

What Does it Mean to Be Human?: Buddhism in the Modern Context

by Dr. Alfred Bloom, Emeritus Professor, University of Hawaii

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Introduction

The starting point for this lecture is *Gankai's* wish which is stated on the cover of the *Gankai* journal. It declares that "the right orientation for the next era cannot be found without manifesting where Christianity and Buddhism meet as well as where religion and culture meet," and that it (*Gankai*) "has the ultimate mission to discover in Buddhism the elements capable of shouldering the contemporary problems."

This global age of instant communications requires that we all look beyond our limited historical, cultural contexts to discover the wisdom capable of uniting all peoples East-West, North-South. This effort requires a courageous openness which allows hearts and minds to share in insights and truth whatever their source.

In this connection, I want to recall some words of Okakura Tenshin, a pioneer in East-West understanding. Leaving aside the special background of his statements in which he maintains the superiority of Japanese traditions particularly in art, his challenge to his students is relevant to our considerations as he urged them "to create a style in the fine arts (we could say religion) that is suitable to this new age. And to that end, you should not hesitate to adopt other countries' traditions if they are worthy of emulation. Don't be narrow minded. Don't delay in your task to create a new style in the fine arts (or religion)." **

Recently at the University of Hawaii we have begun a project called East-West Religions in Encounter. It focuses presently on Buddhist-Christian dialogue which has advanced most notably in Japan. The assumption behind the project and the international conference held under its auspices last summer is that all people of faith, Buddhists or Christians, as well as others, must learn from each other and work together in mutuality in resolving the serious problems of our contemporary world. There was no naive idealism that this is an easy task. It, rather, calls for courage in searching out our own traditions deeply and in exploring other traditions seriously. Above all, it assumed on the part of each participant a deep confidence in one's own tradition, such as exhibited by Okakura Tenshin in earlier years. This deep confidence and faith permits open exploration and acceptance, rather than a fearful clinging because of uncertainty.

It is against this background that I would take up our topic on "What Does It Mean to Be Human?: Buddhism in the Modern Context." I have little to add that is new. I only hope that the observations I shall make will contribute to the progress of the process, and perhaps stir some reflection and discussion.

The central issue facing all societies, cultures and religions in our contemporary world is the understanding of human nature and what it means to be human. In ancient Greek tradition, Socrates borrowed the phrase: *Know Thyself* from the entrance tablet at the Shrine of Delphi. He also declared that "the unexamined life is not worth living." The Platonic Socratic tradition focused upon the ideal of humanity and the search for wisdom in living. In the Old Testament or Jewish Bible, the Psalmist exclaims: "What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God..." In Buddhist tradition the importance of human existence is also declared: "Hard is it

to be born a human being. We now live it." Human existence is a rare opportunity to hear the Dharma and to attain enlightenment.

In all the world religions the nature of human existence remains a problem, despite the exalted status of humanity in the universe. In Chinese Confucian teaching, this is made clear by the principle of Goodness which also means Humanity or Humaneness. *Fen* (*Nin* in Japanese) appears as an ideal, a task, never fully realized by any single person whose life is limited and self-centered. In the Bible, the book of Ecclesiastes states that God has set eternity in the human heart, but it can never be found out. It is the paradox of human existence that we yearn for eternity and truth, but our lives are immersed in impermanence and delusion. It is the mark of profound religion and philosophy that it realistically confronts the complexity of the human predicament and while giving full account of the human condition, also offers some ideal and hope to inspire human effort.

In order to evaluate any system of thought, whether religious or philosophical, social or political, we must first clarify its view of human life and the meaning of individual existence. Despite the complexities of doctrines and symbols and dogmatic appeals to authority, every system is really a statement on the value of life. We can save much time in religious discussion if we go right to the issue of human life.

Buddhism begins with an evaluation and an analysis of human existence. The first noble truth declares that all life is suffering. All other truths lead to methods for resolving this problem. Buddhist history traces various ways by which teachers in India, China and Japan attempted to relate Buddhism to the issues of their cultures and changing times.

In the context of the modern world dominated by Western perspectives, it is important for Buddhism to offer its teachings in ways that confront basic issues raised by western tradition. Whether Buddhism or Shinshu will be a significant force in western or modern culture or even maintain meaning for its own followers in the modern context will depend on its ability to engage contemporary problems and provide guidance for meaningful decision making and personal development. It must integrate the best insights of modern thought into itself and provide alternatives to pressing issues facing society. If this is not done, Buddhism in all forms will play a less and less important role in the lives of even nominal members. Hongwanji in Hawaii has a slogan "Let the Light of the Dharma illuminate our Pathway." This exhortation could only have meaning if it is understood that our Pathway enters into the world of today and leads through our many personal and social problems.

There are several principles in Shinshu which we may interpret to emphasize the openness and inclusiveness required for today. These are the Embrace that does not reject, the principle of manifest and implicit meanings, and the relation of tradition and creativity in Shinran's thought.

The Embrace that does not reject is a central principle of Shinshu teaching on salvation. In this present context it can be an attitude that embraces ideas and experience from any area which deepen and expand our understanding of life and faith. It is an inclusive attitude in approaching learning and human relations.

The principle of manifest and implicit meanings suggests that there is a thread of unity in all experience and thought which deals with human existence, despite differences in background and content. Shinran employed this distinction in interpreting various aspects of Buddhist thought when he formulated his teaching and wrote the *Kyogyoshinsho*, but we may employ it in a wider context.

The relation of tradition and creativity marks the distinctive feature of Shinran's interpretation of Buddhism. We may put it simply that for Shinran tradition was a stepping

stone to deeper insight and understanding, it was not a barrier to growth and development. There was an interaction of tradition and Shinran's personal experience that allowed him to find new depth in tradition for the new age in which he lived. It is not a question of rejecting tradition, but seeing in it wider and deeper implications. As a diamond is turned in the light, new facets sparkle forth. Hence the new age must bring out new aspects from tradition.

The principle of tradition and creativity relates also to the general idea in Mahayana Buddhism that the teachings must match the nature of the beings and the age. These principles reflect the existential and dynamic character of Buddhism which is always the *Way* of a particular person in a particular time as the substance of experience.

I would like now to turn to a brief survey of some of the leading aspects of western thought and Christianity which we, as Buddhists, must engage in establishing the place of Buddhism in modern society.

I. The Western Philosophical Tradition in Perspective

The western tradition can be characterized as rational, critical, individual. The intellect and intelligence became the basic means to deal with reality and human relations. This development began in ancient criticism of Greek popular religion and efforts to explain the true basis for the happenings in nature and society. Ancient Greek philosophers were not satisfied with attributing everything to the whim of the gods. They wished to free people from superstition and fear. This could only be done by inquiry, questioning and careful observations and the formulating of sound theories to account for one's knowledge and finally to arrive at sound judgments.

Despite the wide diversity of philosophies that have emerged in western history, confidence in reason and commitment to intellectual inquiry has remained to the present day. It has been western faith that reason discovers the universal and eternal in things and that the human mind mirrors the rationality of the universe. Even today, despite changes in scientific theory, there is strong reliance on intellectual observation and inquiry as a source of knowledge and truth. In the area of human action, it was believed that wisdom for living lay in the harmonization of reason, will and emotions, under the guidance of rational insight.

Socrates is the model for the search for knowledge and wisdom through dialogue and rational insight and the strengthening of individual conscience by rational reflection. Socrates, as an individual, confronted the tribal society of his time claiming the authority of reason and conscience.

The Greek ideals of reason, search for truth and the principles of goodness, truth and beauty still motivate many people in their approach to life. The individualism of western tradition derives in part from the assumption that each person has intellectual potential, or, as the Stoics taught, that all have the spark of the divine.

In modern times, philosophy, which helped to spawn scientific development, eventually became dominated by the scientific method and its criteria. This has generally meant that philosophy has given up the search for wisdom. Modern western thought has found itself at an impasse. Reason and analysis may provide knowledge concerning many aspects of our world, but it does not provide guidance for the meaning of life or what values are primary. In other words, the breakdown of traditional assurances of the meaning of life and the establishment of objective science which avoided judgments of value has transformed reason into a tool at the disposal of any aggressive philosophy. Fascism, Capitalism and Communism all have their "reasons." Nazi barbarity transpired in one of the most intellectual and scientific nations devoted to reason and critical thinking. It is important to note that Freudian psychiatry made it clear that reason can be captured by hidden forces in

the psyche. Reason turns into rationalization. The decline of reason in modern society and the recognition of its limitations is important in opening the door to other alternatives easily dismissed in earlier times. However, the principle of reason and the importance of critical thinking in liberating people from spiritual exploitation and social oppression remains as a contribution of the Greek tradition and should have its place in Buddhism.

II. Christianity in Perspective

The Greek ideal of human existence entered into Christian tradition and was placed within the framework of the Christian interpretation of God and humanity. Christianity offered a way of salvation on a universal basis in contrast to the aristocratic character of Greek ideals.

Christianity recognized the natural wisdom of the philosophers but it was not a saving wisdom, because it was essentially motivated by human pride and willfulness. According to Christianity, the truth of life could only be revealed through God in Christ and the Bible. It is the truth of the Bible that illuminates the meaning of reason, and reason completes itself only in the service of God through creating order in this world and assisting one's destiny in the next world. Scholarship and education served to make clear God's purpose in all areas of life embodied in a universal society in the Church and an eternal salvation in Heaven.

Christianity added to the aspect of reason and individual commitment to truth from Greek tradition a social vision that would make this world mirror the spiritual world. There was what is called the medieval synthesis in which, at least on the surface, there was a harmony in society, a coordination of heaven and earth through the ministrations of the divine hierarchy in the Church, and a harmony of intellect and spirit, guided by the teachings of the Church.

However, the synthesis broke down for a variety of reasons, social and religious. Through Thomas Aquinas reason once again achieved a certain independence for inquiry, and with the Protestant Reformation, the individual mind and spirit gained more religious authority. The Renaissance and its humanism further stimulated confidence in human capacities to discover truth. Science emerged with its emphasis on observation, experimentation and verification. Religion moved more to the defensive and criticisms of traditional religion arose on many fronts. There were rationalists, idealists, realists, materialists. Political philosophies appeared taking over the ideals of a just and universal society in the form of Socialism and Communism. Capitalism mirrored the diversification of western society and the emerging industrial society. Particularly, the development of modern psychiatry by Sigmund Freud emphasized that reason and religion are under the control of hidden forces in the psyche. Religion was reduced to a matter of the subjective ego as an expression of its reaction to the conditions of life.

Despite the fortunes of the Christian vision in society over the centuries there are features that are still significant and have great attraction.

The drama of Christianity from the dawn of Creation to the establishment of the Kingdom of God stresses the meaning-fulness of human existence in the light of God's purposes. The principle of Incarnation in Christianity affirms the value of human life in asserting that God himself dwelt among people and took on their sufferings. The principle of self-sacrifice as an essential life perspective was dramatized in the life of Jesus. Sin points to human pride and rebelliousness, while salvation means to accept God's priorities and will in life. The kingdom of God becomes real when people fulfill God's will in their lives and manifest love in their actions and attitudes.

Among the conflicting strains of thought in modern society, the Christian vision lost momentum. The problem of God's existence was raised; the idea of revelation had to be defended. The difficulty of the Church to accommodate to a changing intellectual and social environment put the Church on the defensive and weakened its authority in influencing modern events. Again, the assurance of life's meaning that came from involvement in the Church and in Christian faith diminished severely as a result of world wars and the issues of race and continuing social struggle in recent years. The world became the world of Absurdity of Albert Camus and many proclaimed the death of God. Increasing secularization, though promoted by science, has faced us with the possibility of human self-destruction and brought the value of life into question.

It is important to recognize the contributions of Christianity to western culture in its faith in the meaning and value of human life. Its social vision is also significant and should find a place in any Buddhist approach to western society. We must now turn to a survey of features of Buddhism that are also significant for the evaluation of human life in our contemporary situation.

III. The Buddhist Perspective

The history of Buddhism developed many complexities and systems of teaching as it spread through all Asia. Generally, it divided between the Hinayana and the Mahayana. Within Mahayana a great diversity of teachings appeared because that tradition had a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to human issues. We can observe throughout the tradition a keenness of intellect comparable to western achievements. It must be recognized that there is a Buddhist philosophy which began with a critical analysis of the human situation which we usually term "suffering."

However, this suffering may be better understood as deep dissatisfaction and frustration involved in the limitations and impermanence of human life. It is involved in every human experience no matter how pleasant or exalted it may be. The realistic approach of Gautama to the question of life remained within the history of Buddhism. It constantly questions any achievement or thought which induces a person to be simply contented and self-complacent. The teachings concerning delusion and voidness in Buddhist tradition indicate that it is an open system. As Dogen has said, Buddhism is to transcend Buddhism. In Buddhist tradition wisdom is symbolized by a sword which cuts through ignorance and delusion. Enlightenment means liberation. Liberation is from false views and from the fears and anxieties that derive from ignorance.

In the face of the breakdown of meaning in western society derived from the view of history held in Christian tradition, Buddhism indicates that all the resources of meaning lie within the self, if one will explore the implications of the very fact of existence itself. The proper question which arises from this exploration is not what is the meaning of *my* life, but how can I be meaningful to others; how can I bring meaning into the lives of others? In Buddhism the center of concern is not myself, but the other, united as we are within the cosmic Buddha reality and intertwined in the mutual dependency in all our existence. Buddhism can provide a reorientation to the problem of meaning and an ideal of a just society within our contemporary context.

IV. The Shinshu Perspective in Modern Context

Shinran's interpretation of Buddhism begins with the realization of the Original Vow of Amida Buddha as the essence of reality. As a result of his Buddhist practice on Mount Hiei, and his conversion to Nembutsu teaching under Honen and finally his experience in exile and teaching career in the eastern provinces of Japan, Shinran came to understand deeply the limitations of the human ego to attain insight and harmony with ultimate reality, or to

be saved. Stimulated by his own failures and moved by a deep compassion for other suffering beings, he formulated a theory of salvation which views all spiritual reality and experience as a fulfillment of Amida's Vows. The implications of his interpretations have religious and social significance for Shinshu in the modern world. Most important is that Shinran transformed religion from an egocentric pursuit of benefits or a focus of fear. Despite modern sophistication in many areas, most people remain bound by intimidating religious views which play upon their fears and anxieties by threatening hell for unbelief or lure people by promises of benefits in times of crisis.

While all of us, including Shinran and Yuiembo, experience anxiety at the actual prospect of our deaths, Shinran shared an assurance through his faith in Amida that we need not be concerned with our ultimate destiny because Amida has already secured it. Thus, in the *Tannisho* he noted that the follower of Nembutsu is an unimpeded, free path. We are liberated.

As he spells it out, the gods bow down and worship us, no evil demons or opponents of other teachings can obstruct and even karmic retribution is abolished. Indicated in this passage is a completely different religious style and meaning of religion. Not only is magic, fear and superstition transcended in Shinran's teaching, but on the social level the secure spiritual status we receive through faith allows us to share openly and equally with others. There is a connection in Shinran's teaching between being equal to the Tathagata in the expectation of ultimate enlightenment and the principle of Ondobo-Ondogyo, fellow companions in the faith.

The social implications of this teaching appear in Shinran's declaration that he had not even a single disciple. He saw himself, along with the disciples, as recipients of Amida's compassion, and, therefore, on the same level as a human being, though undoubtedly they respected him for his teaching and leadership. He also declared that he never said Nembutsu once out of filial piety, not because he did not respect his parents, but because through Amida's compassion which extends to all, our compassion and concern must go beyond merely family and ethnic relations. Shinran highlighted the universal dimensions of faith in Amida.

In our modern context, Shinshu has the potentiality to offer the world new perspectives to help motivate people to positive living and action as religious persons. Through rigorous self-understanding as passionate beings and the attitude of gratitude we gain from the perception of compassion that sustains our lives, materially and spiritually, we can develop open and honest relations with others. In the contemporary search for meaningful human relations and insight into personality, Shinran's experience and teachings need to be further explored.

In relation to the quest for the meaning of existence, the understanding that all our lives are a manifestation of the fulfillment of Amida's Vows gives new depth to the significance of our individual lives. We can view them as extensions or manifestations of that compassion in our contemporary world.

Thus, in face of the decline of historical meaning it is possible to construct a philosophy of meaning based on the principle of the Vows and absolute Other Power, the central teaching of Shinran. Other Power is not an abstract teaching applied only to Amida, but it represents the power we gain for our lives through mutual and interdependent relations understood as the outworking of the Vow in human society. Though it has not been common to see Shinshu teaching as representing ethical and social insight, there are foundations for active participation in society to express the compassion of Amida in our daily lives.

There have been, and are, problems in Shinshu history that have limited its development along individual and social lines. Within the western context, it is essential to explore these aspects in order to enable Shinshu to fulfill its potential for modern people who seek meaning not only in their inner lives but also in society.

Conclusion

A careful examination of the major issues confronting modern society and the choices we must make as individuals and citizens of our nations are largely based in religious values and different interpretations of the meaning of human existence. As Buddhists, we must be especially keen in perceiving the issues and bringing Buddhism into the marketplace of ideas.

The character of modern society has largely been shaped by ideals of Greek philosophy and the view of life of Christianity, even in Asian contexts where the cultures have sometimes clashed. Buddhism can play a positive role by integrating those ideals into its own life, while maintain the essential Buddhist spirit and perspective. To do this requires a deep awareness of Buddhism and an understanding of the background of modern culture. In taking up this challenge, we should keep in mind the vision Shinran received to embellish the world as he meditated in the Rokkakudo. If we undertake his task to embellish the world, we shall also fulfill *Gankai's* wish to promote the meeting of Buddhism and Christianity and contribute to the growth of spiritual unity among all peoples.

Reference

** "The Ideals of Okakura Tenshin," *The East*, (Sept. 1980), XVI, 9, 10, p.18 .