

Chapter 4

The Mahayana Background:

The Logic of Compassion

The second aspect of our consideration of the Mahayana background of Shinran's teaching is what I call the Logic of Compassion. Although we cannot go into great detail, I hope to indicate in this discussion that Shinran stands clearly within the constant effort of Mahayana Buddhism to plumb the depths of Buddha's compassion, and to constantly widen its embrace. Through the ages, sensitive, perceptive and courageous persons perceived new angles and implications in Buddhist teaching by which they expanded the horizons of Mahayana. In such a fashion, as a result of his own religious experience, Shinran carried the Mahayana tradition to its deepest understanding of religious existence. Though he differs at points with the tradition, he carries forward its most profound intention. This is of the most significance in our comprehension of Shinshu. However, in order to make clear this evolution, we must take a broad view of the development of Indian and Buddhist religious tradition.

Buddhism began against the background of the emergence of Upanishadic mysticism in ancient India, roughly during the period 800-600 B.C.E. This ancient mysticism was a spiritual protest against the religion of the Vedas, which was aristocratic, and based on sacrifice and magic. It was ancient sacrificial religion catering to an economic elite and imposing an aristocratic and priestly dominance on all of the people in every caste. However, Upanishadic mysticism undermined this Vedic social arrangement by relegating sacrifices to a secondary position, after the cultivation of the spirit to achieve Union with Brahman, their name for the Absolute, the central force of meaning and power in the Universe. The later rejection of this sacrificial system gave rise to a doctrine of non-injury or Ahimsa which later became a central idea in Hindu and, still later, in Buddhist tradition. The mystical tradition in India took various forms, and there were numerous teachers. In his own time, an age of great search and experimentation, Gautama Buddha studied under several teachers, and he himself eventually became a teacher in the same pattern as those others. He never regarded himself as the founder of a new tradition, but simply as a teacher of reform and radical new insights in the tradition into which he was born.

Upanishadic mysticism protested the elitism of the aristocratic classes in achieving spiritual goals, but then fell into an elitism of the spiritual and intellectually competent. So, too, did Buddhism as time passed. Although the Upanishadic approach to religion was universal, it

was the universality of competency. It was a selective universality, universal in time and place, but not universal for all kinds of people. A similar pattern befell Buddhism, which in some schools taught a system of five species of people, among whom were certain types who could not become Buddhas. This aristocratic and individualistic tendency of early Buddhism can be observed in the "The Dhammapada," from the following verses:

"By one's self the evil is done, by one's self one suffers; by one's self evil is left undone; by one's self one is purified. The pure and the impure stand and fall by themselves; no one can purify another." [1]

Dr. Suzuki has written concerning Buddha's parting words, where he urges his disciples to be their own lamps and refuges:

"'Self power means 'to be a lamp to yourself,' it is the spirit of self reliance and aims at achieving one's own salvation or enlightenment by the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path or Six Virtues of Perfection. If this is impossible in one life, the devotee of self power will not relax his efforts through many lives as was exemplified by the Buddha who underwent many a rebirth in order to perfect himself for his supreme enlightenment. Recruits for the self-power school must therefore be endowed with a strong will and high degree of intelligence. Without intelligence he will not be able to grasp the full significance of the Fourfold Noble Truth, and an intelligent grasp of this truth is necessary for the sustained exercise of the will-power, which is essential for the performance of the various items of morality as prescribed by the Buddha." [2]

This aristocratic, elitist tradition has remained intact in general Buddhism to the present day. However, within that tradition, from its beginnings, there were compassionate persons who must have wondered what hope the masses of people could have, if they did not possess the economic, intellectual, spiritual or moral capacities to fulfill the requirements of ancient religion. Such compassion found its clearest expression in the Bhagavad Gita and, later, the sutras of Mahayana Buddhism developed within a long social process during which the hardening of class and caste distinctions made mobility in Indian society virtually impossible. Traditional occupations such as hunting, butchering, tanning and the warrior role were defined as sinful because they involved the taking of life.

In Mahayana Buddhism, in such an environment of social rigidity, numerous features developed which reflect a trend to absolute universality of enlightenment and liberation. The Mahayana concepts of Universal Buddha nature, great Bodhisattvas, transfer of merit, hoben

(upaya) and the salvation of evil people and women all pointed to the promise of salvation and enlightenment even for the lowliest, most incompetent persons. The "Lotus Sutra" is perhaps the chief text indicating these teachings.

The trend to complete universality of salvation may be observed in the story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara in the "Larger Pure Land Sutra." The vows he offered all promise that unless all beings can share in his attainment of enlightenment, he will not accept it for himself alone.

The practical means for sharing the benefits of the works of salvation was the transfer of merit, a unique teaching in Mahayana. Dr. Suzuki writes:

"The doctrine of merit-transference is really one of the significant features of Mahayana Buddhism and its development marks the start of a new era in the history of Buddhist philosophy. Before this, the accumulation of merit or the practice of good deeds was something which exclusively concerned the individual himself; the doer was responsible for all that he did, good or bad; as long as he was satisfied with the karma of his work, to enjoy happiness or to suffer disaster was his own business and nothing further was to be said or done about it. But now we have come to deal with a different state of affairs. We are no more by ourselves alone, each is not living just for himself, everything is so intimately related that anything done by anybody is sure to affect others in one way or another. The individualistic Hinayana has now become the communistic Mahayana. This was really a great turning point in the evolution of Buddhist thought." [3]

We will note later that Shinran initiated a further step in the evolution of Mahayana compassion when he carried this doctrine a step further and limited merit transference only to the work of Amida Buddha.

The concept of upaya, or hoben, commonly called Convenient Means, or Tactful Means, is another very central doctrine in Mahayana Buddhism and its educational theory. The gist of this teaching is that the message of Buddha is correlated to the level and capacity of the hearer and aims to lead the person to enlightenment. As an educational concept, it reflects the deep compassion of those Mahayana Buddhists who wished to bring the message within every person's reach. While the bases of universal salvation were present in early Mahayana, they were mixed with themes of self-realization and self-discipline which later were designated as "self-power." These included such practices as precepts, meditation, copying sutras, making images, building stupas and sponsoring ceremonies. The great cave temples of India and China show how ancient people devoted themselves to these efforts. From the most liberating

Shin Buddhist point of view, all of these could be described as *hoben*, or *upaya*, as convenient or tactful means by which the message of Amida's deep and non-discriminating, all embracing compassion, and of universal salvation or enlightenment through that compassion and the light of wisdom illuminating it, could be more readily received.

In China, the Pure Land tradition became the major exponent of universal salvation for the masses, primarily through Tan-Luan (Donran), Tao-ch'ō (Doshaku) and Shan-tao (Zendo) in the period of North-South dynasties and the Sui-T'ang dynasties. The teaching of Tao-sheng (Dosho) — that all beings possess Buddha nature — finally became the central thesis of Chinese Buddhism. It was in Japan, however, that the teaching and spirit of Mahayana Universal salvation came to full clarity, theoretically and socially. There were a number of streams by which this teaching reached Japanese society. During the Heian (794-1185) and Kamakura (1185-1332) eras, the teaching became more prominent. Kuya, the priest of the market place, and Ryonin taught Yuzu Nembutsu during Heian times. This teaching is interesting because it declared that we all depend on each other for attaining enlightenment. This period was a creative, rich period in Mahayana Buddhism, particularly in Japan where priests like Genshin wrote *Ojoyoshu* advocating the recitation of Nembutsu.

All the teachers of the Kamakura period appealed to the masses and assured them that ultimately their salvation was to be realized. The hallmark of this development in Japanese Buddhism was that no one was to be excluded. In this spirit, Nichiren — a contemporary of Honen and Shinran, and himself the founder of the Nichiren sect — is important for his stress on the stories in the "Lotus Sutra" of Devadatta and the Dragon girl as illustrative of Buddha's infinite compassion. According to the Sutra, Devadatta, the symbol of the most evil person because of his conspiracies against the Buddha, will finally attain Buddhahood. The Dragon girl illustrates the power of faith. She was instantly transformed to a Buddha when she believed the Buddha's teaching, despite the limitations of her female nature. In ancient Buddhism, women were barred from Buddhahood unless they went through many rebirths and were born as men to follow the discipline.

Honen bears particular mention because in that same general period he gave witness to the simplicity of his faith in his famous "Testimony on One Sheet of Paper," stating:

"Those who believe this, though they clearly understand all the teachings Shaka taught throughout his whole life, should behave themselves like simple-minded folks, who do not know a single letter, or like ignorant nuns or monks whose faith is implicitly simple." [4]

He also saw, as we have mentioned previously, that salvation had no correlation to social position. He indicated this in an eloquent passage in the “Senchakushu,” his work setting forth the essentials of his teaching. The passage is too lengthy to quote here, but it is one of the most incisive, critical statements rejecting all forms of elitism. (See Study Help.)

Shinran built on the foundations laid by his teacher, Honen. The experience of Shinran in the northern and eastern provinces of Japan during his time of exile and his later teaching career enabled him to give deeper theological interpretation to the meaning of universal compassion. As we shall see later, one of the most crucial features of his teaching was the reinterpretation of the breadth and depth of Amida Buddha’s transfer of merit on behalf of sentient beings and the implications which this view had for the nature of religious existence. Because of Amida’s compassion, our salvation is assured in faith and we need not be concerned for our future destiny. Because of this, religious practice becomes an expression of gratitude, and religion transforms to concern for others rather than efforts for saving oneself. In practice, in terms of the life strategies of modern men and women, this gives existential meaning to religious practice, not as something divorced from life itself but as integral meaning and focus for everyday living.

Mahayana Buddhism, particularly Shin Buddhism, embodies two trends which are essential in contemporary religious life. By employing the sword of wisdom, we continually raise questions concerning our understanding and thought. We cut away illusion to illuminate our perception of reality. We can never be content that we have solved all problems and have a monopoly on wisdom. The sword cuts not once, but again and again, deeper and deeper, helping us to see who and what we really are. In our lives, in this world of dizzying pervasive and expanding technology, of racial, social, economic and political polarizations, the logic of compassion should continuously stimulate us to see whether we achieve the broadest possible views of compassion. Buddhist compassion is not elitist. It is all inclusive and non-discriminating. We must analyze all our religious actions from the standpoint of the logic of compassion. Unless truth and compassion — the basic essentials of faith — are absolutely comprehensive, they are neither the truth nor real compassion. Their development, in medieval Japan as Buddhist responses to history, give us an insight into their potential for relevance in the chaotic mappo times of our own day.

Study Help

Honen: “Universality of Amida’s Way” [5]

"In the next place, if we look at it from the standpoint of difficulty and ease, the Nembutsu is easily practiced, while it is very hard to practice all the other disciplines. For the above reasons thus briefly stated, we may say that the Nembutsu, being so easily practiced, is of universal application, while the others being hard to practice, do not suit all cases. And so Amida seemed to have made his Original Vow the rejection of the hard and the choice of the easy way, in order to enable all sentient beings, without distinction, to attain birth into the Pure Land. If the Original Vow required the making of images and the building of pagodas, then the poor and destitute could have no hope of attaining it. But the fact is that the wealthy and noble are few in number, whereas the number of the poor and ignoble is extremely large. If the Original Vow required wisdom and great talents, there would be no hope of that birth for the foolish and ignorant at all; but the wise are few in number, while the foolish are very many. If the Original Vow required the hearing and seeing of a great many things, then people who heard and saw little could have no hope of that birth; but few are they who have heard much, and very many are they who have heard little. If the Original Vow required obedience to the commandments and the Law, then there would be no hope of that birth for those who break the commandments or have not received them; but few are they who keep the commandments and very many are they who break them. The same reasoning applies to all other cases. If, then, we make the Original Vow to consist in the practice of these many forms of discipline, it follows that those who attain birth into Paradise will be few, while the many will fail. We conclude therefore, that Amida Nyorai, when He was a priest by the name of Hozo ages ago, in His compassion for all sentient beings alike, and in His effort for the salvation of all, did not vow to require the making of images or the building of pagodas conditions for birth into the Pure Land, but only the one act of calling upon His sacred name."

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Notes

[1] E.A. Burt, "The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha," p. 60

[2] D.T. Suzuki, "A Miscellany on Shin Buddhism," p. 6

[3] Ibid. p. 62. The reference to "communistic Mahayana" is not a political reference. He uses "communistic" in the sense of community.

[4] Coates and Ishizuka, "Honen the Buddhist Saint," V, p. 729

[5] Coates and Ishizuka, "Honen The Buddhist Saint," II, pp. 344-45