

Resumé of Comments and Discussion

Following

Comments by William P. Woodard:

It seems to me that you have made relativity an absolute in your explanation of Buddhist thinking.

I don't like the word tolerance because there is a connotation of condescension in it. On the other hand tolerance is only possible to the degree that you have a conviction. It seems to me that the Buddhist attitude of tolerance really amounts to indifference.

Also, I am troubled by the appearance in Japan of Sōka Gakkai and Nichiren Buddhism which seem to be contrary to the real spirit of Buddhism. How do they fit into the picture you present?

Finally, is there room in your thinking for a person who does believe in absolutes?

Discussion:

Some of the participants criticized Professor Abe's paper particularly regarding his use of the concepts relative and absolute. It was brought out that the ordinary non-philosophical mind does not distinguish the *Dharma* from an absolute, although to the Buddhist the *Dharma* is not under dependent origination and is itself the norm. Some participants were puzzled about whether there is true and false within Buddhism and felt if there were no standpoint, where would one stand to view his existence and

that of his society. It was suggested that perhaps the standard should be commitment rather than relative and absolute.

Professor Abe answered that conviction must be combined with openness to other faiths. He stated that the absolute in Buddhism is "emptiness" which is non-substantial, and a non-substantial absolute allows the faith to be open to others without contradiction to its own. The absolute in Buddhism is not an absolute as distinguished from relative. A true absolute must be free from the discrimination of absolute and relative. *Śūnyatā* is neither absolute nor relative; it means everything is inter-dependent. I maintain a critical acceptance of the truth of dependent origination because it is non-substantial (therefore, not closed).

Other Buddhists strengthened Professor Abe's point by saying that the problem of the absolute is that everything is changing, but the assertion that everything is changing cannot be included in the understanding that everything is changing. This kind of reasoning in Buddhism has its own effect and involves a new approach to the problem of absolutes. The idea of non-ego was the most important idea of the Buddha's time and constituted a revolt against the thinking of his contemporaries. His use of this concept was a means not an end. When Buddhism says emptiness, it equals the assertion that the absolute identity of a person does not exist; but because of emptiness, everything exists. The problem we have to deal with here is not the principle of the law of dependent origination but the implications for people's lives. Definitions limit the truth; it must be experienced not defined, and the truth is "that which is" which is the original definition of the word, *Dharma*.

It was recognized that the discussion was here involved in a problem of language—sensory language and matter language. It was stated that to a Moslem the state of the realization of the absolute is the point of the experience of the absolute, described as “ultimate blindness” or ultimate darkness or pure intuition. It was argued that logical positivism and semantics may not be able to be applied to religion, for there are two levels of truth: the scientific method and existential experience. However, it may not be possible to use empirical concepts to define religious realization at all.

Professor Abe elaborated further that emptiness is an existential and subjective truth. The ground of our existence cannot be objectified, therefore it is called emptiness. Religions must demonstrate their *raison d'être* in order for inter-religious dialogue to be productive in meeting today's needs. In answer to the problem of incompleteness or relativity, he said that in Buddhism the absolute cannot overcome incompleteness; it can never be overcome as it can in Christianity by the mercy of the Savior. In Buddhism the relative is the absolute.

Then in answer to the question, “Is there progress in your idea of Buddhism?” Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh replied that progress is the fruit of much practice of the faith, but complained that many Buddhists do not practice their faith well. He spoke of being alive in your religion no matter what “label” (Buddhist, Christian, etc.) you are wearing. He said inter-religious dialogue must be founded on the true experience of a living spirit in the participants and urged Buddhists to turn themselves on to true Buddhism and Christians to turn themselves on to true Christianity. He said he had met Christians who had a living

spirit (which he saw as Buddhism), and a Christian stated he had met many people of other faiths with a living spirit which he saw as Christianity.

Another Buddhist expanded this thought saying that in Buddhism there is no such thing as Buddhism. There is a system of beliefs, but these are not limited to Buddhism. The real point is the level of personal spiritual development. If we think of humanity as a whole, distinctions disappear, and this should be our aim. Boundaries and historical traditions of different religions are only significant culturally today in the fields of art, music, literature, and individual aesthetic appreciation.

The discussion was summed up by a Hindu with this story about Brahma and the Buddha. Brahma always tried to trap the Buddha into arguments but the Buddha was always practical and did not answer impractical questions. The Brahma was struck by this silence. The truth of *living reality* is what we are discussing and this cannot be caught by words. The Buddhists are asking us all to experience this reality and follow the path. Putting an end to suffering is the main point of the religions we represent here. Let us work on this rather than getting lost in a doctrinal discussion. No amount of theology has ever relieved the suffering of one person. If an understanding of religion helps me to understand another person or another society better, that is the point of my understanding. The oneness of our humanity must be recognized in spite of our following of different religions. Our *essential humanity* is our basic common point.