

# BUDDHISM FOR OUR TIME

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## Various Forms of Buddhism as the Development of One and the Same Spirit

What is the meaning of “Buddhism for our time”?

“Buddhism for our time” does not imply that there are various kinds of Buddhism, one for yesterday and another for today. Buddhism itself has no definite form limited by time. Shinran<sup>b</sup> (1173—1262), the founder of True Pure Land or Shinshū<sup>c</sup> Buddhism, pointed this out in his life work, *Kyō-Gyō-Shin-Shō*<sup>d</sup> (*Teaching, Practice, Faith, and Attainment*), quoting T’an-luan’s<sup>e</sup> (476—542) “Commentary on the Treatise on the Pure Land”<sup>f</sup>. “As the true state of things is formless, so the true wisdom is non-wisdom;” and, “As the dharma-nature (*dharmatā*) is No-thing, so the *dharma*-body (*dharmakāya*) has no form, and, because it has no form, it can express itself in all forms. For this reason the various wonderful aspects and manifestations of (the body of the) Buddha are themselves the *dharma*-body (*dharmakāya*)”.

These statements lead us to the understanding that reality is not to be measured by our finite “concepts” and is not to be grasped by our “ego-centered efforts”. Only when such effort to grasp it is exhausted are we awakened to reality. It is no form to be grasped, but, just because it has no definite form,

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a. 大谷光紹 b. 親鸞 c. 真宗 d. 教行信証 e. 曇鸞 f. *Jōdo Ron Chū* 淨土論註 or *Ōjō Ron Chū* 往生論註

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it can manifest itself in various forms. Hence, such various aspects of the Pure Land as are described in the sutras are nothing other than the *dharm*-body (*dharmakāya*) itself.

Therefore, in this basic sense, we can say that Buddhism has never changed throughout all time and that Buddhism for today has nothing in particular to be distinguished from that of other times. However, just because it is itself formless, it has been able to express itself in various forms in the course of history. So we shall review the history of Buddhism briefly before talking about present-day Buddhism.

As is very well-known, Buddhism was founded by Sakyamuni in India and transmitted to Japan through China. In these latter northern countries Buddhism developed as Mahāyāna, which means the Greater Vehicle compared with Hinayāna, the Smaller Vehicle, which we can see in Southeast Asia today. This Hinayāna Buddhism is sometimes called Theravāda Buddhism, which means Buddhism of the elder disciples, whereas Northern or Mahāyāna Buddhism is called Mahāsamghika, that is, Buddhism of the greater communion or masses.

In other words, Buddhism in the northern countries has always tried to develop what Sakyamuni “really aimed at” and to propound it on behalf of the people. Southern Buddhists, on the other hand, believe that they “faithfully keep” what Sakyamuni taught. So some people, in comparing Japanese Buddhism with what Sakyamuni taught, may conclude that there is a discrepancy between them, and may develop a theory that Mahāyāna Buddhism is not real Buddhism.

If we examine closely the life of Sakyamuni, however, we cannot but realize that his life itself was a manifestation of

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the spirit of Mahāyāna. Now I wish to remind you of this fact: after enlightenment Sakyamuni could have remained in that state and could have enjoyed the fruits of it for himself. But he left that state in order to preach the *dharma* to the people. This was the beginning of his activity as a preacher. This was a deed which manifested nothing other than the spirit of Mahāyāna Buddhism. To be sure, it must be admitted that the spirit expressed in the life of Buddha Himself was developed later on and was made more explicit during the course of time.

Sakyamuni taught, for instance, that one must attain a state of mind in which there is no longer any trace of attachment, for he saw that all sufferings of man originate in false attachments to the ego. This is the well-known teaching of the “non-ego”. This principle was formulated in various forms: at one time, by Nāgārjuna (*ca.* 150—250 A.D.) as the “Middle-Path” and, at another, as the One-Path. However, these expressions should be understood in their historical setting and in connection with the people for whom they were intended. For these changes were intended only to find the expression best suited to the people to whom the Way was to be preached.

In this manner Buddhism, which was rather meditative and philosophical in India, became realistic when brought to China and was refined and simplified in Japan. However, in its long history Buddhism also, like many other religions, was sometimes understood statically, scholastically, or abstractly. Its teaching thus became stereotyped,—separated from its original spirit. But in Japan Buddhism sought to overcome this danger, which is brought about by fixation and attachment, and to

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regain its living vitality.

This is exemplified by Sōtō Zen<sup>a</sup>, for example, when it emphasizes “only to sit”<sup>b</sup> and thereby brings about a simplified method; or again by Rinzai Zen<sup>c</sup>, when it attempts to let the disciples vividly experience what is beyond the intellect by presenting a *kōan*<sup>d</sup>. I believe we may be allowed to regard Shinran as one who went in the same direction. For his teaching of single-minded Faith in Amida<sup>e</sup> Buddha and the invocation of the Name in One Voice is nothing but the springing forth of a dynamic spirit.

At any rate, by means of these examples we can perceive that one and the same spirit has expressed itself in various forms or, conversely, that beneath their forms, different though they may be, there is a common spirit.

### **Buddhism as a Teaching in the Progressive Tense**

Recently I have had occasion to collaborate in translating *Tannishō*<sup>f</sup> and *Kyō-Gyō-Shin-Shō* into English. In this work I became aware of a curious matter, that is, the problem of tense in the Japanese language. It is a well-known fact that many of our Buddhist writings were written in Chinese, and the Chinese texts, when brought to Japan, were given Japanese punctuation in order to facilitate reading. Yet, it is in the nature of the Chinese language that there are many cases where an ideogram can be taken for a noun, a verb, or an adjective, and sometimes it is never clear where to end a sentence. Moreover, the tense is also very ambiguous. It is

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a. 曹洞禪 b. shikan taza 只管打坐 c. 臨濟禪 d. 公案 (see p. 17)  
e. 阿彌陀 f. 歎異抄

never self-evident whether a verb represents the past, present, or future tense. For instance, the four characters, 本願成就, which mean "the realization of the Original Vow," can be read in the present perfect, the present, or the future tense.

I believe that in comparison with Chinese, Japanese is far clearer in the expression of tense. Moreover, we have a tense form equivalent to the "progressive form" in English. For instance, we say in Japanese: "The flower is about to bloom." or, "Now the flower is blooming". This may be said to correspond to the progressive tense expressed in the "ing" form in English.

Among European languages, however, neither German nor French has this tense, and I believe this is quite suggestive. English is the language of Britain and America, which are the leading countries of our time, and the progressive tense is the form most appropriate to express something dynamic. Those people whose language has this progressive tense form may be regarded as accustomed to "think in a progressive form," in other words, a dynamic way of thinking. Therefore, the fact that both Japanese and English have a progressive tense seems to enable us to assume that they are always well trained to feel their life dynamically.

Now, what is the relation between this progressive tense and the principles of Buddhism? It may seem that there is no necessity, or rather that it is arbitrary to bring out the "dynamic way of life" in connection with Buddhism, since the Oriental attitude towards life, represented by Buddhism, has been regarded thus far as static in comparison with that

*a. hongan jōju*

of the Western attitude. Now I believe, contrary to this prevalent view of Buddhism, that this dynamic way of life expressed in the progressive tense has a special relevance to Buddhism, because progress is “transiency”.

### **The Dynamic Nature of Buddhism**

Being transient means not to remain in the same moment, to be always in a state of flux. The progressive tense is the best form to express the transiency of human existence. For we human beings do not for a moment cease to change; we never remain in the same place. It is impossible, therefore, to understand the actual state of human beings from a static point of view. Therefore, one must give up one's attachments. This teaching of Sakyamuni was based upon the recognition of the basic transiency of human existence.

Of course, man does not like “transiency”. Man wishes ordinarily to keep the same post and property and to remain in the same state. In other words, man wants security. Reality, however, is incessantly changing and, when one wishes to be secure by “escaping” from this reality, he falls into anxiety against his own will. But, of course, “transient” does not mean pessimistic, desperate, or fatalistic. Buddhism teaches rather that one can find life itself when one accepts this transient reality, throwing oneself into it and living in it.

It was, again, Japanese Buddhism which was most eager to clarify this principle. For the Indians, who are rather meditative or contemplative, tend to escape from the transient world and to observe it from the outside, instead of living positively in it. Therefore, except for Sākyamuni Himself, such a posi-

tive spirit seems to have been beclouded among the Indians, and this seems to be somehow related to the fact that today Buddhism hardly exists in India, where it was founded and developed.

Certainly, it is never easy to transcend the changing world so long as one remains in it. This is the reason that the life of a recluse is often chosen by Buddhists. One must be beyond the transient world in order to recognize its transiency. As long as one is involved in it, one does not even feel it to be transient. Therefore, we can say this: worldly people do not really know what the world is.

This is indicated in one of the ten honorary titles of the Buddha. He is called the "One who understands the world,"<sup>a</sup> which implies that only he who is elevated above the world can understand it. However, if he remains above the world, he will estrange himself from this world and have nothing to do with his fellow beings. Is this not another form of egocentricity? Thus the way of the Buddha has two directions, that is, the direction of transcending the world and that of returning to it. Shinran called the first step "the aspect of going,"<sup>b</sup> and the second "the aspect of returning"<sup>c</sup>.

### Life's Awakening of Itself

Today, even though science has achieved so much, we do not yet know how "life" came into existence on earth. However, it is an undeniable fact that it did appear, and it is also an established fact that, in the long history of "life" on this earth, the appearance of human beings marked a crucial

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a. *seken-ge* 世間解 b. *ōsō* 往相 c. *gensō* 還相

turning point for "life".

Biologically speaking, man appeared in this world as *homo erectus*. His standing posture enabled him to develop his intellect—the faculty to differentiate, conceptualize, generalize, and objectify. By the aid of this faculty man has objectified himself and has become conscious of himself. Until man attained self-consciousness, the living organism simply led an unconscious life. In other words, in man life has become aware of itself.

### **Delusions Are Not Cut Off**

Science today has developed by this analyzing, generalizing, and objectifying faculty of the intellect. Of course, it is no doubt that science is one of the greatest achievements of the human mind. But the greater its achievements, the more dangerous and destructive science may become for life itself. This paradox is best illustrated by nuclear bombs which can destroy mankind. And, if we are always anxious about this threat, we are sure to fall victim to neurosis.

But we human beings are so made that we are not constantly aware of these dangers and we live an easy life for the time being. However, the awareness of a crisis is hidden deep in our minds, always producing the anxiety which is so typical of today's human psychology.

Also, the fact that man becomes conscious of himself by virtue of his own intellect means that man has become divided within himself, with the result that he himself is not sure any longer which is his "real" self, the knower or the known, the see-er or the seen. The more he struggles, the more he



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becomes divided. And, because his real hope cannot be realized, man is threatened by various forms of frustration.

In order to becloud and avoid his basic frustration, man creates, also by his intellect, various false hopes. However, his pursuit of these hopes is futile. For example, even if one hope could be fulfilled, would he be satisfied?

This is not the case either. For once the end has been reached, a further objective to strive for appears. Thus, on the one hand, there is the ideal or an idealized image of the self which has to be attained and, on the other hand, the actual self which, unable to attain that ideal, is powerless. Here again the division of the self derives from the nature of man as a being endowed with intellect. Man is man because he has an intellect, he is inclined to see things in dualistic terms and for that very reason he has to suffer under this basic contradiction. This is a common trait of all human beings and is grounded in the nature of the mind.

This is especially true in the case of Westerners whose way of thinking exhibits the strongest tendency to dualism, and it proves to be no accident, when we look back upon the source of the Western tradition. For it consists of Greek and Christian influences, both of which contain dualistic elements. Whereas the Greek tradition provided the basis for the development of science, the Christian tradition nurtured religious sentiments. It is needless to say that science is built on a dualistic basis. But not only science. Religion also has a dualistic character, for in Christianity man is strictly separated from God. To be sure, one may argue that Christianity is monistic in so far as its God is one. Still this does not nullify

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the fact that there is an unbridgeable gulf between God and man.

So in order to transcend this dualism, it seems to me, the Western way of thinking, including Christianity, is not quite appropriate. In comparison with this, Buddhism from the very beginning has seen a world "beyond" dualism.

### **How Buddhism Answers Today's Problem : the Way to Enlightenment and the Way from Enlightenment.**

What is especially needed in the present-day world is a way of thinking which can accept and at the same time transcend such a dualism. It must become the task of Buddhism to offer a principle by which this can be accomplished. What, then, are the ways to that end?

As we have observed, in the history of Buddhism various ways have been developed which were open to the people who sought enlightenment. Some people trod the way to enlightenment through self-effort. However, on the way they were troubled with dualistic thinking, and they struggled to overcome it. Of course, such effort was futile in attaining self-realization. As long as they stuck to dualistic thinking, their effort usually drove them either to a stronger contradiction or to further estrangement from reality.

Now in order to transcend this dualistic thinking two schools in Zen have developed. As I have already mentioned, Rinzai Zen gives the *kōan*, so that one can be cornered and led to give up dualistic manipulation; whereas Sōtō Zen teaches "only to sit," so that the practitioners can experience the same state of concentration as that of the Buddha. Thus

after stern training and long effort they may get enlightenment", that is, the state of absolute independence, freedom, and wisdom. There they are liberated from every bondage, including attachment to their own ego, having become aware that dualism has been a mere delusion. Thus, at the moment when one becomes truly awakened, one realizes that there is around oneself a boundless grand world of *dharma*. Enlightenment is nothing but an experience of being thus within the grand light of wisdom.

However, there is often a danger for one who has attained enlightenment: he feels as if he himself were the master and the light of the whole world. This is rather natural in a sense, especially just after the experience. But if he "stays" in that state, he is in danger of being caught in a blind cave of private enlightenment, so to speak. This "blind cave of private enlightenment," in my words is expressed in the scriptures as a "Castle of Doubts,"<sup>b</sup> "Palace of the Womb,"<sup>c</sup> "Remote District" (of the Pure Land),<sup>d</sup> or "World of Idleness and Arrogance"<sup>e</sup>. Since it can easily give rise to the arrogance that one has "possessed" the *Dharma*, which is, by nature, never to be attached or possessed, one cannot believe in the "boundlessness" of Buddha's True Wisdom. This "Palace of the Womb" also symbolizes self-complacency or self-confinement itself.

Now in order to overcome this danger, one is strongly advised to go on practicing and deepening oneself through listening more carefully to the Buddha's Teaching. This

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a. *satori* 悟り    b. *Gijō* 疑城    c. *Taigū* 胎宮    d. *Henji* 辺地  
e. *Kemangai* 懶慢界

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Teaching sometimes may come in a form of questions to oneself. Why do people not understand this real self? Why does this enlightenment not penetrate every corner of man's ignorance and dispel every speck of delusion? After all, whence does this light come? Does it come from within oneself or somewhere else? Is this light like that of the sun, or the moon? If we think the matter over, we shall find that one did not "produce" the light by oneself as the sun shines by itself. Rather one has been illumined by the light to find the darkness of ignorance. So we should say that one does not get enlightenment, but rather gets enlightened. And in a more vivid and dynamic expression, one is not enlightening oneself, but is being enlightened, or rather is "ever" being enlightened.

Now as soon as one has attained this state of mind, there opens before oneself an infinite world of Light. And the Light that embraces us is, in Shin-shū Buddhism, called Amida Buddha. Thus, in recalling Amida Buddha we are illuminated by the Infinite Light of no-hindrance.

Therefore, calling the Name of Amida Buddha in "single-minded" Faith is the short-cut to the Utmost Enlightenment. It is effortless, so that every common man can attain it. If one gets awakened to this Faith, one will clearly understand that from the beginning one had been motivated towards enlightenment by Amida's Compassion. Even the fact that man becomes conscious of cravings, or comes to "feel" pain, is nothing but an evidence of the urge of Amida's Grand Will to make man awaken. Man's self-effort towards enlightenment itself is also due to Amida's device derived from His Grand Wish. So the man of faith sails on the Ocean of Light.

Shinran states that "Faith is endowed by Nyorai (Amida Buddha)," and "Faith is nothing but the buddha-nature".

Now in this faith one finds oneself among one's fellowmen. Sailing in the Ocean of the Buddha's Wisdom and Compassion, one finds one's fellowmen as "friends-in-the-*dharma*". So here, in the midst of one's fellowmen of this world, one can practice the way of the non-ego, listening to the *dharma*, and keeping humility and respect in his mind. When one sees one's fellowmen in this light, one cannot help getting out of the self-complacence of "*one's* enlightenment", and also finding that he has become attached to the very "enlightenment he had attained".

Thus, we can understand that Buddhism teaches that even common people can attain enlightenment in faith. As Prince Shōtoku<sup>2</sup> pointed out more than 1300 years ago, "we are nothing but common men". Yet, as Shinran stated, "common men can enter directly to the World of Buddha". Here we find the dynamic development of Mahayana Buddhism.

### **The Simplest Way of Enlightenment for Every Common Man**

Now I wish to return once again to the awakening of the human being on which I touched before. In the long history of living beings there occurred a true awakening, or there appeared an "awakened living power". This "awakened living power" is nothing other than the Power of the Original Vow of Amida Buddha, who wished and vowed to ever enliven as well as to ever enlighten every sentient being. To ex-

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a. 聖徳

perience this Power is to practice the invocation of the Buddha's name, that is, to call "*Namu Amida-butsu*"<sup>a</sup>. While we invoke the name of the Buddha, He reveals Himself in each one of us. In each voice of invocation Amida Buddha is presenting Himself. So here opens the Grand Way of enlightenment in front of each common man. Thus, the single-minded faith is accorded to him in the invocation of Amida's Name in one voice. In other words, here is the way for every common man to realize himself and recover from self-disintegration. The real self is, by nature, formless, that is, the non-ego realized so naturally by the Ever-Enlightening Amida Buddha. And Amida Himself is, as I said at the beginning, without any form and can therefore, naturally express Himself in any form.

Shinran himself has pointed this out in his famous "Chapter on the True Nature"<sup>b</sup>.

"To be natural means for things to be as they are (destined) to be. The Original Vow of Amida Buddha does not depend upon "working efforts" devised by human beings. Simply because He has promised to save those who invoke His Name, those who practise the invocation need not worry about whether their behavior is good or bad. This, as I said, is to be natural.

His Vow is to enable us to attain supreme buddhahood. Supreme buddhahood is without any form; and because it is formless, it is said to be natural. It is called Amida solely for the purpose of enabling us to know that in itself it is formless; Amida Buddha is a way of letting us know the nature of things. When one understands this, one should not talk about it. If one persists in discussing this naturalness, he is making an

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a. 南無阿彌陀仏 b. *Jinen Hōni Shō* 自然法爾章

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effort in vain to find some reasoning, forgetting the important suggestion that the meaning of *Nenbutsu*<sup>a</sup>, the calling of His Name, is beyond reasoning. This is the Unfathomableness of the Wisdom of the Buddha.”

Bearing these words of Shinran in mind, let us ever be on the way to a realization of the *dharma*.

Note: A *kōan* 公案 is a theme or question given to a Zen student to solve as a step towards enlightenment, or possibly as a test of whether he has become enlightened.

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