



Beauty or Beast?

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Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder and so is the perception of “Good” or “Evil”.

The whole world considered Hitler as evil except the Nazi party and most people in Germany at that time. Without the mighty German army marching in front of him, Hitler would only be preaching to an empty stadium.

Thus, although Hitler’s deeds are evil, the Germans who trusted and supported him thought he was good for their country. We can extend the same perspectives to proponents of slavery, discrimination, socio-economic class systems, aboriginal disparities and many other issues that are relevant today. The “right” or the “wrong” is in the eyes of the beholder depending on whether he is a supporter (benefactor) or an opponent (victim) of the issue at hand.

The fundamental flaw in this kind of thinking is DUALITY. It seems that we are unable to comprehend any single thing if we do not have its opponent to bring out the contrast. We would not be able to read if the ink and paper were of the same color.

There are better ways for us to think and comprehend. Firstly, we must recognize that duality is true in the ordinary sense and is the normal thinking mode. This is the MANIFESTATION (色相) of duality. Secondly, we must go deeper to realize that duality describes the contrast of appearance, which is entirely relative. For example, without black there is no white; without hell, heaven would not be so attractive; we would not know joy if we had not experienced sorrow and so on. This is the FUNCTION (作用) of duality. Thus, the contrast of black ink on white paper or white ink on black paper allows us to read and write. Thirdly, we must come to acknowledge that both sides of duality have equal value in allowing our mind to comprehend a concept. Thus, black ink is not more valuable than white paper. Similarly, black or white papers have the same value. At this level we gain insight into the ESSENCE (本體) of duality.

In Buddhism, we use the term “DUALITY” or “two-sidedness” to point out the flaw of first-level thinking mode in order to raise our awareness to a higher level.

At level two, we use terms such as “form”, “appearance”, and “color” to describe the individual members of a dual set. These terms make us aware that things by themselves (level one) or paired up with its duality partner (level two) still do not describe the ultimate reality, the essence. However, learning these terms helps us to (1) familiarize ourselves with level-two thinking, (2) diminish the conflict that is inherent in level-one thinking and (3) see that there is yet another higher level of thinking. For example, the term “matter (色身)” – meaning the presentation in visual form of living or non-living things – is frequently used to highlight the second level.

At the third level, we no longer need the contrast between the two opposites. Instead, we assign equal value (thereby equal to no value or immeasurable infinite value) to each member in the set. Examples for this level of

comprehension are terms like “equanimity”, “oneness”, “transcending duality” and “essence”. Other terms such as “Dharma body (法身)” or “color equals void, emptiness equals color (色不異空，空不異色)” are meant to convey the same idea of third level understanding.

Granting that the third level of thinking is not easy to understand or practice and following an earlier metaphor, we would say third-level understanding is “the ability to read and write using non-contrasting ink and paper (black ink on black paper)”. Immediately we can see how confusing it is to invent new terms or expressions in an attempt to convey old ideas or teaching, especially when they are taken out of context or perceived by our level-one thinking mode.

Buddhism is a unique religion. Like other religions, Buddhist teaching guides us in how to become do-gooders and be forgiving of the evil-doers. But unlike other religions, Buddhism presents a new mode of thinking that motivates us towards reaching that goal. Without the insights of higher thinking mode, duality would only bind people to do good by obeying some doctrines (commandments or silas) without requiring us to develop the wisdom to understand the workings of the mind.

Another important feature in this “non-dual” thinking is to point out that every being has equal potential to become good or evil depending on the state of mind at each moment in time. A person can be “holier than thou” one moment and “hate your guts” the next. The free choice lies within the being. Hence, a person can no longer be labelled.

Why then do we always seem to make the wrong choices? Buddha taught us it is because of our habitual tendency and ignorance. Through cultivation we can be trained to make good choices initially until, finally, only good thoughts and wisdom (prajna) arise.

The four stages of Buddhist learning are: (1) believing in our potential, (2) understanding the thinking modes, (3) practicing our mindfulness and eventually (4) realizing the dharma.

May all beings transcend duality and dwell in equanimity. This is infinite non-attachment.

