

3: Isms and Ists: The Language of Self-image

Dharma Talk by Ven. Shikai Zuiko O-sensei
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Solipsism, euphemism, pessimism, nihilism, negativism, positivism, legalism, cynicism, terrorism, imperialism, dogmatism, baptism, conservatism, liberalism, centrism, socialism, communism, Leninism, Marxism, Mao Tzeism, Trotskyism, Fidelism, fascism, synergism, nestorianism, vegetarianism.

[Laughter]

Isms, isms, isms; ists, ists, ists. Sometimes, isms and ists can flow off the tongue like a waterfall. Sometimes they bang and clank like airplane baggage on the roundabout. They can be turned into accusations. They can be hurled as invectives. The velocity of accusations and invectives increases and, in the course of human history, words have frequently turned into bullets. Or self-image wears these words on its metaphoric sleeve like scouting badges, declaring to the world that it is a non-racist, non-sexist, non-ageist, masculinist, pugilist, who practises vegetarianism.

We may be at a social event and meet someone who is a stranger. In an attempt to pinpoint us, they may ask us if we are a nationalist, a federalist, a feminist, a capitalist, a Buddhist. Scarily, we may answer yes or no without knowing what we are being asked.

It took me years to figure out that answering what I thought I was being asked without asking what was really being asked was not useful. This was ages ago, in the beginning of the feminist movement. I had my own definition of what this was. My definition, however it was arrived at, was in the nature of “someone who believed that every being has the right to shelter, food, care, and instruction that would allow them to unfold their full potential”. I now know that I must have made it up. But I would answer the question, “Are you a feminist?” or “Are you one of those feminists?” with a “Yes.” Much to my surprise, the responses to my answer varied. Sometimes I was welcomed into groups that seemed to regard weapons and genitals as the same thing. Sometimes the groups were busy changing “e” to “y” in words so that we wound up with “womyn” and “humyn”. Other linguistically focused groups were busy changing “men” into “persons”, as in “chairperson”. Frighteningly, there were also weird illogical worlds where a “womyn” talked of “peace” and of aborting all male fetuses in the same breath. Charges of being a “ball-breaker”, a “hater of males” and a “cold, calculating bitch” were numerous.

One day, and fortunately, a light went on and I heard myself say, “What are you asking me?” I was saved. Funnily enough, most of those who were asking me if I was a feminist or believed in feminism didn’t have a definition and the attack or the seduction would mysteriously dissipate. I began to notice that we human beings love “isms” and “ists”. Check it out for yourself. Pick up any magazine or newspaper, listen to the news or look at the news. Why do we like them?

In the teisho series, “Questioning the Enigma”, which is a SAKN tape for formal students, Anzan Hoshin roshi says,

The flow of reality spills out every where and every when. It flows as the rising and falling moments that are the presencing of this motionless, beginningless and endless moment of experiencing. It is the dirt beneath your fingernails and the wax in your ears. It is the openness of the sky and the complex,

interlaced and overlaid currents of air that a bird passes through, rides on, and is carried by in its flight. It is the openness of this moment and it is also the dense overlay of structures of conditioned perception and cognition that self-image rides on, exists on, and propagates itself through.

Isms and ists are part of that “dense overlay of structures of conditioned perception and cognition that self-image rides on, exists on, and propagates itself through.” We weave them around ourselves to create a structure we can nest within and we believe that is who we are. We use the structure to define and align ourselves and to deflect information that doesn’t fit. This structure can become woven so tightly that it is impenetrable, letting nothing that is not already known through.

Isms and ists, words, words, words. “What’s the harm?” you may ask. From childhood rises an echo of a verse:

*Sticks and stones
Can break my bones
But words can never hurt me.*

Well intended, but not really true. Millions of human beings have been murdered because the isms and ists applied to them were the wrong isms and ists. It’s pretty simple. Turn something one way and one person’s terrorism is another’s patriotism; turn it the other way and it’s vice-a-versa. Isms and ists can be useful, for example in libraries they can help us sort things. Isms and ists, when used by individuals or groups as descriptions of who they think they are and what they believe, can be, and usually are, a red flag to contraction. It’s often quite flagrant and not particularly useful in clarifying anything.

Now, here’s a quote from a recent edition of a well-known Buddhist magazine:

There’s a strong streak of anti-essentialism and feminism just as there is in Buddhism.

Say what???

[Laughter]

Not once in the article was there a definition of either “feminism” or more importantly, “Buddhism” even though they used a big “B”. Now, what are we talking about when we use the word “Buddhism”? Are we talking about and understanding the same thing? What comes to mind? Are we talking about a religion? Sometimes. A Philosophy? Sometimes. A lifestyle? Some people. A way of life? Could be. Saffron robes? Saffron and maroon robes? Black robes? Brown robes? A little bit of coloured string around a wrist? Socially engaged? Celibate? A big gold statue with blue hair?

We could go on and on but I think you’re getting the picture and starting to understand why here, we tend not to use the “B” word. We may not know, unless we look critically what it is that is being talked about. To respond to the word, as with other isms with a mere yes or a no is cutting off understanding and being intellectually lazy. It’s like taking a shortcut without knowing where we are going. It also describes an attempt to create a self that is defined by a contraction of belief rather than the openness of the practice of experiencing. It doesn’t matter what the contraction is called. Just as what we call a “human being” is still

the process of being a human, regardless of being labeled as white or black; Asian or Caucasian; French or English; old or young; Brian, Fatima or Lee; so a contraction is a contraction, whether we call it a phobia, an allergy, a judge, a dictator, a fascist, or a humanist. They're all stories, sometimes useful, and sometimes not depending on context.

In our practice, the label doesn't matter except that when we notice that we are using one or one is present and we are taking it seriously, we are presented with yet another opportunity to open to Openness and we do that by feeling the breath, seeing the seeing, hearing the hearing, sitting up straight, opening attention to this moment. The problem is, however, we have become so convinced of our stories that we often think they matter and will fight to the death to defend them sometimes. And the stories are convincing because they are supported by social culture. The stories can be about our health, our family, our beliefs, the world. The stories we make up are not true. The fact that they come up as part of a process that can be known is true. Seeing that and practicing that moment of noticing something about our experience changes, weakens, and eventually wears out our stories and co-incidentally, our ability to believe the stories of others, be they friends, strangers, corporations, or governments. As we learn to notice our experiences and experiencing, we may start to notice interesting and funny, or at least, mildly amusing things.

For example, a major reality hit is that the movement of attention from open to focused is the same regardless of the content. The choice to scratch an itch during this Dharma Assembly and during zazen, while differing in duration or in seriousness of consequence is the same in functioning and mechanism as the choice to lash out at someone or to kick the cat. Learn to recognize that focusing: Learn to recognize that congealing: And learn to mean what you say and say what you mean. That sounds simple and straightforward, but is it? Think about it. How many times have you answered a question such as, "Are you a capitalist, a socialist, a racist, a sexist, a feminist, a humanist, a socialist or a Buddhist" with an immediate yes or no? Did you really know the question you were being asked? What were you being asked, really?

How many times have you nodded wisely when reading or hearing about pacifism, nationalism, communism, terrorism, constitutionalism, or in the first Dharma Talk, fascism? The next time you come across an ism or an ist, stop, look, ask yourself if you know what is being talked about. If you are asked a question as to whether you are or are not an ism or an ist, stop, look, before you cross that gap and give an answer. What you mean and what the other person means could be two entirely different things.

I'm not suggesting that you cease using any and all of the isms and ists; quite the opposite, in fact. Enjoy them. Become curious about them. Remember that they are, as any other words are, merely descriptions of experience and not the experience themselves, and as Roshi says, "Part of the dense overlay of structures of conditioned perception and cognition that self-image rides on, exists on, and propagates itself through". Enjoy them, practise with them, and never, never, never, stake your life on them.

Thank you for listening.