

Japanese Culture and The Tendai Concept of Original Enlightenment

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The term "Japanese Buddhism" has two connotations, namely, the effect that Buddhism has had on Japanese culture and society, and the development of a Buddhism uniquely defined by the same Japanese culture and society. The question then becomes one of which side had the greater effect. A good source of material for studying this question is found in the Tendai concept of original enlightenment (*hongaku shisō* 本覚思想), which reached its consummation in the middle ages of Japanese history.

From a historical point of view it is evident that the basic ideas and theories of Japanese culture were formed during the middle ages. Throughout this time it was the Tendai concept of original enlightenment which was utilized. Under the influence of the indigenous Japanese world view, the Tendai concept of original enlightenment steadily became an increasingly thorough affirmation of the actual world, and later was used as a philosophical basis for the religion, literature, and art forms native to Japan. These include Shinto, *waka* poetry, Noh theatre, flower arrangement, and the tea ceremony. It is clear that the elucidation of the Tendai concept of original enlightenment is necessary in order to understand the interaction between Buddhism and Japanese culture.

The Characteristics of the Concept of Original Enlightenment

The earliest appearance of the term "original enlightenment" 本覚 in a Buddhist text is in the *Awakening of Faith* 大乘起信論 (T. 32, 575-583), presumed to have been composed in the sixth century A.D. The definition of this concept of original enlightenment can be divided into two major parts:

- (1) A thorough investigation of absolute non-duality, transcending the relative duality of the actual world.

(2) A thorough affirmation of all aspects of relative duality, a “return” to the actual world.

Our life consists of two worlds, that is, the actual world (the phenomenal world) and the eternal world (the essential world). In the actual world, various kinds of activity and phenomena occur every day, which can be arranged dualistically into opposing factors “A and B,” such as subject and object, man and woman, young and old, body and mind, life and death, good and evil, enlightenment and illusion (Buddha and human being), pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, and so forth. These factors A and B, however, do not exist on their own with an eternally unchanging substance (*ātman, svabhāva*), but change interdependently on the principle of non-substantiality and emptiness (*śūnyatā*). In the *Vimalakīrti-nirdeśa Sūtra*, the interdependence of A and B on the principle of emptiness was expressed in terms of non-duality (*advaya* 不二). This non-duality of A and B is the aspect of the eternal world. The Tendai concept of original enlightenment carried this aspect of the non-duality of the eternal world to its ultimate limits. This is expressed in the part (1) of the above definition. Japanese Tendai Buddhism did not stop at this point, however, but “returned” to the actual world by affirming the dualistic aspects of this world in their totality. This is expressed in part (2) of the definition.

The actual world consists of a twofold aspect. First, the existential aspect such as “life and death,” and second, the illusional aspect such as “Buddha and human being.” The Tendai concept of original enlightenment first affirmed the existential aspect, and then affirmed even the illusional aspect. With regard to the duality “life and death,” typical of the existential aspect, eternal or absolute life can be perceived in terms of the non-duality of life and death, a transcendence of the antagonism between life and death. If the “life and death” of this actual world is seen from the perspective of their non-duality, then not only life but also death is seen as an active figure of eternal life and as a manifestation of non-dualistic original enlightenment in this actual world. This affirmation of “life and death” (生死 *saṃsāra*) is understood as an affirmation of the transience of the actual world. To give an example, the *Sanjūshika no kotogaki* 三十四箇事書,¹ in commenting on the term “the world abides forever” 世間相常住 from the *Lotus Sūtra*, says that “the term ‘the world abides forever’ does not mean solidity and immobility. The world is transient and various. Transiency is transiency, though eternally abiding. Variety is variety, though eternally abiding” (Tada 1973, p. 157). In short, the transience and mutability of this world is an active figure of eternal life. Applied to the four seasons of nature, the poetic motto “Bloom and bloom, this is eternity; fall and fall, this is eternity” was created. In terms of

¹ A Tendai *hongaku* text attributed to Genshin, but probably compiled around A.D. 1250. See Tada 1973, pp. 151–185, 566–68.

time and space, it was insisted that the present moment, any moment, is eternity itself, the Eternal Now. The expression “Sahā is the Pure Land” reflected the belief that the eternal Pure Land of the Buddha can be seen in this Sahā world.

As for the duality “Buddha and human being” typical of the illusional aspect, the absolute Buddha can be seen in the non-duality of Buddha and human being, transcending the antagonism between Buddha and people. If the duality of Buddha and human beings is seen from the perspective of this non-duality, then not only Buddha but also people are seen as manifestations of the absolute Buddha of non-duality in this actual world. In an extreme sense, human beings are indeed the Buddha living in the actual world, so that they are the true and real Buddha. The Buddha which transcends the actual world is an expedient and dead Buddha. Thus people with their illusion are affirmed as they are, and no particular practice is necessary for enlightenment. As it is said in the *Sanjūshika no kotogaki*, “What is the use of discussing enlightenment or non-enlightenment with regard to the Dharma which is originally eternal, without beginning or end?” (Tada 1973, p. 176) The *hongaku* texts are full of statements identifying human beings and the Buddha, signifying that deluded people are themselves the eternal Buddha.

In summary, at its first stage the concept of original enlightenment reached the climactic position of absolute non-dualism, which can be considered the highest achievement of Buddhist thought. At its second stage the concept of original enlightenment re-turned its attention to the actual by reaffirming all dualistic aspects of “A” and “B.” The first step is grounded in traditional Buddhist thought, while the second step, especially the affirmation of deluded humanity, oversteps the boundary of Buddhist thinking patterns and is due more to the influence of Japanese thinking patterns. A fuller examination of this topic requires an investigation of the history of the concept of original enlightenment in China and Japan.

The History of the Concept of Original Enlightenment

The term “original enlightenment,” found first in the *Awakening of Faith*, refers to the original character of enlightenment immanent in human beings or the actual world. In this sense it is similar to the principle of Buddhahood or Buddha-nature 仏性 (*buddha-dhātu*) or the tathāgata-matrix 如来藏 (*tathāgata-garbha*) found in Mahāyāna Sūtras composed in the 4th century, but there is a great difference between the two principles. The former, *hongaku*, was established on the basis of both the essential world (*shinnyomon* 真如門) and the phenomenal world (*shōmetsumon* 生滅門), while the latter, Buddha-nature and so forth, were established only on the basis of the essential world. The former is defined in terms of a trinity of concepts: original enlightenment, actualized enlightenment (*shigaku* 始覺), and

non-enlightenment (*fugaku* 不覺). It involves a combination of both the essential world and the phenomenal world.

In China Fa ts'ang 法藏 (643-712), the third patriarch of the Hua-yen tradition, systematized Hua-yen doctrine of the basis of the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* and the *Awakening of Faith*. He set a high value of the *Awakening of Faith* and wrote a commentary on it called the *Ch'i hsin lun i chi* 起信論義記 (T. 44, 240-286), in which he presents a full examination of the term "original enlightenment." It was here in Hua-yen doctrine, a "philosophy of becoming" 性起說 based on the idea of one principle or one mind, that the concept of original enlightenment first took on special significance.

In Japan Kūkai 空海 (774-835) systematized the doctrines of esoteric Buddhism and founded the Shingon 真言 sect, utilizing esoteric scriptures and the *Shih ma ho yen lun* 釈摩訶衍論 (T. 32, 591-668, Jpn. *Shakumaka'enron*), a commentary to the *Awakening of Faith*. Kūkai highly esteemed this book because of the emphasis placed on original enlightenment, especially the concept of non-duality (*funi* 不二). It was therefore with Shingon esoteric Buddhism that we find a rebirth of the concept of original enlightenment based on the principle of non-duality. After the death of Kūkai, the concept of original enlightenment and esoteric Buddhism was introduced into the Tendai sect on Mt. Hiei. The Shingon sect went on to concentrate on ritual (*jisō* 事相), since there seemed to be nothing left to be added to the theory (*kyōsō* 教相) which had been fully developed by Kūkai.

In the Tendai sect the concept of original enlightenment was promoted at first in tandem with the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the doctrinal basis of the Tendai sect. Near the middle of the Kamakura period (ca. 1250), however, the concept of original enlightenment was combined with the teachings in the later half of the *Lotus Sūtra*, which resulted in the thorough affirmation of the actual world. As previously stated, I believe that such a thorough affirmation of the actual world is due to the influence of Japanese patterns of thought, rather than traditional Buddhist teachings.

Original Enlightenment and Kamakura Buddhism

Hōnen 法然 (1133-1212), the founder of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan based on the conditions of the age of the Latter Dharma (*mappō* 末法) at the end of the Heian period, insisted on the relative dualism and the negation of the actual world, in opposition to the standpoint of the Tendai concept of original enlightenment. As for the negation of the actual world, Hōnen first negated the illusional aspects, such as that of ordinary people, and next negated the existential aspects of the world such as death and transience. Hōnen's negation of the actual world is thoroughgoing. He regarded deluded human beings as part of the existential aspect of the world, and insisted that even the most eminent person could not be delivered from illusion as long as

one lives in this world. Consequently he taught that it is impossible to attain enlightenment through practice. In place of practice for the purpose of gaining enlightenment, Hōnen advocated birth in the Pure Land.

After Hōnen, Shinran 親鸞 (1173–1263), Dōgen 道元 (1200–1253), and Nichiren 日蓮 (1222–1282) appeared. These men were engaged in propagation and writing at a time after the Jōkyū Revolt when the times were ripe for taking a more positive or optimistic slant toward the actual world. The affirmation of the actual world in the Tendai concept of original enlightenment again attracted people's attention. In addition, the concept of original enlightenment was attractive for its superior philosophical sophistication. Nevertheless it is an undeniable fact that human life is uncertain and human beings are imperfect, even if one denies the idea that this is the degenerate age of the Latter Dharma. In this sense we must admit the validity of the relative dualism or negation of the actual world as presented in Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism. Caught between the absolute non-dualism or affirmation of the actual world in the Tendai concept of original enlightenment and the negation of the actual world in Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism, Shinran, Dōgen, and Nichiren strained to find a way to unify the two options.

Shinran, Dōgen, and Nichiren expressed the same opinion that both Japanese culture and the Tendai concept of original enlightenment expressed. They praised the beauty of nature and affirmed the existential world of "life and death" and transitoriness. However, they criticized the affirmation of delusion and the world as it is, and thus parted ways with the Tendai concept of original enlightenment. In this sense it can be said that they incorporated the relative dualism or negation of the actual world of Hōnen's Pure Land Buddhism.

Characteristics of the Japanese World View and Culture

In Japan the four seasons and climates change moderately, so that the close ties between human life and nature have been felt keenly since ancient times. This is the reason why the life and thought patterns of the Japanese people, or the thought and culture indigenous to Japan, have been rich in the area of accommodation to nature. For example, the attitudes of a "clear and bright mind" (*kiyoku akaki kokoro* 清く明き心) or a "clear and natural mind" (*kiyoku naoki kokoro* 清く直き心), frequently advocated in ancient texts such as the *Kojiki* 古事記, *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀, *Shoku nihongi* 続日本紀, and so forth, signify the importance of a natural and honest mind. Motoori Norinaga 本居宣長 (1730–1801) once wrote that "The true mind which follows nature is reasonable. The true mind indicates the innate mind untouched by good and evil." He also insisted that such a mind is the *Yamato damashi* 大和魂, the mind or spirit of Japan.

The characteristic of the Japanese ability to accommodate themselves to

nature is reflected in Japanese indigenous religion which is rich in nature worship, and its traditional literature which finds beauty in the transition of nature. In literature, for instance, Yoshida Kenkō 吉田兼好 (1283-1350), an essayist in the middle ages, defined the transience of nature and life as *mono no aware* (lit., the pathos of things), saying, "There is *mono no aware* or charm just in the transience of time." Zeami 世阿弥 (1363-1443), the accomplished composer of Noh plays, said that a fading flower is in itself charming. He also insisted that Noh should be played according to three categories of *jo* 序 ("arranging"), *ha* 破 ("breaking"), and *kyū* 急 ("speeding"). Such a theory may be called a kind of Japanese dialectic, for it originates in the transience of nature as discussed above. A similar format was defined for the tea ceremony at a time contemporaneous to that of Yoshida and Zeami, that is, *shu* 守 ("arranging"), *ha* 破 ("breaking"), and *ri* 離 ("leaving"). In flower arrangement the three categories of *shin* 真 ("formal"), *gyō* 行 ("informal"), and *sō* 草 ("flowing") were defined and combined with *jo*, *ha*, and *kyū*. These theories were defined in order to express the transition of nature to action, and thus finding beauty in it. In conclusion, these examples show that a characteristic of Japanese culture is one of accommodation to nature.

When this characteristic is applied to the actual world, it becomes one of accommodation to the actual world and even an affirmation of the actual world. It was in the middle ages that this accommodation to the actual world developed into an affirmation of the actual world.

This accommodation to the actual world developed in the 12th century into a somber fatalism under the influence of the idea that the world had entered the degenerate days of the Latter Dharma. Toward the middle of the Kamakura period, however, a more optimistic direction of affirmation came to the fore. It was after the Jōkyū Revolt 承久の乱 (1221) that this affirmation became apparent. The Jōkyū Revolt was led by ex-Emperor Gotoba in order to regain the seat of power, but ended in failure. With this revolt, however, the order of the old state was repudiated and a new order was established under the control of the new military class. Such a positive spirit made the idea of accommodation to the actual world develop into an affirmation of the actual world. Influenced by these trends, the Tendai concept of original enlightenment came to actively affirm the actual world.

From the middle of the Kamakura period (1250) through the Nanboku-Muromachi era (1400), this indigenous Japanese thought-pattern or culture was established through theorizing and ideology, where the doctrine of the affirmation of the actual world systematized in the Tendai concept of original enlightenment was re-imported and utilized. Shinto thinkers, for example, tried to win independence from Buddhism from about the middle of the Kamakura period, endeavoring to establish theories which placed Shinto in a

superior position viz-à-viz Buddhism. This was called “*han honji suiijaku setsu*” 反本地垂迹説 (the theory of converse origin and traces), which claimed that it was the Japanese *kami* who are the origin or basic reality, and that the Buddhas are the “traces” or incarnations which appear in this world on this basis, rather than the other way around as claimed in the Buddhist *honji suiijaku* theory. The Tendai thought of original enlightenment was utilized on this occasion, particularly in its formulation of the triple *kami*: the *kami* of original enlightenment, the *kami* of actualized enlightenment, and the *kami* of non-enlightenment. These Shinto theories were expounded by Jihen 慈遍 and Ryōhen 良遍, Tendai priests who were converted to Shinto. Their full development is found in the Yui-itsu Shinto 唯一神道 (Only One Shinto) of Yoshida Kanetomo 吉田兼俱 (1435–1511).

In literature and art, Fujiwara Shunzei 藤原俊成 (1114–1204) and Fujiwara Teika 藤原定家 (1162–1241) tried to work out a theory of *waka* 和歌 poetry with the help of Tendai doctrine. Shōtetsu 正徹 (1381–1459) followed in their footsteps, using the term *hongaku* in his poems and rendering it into the Japanese readings of “*moto no satori*” or “*moto no hotoke*.” Later the literary form of *renga* 連歌 (linked verse) was perfected by Shingei 心敬 (1406–1475) and Sōgi 宗祇 (1421–1502). Sōgi claimed that “the way of poetry . . . must entrust itself to the principle of original enlightenment and suchness (*shinnyo* 真如).” The Tendai concept of original enlightenment was utilized in Noh, flower arrangement, and the tea ceremony, and was adopted for the elaboration of their respective theories. The same methods as those used by adherents to the Tendai concept of original enlightenment were used for the transmission of these arts, such as secret oral transmission or transmission on slips of paper.

A common characteristic of these Japanese arts lay in the fact that they found beauty in the changes of seasonal nature and human life, which were celebrated in these arts. As mentioned above, there was originally the accommodation to nature, which then developed into the accommodation to the actual world and further into the affirmation of the actual world. It was at this point that the Tendai concept of original enlightenment was re-imported and utilized. On the Tendai side, its affirmation of the actual world was emphasized by applying that idea to the scenery of nature, for example in doctrinal texts where the eternity of “life and death” is expressed in terms of “Bloom and bloom, this is eternity; fall and fall, this is eternity.” This is a projection of the mutability of human life onto the transition of nature, and conversely speaking, a transfer of the beauty of charm discovered in the seasonal changes of nature to the mutability of human life. In this way the Tendai concept of original enlightenment and traditional Japanese thought patterns and culture developed in mutual dependency.

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