

Chapter 17 **Water Moon World: Mirror Wisdom**

What is that which always is, and has no becoming? And what is that which is always becoming, and never is?

Plato, *Timaeus*

The sun is always the same, always itself, never in any sense “becoming”. The moon, on the other hand, is a body which waxes, wanes, and disappears, a body, whose existence is subject to the universal law of becoming, of birth and death The moon, like man, has a career involving tragedy.... For three nights the starry sky is without a moon. But this “death” is followed by a rebirth: the “new moon”. The moon’s going out, in “death”, is never final. One Babylonian hymn sees the moon as a “fruit growing from itself”. It is reborn of its own substance, in pursuance of its own career.’

Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*

*To what shall I liken
The world and human life?
Ah, the shadow of the moon,
When it touches in a dewdrop
The beak of the waterfowl.*

Eihei Dogen

In the previous chapter I referred to Shakespeare’s reference in *Hamlet* to art as “holding up the mirror to nature” and to Goethe’s understanding of the theory of *mimesis*, which is never merely imitation but points to something beyond appearance. In other words, through art, nature holds the mirror up to ourselves. Mirrors, in fact, have always held a fascination for us.

In *The Mirror: A History*, Sabine Melchior-Bonnet quotes Berengar de la Tour d'Albenas:

O sweet mirror, invented in order to know that
which our own gaze cannot see.

Part Two of her book Melchior-Bonnet entitles “The Magic of Resemblance”. In the first chapter of this Part, “In the Semblance of God”, she begins with a contemplation on the nature of the mirror. Despite its irregularities and shortcomings, the mirror was thought to be a “wondrous instrument” in pre-modern times, not only to help us discover our own image and know ourselves better, but, “by means of the visible, to perceive the invisible”.¹ In the Middle Ages, under the influence of Platonism, sight was the favoured means of acquiring knowledge, through which one could experience the beautiful: “The mirror was invested with exceptional symbolic importance because of its capacity to enhance visual acuity and to radiate light, the source of all beauty.”

At the same time, as Melchior-Bonnet points out, this wondrous object was also a disturbing one. It does not return a perfect picture. To begin with we see a reverse image of ourselves. At the same time the mirror also poses other questions. Not only is the picture in the mirror not quite the same as the reflected object but it leaves us to wonder just where the image “is”. There is an unsettling depth and uncertain spatial location to the image, which appears behind the solid screen of the mirror, leaving the observer to wonder if he is seeing the surface of the mirror or looking through it. The reflection suggests the experience of “an ethereal world looming beyond the mirror, inviting the eye to cross through to it.”

In short, the mirror offers “an enigmatic and divergent way of knowing”:

Before it helps to put the world in order and maintain the conscious self, looking into the mirror leads one’s gaze on an indirect course marked by echos and analogies, a course that seems to attest to an enviable “elsewhere” in the heart of the visible. Form without substance, subtle and impalpable, the mirror image manifests a diaphanous purity, a revelation of the divine source from which all likeness emanates.²

The sun, moon and water moon

The moon is, of course, our night-time mirror of the sun. And the water moon is a further reflection of that image in the myriad liquid surfaces of the Earth, a “revelation of the divine source” infinitely reflected in every drop of water around us. Thus, the “invisible” sun has a presence throughout the darkness of the night.

Moreover, the sun and moon form a spectrum. That “which always is” and that “which is always becoming” are two ends of a continuum, not just the celestial symbols of night and day that we – like Plato - customarily oppose in our dualistic way of thinking. From an astronomical perspective we know the sun is also “becoming” even though to us it simply “is”. But nothing can “be” without also “becoming”. They are integral to each other.

The sun and moon represent universal and relative qualities. The changeless sun is always there. It shines at night as well as in the day. At night we just don’t see it, but experience it relatively through the reflection of the moon which comes and goes. While, contrastingly, we cannot look directly at the sun by day because it is too bright, we can see it at night, as if through a glass darkly. For the sun there is no light and dark, it is absolute light, while our lives, on the other hand, are lived in both shadow and light.

The water moon - the image of the moon reflected in water - also embodies the twin qualities of ultimate and relative reality. While the sun it reflects is an unchanging and timeless presence, the image of the moon, as Mircea Eliade points out, is itself forever changing and, insofar as it functions as our calendar, it is a symbol of the transience of all phenomena. The sun is beyond dualism. While, for it, there appears to be no cycle of existence, no historical change, the life which it generates - including us - undergoes continual transformations. The moon appears to come and go, and even disappears completely for three days every month when we are left in total darkness while we wait for the sun to reappear at dawn each day.

The chain that results in the appearance of a water moon, the image that symbolically unites being and becoming, depends for its appearance on a number of necessary links: the sun, the moon to reflect the sun, a still surface of water - a mirror - and a perceiver in the right place to see its reflection in the water. If any of these links are missing it won’t appear but, on the other hand, given these conditions, it is visible to every eye that looks for it. Seeing a clear, still water moon is therefore a special experience, since the image of

the moon is frequently distorted or disturbed. The water moon can be fragmented, or splintered, in the surface of moving or stormy water or completely obscured by clouds in the sky. As a result, although the water moon reflects a timeless, immovable sun, it is, itself, a transient phenomenon, likened in buddhist writings to a bubble, dream or magical illusion.

Enlightenment and Dogen Kigen

The water moon, as a reflection of the sun in the tiniest drops of water, is also a symbol of enlightenment in Asia - the water moon mind. The thirteenth century Japanese Zen master, Eihei Dogen, expressed this in his lifework, *The Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*. In the chapter, *Genjo-Koan* - "Actualising the Fundamental Point" or "The Realised Universe" - he wrote:

Enlightenment is like the moon reflected on the water. The moon does not get wet, nor is the water broken. Although its light is wide and great, the moon is reflected even in a puddle an inch wide. The whole moon and the entire sky are reflected in dewdrops on the grass, or even in one drop of water.

True enlightenment leads to contact with the Absolute:

Enlightenment does not divide you, just as the moon does not break the water. You cannot hinder enlightenment, just as a drop of water does not hinder the moon in the sky.

A water moon in the smallest drop of water reflects the sun, and therefore the universe itself:

The depth of the drop is the height of the moon. Each reflection, however long or short its duration, manifests the vastness of the dewdrop, and realises the limitlessness of the moonlight in the sky.³

Meditation

For Dogen the essential "drop" is the mirror of the meditative human mind in which the images of moon, sun and infinite sky are reflected. The art and practice of contemplation provide the calm surface where enlightenment can be realised. Dogen's oft-quoted idea of meditation is the "dropping of mind and body". By the dropping of mind he is referring to

the relative, personal mind. When the mind mirrors the actual and metaphysical light of the sun it is in contact with the spirit of the absolute, being as well as becoming.

Like the dewdrop, the human mind mirrors the changing universe, as well as the changeless, absolute reality which gives birth to it. If each of us, like the Earth which bears us, is a transient water moon then, through contemplation, we are also the timeless sun. Tanahashi expresses this in his introductory section on “Concentration in serenity”:

Moonlight, which appears to be still, shimmers on ocean waves that crash against rocks and burst into droplets. Millions of bits of light burst, spread and merge with one another. For Dogen meditation practice implies this sort of mutual permeation between an individual’s “light” and the activities of all things. Although one person’s practice is part of the practice of all awakened beings, each individual practice is indispensable, as it actualises and completes everyone’s activity as a buddha.

Time-being

Dogen also expresses this, correspondingly, in his notion of “time-being”, the sense in which the image of all time can be experienced in the present moment, when you are looking at the “external” world as it is mirrored in the mind. Again, as Kazuaki Tanahashi writes in his commentary on Dogen’s teachings:

Awareness of each moment is indispensable to the way of mindfulness, because practice is complete only when a person focuses attention on the present moment: the very moment of one’s existence. Time, according to Dogen, is experienced from moment to moment; actual experience occurs only in the present. Past was experienced in the past as the present moment, and future will be experienced in the future as the present moment. ⁴

Each moment carries all of time and therefore is timeless - divine time or “being-time”. “Now” is eternal. Being and becoming are realised as non-dual.

Buddhism is thought to point to the impermanency of life, but awareness of impermanency is inseparable from recognition of the timelessness of a moment. Tanahashi quotes, by way of illustration, from a poem of Dogen’s, “Inconceivable Mind of Nirvana”:

As usual
cherry blossoms bloom
in my native place,
their colours unchanged -
spring

As Tanahashi points out, cherry blossoms usually symbolise transiency in Japanese poetry but Dogen is suggesting that something about cherry blossoms is also changeless and timeless, just as nirvana goes beyond the vicissitudes of birth and death. As Tanahashi puts it: “Timelessness is experienced in momentariness.”¹⁴ Isn’t this also the theme of Shakespeare’s Sonnets?

Appearance and reality

Mirror wisdom provides, then, both a clear reflection of the phenomenal world and also insight into the nature of reality behind and within it, what Western philosophers think of as the difference between appearance and reality, or in the East what sages express as the contrast between the way the material world seems to our senses and the way it really is.

The image of the water moon is not just a direct link to the sun but also symbolises the mirror-like reality of all things in nature - including the human mind - which both mirror the sun and each other. In *The Avatamsaka Sutra*, compiled in the early centuries of the first millennium, there is the famous story of Indra’s net, a symbol of the interconnected nature of the whole universe. The young Tibetan lama, Yongey Mingyur, describes it:

At every connection in this infinite net hangs a magnificently polished and infinitely faceted jewel, which reflects in each of its facets all the facets of every other jewel in the net. Since the net itself, the number of jewels, and the facets of every jewel are infinite, the number of reflections is infinite as well. When any jewel in this infinite net is altered in any way, all of the other jewels in the net change too.⁵

This is a metaphor which symbolises not just the interconnectedness of all things but how we are all connected by a jewel-like quality in our nature which, like the moon and water moon, reflects - and is - the light of the sun. In the East light is the essential substance of the universe and what we call “matter” is where the light is obscured, or refracted, as in a prism. The mirror nature of everything is often likened to the workings of the modern cinema. We take the pictures on the screen for reality when they are really

produced by the light projected onto the screen. The light is the essential reality, not the images. Similarly with the human being. The personal self is a mirror image of the light which illumines us, and which poets and musicians try to express. This mirror quality is within us all.

This is a theme taken up by Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, one of the most respected of the modern Tibetan lamas - and father of Yongey Mingyur. In his book, *As It Is* - as opposed to "as things appear" - a collection of his teachings in 1994-5, he underlines buddha nature as the basis of all things. Tulku Urgyen's teachings were directed at Tibetan scholars, but in chapter 3 - "Buddha Nowhere Else" - he speaks to us all. Buddha nature, as "original wakefulness", is an understanding of how the mind really is, rather than how it seems to be.

Who we really are

Buddha mind - the jewel mind - is essentially an emptiness - infinite space - but it is an emptiness that is also an awareness. It is an awareness of the indivisibility of mind within each of us, but continuous also with the mind within all things. If we reflect on our minds, if we look into them and see beyond the reflection, we see ourselves as we really are: "This indivisible nature is present in every single being as the continuity of one's mind. If we recognise this indivisible nature as our natural face, we don't need to seek a buddha elsewhere." ⁶

Buddha nature is present in everyone, just as the water moon is reflected in every dewdrop. In this is our equality. The difference between us lies in how the conditions of our life reveal or obscure it, or how calm or restless is the mirror mind which reflects it. In fact everything shares buddha mind. Nature and its various kingdoms are an expression of it. Only human nature has the chance to recognise and realise it.

Moreover, as Tulku Urgyen reminds us, the darker the age we live in, the greater the opportunity:

When the three poisons are ablaze in peoples' minds, it is easier to acknowledge their antidote, which is the recognition of buddha nature. ⁷

Notes

¹ Sabine Melchior-Bonnet, *The Mirror: A History*, translated by Katherine H. Jewett with a preface by Jean Delumeau, New York: Routledge, 2001 (1994), p 101.

² Ibid. p102

³ These quotations are all from Kazuaki Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop: writings of Zen Master Dogen*, New York: North Point Press, 1985, p 71.

⁴ Ibid. p 13

⁵ Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, *The Joy of Living: Unlocking the Secret and Science of Happiness*, written with Eric Swanson, Foreword by Daniel Coleman, New York: Harmony Books, 2007, pp 174-5.

⁶ Tulku Urgyen Rinpoche, *As It Is, volume 1*, Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe, 1999, p 50.

⁷ Ibid. p 51