

Brainwashing **by Rev. Master Seikai**

In her book *Zen Is Eternal Life*, is the following passage written by Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett:

*[A trainee] must just train for training's sake and nothing more. In some ways this type of meditation could be called brainwashing for it is a constant criticism of oneself in the minutest details, but it is brainwashing with the difference that it is done by one's own wishes and not by those of another.**

I became a monk at an early age, in part because of internal demons which included a voice which was intensely self-critical. It is implied in what my master wrote that, in coming to Buddhist training, one would have to develop a voice of internal criticism on the assumption that one did not have such a voice to begin with. In developing that voice, there is also an assumption that one would do it because you genuinely want to do something to improve yourself, which is the only way to really change, as opposed to having someone else stand over you all the time and criticize you so that you are in some sense forced to change.

35 years ago when I was a young monk, my master also spoke of learning to love yourself, as this was a key ingredient in training successfully in the Zen tradition. The very idea of loving yourself was new to me, given that I had been brought up in a religious tradition which emphasized guilt and a belief that human beings have a fallen nature, one that requires redemption from some external agency to which we are thus eternally indebted. I had long since put such a belief aside by the time I was a novice monk, but my voices of self-criticism and self-doubt were still very loud. I wanted to do something about myself as a human being, and find relief from my own intense, internal suffering.

Up to this point, I had made a noble if not heroic effort to train my own mind to be focused and clear and thus, in a sense, enlightened. But what I lacked was a quality of gentleness which is embodied in the Mahayana Buddhist bodhisattva Avalokiteshwara – or Quan Shi Yin if you are Chinese, or Kanzeon if you are Japanese – she who hears the cries of suffering beings. The idea of self love, which can be described as “turning the stream of compassion inwards”, is essentially a practice of compassion: being compassionate towards yourself. My earlier religious indoctrination held that self love was a self indulgent thing, a mistake in religious belief or practice which is to be avoided.

So I approached my teacher with the following question: How is it possible for me to love myself but to then also criticize myself in the minutest detail? I've told this story many times because it had such a revolutionary impact on me at the time; without a moment's hesitation, Rev. Master Jiyu said: “Love yourself when you criticize yourself. Very few people ever really learn to love themselves, but if you can learn to do so truly, you will have discovered one of the greatest keys to success in training.” What she was saying is that, yes, it's good to criticize yourself for the purpose of becoming a better human being, but you also have to look at the attitude of mind with which you do that criticizing. If you do it with a judgmental tone, a harsh or condemning tone, there will be pain associated with that, but if you can do it with a loving tone, an accepting or compassionate tone, pain will be slowly dissolved.

There is a subtle but important distinction to be made between these two kinds of self-criticism. The first kind is the reflexive kind, the internal demon kind of self-criticism, in which there is a harsh or condemning tone to it. We engage in this kind of thinking as a result of the conditioning that we receive early in our lives, conditioning which includes whatever belief system we are taught, religious or otherwise. Society as a whole has its own set of beliefs, a belief system, into which we are born and slowly but surely absorb as young people. I sometimes say that consumerism, or materialism, is the bedrock belief system of Western society and culture.

The monotheistic religions of Judaism and Christianity are of course also part of our society's collective belief system, but they have lost most if not all of their mythological components and have been reduced to *logos* oriented belief systems. In other words, we try to make rational sense of what originally was mythological in nature, and thus not intended to be rational. So an unintended side-effect of this shift has been that we internalize components of religion which are telling us that we are in need of salvation, of a sinful (or fallen) nature, or that we are unworthy of sanctification in the eyes of God. This is how much of our culturally inherited sense of inadequacy originated.

The kind of self-criticism which my master was speaking of, the kind which is done with a quality of gentleness, with a measure of self love mixed into it, is a horse of a different color. Admittedly it is not an easy thing to do, because it can come about only as a result of very focused training of ones own mind – which in the Zen tradition means that you meditate on a regular basis. Most people find this hard to do. The world is very distracting, and a fairly high level of motivation is needed to overcome the constant distractions of the immediate environment in order to engage in serious mental discipline. Zen teachers are forever admonishing their students to make a commitment to the practice, to devote time to it every day; how else are you going to become familiar enough with your own mind to really engage in the kind of practice, as described by my master, which will transform you into a better human being?

The first kind of self-criticism, the harsh kind, is something that almost everyone I talk to about meditation is familiar with. I believe this is because our society and its culture, with all of its bedrock assumptions about what it means to be a human being, essentially guiles us into believing that we are inadequate. In order to become adequate as human beings, we have to acquire a number of things from the outside which will allow us to measure up to the arbitrary, unspoken, but nevertheless very real message that we have been brought up to believe: we are inadequate. In other words, this way of relating to oneself seems to be almost universal in our culture; we don't need anyone else to stand above us and tell us that we need to be self-critical because we already are.

The second kind of self-criticism, the loving kind, is something that few people are taught as children unless they have exceptionally good parents who are capable of doing it themselves. Most childhood discipline is administered with a bit of harshness, impatience or anger thrown into the mix, and most of us do not come away from childhood with a clear sense of what it means to be both disciplined and compassionate to oneself as equal parts of a whole package. Thus, relatively few people are familiar with the second kind of self-criticism. We have some vague idea that it might be possible, but since we have witnessed so few examples of it, it is largely an unknown quantity to which we have to be introduced, as I was by my master, and learn from scratch.

Having arrived at the point where we can make a distinction between the two kinds of self-criticism, we then have the choice to practice one or the other. The first kind is of course habitual and reflexive; we make a mistake and proceed to chew ourselves up one side and down the other in our own minds. Or, sitting in meditation, the mind wanders off on some interesting expedition or another, complaining about this, that or another person, this that or another situation, and how badly we have been treated; we awaken to the flight of fancy and then we feel foolish and inadequate for being such poor meditators. I had a bad case of this, of course, but what I was taught – to love myself when I criticized myself – was a revolution of the mind in that it made it possible to love myself no matter what I was thinking, no matter what happened on an external level, no matter what, period. I could just love myself, and I didn't need to be especially worthy of it. The conditioned thinking of being unworthy, the internal demon, can only be converted to the truth – which is that we are in fact worthy as human beings and always have been – by compassion turned inwards. Acceptance of me as I am, loving myself as I am, is one of the marvelous tools which Zen meditation has put in my hands. It never fails me.

This brings me to the word *brainwashing*, which has entirely negative connotations in

everyday language. A dictionary definition is as follows:

Make (someone) adopt radically different beliefs by using systematic and often forcible pressure. "The organization could brainwash young people." Synonyms: indoctrinate, condition, reeducate, persuade, influence, propagandize, inculcate. [Merriam On-line Dictionary]

In our individualistic culture, we have a prejudiced view against this kind of human activity, and yet it is going on all the time. Even if we are not part of, say, a religious organization which uses some form of brainwashing to get its members to think alike, we are still in a culture which employs brainwashing. All cultures, no matter how small and simple or large and complex, employ at least a little bit of brainwashing for the sake of harmony. If we all think alike we will have fewer differences of opinion; fewer differences of opinion mean less squabbling and, in the end, less strife. America might be the ultimate proving ground for Buddhism in the sense that it is easily the most diverse nation on the face of the earth. It is a pluralistic culture. Having pushed the original inhabitants aside, the continent was filled up with immigrants from every other continent on the globe. The dominance of white-skinned people of European descent is diminishing year by year, and as a nation we are still in the early stages of coming to grips with this demographic shift.

Having said that, however, there are nevertheless many forms of collective belief which can be said to be brainwashed American values, for instance a belief in our "exceptionalism" as a nation, which gives us the right to interfere in the internal affairs of other nations the world over if we disapprove of what is going on there. Within American culture, advertising is an ubiquitous form of brainwashing, one which reinforces the basic assumption I referred to earlier, that we are inadequate. You are inadequate unless you go out and get a really nice new car, or unless you drink this certain kind of beer or buy this kind of insurance or perfume. And since sex is used to sell just about everything, we have a very insidious sexual inadequacy brainwashed into us, making it necessary to seek for sexual gratification in order to feel whole and accepted. On the whole we are, as I mentioned, brainwashed into being consumers.

So now the question becomes whether or not we are using religious practice to deprogram, or "unbrainwash", that kind of stuff out of our thinking. My experience is that I did exactly that. Or to be more precise, I used the kind of brainwashing that my master describes above in order to, on one level, become a better person; on another level to correct what I had come to regard as flawed thinking; and on a third level, to learn to simply be at peace in the moment. So given that this was and is my experience, I am in essence advocating a kind of positive brainwashing, one which is done without the use of any force or coercion, but is rather a use of the word brainwash to indicate a personal decision to "wash out of one's brain that which can be regarded as flawed, inaccurate or undesirable."

In everyday language, to have a "dirty mind" means to be preoccupied with sexually oriented thinking, inevitably involving the desire for sex. I suppose it is one of the oddities of language that one would not generally speaking employ brainwashing to cleanse a dirty mind, but be that as it may, even to call sexual thinking and desire dirty is the result of a previously existing form of brainwashing derived from a religious paradigm. It is far more accurate to say that to be preoccupied with sexual thoughts is the result of having an animal brain – it is what the animal brain does. And as human beings, we all have an amygdala, the core part of our brain which produces emotions and other unpremeditated human responses such as the very basic drives to eat, sleep, stay warm and survive. So to call hard wired human motivations "dirty" is to create a form of brainwashing which casts human nature in a negative light. We don't have to do this. There is an alternative. The alternative is to simply witness hard wired animal thinking and accept it for what it is; meanwhile, one also can learn to filter those animal thoughts through the cerebral cortex – the areas of the brain involved with more complex thinking – before acting on any particular impulse. I would regard that as a kind of wisdom, as opposed to calling it brainwashing, even if it partakes of a positive form of it.

I have noticed that it has become fashionable among Buddhist book authors to state that Buddhism should not be confused with self improvement, I would imagine because there is a huge genre of writing now known as self-help or self-improvement, and as Buddhists we would like to retain an identity separate from such secular approaches. Buddhism goes much further than what is normally within the self-help and self-improvement genres, which proceed from a desire-based assumption that we need to find better ways to get what we want in life, to amass a fortune, or sculpt a beautiful body, to make friends and influence people, and be happy. Buddhism points out that desire, in and of itself, is the root of our chronic unhappiness; that unfulfilled desire leads naturally to frustration, then anger and then hatred; and that the cumulative outcome of this process is delusion.

What the Buddhist authors are saying is that, as meditators who reflect upon our own thinking and motivations, what we need to do is simply accept ourselves fully as we are and let go of any further involvement with our thoughts. We are not specifically trying to become better people, but rather that we are trying to become more fully who we already are. This is to give up a desire-based approach to human happiness, to turn compassion inwards, and is excellent as far as it goes; the question is whether it goes far enough. To my mind it does not. Although it goes a long way in the direction of loving oneself, learning to be kind to oneself and cultivating a gentler inner dialogue, it still needs to be recognized that in addition to suffering from desire and anger, we also have confusion and, if it goes far enough in the wrong direction, delusion. Delusional thinking and habits are what make a difficult human being difficult; can we dispense with the need to become better human beings? Will it happen by magic?

Delusion is not easy stuff to get rid of, or brainwash out of oneself. In my own experience, I have found it necessary to look carefully at my own thinking about which I have a little nagging sense of uneasiness, and question carefully what it is about. In other words, this is not a totally passive enterprise, meditation; it has an active side to it, and we should not be too bound by a formulaic idea of what meditation is or is not, thinking that it is to be totally passive in the presence of squirrely thinking. Confusion and delusion are woolly, tangled up thoughts, and they pretty much need to be untangled. On its own, this is a large topic which I do not have the time and space to go into in any detail right now. The untangling of squirrely thinking generally is a painstaking business involving a very high level of honesty with oneself; having a wise person with whom to talk over the nature of the thinking in question seems to be a necessary part of the process. Hearing ourselves give voice to our squirrely thinking is a necessary first step in washing it out of ourselves and how we relate to the rest of the world.

Concluding my thoughts on the subject of brainwashing, positive and negative, I have a method for "washing out of my brain that which can be regarded as flawed, inaccurate or undesirable." This method occurred spontaneously to me not so long ago: I walk around our temple grounds and ask the sky, the mountains, the trees, the brush and the hills to help me wash out of myself the thinking that I have come to realize is troublesome, thinking which partakes of suffering. I might also stand in front of a statue of the Buddha and ask for assistance in the same way, but it just has felt right to simply go outside and ask the whole universe to help me. I have no doubt at all that what I am asking for is granted; there is a compassionate nature to the universe. And it is not as if I'm asking for some kind of miracle to occur in which I wake up one morning and all my delusional thinking has vanished; and I am fully aware that I still need to do the work of positive brainwashing. However, on the deepest level, I can see that the meditation itself does the real work of purification. I witness a strong flow of something though the center of my being. I could call it energy, or a river, or as my master used to say, "the water of the spirit". Whatever set of words one might use to describe something which is fairly indescribable in its real essence, I know that it works. It has a totally reassuring quality to it which never fails to strengthen my faith in this practice. It is not a separate thing coming from outside of me; it is my true nature as a human being and yet it is not something I can possess in the usual meaning of that word. But it is the answer to my effort and willingness to wash out of myself whatever it is that might cause me to see unclearly.