

Chapter 5

Kamakura Buddhism: Buddhist Responses to History

Like Shinran and his fellow Buddhists of Japan's Kamakura period, we live in an age of the loss of meaning. As we have noted earlier, such an age is referred to in Buddhism as mappo, the last age in the decline and disappearance of the Dharma. It is an age when revered and powerful symbols of the past no longer inspire a sense of wholeness and meaning for great hosts of people. There survive, in such an age, few if any symbols or myths which really grasp the imagination and stir conviction and determination in a person. Despite the difference in time and place, we today face problems similar to those of the Kamakura Buddhists, among whom Shinran was a major figure.

To appreciate Shinran, and Kamakura Buddhism, we need, therefore, to dwell for a moment on history. For it is from history, and the examples of conviction and commitment it provides, that we draw our own direction, and find guidance in making our contemporary decisions. When we see the way in which earlier individuals faced the problem of their existence, we can better appreciate the character of their thought. This is certainly true in the case of Buddhism and of those Buddhist schools that emerged during the Kamakura times. Despite the recent interest shown by Westerners in such Buddhist traditions as Zen, other Buddhist schools, particularly those of Kamakura, have suffered a loss of religious and intellectual prestige in our modern period. We are in an age of reconstruction and reinterpretations of existential meaning and religious resources.

In order to achieve this, it is necessary to return to origins, to the time when the movement started, and begin to grasp the issues and problems of that time in both a historic and religious perspective.

The Kamakura period of Japanese Buddhism is unique. It was during this period that the reforming element which we earlier perceived in Buddhism broke forth into a flowering of movements, each with its own character and basis in Buddhist tradition. There was here a meeting of the time and of diverse personalities, each stimulated in his own special way to give rise to interpretations of Buddhism which at once were creative, and also carried the tradition to new heights.

In recent years, there has been much discussion concerning the question as to whether Kamakura Buddhism was really a reformation in Japanese Buddhism. We cannot go into the

issues of such a debate here, but if we allow for the distinction between the life and teachings of the founders and the development of the institutions claiming to represent them, we can accept as a premise that the basis of true reformation was present in the new schools of this period. This trend is especially true in the cases of Shinran and Nichiren (1222-82), who developed schools and teachings not before seen in Buddhism. Honen (1133-1212) and Dogen (1200-53), though they had features which mark them also as belonging to this creative period, can be viewed, to a degree, as extensions of Chinese schools into Japan. Other important teachers of this period are Ippen (1239-89), a Pure Land proponent and Myoe (1173-1232) who attempted to revive adherence to traditional disciplines in Nara.

The new schools of Kamakura Buddhism were spawned in a period of prolonged social crisis, a period which began in late Heian times (perhaps from the eleventh century) when the tremors of turbulence began to be felt in the capital, Kyoto, behind which loomed Mt. Hiei, the monastic capital and major center of Heian Buddhism. The year 1052 generally came to be regarded in Japanese Buddhist history as the beginning of mappo. From that time on, the conflict between the capital nobility of the Emperor's Court and the provincial warriors of the many powerful regional clan families intensified. Eventually, the Taira clan became the dominant force in the capital, and established a dictatorship. When the Taira became accustomed to their new power and began to enjoy it too much, the Minamoto laid the basis for their eventual rise to power. The Gempei wars ended with the tragic battle of Dan-no-Ura and the drowning of the boy Emperor Antoku.

At this point, in 1185, the Kamakura period is usually considered to begin. However, all did not then become peaceful. The court continued to conspire to get back its power and these activities led to the Shokyu rebellion in 1222. Later, in the 13th century, the prospect of invasions of the Mongols from their positions of power on the Chinese mainland, added to the sense of turmoil in the island nation of Japan. Along with internal political struggles and the external threat of invasions, there were frequent plagues, famines and earthquakes, all adding to the miseries and anxieties of the people. In such times, the traditional religious institutions, which were largely dominated by the nobility, proved unable to provide consolation for the masses. The times called for new leadership, for new insights to meet the spiritual needs of the people.

Most religious traditions, when they are freed from the domination and manipulation of the ruling classes of the society, break forth in a new freedom of the spirit. Their inherent universality, and their drive for truth comes forth. Although we may not enjoy or desire such

times of upheaval in social or personal life, they are good for the spirit for they challenge us to seek deeper into our beings for the truth that sustains life. The Kamakura period spurred such a breakthrough in Japan, so that Buddhism achieved new spiritual heights and, at the same time, offered itself to the people in a way it had not been able to when it was monopolized by the aristocracy, and functioned merely to serve the interests of the state or clan.

When we view Kamakura Buddhism in that context, we can see it was an exciting development, perhaps the most stimulating and significant since the time of Buddha himself, or the development of Mahayana. This may seem an extreme statement, but in Kamakura Buddhism we discover individuals searching on their own to find meaning in a tradition they had known for centuries. We have forms of Buddhism emerging, without any assistance of the state which had introduced it as a court religion in the 6th century. The new developments of Kamakura Buddhism were in every sense free expressions of the spirit. It is difficult today to comprehend the decisions Shinran and his contemporaries made, the convictions they staked their lives on, the inner forces that drove them out of comfort and complacency on Mt. Hiei to lives of suffering and difficulty among the people.

Honen, Shinran, and Nichiren suffered persecution and banishment from the capital, while Dogen virtually imposed punishment on himself. In their responses to history, each of these Kamakura Buddhist teachers was reacting to the conditions of his time in his own personal way. Each developed teachings which reflected his own inner condition and ideal. Each was dissatisfied with contemporary Buddhism and, like the Buddha himself, made the difficult personal wrench of leaving behind their lives to seek out a new way. It is interesting that even today the Tendai school maintains it is the mother of Kamakura Buddhism, since all the major teachers received their training as Tendai monks on Mt. Hiei. Along with their training as monks, they absorbed spiritual influences from Tendai teaching which strengthened their decision. However, they all felt impelled to reject Tendai as an institution because they saw that it was too enmeshed in the political and social evils of the age to provide true spiritual guidance for them.

Earlier Tendai teaching had brought all forms of Buddhism together in a grand eclectic synthesis. One could study all major trends of Buddhism on Hiei. There was Zen, Pure Land, Shingon (Esoteric Buddhism, Mikkyo) and Tendai. Everything had its honored place as one of many means provided by the Buddha for the liberation of beings. However, the teachers of Kamakura broke through this eclecticism. Each chose the particular aspect which appeared to him as the essential and sole basis for true enlightenment. Honen focused on the Nembutsu.

Shinran followed this trend and buttressed it with his understanding of faith. Ippen, also a Pure Land teacher, roamed the country, offering the Nembutsu to all people he met. Dogen selected Zen, while Nichiren claimed to revive Tendai in its purity and singleness of devotion to the Lotus Sutra. Myoe Shonin of Nara represented a conservative attempt to revive the precepts and monkish order.

A problem that always has to be faced in religion is that the pursuit of truth, even though it is universal truth, tends to create division, while more pragmatic religious approaches are more relative and tolerant. Several important features bound the Kamakura teachers who left Tendai to found new schools. Their new schools were all voluntaristic — they were joined by a decision on the part of the devotee, in contrast to the traditional communal-clan based religion of the time. The new schools were also individualistic in providing a way of liberation. Unlike the court Buddhism of the Heian age, they did not appeal to political leaders to help implement and spread their teaching. All were spiritual in the sense that the primary consideration was to follow Buddhism. They were committed to the truth of Buddhism as the fundamental issue. This was in sharp contrast with the view of the traditional Buddhist schools of that time that Buddhism's main task was to protect Japan (actually the Emperor [mikado]) by warding off disasters or securing blessings. Curing illness and making it rain were important motives in the sponsorship of Buddhist ceremonies by the state and nobility.

In approaching the masses, the new Kamakura schools were all simple. They attempted to clarify the essential teaching of Buddhism beyond the scholasticism and technical language of the monastic schools, to bring the Buddha's teaching to everyone, in every walk of life. Not only was there this simplification in teaching, there was similar simplification in practice. These were laymen's religions, and laymen had to work hard for their living. The peasant, the hunter, the fisherman, the merchant, had little time for the complicated and arduous disciplines of the monasteries. Honen advocated the simple recitation of Nembutsu and Nichiren urged the recitation of the title of the Lotus Sutra as practice that was sufficient in itself. Shinran followed Honen in reciting the Nembutsu as a sole practice, while Dogen held up the ideal of practicing Zazen (sitting meditation) alone. The new teachers and their teachings were universal in their appeal. No one was excluded from the hope of salvation. A great humanism and a desire for human welfare lay behind all these movements. No matter what class, no matter how rich or poor, no matter how ignorant or weak, Buddha's compassion could reach all.

Lastly, although it may possibly be regarded as a negative factor, each new movement was sectarian in tendency. The Mahayana concept of One Vehicle combined with the concept of mappo so that each teacher insisted that his way was THE way in Buddhism for that time. Though other forms might be respected, they were considered ineffectual to bring the required assurance of true enlightenment and ultimate release.

Honen has samurai background. His teachings thus reflect a more straightforward and decisive character, however, are neither bombastic nor combative. He is extroverted and pietistic and appears more magisterial, having risen in his lifetime to the position of chief spokesman of a burgeoning movement. Honen comes on the scene as a compassionate person. In contrast to Heian Buddhism, which favored the aristocracy, his teaching aims specifically to assure the salvation of all individuals regardless of their moral and social standing. His personality has been sentimentalized by tradition, but he has a strength which projects through that sentimentalization of the centuries, a strength which enabled him to withstand the persecution brought by the authorities on Mt. Hiei and which finally resulted in his exile, a strength that attracted a student of the stature of Shinran.

I believe, however, that we can view Honen's Pure Land teaching as a rejection of history. Through the meritorious recitation of Nembutsu, one gains birth in the Pure Land (Jodo) apart from this defiled world of troubles (Edo). The stress on Pure Land teaching in the Heike Monogatari illustrates this tendency, particularly in the story of the death of the boy Emperor Antoku and his going to the kingdom under the sea. Honen's teachings offer a vision of an alternative world in place of the harsh existential reality in which we presently suffer. The starkness of worldly life is softened by the upaya of otherworldliness which is a gift of compassion to those whose burdens are heaviest and whose understanding of the nature of burdens is not easily expressed.

In terms of social class, Shinran was of Fujiwara lineage. The tenor of his teaching suggests an aristocratic background. He also was neither bombastic nor intemperately critical of other teachings. Rather, he was lyrical and passionate, as revealed in his hymns and self-confessions. Shinran was inward, more introverted, probing his inner world.

Through deep introspection of his attitudes and feelings, Shinran sought to discover some clue or solution to the problem of destiny. As we shall see, he struggled for years against a sense of imperfection and appears to have internalized within himself the decline of society. He took history within himself and resolved it in his own consciousness by identifying the resulting sense of imperfection with faith in Amida Buddha. His spiritual inner pilgrimage brought him

to a new departure point. Released from his anxiety and bondage to history, he could live constructively and meaningfully in the world. From age 35, a political exile, Shinran went out into provincial Japan, moving from Echigo to and through the Mito-Kanto area, living a secular life for twenty years, a life in which he was a teacher and practitioner of Nembutsu among the ordinary people to whom he described himself as neither priest nor layman. In this period he married Eshin-ni, raised a large family, and only on the threshold of old age returned to the capital of Kyoto where he continued to teach, to write and to live as neither priest nor layman.

If Honen's teaching is marked by its effort to bring salvation within the reach of ordinary people, Shinran's is concerned for the inner reality of that offer of salvation. Where Honen places the full reality of salvation beyond history, Shinran, the existentialist, attempts to find it within his life by experiencing the assurance of Amida's compassion even in the turmoil of his own passion and egoism.

Dogen, the Kamakura founder of Soto Zen, also appears to have been a Fujiwara with considerable literary and philosophical background. He was singularly impressed with the brevity and transiency of life through the early loss of his parents. This awareness provided the major theme of his teaching. His urgency was that we should practice as though it was our last day. He was deeply theoretical, as well as subjective, or inward, though not introspective in the same sense as Shinran. Dogen was a very serious person, and demanded seriousness in religion. He was not content with halfway measures but insisted that devotees give themselves totally to Buddhism. The key phrase he learned from his master Ju-ching was "Cast off mind and body; body and mind cast off!"

Zen Buddhism represents an attempt to transcend history directly through realizing the Void or one's original nature. Though there may be some recognition of the decline of history represented in the theory of mappo, Zen retains the basic optimism of the potential of men to perfect themselves through meditation and insight. Freed from the bondage of history by transcending it, one may dwell unperturbed in the world of turmoil.

Nichiren, the last and latest of the Kamakura teachers, was of peasant-fisherman origin. He was proud of his lower class background and probably because of his need to prove himself against Buddhists from the upper class, he appears more critical and combative than any of the other teachers. He is objectivist, literal and scripture-oriented in his outlook. He was an individual with a passionate desire for leadership and sought a basis for unifying Buddhism and society in order to bring social peace. He was a patriot, more aware of general social

conditions than were other Buddhists of his time. He particularly felt the threats coming to Japan from the invasions of the Mongols, and it was these threats that stimulated his sense of mission to warn the country and turn it to true Buddhism. Nichiren represents a confrontation with history. He demands no inward recognition of evil, nor makes a call for direct transcension. Rather, he stands over against history, pronouncing judgment and calling for commitment to truth to stave off disaster. A sense of mission inspires his devotees to become witnesses to truth in history, and the contemporary institutions based on Nichiren, such as Soka Gakkai, preserve Nichiren's combativeness, and his sense of political mission in Buddhism.

While each of these various threads of Kamakura Buddhism had its contribution to make as a source of spiritual insight for our contemporary times and problems, we are focusing on Shinran's perspective because I believe his conquest of history within himself provides the most profound view of human existence to emerge in the Kamakura period. The distinctiveness of Shinran's teachings will become increasingly evident in a deeper acquaintance with the reinterpretation of doctrine which he carried out, and in the changed style of life which he initiated. The conquest of history within one's consciousness is an existential awareness which means to recognize and accept one's historicity, but at the same time, to see that it is not our essential self and destiny — it is not our fate.

Shinran's conviction that we are embraced by the compassion of the Buddha suggests that we may act and participate in history, in our time, knowing that our being is an expression of something that reaches beyond and surrounds that history. Such an existential definition of ourselves is a defense against the despair resulting from our own imperfections or the failure of our expectations in the world. More than a defense, it is a point on which to stand through our lives, a point from which we see with increasingly clearer and deeper vision the paradox that we are bound, but in our bondage we are yet free.

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