

Three Views of My Father

By Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

Thanks to my encounter with Buddhism, my view of my father has gone through a considerable transformation. I can say that I have seen my father in three different ways in three different stages of my life.

First I saw my father as an object of my hate.

Second, I saw him as an object of my compassion.

Third, I saw him as an object of my gratitude.

Before I discuss these three views of my father, let me talk about my family background because it is indispensable for my discussion.



My Family Background

I was born in Nagano, Japan, into a dysfunctional family. My father had a couple of divorces when I was small. The first divorce took place when I was one. My father remarried when I was five. But that second marriage lasted only two years. Thus that marriage ended when I was seven. That was his second divorce. Then my father remarried again when I was twelve.

About fifty or sixty years ago when those divorces took place, divorce was a rare occurrence in Japan. When one took place, the Japanese were very secretive about it. Since a divorce was a kind of family shame, people hid it. They lived their lives as if it had never taken place. Nobody told me anything about my birth mother. Thus I grew up without knowing anything about her, not even her name. Since my father destroyed all of her photos, I never knew how she looked. I have an older brother, and he and I had the same birth mother. My brother and I never talked about our father's divorces or our birth mother.

Thus when I came to the United States at the age of twenty-five, I was surprised because many Americans were so open about their divorces. Even in my first meetings with them, they told me about their divorces. Compared with the Japanese, who were so ashamed of their divorces and were secretive about them, some Americans sounded as if they were bragging about their divorces. Anyway, my father's divorces were a heavy psychological burden for me in my childhood and youth.

My Hatred of My Father

Having told you about my background, let me talk about my first view of my father as an object of my hate. Because of my father's divorces, my childhood was generally a dark one. I was motherless in most of the early years of my childhood. Thus I envied my friends for having mothers. But motherlessness was not the only problem I had. Actually I was better off when I was motherless. When my father remarried when I was five, I started to be traumatized by the constant arguments that my father and my new mother had. This new mother had a daughter from her previous marriage and she brought the girl with her when she moved into our house. The girl was a couple of years older than I. Thus when my father remarried, I gained a new mother and a stepsister.

Unfortunately my new mother did not care for me much. Of course, I cannot blame her for not loving me because, in those days, I was one of the most uncontrollable rascals in all Japan. But because of her exclusive love for her own daughter, there was constant fighting between siblings and constant arguments between parents. So my father's second marriage lasted two years.

When my father remarried when I was twelve, there again constant arguments between my father and my new mother. Thus when I was in junior high and high school, I really fed up with their arguments and with the institution marriage in general. In those days I wondered why people married. I told myself many times that I should not marry matter what might happen. That was my firm resolution. (But later I got married. So, you know my firm resolution was not firm at all.)

Since many miserable things happened in my childhood, I had a lot of self-pity. I thought that my father alone caused all of my misery. I thought that his selfishness was responsible for it. Thus I blamed my father alone. In my teenage years I started to hate him and my hate reached its climax in my high school days.

My Compassion for My Father

Now let me talk about my second view of my father as an object of my compassion. When I was in high school, I started to attend a Christian church. I attended it because a Christian teacher, who taught me in junior high school, deeply impressed me. I attended a church of which he was a member. This new move of mine was probably caused by the unhappy and uneasy feeling I was experiencing in those days, although I was not aware of it at that time.

When this Christian teacher was teaching us in junior high school, he always encouraged us to read classics. He often told us, "Don't read best sellers of our time! Those books may be popular now, but in a couple of years people will not pay any attention to them. Read those books that have been proven by time." He even made a list of the books he recommended to us. Because of his influence, I started to read books in high school. When I read a book of one hundred short stories selected by Somerset Maugham, I was deeply moved by "The Death of Ivan Ilych," a story written by Leo Tolstoy. Thus when I started to attend a Christian church, I started to read Tolstoy,



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particularly his religious writings. After graduating from high school, since I was totally enchanted by Tolstoy, I went to Tokyo to study Russian in college.

Then on one of my college days when I was a senior, I happened to pick up a commentary on *Faust*, written by Shuichi Maida. I had never heard of Maida. But when I read the book, I was deeply moved by what he said in the book. Maida was a Buddhist and was commenting on *Faust* from a Buddhist point of view. Through Maida I became interested in Buddhism.

After I started to study Christianity and Buddhism, my view of my father gradually changed. Because of the teachings I received from the two religions, my hate toward him gradually turned into compassion. Before I studied religion, I had a lot of self-pity and I thought that I alone was an unfortunate victim. But I gradually started to think that my father was also a victim of unfortunate circumstances. Of course, I never doubted that my father was responsible for his divorces. But I realized that there were many other conditions that contributed. For example, my grandparents lived with us. Since my father was the oldest son, he had to live with his parents. (In Japan the oldest son usually takes care of his parents.) Although my grandfather was a loving person, my grandmother was one of the most difficult persons in the world. She was the only daughter of the Haneda family, one of the wealthiest families in the city. Since she was an only daughter, my grandfather was adopted into the Haneda family. My grandmother always had a couple of maids. She was a totally spoiled and selfish person.

In this family situation, any woman who married my father had to have a hard time with her mother-in-law, who lived in the same house. To make matters worse, my father's three sisters, my three aunts, lived near our house. In Japan sisters-in-laws or brothers-in-laws are usually said to cause all kinds of problems for a newlywed wife. (They are called "small mean in-laws" in Japan.) Thus, for my father's wives, these three sisters-in-law did not make the situation any easier.

In this way I gradually gained insight into the difficult circumstances that caused my father's divorces. I realized that my father was not the only cause. There were many other causes.

In the *Tannisho* Shinran says, "If certain conditions arise, I could do all kinds of things." When I read these words, I thought they were true. I thought, "Yes, if I had been in my father's shoes, I would have done the same thing; I would have had no choice but to get a divorce. Am I any better than my father? Who am I to judge him? All human actions are caused by conditions. All human beings are weak and fallible."

Thinking this way, largely because of the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism, I gradually stopped blaming my father as the only cause of my unhappiness. I started to feel compassion or commiseration toward him. That was my second view of my father.

My Gratitude toward My Father

Now let me talk about my view of my father as an object of my gratitude. Four years ago while I was visiting Japan, my father passed away. It was as if he had waited until I arrived to die. At that time my father had all kinds of physical problems. He was just lying in bed. He could not speak. Since he could not eat anything by himself, somebody had to feed him. During the last week of his life I was by his bedside and was feeding him. Although he could not speak, he could hear and understand what others were saying. He looked deeply depressed. He never smiled. He did not show any warm feeling toward anyone at all.

My father had nothing but hate toward religion throughout his life. When I started to attend the Christian church in my high school days, he tried to dissuade me from attending it. Even now I can remember how he, with tears in his eyes, attempted to tell me that I, a young man, should not

be influenced by a narrow dogma. After I started to study Buddhism, he often told me that he could not understand why I was studying it. For him all religions were nothing but superstition.

When my father passed away, I thought about all the things that had happened between him and me. I reflected upon what my father meant in my life. Then, I could not help feeling deep gratitude toward him.

All the sad and unfortunate things that had happened in my life—those things that I had hated and deplored—became objects of my gratitude. The fact that he had a couple of divorces became an object of my gratitude. The fact that he had constant arguments with his wives became an object of my gratitude. The fact that he criticized my interest in religion became an object of my gratitude. Even the way he died, deeply depressed without having any warm feeling toward others including me, became an object of my gratitude.

I thought all these things were indispensable conditions for my life. All the things that he did or did not do were powerful and valuable teachings for me. Without them I would not have become interested in Christianity and Buddhism. I totally owe to him what I am today.

Buddhist teachers often teach us that if we truly understand the Dharma, we come to appreciate all people. We come to think that all the people that we have loved, hated, respected, and despised in our lives are actually teachers (or Buddhas) in disguise; they are appearing before us to guide us to the Dharma. I thought of the truthfulness of this teaching.

In Buddhist seminars I have often heard Buddhist women talking about spiritual transformations they experienced because of their difficult relationships with their mothers-in-law. Those women said that they had tremendous difficulties with their in-laws. They often considered them “mean devils” and even wished to kill them. But when they gained deep insight into the Dharma, they said that their difficult experiences with their in-laws enabled them to turn toward the Dharma and to appreciate it. They said that they owed their happiness at meeting the Dharma to the difficult experiences they had had with their in-laws. They said that their in-laws were actually Buddhas in disguise that appeared in this world to guide them to the Dharma.

I recently watched a Japanese television program about a man whose twelve-year-old son committed suicide. His son was abused by his classmates and killed himself. After his son committed suicide, the man felt tremendous agony. He could not do anything. He just kept on asking “Why?” and blaming himself and his son’s classmates, who had abused him.

But this agony eventually led him to Buddhism. By gradually gaining insight into the Dharma, he regained his power to live. Now he is a totally changed person. He hosts a hot line program for abused children. He receives many telephone calls from children who are thinking of committing suicide. Some of those children even visit his house and stay with him. In this way, although he lost his own son, he has gained many new sons and daughters throughout Japan.

The man says that thanks to the difficult experience he had, he has been liberated into a wonderful world. He says that the thick shell of his ego was shattered and he was liberated into a wider world. Now he says that his son was actually a Buddha in disguise; his son appeared and died in this world to guide him to the Dharma.

Conclusion

Buddhism teaches us that we are liberated by the Buddha’s wisdom, by a perspective through which we see all things in a totally new way.

In order to explain this I have talked about my three views of my father. First, I saw my father as an object of my hate. At that time I was standing above him and was judging him. I was an innocent victim and was looking down on him and criticizing him. Second, I saw him as an object

of my compassion. At that time, I no longer stood above him. I saw myself standing on the same level with him. I identified with him because I discovered in myself the same weakness and fallibility. Third, now, I cannot help thinking of him with a deep sense of gratitude. Now I look up to him as a Buddha who guided me to the Dharma. All the things he did or did not do have been invaluable teachings for me. He was and is an invaluable teacher.

Things we encounter in our lives do not have any inherent meanings. It is our perspective that determines what meaning things have in our lives. The deeper our wisdom gets, the deeper the meaning we discover in all things. The more arrogant we become, the more enemies we have. The humbler we become, the more friends we have. The higher our heads become, the fewer Buddhas we have in our lives. The lower our heads become, the more Buddhas we have in our lives.

It is so crucial that we encounter our historical teachers such as Shakyamuni and Shinran, who embody wisdom, and learn this wisdom from them. Some people are stubbornly attached to their fixed ideas, views, and opinions. They keep them forever. They do not have flexible minds. But reality is constantly changing. We are constantly changing. We must receive the Buddha's wisdom, a perspective through which we can discover new meaning in all things. We must learn to have deep appreciation of all the things and people we encounter in our lives.

Dr. Nobuo Haneda, director of the **Maida Center of Buddhism**, will be conducting the 2009 Maida Center Summer Retreat on August 1-3, 2009 at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley, CA. For information or registration please contact Dr. Haneda at maidacenter@sbcglobal.net

Dr. Haneda is the author of the book, [*Dharma Breeze*](#), which is available in the [ToDo Institute online bookstore](#). <http://www.todoinstitutebooks.com>

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