt about how we're practicing or how we're living or if we're doing enough. It is disconcerting to feel this underlying nagging doubt, even if it's not a big one. So we try to prop up some version of our self that looks good or feels good, and we may try to fake it a little, contriving a better self, not being authentically who we really are, which we can't actually get a hold of.

Since our modern culture places a high value on productivity and keeping busy, we sometimes immerse ourselves in busyness to build self-confidence and relieve self-doubt. We often get approval from others if we look busy. These tendencies which may be common in the business world also tend to creep into the world of spiritual practice. Are we practicing to accomplish something in order to feel better about ourselves and be approved by others, or are we practicing to drop away all the views about ourselves completely? This a good question for practitioners to ask, again and again.

We can consciously or unconsciously set up some kind of practice goal and then feel better about ourselves if we reach it, and feel bad if we don't reach it. The self can concoct some elaborate setups, contrived to build up a sense of self-esteem. Spiritual institutions like Zen Centers often operate around these unconscious motivations. As soon as a practice place is set up, all these issues are immediately there. As an old Zen saying goes, "if you set up a single speck of dust, the nation flourishes but the old peasants frown." The old peasants, ordinary people, are happy living a free, natural, uncontrived life. But set up a Zen Center and soon there are defined roles, power and authority, hierarchy, doing the practice right and not doing the practice right, fulfilling requirements and commitments, wondering if we need to be ordained, if we need Dharma transmission, if we need some important role in order to be practicing well. All these forms are just made-up human constructs; they serve a function that can be beneficial if taken up or received selflessly, but they can also simply make us feel like we're doing something important, which will raise our self-esteem and self-confidence, or make us feel worthless if we fail.

This kind of tendency seems to be built into every institution. There's nothing really wrong with trying to build up self-esteem. From a conventional or therapeutic view, it may even be quite important. Since it's almost inevitable we don't have to eliminate it, but if we're not aware of it, it can distract from and undermine the essential practice of nonbusyness, freedom from self-

concern. We can start to think that Zen practice is all about which roles we have, or how much we're accomplishing, instead of just fully appreciating whatever appears to arise and the boundless space of awareness in which it's all happening. Doing things to benefit others is important in the conventional world, but if we forget the empty ground of suchness, it's easy for a spiritual community to become another worldly business.

I was recently at a retreat with one of my Tibetan teachers who admonished his students: "People have no time to study and clarify the practice but they want to meditate. People have no time to meditate but they want realization. People have no time for realization but they want to be a teacher." It's only natural that this is the way it goes, especially in a fast-paced busy culture like ours, where many people are trying to boost self-esteem in as easy a way as possible.

Case 21 in the Book of Serenity is called "Yunyan Sweeps the Ground." It's about two Zen practitioners in ancient China exploring the issue of busyness: As Yunyan was sweeping the ground, Daowu said, "Too busy." Yunyan said, "You should know there's one who isn't busy." Daowu said, "If so, then there's a second moon." Yunyan held up the broom and said, "Which moon is this?"

Yunyan was sweeping the ground, which means any kind of busyness: being caught up in overwork, obsessed with lots of things to do, trying to raise self-esteem, and even doing various kinds of meditation practices. Meditation is sometimes spoken of as sweeping the ground of mind, such as using the breath to sweep thoughts away, in order to achieve a more peaceful state. Even this kind of effortful practice could be seen as just a little bit "busy." Any kind of self-improvement project could be considered busy. The beauty of just being aware of being aware is that it doesn't involve any doing whatsoever. The point is simply recognizing that awareness is already and always aware of itself, and there is nothing outside of this all-inclusive awareness. This is actually the only way of being that is completely and utterly effortless, truly not busy. Recognizing our original face is not seeing some thing. It's empty of anything other than itself, totally ungraspable, and yet embraces the appearances of every single experience. Thus "the one who isn't busy" is the true nature of the busy one. Or it could be said that the experience of busyness appears in the boundless space of "the one who isn't busy;" the busy one is actually a manifestation of the unbusy one.

The moon represents reality or truth; a bright full moon is like the silent truth of Dharma. Nagarjuna's teaching of the middle way says that there are two truths, the conventional truth of dependently arising appearances, and the ultimate truth of inconceivable emptiness – and these two truths are actually one inseparable unity. Daowu was pointing out that the two truths of conventional busyness and ultimate non-busyness sound like two separate realities. How could there really be two moons?

Yunyan held up the broom, and asked, "Which moon is this?" This is the heart of the story, the heart of the middle way. How could the not-busy one be somewhere else apart from the one holding the broom? The one who's not busy is the very nature of the one who appears to be busy. Thus we don't need to eliminate the busy one, but simply recognize the non-busy one who is always simply aware of everything, including the busy one. We can take this question into our life throughout the day as well as during zazen, asking again and again in all kinds of situations,

“Which moon is this?” While sitting silent and still, following the breath, settled in the body: which moon is this? While driving in traffic, cooking a meal, washing the dishes: which moon is this?

Here's another story about these two Dharma brothers: Yunyan was making tea and Daowu asked, “Who are you making tea for?” Yunyan said, “There is somebody who wants it.” Daowu said, “Why don't you let him make it himself?” Yunyan said, “Fortunately, I am here to do it.” You and I make tea for the one who's not busy because she can't do it herself, she's never busy. We do the work in this world and somebody just witnesses. Truly you and I are servants, we live for that somebody, our practice is to serve her. She appreciates tea and she equally appreciates no tea. She is free from male and female, human and non-human, life and death, arising and ceasing, purity and impurity. She is the only one who is truly not busy.

Wansong's ancient commentary to the story of Yunyan sweeping the ground says, “Good people, while you eat, boil tea, sew and sweep, you should recognize the one who is not busy. Then you will realize the unity of mundane conventional truth and awakened ultimate truth. In the Soto Zen lineage this is known as simultaneous inclusion, naturally not wasting time.” Simultaneous inclusion is the middle way, and when we are in accord with it, there are not two moons. This is truly not wasting time.