

Liberative Elements in Pure Land Buddhism

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Introduction

Today we, Christians, approach Buddhists, or adherents of any of the other Asian Religions, to ask the question: “What are the liberative elements in your religion?” This question of ours is most directly inspired by the tenets of liberation theology and therefore tends to mean, more concretely: “Which motivations do you find in your religion for engagement in social activity aiming at greater justice in the world, the betterment of human society or, most recently also, the saving of our planet earth?” But we may know already, from our experience with inter-religious dialogue, that Buddhists, for example, in most cases do not find it easy to answer our question or, even worse, do not show any sign of even having understood this question – which, for us, may have come to mean a question of life and death for religion.

It may then be good – in order not to lose patience with the others, or not to yield to feelings of superiority – to pause for a moment and ask ourselves: Would I myself have really felt the poignancy of the question let us say forty years ago (for those of us who are happy enough to have lived that long)? Or: Would St. Paul have understood the question? Or again: Why do we not find more preoccupation with the question, and action along its lines, in the history of Christianity? Could it be that we are the first generation to really understand Christ’s message, namely that what He really expected from his followers was that they take the side of the poor?

More theoretically speaking, we may be faced with the following two questions. What are the necessary preconditions enabling the question of liberating elements, in our present sense, to be posed at all? And, secondly, what are the requirements for our question to be relevant to religion?

The Prerequisites of Our Question

As to the first, we can surmise that the question of liberative elements can be posed only on condition that the following ideas have been entertained (or not rejected as evidently absurd).

1. The harmony of the whole (of the cosmos, of humanity, of the nation, of the family) is not the only, sometimes not even the decisive, criterion to judge things by. In other words, individuals or sub-groups may be more than merely constitutive parts of the whole and eventually constitute a second standpoint or criterion to judge things by. We must remember that, in the eyes of former generations, slaves were evidently necessary for the harmony of the Greek polis, women's subordination to the paterfamilias was clearly necessary for the stability of household and state, and in Japanese history the diverse religions could be tolerated only insofar as they were all subservient to the welfare of the state (a requirement Christianity did not fulfill in the eyes of the Tokugawa rulers).

Here, we might immediately reflect on how central and all-dominating the viewpoint of the whole and its harmony is in the two great Asian civilizations of India and China. As for China and the Confucian ethos, I must content myself with the testimony of a Chinese philosopher who wrote: "The most deep-rooted desire of the Chinese people is for harmony. Whether they are speaking of self-cultivation or dealing with the affairs of the world, harmony is the keynote of all their thinking.¹ How far Taoism represents a real divergence on this point may be a moot question, however. With regard to the Indian ethos, as represented by the traditional Hindu, but also fundamentally by the Jain and Buddhist, conception of reality, R. Panikkar refers to the centrality of the *Dharma* concept:

¹ John C. H. Wu, "Chinese legal and political philosophy." Charles A. Moore ed., *The Chinese Mind*, Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1967, 227.

The starting point here is not the individual, but the whole complex concatenation of the Real, . . . the order of the entire reality, that which keeps the world together.

The individual is thereby seen not in itself but from the position it holds in “the net of relationships which form the fabric of the Real (its *svadhama*).”² Again, and this time more directly relevant to our present problematics, the question arises in how far the “extremely individualistic” Theravāda Buddhism transcends this Hindu framework.

2. The order of human society at any given moment is not an eternal unchangeable given, ordained by heaven, but a human construct that can change. Here we must remark that the link between that which keeps human society together and the “Will of Heaven” is naturally seen as a religious idea. Could it be, however, that this idea had no place in the religious horizon of original Buddhism, or even that Sākyamuni deliberately rejected this determinism together with the determination of the individual’s lot by the capricious gods?

The idea that society can change is, of course, contiguous to the idea of history and to the intimation that humans make history and have the powers to change the course of history. And linked with this again there is the notion that intolerable social situations may be caused, not merely by abuses of power by individual rulers (“evil people”), but also by traditional social structures, in which case they are “unjust” in a much more basic sense.

At this point we must ask where and when such ideas really became operative in human history. In this connection it might be helpful to enquire where the difference lies between, on the one hand, the many “rebellions” in Chinese history, the rebellion led by the Roman slave, Spartacus, etc., and on the other hand the French “revolution.” Would it not be true that, insofar as the former had any idea of changing the social system, they were inspired by the (religious) eschatological idea of the end of the world? What – to take an example from Japanese history, that is often presented as inspired by religion- did the people involved in the *ikkō-ikki* uprisings rebel against or reject? Simply the intolerability itself of their situation (the burden of taxation which did not leave them enough to lead a life preferable to death), like an individual running amok? The arbitrariness of the local rulers that imposed these taxes?

2 R. Panikkar, “Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?” *Inter-culture* 27/1 (1984): 39, 40.

The fact that “their class” had to carry the whole burden of the system? The four-class feudal system itself? I must confess I am not enough versed in Japanese history to answer this question in any detail, but it seems clear enough that the expectations (or views of the possibilities) of the *ikkō-ikki* people were a far cry from these of the French revolutionists, who endeavored to do away with the feudal system and thereby to change the course of history “through the power of the people.”

We now come to our second question: “What is required, on the side of religion, to make the question of liberative elements – and, implied therein, social justice, the course of history, etc. – relevant to religion?” Since our aim is to investigate the liberative elements in Japanese Shinshū, we shall from now on concentrate on the historical matrix of the Shinshū movement, the Buddhist Path. And a comparison between Christianity and Buddhism may prove to be the best way for us to approach the problem of whether and in how far our Christian question can be experienced as relevant to their religion by Buddhists.

Liberative Elements and Buddhism

In the light of the above considerations I want to proceed here from the presupposition that, also for Christianity, full consciousness of the relevance of our question is a relatively recent acquisition, made possible by the modern evolution in Western ideas and crystallized in a very emphatic way in the theology of liberation. Since this may be thought to be a rather arbitrary idea, I want to call some witnesses to my defense by quoting two serious theologians, with due apologies for the length of the quotations.

The fact is that the understanding of the scope of human power and responsibility that underlies our contemporary concerns with politics can be read out of the New Testament only by first being read into it. . . . My point, in short, is that an understanding of [religious] ultimate transformation as also involving penultimate transformation of social and cultural structures depends not only on normative Christian witness but also on a distinctively modern historical consciousness. . . . We are aware, as earlier generations were not, that even the most basic structures of social and cultural order are neither divinely ordained nor naturally given but humanly created – by historical beings like our-

selves who have the power and the responsibility to change them, given the moral demand implied by faith.³

It is really only in modern times that we have come to understand social evil as structural or as systematic in character. . . . The possibility of significantly transforming the social order is a relatively new thing among Christians. We shouldn't then make claims that this is somehow one of the profound insights of the Christian tradition. It is, rather, largely because of the revolutions of modernity that we think in these kinds of terms.⁴

If this presupposition is well taken, it would follow that, in most of their histories, the two religions showed a rather similar mentality and attitude as to the matters involved in our question, without of course ever asking our question as such. In that case, however, the question why in fact a liberation theology developed in Christianity and not in Buddhism becomes all the more meaningful. Would this solely be due to the dynamism of secular Western ideas, or would there be elements in Christianity which predisposed it to this way of thinking, once the required presuppositions were in place? Here, I am inclined to think that, indeed, Christianity contains such "predisposing elements," on each of which it can be contrasted with Buddhism; and I would list them, tentatively (without possibility of sufficient discussion here), as follows.

1. A strong conviction of the irreducible reality and religious importance of the "outward" (cosmic and social) world, ultimately based on, or expressed in, the doctrine of the creation of heaven and earth by God himself.

In contradistinction, the whole tendency of Buddhism appears to be that only the mind is ultimately real and religiously important, while the outer world is not real enough to merit our concern. This all-pervading trend is exemplified, for instance, by the first verse of the *Dhammapada*: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on

3 Schubert Ogden, "Christian Understanding of Ultimate Transformation," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 57–58. It may be good to remark here that "ethics" or "morality" is used in this paper to mean all prescriptions for responsible attitudes and actions, irrespective of whether they are meant as norms for the believers only or as universal rules for all human beings.

4 Gordon Kaufman, "Responses to Rita Gross," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987):115.

our thoughts, it is made up of our thoughts.”⁵ From such a perspective, the phrase: “If you want a better world, purify your own heart (mind)” – which often enough sums up the Buddhist reaction in a dialogue wherein the question of social involvement is brought up indeed says it all.

2. The conviction that Christ’s religious message, like that of the prophets before him, is intrinsically ethical. In A. Dondeyne’s words: “It is a specific trait of the biblical faith in God that, in order to be authentic, it must emerge into an ethic of truthfulness, justice, and goodness.”⁶ This means that in Christianity salvation, although in the final analysis depending on faith, passes through ethics; or again, that Christianity is a religion that wants to find its expression in moral activity on the everyday or secular level (charitable action for the good of neighbor; cf. Matt. 25). Buddhism on the other hand has been called a “mystical religion,” in the sense that it seeks deliverance from the human quandary in a unity with the Absolute or the totality of Reality on a level transcending that of everyday human consciousness and activity, and likes to stress (especially in its Mahāyāna variety) that religion, as a spiritual quest, transcends the ethical dimension with its distinction of good and evil.⁷

Needless to say that a detailed examination of the rich Buddhist variety might do away with the stark black-and-white contours of this thumbnail sketch, but this would not, I believe, change the fact that we are faced here with an important difference between our two religions – a difference which is relevant to our present question.

3. Our next point concerns a difference in stress on the individual and the social between the two religions. It can be said, I think, that for both Buddhism and Christianity religion is ultimately a question “between the individual and his God (Dharma).” In the case of Christianity, however, we must directly add that religion is intrinsically an intersubjective and social affair. Nobody is saved alone, but only in the “communion of

5 Max Muller, *Sacred Books of the East*, 10: 3.

6 Albert Dondeyne, *Collationes Brugenses et Garidavenses* 4 (1970): 518.

7 On the further question why Christianity, and not East Asian Buddhism, felt impelled to elaborate its own ethical system, rather than adopting a pre-existing one, see Thomas P. Kasulis, “Does East Asian Buddhism Have an Ethical System?” *Zen Buddhism Today* 8(1990): 41–60 and my article “Christian Ethics in Japan,” *The Japan Missionary Bulletin* 36 (1982): 360–72.

saints;" love of God can only be realized in love of neighbor; we are linked to Christ in his mystical body, the Church. In all this Christianity is, of course, heir to the Judaic tradition, for which religion is a question of the covenant between God and his people, Israel.

In comparison, in Buddhism the stress is much more unilaterally on the individual – "rely on yourself, rely on the Dharma. And this notwithstanding the fact that the ideal of the *arhat*, "lonely as the rhinoceros," was soon tempered by ideas like the transference of merits or, later still, "the bodhisattva saving himself by saving all others." One indication of this abiding difference may be the fact that we do not find in Buddhism any elaborated doctrine comparable to the Christian ecclesiology. Or we could say that in Buddhism "all sentient beings" remain a formless infinity without any of the socially structured contours implied in the idea of a "people." An interesting remark by Kenneth Cragg on the "genesis stories" of our two religions may be enlightening on this point. He remarks that the Buddhist story (Sākyamuni motivated to start his religious quest by the encounters with a sick person, an old and decrepit person, and a corpse) has "its focus on the lonely, physical experiences of frailty, decay and death." And he continues:

Sākyamuni took stock of human privacy and mortal flesh, of generic man in natural contingency and flux. Moses' venture from inside the Pharaonic palace confronted him with Hebraic man. . . He was wrestling with ethnic identity and social injustice. He encountered humanity, not in the raw of mortal fate, but in the raw of slavery, oppression and political despair. . . The point [here is] to underline the focus of Sākyamuni's awakening awareness on sheer human, personal finitude, all politics, society, culture and history apart.⁸

More directly in line with our present problematics we could say, I believe, that, while for both Buddhism and Christianity the religious reality of the individual transcends the society of which he/she is a part, for Christianity, at the same time and differently from Buddhism, the social has its own reality and is more than the mere sum of the individuals comprised in it. For confirmation let us quote two theologians again. Langdon Gilkey said: "[For Christianity] Social matters are of spiritual as well as of material importance. That conception has existed for a long

8 Kenneth Cragg, *The Christ and the Faiths* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1987), 247–48.

time. I think that it is a Hebrew idea.”⁹ And Gordon Kaufman remarked: “The imagery of the kingdom [of God] . . . is political imagery. And it suggests that the coming that is looked for, the transformation that is looked for, is a social transformation.”¹⁰

4. Whether or not it is true that modern Western culture owes its idea of history to its Hebrew roots rather than to its Greek ones, it is true enough that, in the wake of Judaism, Christianity has found its all-embracing idea in history (“the history of salvation”) rather than in nature. History then as an irreversible process, with a beginning and an end (a “telos”), and producing new elements on the way through human agency in collaboration with divine initiatives. It is well enough established, I believe, that such an idea of history does not really play a significant role in the Buddhist conception of reality, the often adduced “*mappō* idea” notwithstanding.

It may be relevant to add that Christianity has always seen history, or society, as the battle-ground between good and evil, and stressed the duty of the Christian to engage in that battle to overcome evil. In other words, it has envisaged history as basically a “conflictual” rather than an harmonious reality, although harmony is certainly seen as the goal, to be finally reached at the eschatological time of the “recapitulation of all things in Christ.”

In contrast, the Buddhist ethos appears to share in a larger “Asiatic” conception of which it has been said: “[The role of the human being] is not to transform the world and to intervene in it, but to hold it together and to support it by harmonizing into it and by playing the role assigned to him by Life.”¹¹ Besides the stress on the harmony of the whole, we can retain here the idea that the preferred human attitude is rather one of non-action than of action. Indeed, the first and fundamental commandment of Buddhist ethics is *ahimsa*, which literally reads: “thou shalt not kill any living being,” but whose application tends to go in the direction of non-interference with things as they are. And there is also the strong stress in Mahāyāna Buddhism on the difficulty of really “profiting others:” not we, discriminating and passion-ridden mortals, but only the enlightened bodhisattvas can really do it.

9 Langdon Gilkey, “Responses to Rita Gross,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 115.

10 Gordon Kaufman, “Responses to Schubert Ogden,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 68–69.

11 Robert Vachon, *Christians and Human Rights*. Pro Mundi Vita Studies 16 (1990), 5.

5. Our fifth and final point can best be introduced by a word of the Zen philosopher, Masao Abe: the Buddhist equivalent to the Christian notion of love would be the notion of compassion. But there is no Buddhist equivalent to the Christian notion of justice.”¹² Two introductory remarks seem in order here. First, in the light of the preceding it is good to remember that the idea of justice essentially goes beyond the realm of personal morality. “Every problem concerning justice and injustice has a moral dimension, but each is primarily social and political in nature.”¹³ Second, the Christian concern with justice is again an heritage from the Judaic, especially prophetic, tradition, as typified by the passage: “To judge the cause of the poor and oppressed, is not this to know me says the Lord” (Jer. 22:16).

Accustomed as we are to this Judeo-Christian perspective, we may be astounded by Abe’s words and ask ourselves: How is it possible, and what could it mean, that justice as such has not been an explicit religious concern in the Buddhist consciousness? I do not pretend to be able to really answer that question and can only venture a few preparatory reflections. Would it be permissible to circumscribe Jeremiah’s words, “to judge the cause,” as “to respect and defend (promote) the rights?” If so, the question could become: How do those “rights,” as understood by Jeremiah, relate to our modern understanding of “human rights,” equally possessed by each individual human being (and by each human group).

In an article already quoted, R. Panikkar ably defends the thesis that this modern idea is not a universally valid one but rather a Western conception. The Asian ethos would not believe in such abstract individuals (or groups) and stress instead the varying duties and responsibilities incumbent on each individual (and group), each according to the status in society given it by circumstances (or karma). And indeed that way of thinking can be traced as well in Confucianism as in Hinduism. Still, I would like to offer two marginalia on this topic.

1. Precisely on this point Sākyamuni may represent a breakthrough of this “Asiatic mentality” by his stress on the spiritual equality of all

12 Abe Masao, “Responses to Rita Gross,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 7 (1987): 114.

13 James L. Brown, in a book review, *Cross Currents* 40/2 (1990): 275.5

people, regardless of their social position in life.¹⁴ Seen from this point, the modern idea of the equality in basic rights of all individuals might have grown out of Buddhism, instead of out the Judeo-Christian tradition as it probably did.

2. It may be true that the idea of equal basic rights of all individuals was (and is) absent from the Asian ethos but, on the other hand, the idea of the “special rights” of the possessor must have been there, at least implicitly, in the commandment, “thou shalt not steal;” and the idea of the “special rights” of the paterfamilias over the members of his household appears to be implied in the duties of these members toward him and the laws sanctioning his position. Conversely, I do not know whether the Hebrew prophets had any idea of “equal rights.” Anyway, what they are talking about are also “special rights;” only, not this time of the beati possidentes or the higher-ups in the social pecking order but, on the contrary, those of weak and dispossessed individuals (widows, orphans, aliens.. .). The same attitude can be detected in medieval Christian casuistry, which gives the poor the special right to steal bread, if otherwise they would starve. And it is probably from there that it is only a short step to the explicit recognition of the basic right of every human individual to the necessities of life. Universality is only reached, after all, through the lowest common denominator.

It may be good, at this point to remind ourselves that what we are trying to do is to investigate the liberative elements, or motivations for social action, present in Shinshū religiosity. The above then was an attempt to pin down some of the relevant traits in Buddhism in general, this original matrix of the Pure Land movement. Shinshū religiosity, however, is not only Buddhist. It is also Japanese; and to that element in its make-up we must now turn.

Japan's “Basic Cultural Codes” and Buddhism

It was during the Kamakura Period (1185–1333) that Pure Land Bud-

14 See for example the impressive words in chapter 26 of the *Dhammapada*: “I do not call a man a Brahmana because of his origin or of his mother. . . . Him I call indeed a Brahmana who (and then the Buddha lists all kinds of spiritual accomplishments, as for example, in verse 417: “Him I call indeed a Brahmana who, after leaving all bondage to men, has risen above all bondage to the gods, and is free from all and every bondage.”) See Max Muller, *Sacred Books of the East*, 10: 91–95.

dhism took organized form in Japan through the endeavors of Hōnen (1133–1212), who advocated the invocation of the Name of Amida as the only practice conducive to salvation in this Latter Day (*mappō*) age and thus founded the Jōdoshū. His disciple, Shinran (1173–1263), then gave rise to a separate organization through his very original interpretation of the Pure Land doctrine. This became the Jōdo Shinshū on which we concentrate here.

The Kamakura Era is often considered to be the religiously most creative period in the history of Japanese Buddhism and the time that “authentically Japanese” Buddhism developed. It is true that, among the Buddhist sects that originated during that period, the Pure Land and the Zen sects – differently from the Nichiren sect – are further developments of Buddhist movements brought over from China. However, the fact itself that the practices of these movements were chosen separately by different groups as the only practice, with exclusion of all other practices of the rich Buddhist tradition, already shows a Japanese preference. Moreover, these movements adopted from China were soon transformed and adapted to Japanese tastes.

Speaking of Japanese preferences and tastes appears to bring us into the orbit of what N. S. Eisenstadt speaks of as “basic cultural codes.”¹⁵ “Eisenstadt holds the theoretical position that all societies have basic ‘codes’ (constituting the hidden or deep structure of a social system) which connect the broad contours of institutional order with answers to the basic symbolic and cultural problems of social existence.” And he stresses the persistence over time of these basic codes. “Although during periods of rapid change or turbulence the codes are subject to dispute and uncertainty as to their application and institutionalization as ‘grand rules,’ their continuity even in postrevolutionary societies such as Russia and China is apparent.”¹⁶

There are ample reasons to believe that Japan represents an extreme example of this persistency of basic cultural codes. The very survival of Japan’s “tribal religion” in the form of Shinto, even after 1500 years of solid establishment of the world religion that is Buddhism, may be evidence enough, but scholars like Nakamura Hajime explicitly recognize this extraordinary persistency. “Objectively speaking, the Japanese

15 N. S. Eisenstadt, *Revolution and the Transformation of Societies* (New York: The Free Press, 1978).

16 K. Peter Takayama, “Enshrinement and Persistency of Japanese Religion,” *Journal of Church and State* 32/3 (1990): 530.

never assimilated other cultures in such a way that all their values and their entire outlook might attain a new configuration. They always adamantly kept to their own traditional values and outlook.”¹⁷

In these terms, the question in which sense Japan is a Buddhist country or how deeply Buddhism entered the Japanese “soul” might be rephrased as: “In how far did Buddhism succeed in influencing the basic cultural code of Japan?” Or, more directly in our present perspective, “What kind of liberation did Buddhism effect in Japanese history?” Equally relevant, however, might be the converse question: In how far did the all-pervading influence of Japan’s basic code transform all Buddhism in Japan, especially the Buddhism which is called “authentically Japanese?” And, more specifically, how did this affect the liberative elements of Buddhism in Japan?

I believe these to be the basic questions insofar as the Japanese background of Shinshū is concerned, but I fear that my answers to them can only consist in some unsatisfactory hints. Still, for the sake of argument, I want to couch my answers in the form of a bold thesis: In the broader sense of “everything that is conducive to greater inner freedom,” many liberative elements were undoubtedly bestowed by Buddhism on the individual Japanese; but, when taken in the stricter, more sociological sense wherein we are taking them presently, it would seem that most liberative elements present in original Buddhism (mostly elements wherein Sākyamuni’s message transcends the “Asiatic ethos”) were not permitted to exert their influence, to any great extent or for any considerable length of time, but were effectively neutralized by the Japanese basic cultural code – which, in our perspective, we could characterize, with Kōsuke Koyama, as a “cosmological culture of salvation.”¹⁸

To quote only a few random examples of the former influence Buddhism must have helped the ancient Japanese to overcome many superstitious fears and taboos, especially with regard to the mysteries of nature. Thus, it may have been Buddhist hermits who first dared to go and live in the mountains, that territory of gods and souls of the dead. Also, Buddhism brought to the Japanese a liberative answer concerning the after-life and concrete ways to treat deceased ancestors accordingly.

17 Hajime Nakamura, *The Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (Tokyo: Japanese National Commission for Unesco, 1960), 458.

18 Kōsuke Koyama, as quoted by K. P. Takayama, “Enshrinement and Persistency of Japanese Religion,” 537.

Similarly, by its conception of personal *karma*, Buddhism supplied an answer to the perceived “injustices” in life: good people suffering and evil people flourishing.

But, when it comes to liberative elements with more direct social implications, the picture may not be so positive. Here, mainly three elements come directly to mind:

1. A relativization of the social structures (household, caste, tribe, nation) and a certain freedom of the individual from their bonds was certainly implied in the Buddha’s message. However, it does not look as if this Buddhist ferment was able to relativize the absoluteness of the state, of Japan as the “land of the gods.” Likewise, the freedom not to carry on the family line, and instead to choose a celibate life for the sake of a higher individual pursuit, was gradually lost in Japanese history. And, the Buddhist stress on the individual notwithstanding, the Japanese ethos appears not to have surrendered its basic group-orientedness and strict demands of conformity.
2. It may have been relatively easy for Sākyamuni to set up a community, based on religious principles, not subservient to any state, and which, by the clear principle of the superiority of the Buddha law over the King’s law, could eventually function as a critical instance. However, partly because of compromises already effected in China, very little of this seems to have been operative in the history of Japanese Buddhism. In Japan, the Buddhist social principles never went beyond a *sangha* which was itself soon subservient to the state and infiltrated by the Japanese hierarchical principles. Japan’s Buddhism soon defined itself as “Buddhism for the welfare of the state,” and an ideology of the identity of the Buddha law with the King’s law soon emasculated all critical potential of the former toward the latter. On this point Joseph Kitagawa is worth listening to:

Buddhism in Japan had always equated its own sphere with that of the state so that, in principle, outside the national community there was no meaningful framework for the sociological expression of Buddhism. Thus . . . there never developed an independent Buddhist community which would nurture Buddhist normative principles concerning the social, political, and cultural dimensions of human life and society.¹⁹

19 Joseph Kitagawa, *Religion in Japanese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), 110. We can, of course, agree with T. Kasulis’ view (“Does East Asian Buddhism Have an Ethical System?”) that, in view of the general soundness of the Confucian ethics, Buddhism in Japan did not feel the urgent need of setting up its own system of norms.

We have every reason to remember, of course, that a similar thing often happened in the history of Christianity also. A recent witness to this may be some South American countries where a critical stance toward oppressive social structures appears to necessitate the birth of a new “Church” beside the official Church, too much identified with the powers that be.

3. Our third point is, in fact, already implied in the former two, but it may be important enough to merit some special attention. I mentioned earlier that the Buddha’s message contained a revolutionary impulse towards the idea of the social equality of all humans, whatever caste or nation they may belong to by birth. In other words, if original Buddhism admits of any classification or hierarchy of human beings, its criterion is certainly not birth or social status. Its yardstick is rather a twofold one. One, the spiritual capacity to “hear” and understand the Word of the Buddha – the eye of the mind being more or less clouded by former karma. And two, the amount of effort spent in the spiritual quest, which determines one’s stage on the arduous path of deliverance. All in all, one might say that Buddhism originally represented a kind of spiritual meritocracy, that, in its early history, proved to be able to cross the boundaries of classes and nations.

The Japanese basic code, on the other hand, has always tended to attach great importance to social status (and the rights and duties implied therein) and, strongly imbued by the Confucian ethos, has always considered the harmony of society to depend on vertical, hierarchical relationships. Furthermore it has always tended to limit its outlook to the sole Japanese nation, as having an absolutely unique origin and destiny, which puts it apart from all other nations.

When we now ask again in how far the Buddhist ferment was able to infiltrate and modify Japan’s basic code, we must first remark how sociologists and cultural anthropologists confirm the persistency of the predominance of vertical relationships in all the layers of society, in the family (older and younger brothers), in school and work place (*senpai* and *kōhai*), etc. And even the Buddhist communities are no real exception to this rule, witness the cult of the founder and his “blood descendants,”

and the absolute authority the spiritual leader enjoys in many cases. It is true that the post-World War II democratization seems at first sight to have produced an exceptionally egalitarian nation, where about 85% of the people consider themselves to belong to the “middle class.” Economically speaking there may be much truth in this impression, but when it comes to power, the gap may be as absolute as ever: all power in the hands of a political and business elite that perpetuates itself and real “people’s power” nonexistent. Indeed, since the Meiji Restoration a handful of Buddhist-inspired activists, and recently even some religious leaders, have tried to take a critical stance against some abuses of the powers that be, but the faithful, strongly in the grip of the Japanese code, soon kill such sparks by their passive resistance. And, lastly, while their doctrine seems to predestine the Japanese Buddhists to be the torchbearers of an international spirit in Japan, very little of such influence can be traced.

So far our summary investigation into the liberating influence of Buddhism in Japanese society. Looking back on it, the picture that emerged strikes one as extremely negative and bleak – in fact, too bleak to be credible. Could it be that this kind of investigation, although seemingly performed along academically acceptable lines, does not permit one to really detect the liberating influence of Buddhism, which would have been at work in more subtle ways? I am inclined to believe so, and it is possible that the following hints point us in the right direction.

Would it really be true that the present egalitarian mood of Japanese society is merely of an economical nature? Could not it be that, over the ages, Buddhism has unobtrusively been teaching the Japanese a different criterion to judge people by, apart from that of social status and social success? And what about the great admiration – one could even speak here of “cult” – the Japanese people, their group-oriented-ness notwithstanding, reserve for the rugged individual? Can we not see Taoist and Zen influences at work there?

One example of “democratization” of Japanese ideas under Buddhist influence is sometimes pointed out by historians of religion. It concerns the belief in *goryō*, which burst upon the Japanese scene in the Heian Period. “Goryō” are spirits of persons who died with a grudge in their hearts against people that wronged them and later come back to wreck vengeance on these people. It is said that this “power to come back” was originally ascribed only to noble or “divinized” individuals, but little by little, under the influence of Buddhist egalitarian ideas, came to be

thought of as possessed by every human being (nowadays even by the spirits of aborted children). The influence of Buddhism in this particular case may not necessarily be considered a happy one, but would not that “equalizing” influence have been at work on a larger scale and in more auspicious questions? We can only hope that our somewhat more detailed look at the Shinshū religiosity will throw some light also on this issue.

Liberative Elements in Jōdo Shinshū

It is time for us to focus on the (potential and/or actual) social influence of some of the specific tenets of Pure Land Buddhism, mainly in the shape it took in Shinran’s Jōdo Shinshū. Special attention will be paid here to the points wherein Jōdo Shinshū sets itself off against its Buddhist tradition or presents a breakthrough of the Japanese cultural code.

At this point it might be good, however, to remind ourselves that the history of religion often reveals a considerable gap between, on the one hand, the pure doctrine of a religion and the practical attitudes which seem to follow logically from there and, on the other, the ideas that were factually operative in historical practice. In connection with Shinshū Robert Bellah, for example, has this to say: “In the early period Shinshū stressed salvation by faith alone and paid little attention, relatively, to ethical demands. . . Rennyō [1415–1499] raises the ethical demand to a very important place in Shin thought but it remains something separate from the religious demand. By middle Tokugawa times [about 1750], however, salvation and ethical action came to be indissolubly linked. No more was heard about the wicked being saved. Ethical action had become the very sign of salvation.”²⁰

THE VIEW OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

In the eyes of Pure Land Buddhism the human condition is a truly desperate one. “Sentient beings” are routinely qualified as “foolish and evil;” and the classical formula for the human beings is: “A foolish being of karmic evil, caught in birth-and-death, forever sinking and wandering in transformation from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never an inner condition that would lead to emancipation.”²¹ The conclusion

20 Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 118.

21 Shan-tao, as quoted by Shinran in his *Kyōgyōshinshō*. See *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way vol. 2* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1985), 213.

is then drawn that the human person is completely impotent as to his own salvation and must completely rely for it on the grace of Amida.

There can be little doubt that this description refers to the very nature of the human, and is therefore valid for humans of all ages, past, present, and future. The picture is compounded, however, by the stress which the Pure Land people put on the idea that right now we are living in the “latter days of the Law” (*mappō*): a period totally decadent in comparison with the pristine days of Buddhism. “In this evil age of the five defilements, in this evil world, among evil sentient beings, evil views, evil passions, and in a time when evil acts and lack of faith prevail.”²² This idea may, however, have served a double purpose. One, to present the evil nature of the world and the human as concretized, historically “er-ignēt,” in the present evils. Two, leaving a loophole to answer the objection that, nevertheless, most sūtras grant the human being the power to work his/her own liberation.

However this may be, this world-negating and “anti-humanistic” conception may be very near Sākyamuni’s original conception of the world and the human as products of *avidyā* (basic ignorance), but contrasts sharply with the world-affirming notions of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism, for which sentient beings are basically good, in their “true self” their “Buddha Nature,” or “original enlightenment.”

Our question is then: What kind of effect does such a negative evaluation of world and human being have on the social attitudes of people? Given the presence of the other enabling ideas, it would seem to predispose people for a critical stance over against existing society. However, does such a doctrine not make people believe in their impotence also when it comes to changing their lot here on earth? Or should we rather think, along Weberian lines, that belief in their impotence to work their salvation makes people turn their energies to earthly tasks, in an “inner-worldly asceticism?” The release from the traditional Buddhist insistence on “diligence” (*virya*, Jap., *shōjin*) in working one’s liberation frees time and energy for other, inner-worldly, pursuits, but may not by itself motivate for strenuous efforts for personal and social betterment. Indeed, one of the first reactions to Shinran’s doctrine of grace on some groups of people was a moral laxity or “letting go.” On the other hand, however, in Robert Bellah’s view, this faith has led to a kind of “Protestant work ethic” in the traders’ families of the Ōmi region.²³

22 Shan-tao, as quoted by Shinran in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, 216.

23 Robert Bellah, *Tokugawa Religion*, 117ff.

For the believer the “feeling” of this vale of tears changes drastically by the idea that the universe is pervaded by the limitless Mercy of the Buddha Amida, who saves all sentient beings irrespective of their sins and works. The only requirement on one’s part is faith in Amida’s merciful Vow, expressed in the recitation of his Name (*nenbutsu*).

It cannot be doubted that such a faith can mean a wonderful spiritual liberation for the individual. In this connection, it may be significant that, in Shinshū, faith often goes by the name of *anjin*, which literally means a “mind at peace.” One is freed from anxiety because carried by Amida’s mercy and grace.” One’s salvation is certain because it depends only on the all-merciful Amida and not on the quality of one’s works. Thereby one is freed from the oppression of sin and guilt; there is no need for continuous and detailed examination of conscience, expiation of every little sin, or counting of merits. In this way, this faith also frees from self-centeredness and self-righteousness, and leads to a life of gratitude in recognition of one’s universal indebtedness.

But, on the other hand, it would seem that this kind of faith, rather than being conducive to social liberating action, tends to lead to pietism or a quietistic religiosity. There is, first of all, the consideration that, just as a personal moral life, so too one’s work for others or struggle for a better society does not contribute to one’s salvation. Furthermore, the only act required for one’s salvation, the *nenbutsu*, is a practice which stays within the private religious sphere (between Amida and me), without going out into the profane and the social. Unlike charity, this practice is not communal by itself, but can become so only through the consideration that my salvation involves the salvation of all, as condition and effect. And, as we saw in general Buddhism, also here the stress is on the difficulty of doing good to others. In a sense, the working of mercy is reserved to Amida. We are called to do good to others, but we cannot do it as *bonbu* here on earth, but only once we have entered the Pure Land, have obtained enlightenment there, and are allowed to come back” to work for the salvation of others (*gensō*). Shinran is reported to have said:

The compassion of the Pure Land is that one says the *nenbutsu* and quickly becomes a Buddha, thus enabling one to aid all sentient beings with a heart of compassion and care...In this life, no matter how loving and saddened we become, it is most difficult to aid others since our compassion and care are truly limited.²⁴

And also one frequently encounters, in Shinshū, the reduction of “doing good to others” or “profiting others” (*rita*) to “leading others to enlightenment” (*kyōke*) – a tendency which has prompted the following question:

The soteriological [in a limited, spiritual sense] context of the notion of compassion is I believe evident. . . Can this soteriologically oriented notion be transported or expanded to include social ethical considerations?²⁵

To the best of my knowledge, an answer to this question from the Shinshū side is not yet forthcoming.

As a matter of historical fact, the idea of a life of gratefulness towards Amida has found an expansion into (or, better a tie-up with) the social reality, when it came to be expressed by the (Confucian) notion of *hōon*: “recognizing one’s indebtedness, repaying one’s debts towards” or, possibly better, “living up to the expectations of.” This expression is vague enough to enable one to fill it out with different contents such as, for instance, “repaying one’s debt to Amida by leading a “good life,” doing good to others, etc. And, in fact, gratitude to Amida has thus been combined with gratitude to the Shinshū founder Shinran (and his descendants, the hereditary leaders of the Sect), to one’s parents, to the leaders of the country, etc. But it must be admitted that, in this complex of ideas, the stress has rather been on social harmony than on liberation.

The reason why it may be better not to translate *hōon*, when directed at Amida, by “repaying one’s debts” is that this expression seems to imply a “quid pro quo” or the idea of justice – something which can of course not apply. Indeed, it is a pronounced trait of this conception of salvation that the idea of justice is totally absent or expressly negated, in Amida himself who is a motherly figure who does not discriminate in his mercy; in the believer who carries no responsibility; and in the Amida-bonbu relationship which transcends the struggle of good and evil.

²⁴ *Tannishō*, chapter 4.

²⁵ John Junji Ishihara, *Journal of the Chikushi Jōgakuin* 2 (1990): 67.

Pure Land Buddhism understands itself – more or less emphatically according to the age and the inclinations of the individual believer – as the religion of the *bonbu*, the only path to salvation for the bonbu. Its *raison d'être* lies in the condition of the bonbu. Theoretically, the possibility is left open that some especially privileged people might save themselves by other ways, but the bonbu is essentially the one without any privilege, religious position or capability. He is the one without rank at the bottom of the totem pole: the lay person, the unreformable sinner; the one who, I like to think, corresponds to the *anawim* of the Bible. But precisely he/she is the privileged object of Amida's Mercy, the right "vessel" for the reception of salvation. This idea has a double implication:

1. *The basic equality of all people.* No matter how much outward appearances differ – daimyō and farmer, good people and bad people, monk and lay, male and female – basically we are all sinners of the lowest rank; and the consciousness of this is precisely one of the two elements of the "enlightenment" implied in faith.

While original Buddhism brought a thorough relativization of all social status, but produced a religious meritocracy, Pure Land Buddhism also sweeps aside all distinctions in religious capability or merit as of no consequence. It recognizes an equalization of all on the lowest level, a "democracy of sinners." It was in that spirit that Shinran considered himself to be "neither monk nor layman" and, declining the title of teacher, called himself a "fellow wayfarer" (*dōgyō*), "without a single disciple." And Soga Ryōjin drew the most extreme conclusion from this when in his writings he presented Sākyamuni Buddha himself as a bonbu, a sinner in need of salvation by Amida.

2. *The dignity of the "little man."* Despised as he may be socially, and despicable as he may be as a sinner, the bonbu has a high dignity as object of Amida's Mercy. Thereby he is a "child of the Buddha" and an "equal of the Tathāgata" (Shinran).

There can be no doubt that such ideas do help lowly people to gain self-respect and to rise above their social lot subjectively, but do they also become a force motivating them for efforts to better their lot objectively? A priori it would seem that this kind of self-consciousness

certainly helps people to take a freer, more self-confident attitude towards the “higher-ups,” but it is also imaginable that, under certain conditions, it would induce them to be resigned to their objective lot. How, then, did these ideas work in fact, in the history of Japan? At a certain moment they may, indeed, have worked as “social dynamite.” They were at the least partially responsible for the *ikkō-ikki* uprisings of the farmers against the constables-landlords in several regions of Western Japan in the 15th and 16th centuries. The idea that all people are equal before Amida made it possible then for samurai and farmer to associate and to exercise socio-political influence together.

It may be safe to say, however, that by the end of the 16th century the spirit of freedom inspired by the Pure Land ideas had been successfully curbed, never to show up again till today. Very instrumental in this containment was undoubtedly the enormous influence of the “second founder of the Shinshū Sect,” Rennyō Shōnin (head priest from 1457 until 1499), who endeavored to shape the Shinshū sect into a socially acceptable religious movement by adapting it to Japan’s cultural code. “He developed therefore the paradigm of the person who lives an intense religious life inwardly but who is unobtrusive and self-effacing outwardly.”²⁶ And gratitude to Amida was thereby fused with the Confucian idea of indebtedness towards the rulers of the land. That paradigm appears to dominate Shinshū religiosity even today, which prompted one author to lament “the passive defeatism of traditional Shin Buddhist attitudes.”²⁷

Among the leaders of the Nishi as well as of the Higashi Hongan-ji, there appears to awaken an awareness that Shinran’s doctrine can become a principle of society building and society critique. For example, a big banner hanging from one of the massive pillars of the Shinran Hall in Nishi Hongan-ji reads: “Let us aim at a society of fellow wayfarers.” But will these leaders be able to revive that spirit in their people after so many centuries of mobilizing Shinran for the cause of social conformity?

THE IDEA OF BIRTH IN THE PURE LAND

The aim of Amida’s Primal Vow is to save all sentient beings by procuring them Birth (*ōjō*) in the Pure Land (*Jōdo*). In the Buddhist perspec-

26 James Dobbins, *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 144.

27 John Junji Ishihara, *Journal of the Chikushū Jōgaku-en* 2 (1990): 89.

tive of “liberation,” this must be interpreted as either being *nirvāna* or leading directly to *nirvāna*. Everything indicates, however, that in the religious consciousness of ordinary believers, this idea lives and functions rather as the “Land of Bliss” or “Paradise” (*Gokuraku Jōdo*) – something very akin to the “heaven” of the Semitic religions. It puts an end to the miserable cycle of future rebirths that the Buddhist believer must see as his/her lot.

Thus, the Marxist accusation that the expectation of heaven is an opium for the people – grants them real consolation but turns their attention and energies away from this world – equally applies to the expectation of Birth in the Pure Land. Many Shinshū “theologians” agree that, in its traditional interpretation as Birth *after death*, the idea of the Pure Land has indeed worked that way, in China and also in Japan up to the Kamakura Era. Shinran, however, strongly reacted against that tendency, by laying all the stress on the moment one obtains faith (and the benefits obtained thereby) instead of on the moment of death (the moment of entering the Pure Land), and by interpreting the Pure Land, not as a place to stay in individual bliss, but as the point from where to return to this world in order to “benefit others.” These same theologians have to concede, however, that Shinran’s ideas on this point never really changed the minds of the people, who continued to pin their hopes on the future bliss in the Pure Land.

Some younger Shinshū scholars, influenced by Catholic liberation theology, see the need of rethinking the notion of salvation by Amida: no longer defining it in terms of the inner life of the individual, but rather seeing it as the holistic liberation of the total human being living in society. The idea of the Pure Land, which after all implies the notions of a “world and of a “society,” then appears to them as a promising vehicle for this rethinking of salvation. In that case, the Pure Land must be seen, not as a realm existing by itself apart from this world, but as a reality mediated by the actual social situation. Understood in this way, the Pure Land would be able to function as a basis for a critical stance towards actual social conditions, and might come near the Christian idea of the “Kingdom of God.”

There is, indeed, in the Pure Land Sūtras and commentaries, the intriguing notion of *shōgon jōdo*, “adorning (or building) the Pure Land.” In most interpretations this activity is reserved to Amida, but if it could be interpreted as an activity of Amida wherein the faithful can and must participate, we would again come near the Christian idea of “working for the Kingdom of God.” Soga Ryōjin’s interpretation seems to go

in that direction; for instance when he writes: “Is not the saintly crowd of the Pure Land always on a tour of duty in the *saha* world and exerting their efforts in the building of the true Buddha Land?”²⁸ Still, he appears to see this activity as a purely spiritual, “ideal” one.

EXCLUSIVE DEVOTION TO AMIDA ALONE

In a marked deviation from most forms of Buddhism, with their rich pantheon of objects of worship, the myriad Buddhas and bodhisattvas, Shinshū belief concentrates everything on the sole saving figure of Amida. The question of where Shinshū doctrine then locates the other Buddhas and bodhisattvas, and especially the figure of Sākyamuni Buddha, clearly falls outside the scope of this paper; our question is only whether such a centering on one figure – this kind of “monotheism” – has a liberating effect.

It is easy to imagine that this reduction to Amida alone allows people to stop worrying whether they gave each of the many Buddhas his due, but another aspect of this reduction may be more relevant to our problematics. History testifies to the fact that the many-buddhaed brands of Buddhism have, on the whole, shown themselves very tolerant to the native gods of many peoples, to the point of as it were co-opting them. No matter how enlightened this kind of tolerance may be thought to be, it involves the danger that the native cultural code, of which the native gods may be considered to be the symbols, is at the same time uncritically embraced.

In the case of Japan, the native gods are, of course, the Shinto gods, which symbolize, and function as upholders of, the Japanese tradition and national establishment. We have noted how intimately traditional Japanese Buddhism associated itself with the state and joined the native gods as objects of worship to the Buddhas (*shinbutsu konkō*). This goes far to account for the fact that the sense of worship of Japanese popular religiosity is, as it were non-directional and can accommodate, according to circumstances, all kinds of objects (“gods”).

In a truly revolutionary counter-move, Shinran, in his single-minded loyalty to Amida alone, upheld the “principle of non-worship” by quoting the *Nirvāna Sūtra*: “If one has taken refuge in the Buddha, one must not further take refuge in various gods.”²⁹ Shinran moreover unambiguously upheld the superiority of the Buddha law (*buppō*) over

28 Soga Ryōjin Senshū 3: 63–64.

29 See *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, vol. 4: 555.

the King's law (*ōbō*) and, in so doing, legated to his followers the principle whereby to transcend the "religion of Japaneseness" (*nipponkyō*) and to take a critical stance toward established society.

In all of this Shinran can be seen as a prophetic figure rising beyond the accepted ideology of his environment, but the question – as with all the fresh ideas of religious founders – is in how far these impulses survived in the institutionalized mass movement that Shinshū soon became. In fact, and not surprisingly, the Shinshū "church" soon (already with Zonkaku but again mostly through Rennyō) reverted to the ancient idea of the relationship of Buddha law and King's law as the "two wings of a bird," which factually put the King's law on top and was used as the principle for obedience to the political establishment. And all kinds of theories were found to justify the worship of the native gods or, as one theory has it, to worship the "reality of Amida in the gods." The upshot is that, at least since the Tokugawa era Japanese Pure Land Buddhism tended to maintain and intensify commitment to the state and its central values, supplying motivation and legitimation of that commitment. The latest example of this may be the exemplary zeal with which the Shinshū leaders motivated their followers to all-out effort and sacrifice for the fatherland during the Pacific war – a fact which still gives rise to quite some soul-searching especially among the Higashi Hongan-ji leaders.

To put all this in a broader perspective, I want to quote here a rather cynical judgment, this time on Christian practice: "If history is anything to go by, liberation theology will never be anything more than a fringe movement, and the Church of South and Central America will continue to conform and to serve the powers of this world. The Church is no threat. A dreadful and disheartening indictment, but quite true. The Church can be relied on."³⁰

Postface

In light of the foregoing, it may not be an exaggeration to conclude that the liberating record of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism – or, more generally, of East Asian Buddhism – has not been a very brilliant one. But, as for throwing the first stone, Christianity may not be in the right position to do this and, anyway, in the present predicament it is surely much

30 Michael Knowles, "Is There a Catholic Social Ethic?" *New Blackfriars* (Oct. 1984): 411–12.

more important to discern whether this Buddhism carries in itself the seeds for liberative action which it could develop and act on in the future – no matter what the past has been. Is there a possibility that an influential sector of the Shinshū movement could come to agree with the view, expressed by a young Shinshū scholar at the 1990 convention of the Japan Society of Religious Studies, to the effect that “it is our duty at present to see the social problems as directly constituting tasks for our faith and doctrine”?

As a framework for my final reflections on this point, I want to use the conclusions reached with unanimity by the Buddhist and Christian participants in the 8th Kyoto Zen Symposium:³¹

The world as a whole is facing a time of crisis. Indeed, a necessary condition may be the conviction that we are facing a crisis which is unprecedented in human history and which will lead to unimaginable social evils, even extinction, for the whole of humanity, unless “all forces for good” extant in this world are mobilized and directed towards the prevention of these evils – no matter what their original objectives may be.

In order to deal with this crisis it is necessary to undertake a radical reevaluation of religious tradition. This reevaluation will have to imply a “prophetic reinterpretation” so as to render one’s religion a liberative force in the world. This formulation, however, may confront us with the crux of the problem. How far can a reinterpretation of a religion go without renouncing the very “nature” of that religion? The above analysis may have shown us that, while Christianity is structurally predisposed toward organically incorporating the liberative viewpoint, Buddhism may find this much more difficult to accomplish. It may even look as if Christianity would need a “radical reevaluation” only on the point of the human’s relationship to nature. Would for Buddhism a return to the original spirit of the founders – Sākyamuni and Shin-ran – go a long way in the right direction? Also a more radical and much more profane reinterpretation of the bodhisattva’s capital virtue, mercy, appears to be an urgent requirement, but can we really expect Buddhism to turn into a “prophetic religion?”

A way must be found to connect the realms of religious experience and social ethics. This might be the most poignant expression of the problem in the Buddhist context. The “religious experience” required here may be a religious experience of the poor and oppressed.

31 See *Zen Buddhism Today* 8 (1990): 173.

Let us end with a quote that offers a hopeful perspective:

Every religion also has the inner potential for change. Religion becomes liberative when it breaks forth from the narrow dogmatic fundamentalistic garb and meets all the people, particularly the poor and the oppressed.³²

³² See *Zen Buddhism Today* 8 (1990): 173.