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A Dabrowskian analysis of a Japanese Buddhist nun

Although Satomi Myodo (1896-1978) was born at the end of the last century in a small farming village on the culturally conservative island of Hokkaido , she had an eventful life. She had aspirations to become a writer, studied at Tokyo University , had a child with a man to whom she was not married, performed in an acting troupe, served for a time as a Shinto medium, and at mid-life became a Zen Buddhist nun.

From at least young adulthood Satomi experienced periods of spontaneous multilevel disintegration, but these were of course preceded by the stage of unilevel disintegration. At the age of twenty, Satomi, involuntarily pregnant, reluctantly

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a condition of hopelessness:

Everyday the three of us [Satomi's parents and herself] silently arose, and silently we went to work in the fields. As for me - with my body, which couldn't be more shameful, and my face, which one could hardly bear to look at - I just wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. Looking like a barrel whose hoops were about to burst, and in a condition of utter despair, I was incapable even of dying. I could do nothing but sit back and watch my shame grow. I felt wretched, miserable ashen - as if I were travelling alone at night through an endless wilderness, wearily dragging one foot after the other. (Myodo, 1987:7)

There is a strong emphasis here on shame, which is the name Dabrowski gives to a dynamism operative in the stage of spontaneous multilevel disintegration. However the dynamism Dabrowski has in mind is a self-critical one and implies that the person has a goal or direction but has failed to pursue it. In the passage cited above shame is more a reflection of what Dabrowski calls the second factor (susceptibility to the opinion of others and a need for recognition and approval), and is accompanied by despair, or a lack of direction. In other words the passage indicates a condition similar to the one Dabrowski calls unilevel disintegration.

At this point Satomi had an emotional experience of an intuitive nature, which provided her with the direction she had been lacking. She suddenly realized the importance of morality.

I had never known such a wonderful world as the one I experienced in that moment. I saw the grass and trees, the hills, river, fields, and stones, the hoe and sickle, the birds and dogs, the roofs and windows - all shining brightly under the same sun. For me it was a wonderful breath of fresh air.

Both the animate and inanimate were vividly alive, familiarly addressing me and waving their hands. Struck by the unearthly exquisiteness of this world, I broke into tears and lifted up my face, weeping, in ecstasy. I saw right through myself and completely emptied my bag of emotional problems.

All those words about morality that I had heard in elementary school, and that I had thought were just lectures to be forgotten, suddenly took on the form of living truth for me. (Myodo, 1987:9)

The experience opened up a new direction for Satomi, and it resulted in a measure of self-criticism typical of spontaneous multilevel disintegration:

I never realized that until this time I had been impure and cold-hearted. I had never so much as shed one tear for truth. I had never thought of others nor felt the need

to do so. Self-centred and capricious, I had thought I could play with others in any way I wanted. I had thought "honest person" was another term for "great fool." I had cherished the superiority complex of an evil person. I was haughty, but in truth I was an insignificant nobody. (Myodo, 1987:10)

At this point the father of her child came to stay with her and her parents, during which time he worked in the fields with the family. He and Satomi were married, Satomi became pregnant again, the husband had a quarrel with Satomi's father and then left for Tokyo .

Sometime after the child was born, Satomi left one of her children with her parents and returned to Tokyo with the other. She attended classes at Tokyo University, leaving the baby alone at home during this time. Her husband came with his mother and his aunt and took the baby away, as a result of which Satomi experienced a particularly intense period of disordered grieving. So intense that it precipitated a nervous breakdown and she had to be institutionalized. On her release Satomi joined an acting troupe, had a relationship with a man several years her junior and then began training to become a Shinto medium.

Throughout this period Satomi experienced a sense of dissatisfaction with the direction of her life. Various manifestations of spontaneous multilevel disintegration, or of the interface between unilevel and spontaneous multilevel disintegration, can be discerned, an example of which is the following:

"What makes life worth living?" I wondered. "Surely it is to exhaust all one's strength for the sake of the world and for the sake of humanity and to sacrifice oneself to this end." Thus I gave my projects my all and ran about in all directions. I couldn't find satisfaction in any other way.

And yet, no matter how much I ran busily about, a touch of sadness and dissatisfaction remained deep in my heart. Feeling my spirit wasn't getting enough nourishment, I began to read everything on moral self-cultivation that I could lay my hands on. (Myodo, 1987:64)

Satomi was not at this point entirely certain about the direction her life, but there was an incipient hierarchy of values, as is indicated by her engagement in community service and her feelings of sadness and dissatisfaction at not having a clearer set of values.

Satomi discovered her life purpose in Zen Buddhism. She attended lectures and these were the occasion for a deepening of an inner conflict of a multilevel type:

I was gloomy. Dissatisfied with the Hoganji Temple's Dharma talks, I felt I had no

spiritual home. When I saw the perfectly peaceful appearance of my fellow seekers, I felt that I was the only one who hadn't found spiritual liberation. (Myodo, 1987:70)

Her multilevel condition intensified her decision to engage in prolonged and meditation practice, and such practice is considered by Dabrowski to be an expression of the emergence of the dynamisms of the third factor and self-control. Her first efforts at meditation were a source of frustration:

At first I felt I would reach satori within a week. Then the spring equinox came and went, then the fall equinox approached. I had still not achieved satori! I didn't intend to meet Roshi personally until I achieved satori; I thought it would be useless. In truth, I thought I would easily attain satori and then meet him. But the more I practised *zazen*, the less things turned out the way I expected. (Myodo, 1987:73)

Although Satomi was beginning to take responsibility for her development, she still did not have control over either her behaviour or her unruly mind. However after continued practice she had her first *kensho*, or mystical, experience and then worked on deepening it. Her struggle did not cease, but at this point she had greater control over herself and was more content:

Since *kensho*, I have been working with koans, one after another. Every time I penetrate a koan, a thin skin peels off my mind. Layer by layer, the mind's foundation is gradually becoming clear. Thus the more I enter into the ocean of the Buddha Dharma, the more I understand how deep it is. And yet its content is nothing at all. A human life filled with this "nothing at all" is a marvellous thing. (Myodo, 1987:109)

Satomi Myodo underwent a shift from unilevel to spontaneous multilevel disintegration in her twenties. But because she did not have immediate access to a mystical institution and therefore to models of spiritual development, information on how to practice meditation, spiritual direction, financial support and emotional encouragement, Satomi did not proceed from spontaneous to organized multilevel disintegration until much later in her life---specifically not until she was fifty-nine years old (the age of her first *kensho* experience).

Satomi, as indicated in a passage cited above, made use of meditation in her spiritual growth process. She also engaged in asceticism, although the first employment of such practices, in her twenties, were undertaken to assist her in becoming a Shinto medium:

Ever since I first woke up to [the significance of] sincerity [the experience cited above as an awakening] ...I couldn't help being aware of my moral ugliness.

Tortured with guilt, all I could think of was to somehow wipe away the defilements with which I was stained and to develop the ability to understand myself. Thus I zealously began ascetic practice. At first I would take a vow and set about my asceticism for set periods of seven, fourteen, or twenty days. As might be expected, during the period of ascetic practice, with my body purified, deluded thoughts had no chance to put in an appearance. I felt that, in accordance with my goal, I was becoming completely pure. However, as soon as I fulfilled my vow and took a breather, my true character revealed itself, and in the end I saw that I was no better off than I had been before. (Myodo, 1987:46)

Since Satomi's purpose at this time was to become a *miko*, or Shinto medium, one might suppose that the above passage is more an expression of a "shamanic struggle" rather than a mystical struggle. However, by Satomi's time, Shinto had been influenced by both the ethical orientation of Confucianism and the mystical approach of Zen Buddhism. And the above passage illustrates the function of asceticism described by Dabrowski (1967:130) as consisting "in dampening of natural, instincts with a view to attaining a higher goal, usually of a religious and moral character." Satomi continued to engage in an ascetic lifestyle even after she became committed to the practice of Zen:

In order to practice meditation, I quickly left my family [in the village in Hokkaido] ("severing all karmic bonds") and moved into a hut attached to the back of that Kannon shrine by the waterfall where, until the previous year, an old charcoal maker had lived...Inside, the hut was gloomy. The coarse tatami mats were sooty and laid out loosely, unattached to anything...Living the most meagre of lives, I continued with *zazen*. (Myodo, 1987:72-73)

At this point Satomi's asceticism is less severe, and she consciously relates it to her practice of meditation, but it serves a similar function - i.e., one of deliberately frustrating a lower level structure of dependency, in order that the dynamisms of a higher level of personality might emerge, as indeed they do with her first *kensho* experience.

Consideration of Satomi Myodo from the perspective of the theory of positive disintegration makes it possible to trace a number of changes in her personality over the years. Through an identification of developmental dynamisms, the evolution of her personality from unilevel to spontaneous multilevel and to organized multilevel disintegration can be seen. And even in this very brief analysis one can see something of the psychological function of asceticism and meditation in the process of positive disintegration.

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