

AKIZUKI Ryōmin, *New Mahāyāna: Buddhism for a Post-Modern World*. Trans. James W. Heisig and Paul L. Swanson. Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1990. xii+193 pages. Index. Paper \$14.00, ISBN 0-89581-900-7.

Akizuki Ryōmin is a Zen Master in the Rinzai tradition who, appropriately enough, has been dominated all his life by the desire to attain enlightenment. This he eventually did, and his enlightenment was, in his own words, “about half the size of the hindquarters of a flea” (p. 1). Whether he is being modest or otherwise is difficult to say, but presumably it gives him the authority to say things that the rest of us cannot.

In addition to being an enlightened master, Akizuki is a scholar who, with deft strokes, discriminates between the false “primitive Buddhism” dreamed up from the Pāli texts by European scholars, and the authentic “early Buddhism” that consists of the true teachings of the Buddha (p. 25). This early Buddhism is the teaching of the “*prajñā* Buddha Dharma of Mahāyāna,” which had been retrieved by the Mahāsaṃghika school after having been suppressed in the dogmatics of the Sthavira sects (p. 27), then was passed into the Mahāyāna current by way of Nāgārjuna, and finally was transmitted to Japan by way of the Chinese texts. According to the author, the teaching concerning the “Great Matter” of *nirvāṇa*, *bodhi*, *prajñā*, original purity of mind, “the awareness of the original self (or Buddha nature)” (these terms are used as virtual synonyms) was marginalized by the “Hīnayānists.”

The New Mahāyāna of the title is thus the old Buddhism of Śākyamuni—that is, original Buddhism—as it has come down from Prince Shōtoku, Shinran, Nichiren, and Dōgen. European scholars and Sinhalese monks having been put firmly in their place, Akizuki proceeds to unfold the true Buddhism of the Japanese Mahāyāna tradition.

However, given the actual history and contemporary condition of Japanese Buddhism, this original Buddhism of the pure Buddha Mind must still be excavated from beneath institutional ruins. Akizuki’s observation about the decline of Buddhism in Japan is that it has become almost completely identified with funeral services, and consequently monks are treated as a source of pollution or bad luck if they appear out of context, for instance at weddings (p. 11). The original source of this funerary identification was China and Confucianism (p. 13). However, the Tokugawa administrative policy also helped ensure that institutionalized Buddhism forgot its primary *raison d’être* in the dissemination of Śākyamuni’s teaching by turning monks into married priests, and priests into government officials. The New Mahāyāna that Akizuki advocates is the restoration of that original teaching, particularly the centrality of “The Great Matter,” which is the pursuit of the pure Buddha mind. As he puts it, with a characteristically sweeping generalization, “Religious reformations always take the form of a restoration” (pp. 37–38).

In what does the New Mahāyāna consist? First, it means dealing with the errors of modern European scholarship, which has generated the wrongheaded belief that the original message of the Buddha is most clearly found in the Pāli Canon. On the contrary, claims Akizuki, some Chinese texts are older than the

Pāli texts, and anyway, Mahāyāna Buddhism conveys the true meaning of the Buddha's teaching about enlightenment and is "much more impressive" than Hīnayāna Buddhism (p. 37).

Second, it means the return to the founder, and the return to the founder is not primarily a matter of scholarship but of practice. To return to the founder Śākyamuni is not to discover some historical construct but to discover existentially, through the triple learning of Precept, Practice, and Meditation, that one *is* the Buddha.

Third, it means entering into dialogue with other religions in the search for a common humanity that all traditions, in their different ways, can recognize.

Fourth, the recognition that the world is entering a "post-modern" age. This recognition brings with it several factors, including the search for "a new lord of humanity" to be the world teacher (p. 43); the value of "prajñā" (insight/wisdom) over against "vijñāna" (analytical rationality); and the importance of the community in religious practice, instead of the exclusive concern with the individual dimension. Akizuki summarizes this religious revolution by quoting Hisamatsu Shin'ichi's phrase "creating history by transcending history" (p. 44).

Fifth, to restore a genuine lay Mahāyāna Buddhism that places the bodhisattva ideal of compassionate living in the world at the center. This would imply renouncing the "Bikkhu vinaya," or the notion of a special rule and a special status for monks, even though some people might continue to be called monks on a purely occupational basis. The important point is to bring the Mahāyāna ideals of compassion and wisdom into the community, where they become the true and living basis of society, and not the preserve of some specialist class that is anyhow liable to live by double standards.

Clearly Akizuki Ryōmin has an inspiring vision, and this vision is sincerely advocated and rooted in genuine Buddhist practice. However, I find various problems with Akizuki's work as revealed in this book.

Akizuki has a tendency to resort to sweeping generalization, including philosophical and historical oversimplification, which undermines the book's pretense as serious scholarship. His treatment of concepts such as Causality, Karma, rebirth, free will, and the history of ancient India provide many examples of this. He also generalizes uncritically about the work of an unanalyzed collectivity called "European scholars" who, along with their Japanese counterparts, invented a "primitive Buddhism" out of their "paltry brain power" (p. 24). I found only one actual European name cited in the text, and I found no actual examples or dates of European scholarship cited. It would seem that, in the author's mind, there is no distinction to be made between, for instance, a Max Muller working in the nineteenth century and, say, a Heinz Bechert or Richard Gombrich working in the late twentieth century. On the other hand, Akizuki also supports his argument for the greater age and reliability of the Chinese texts by saying that some European scholars have demonstrated this to be the case.

Akizuki's attitude towards other religions seems unselfreflective. When he refers to other religions as worthy of dialogue, it seems to be exclusively Christianity that he has in mind. The observations he makes about other branches of Buddhism, specifically the Theravāda Buddhism of South and Southeast

Asia, tend to be denigrating. Is there really no virtue at all in the Buddhism of the Pāli tradition? And is it really true to generalize that “the error of what is sometimes called ‘Hīnayāna Buddhism’ is that it failed to keep this one Great Matter at the center” (p. 27)? After all, closer attention to historical and empirical detail might show that Sinhalese Buddhism has, in some respects, been more successful than Japanese Buddhism in keeping the teaching concerning *nirvāṇa* at the center, even though that specifically soteriological teaching was mainly restricted to the *Bikkhu Sangha*.

A final point concerns problems of terminology, and these may have been partly generated by the difficulty of translating technical and philosophical terms. Right at the heart of Akizuki’s argument is that Buddhist practice is concerned with “the absolute subjectivity of the enlightenment (*prajñā*) of the true individual (Buddha) through the triple learning” (p. 39). This central notion is expressed in various ways, and like all subtle doctrines there is necessarily a genuine difficulty in getting it across. But, personally, I came away from this book feeling more, rather than less, confused about the Buddhist teaching concerning self, person, or individual. At one point, the author makes explicit that the idea of the Great Self or ultimate self of Vedānta, though it “appears to be similar to Buddhist ideas . . . is actually quite different” (p. 74 footnote). But on several occasions I found the language reminiscent of Vedantic ideas: “All existence is integrated into a single, non-dual reality” (p. 86); “one who experiences and realizes one’s ‘original self’ . . . is a Buddha” (p. 86); “a self-awareness of the original self” (p. 86); “the non-duality of self and others” (p. 87); “one’s own self and the selves of all others are bound inseparably to one another” (p. 87).

And sometimes the language becomes a nightmare: “The sight of the star triggered an explosion of selflessness in the nothingness of contemplation and the wisdom of *prajñā* was made manifest. He had a direct insight into the original self, the original purity of the mind” (p. 84). One could multiply the examples of tortuous straining after paradox. What happened to that traditional Zen reticence, expressed in the saying “He who knows doesn’t speak”?

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