

Dewdrop On Grassblade: Shin Buddhism And The New Physics

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by Ruth Tabrah

My proposal to Shin scholars and followers – and, in fact, to all Pure Land Buddhists, to all who are either living or studying the way of the Buddha in these last years of the 20th century – is that we begin to think about, to address issues, to translate and to transmit Buddhism in a globally-comprehensive contemporary style.

It was a young American physicist, Evelyn Fox Keller of Northeastern University and M.I.T. whose biography of Nobel prize-winning geneticist Barbara McClintock first inspired me to take a new look at our world in which everything – including the basic theories of science – is changing. In the final chapter of her "A Feeling for the Organism" (W.H. Freeman and Company, San Francisco and London, 1983), Ms. Keller cites the conviction of such eminent scientists as Robert Oppenheimer, Erwin Schroedinger, and Niels Bohr that the recent discoveries in atomic physics and quantum mechanics correspond to and are highly compatible with the insights basic to Eastern thought, and to Buddhism. "Indeed," writes Keller (p. 204), "as a result of a number of popular accounts published in the last decade, the correspondences between modern physics and Eastern thought have come to seem commonplace."

For me, however, any such correspondence did not seem commonplace at all. Such fresh and astonishing information! My very limited understanding of science, derived from an education founded on the premises of classical physics, tended to see the measurable, demonstrable, mechanistic "science" with which I was familiar as having little or no correspondence with my Buddhist view of immeasurability, inconceivability, the interrelatedness and 'dewdrop on grassblade' nature of change and impermanence of all that exists. To acquaint myself with the scientific revolution that Keller describes as 'commonplace' knowledge, I read David Bohm's "Wholeness and The Implicate Order", an Ark paperback published by Routledge/Kegan-Paul in 1983. The result of that reading was this paper.

My title, "Dewdrop on Grassblade: Shin Buddhism and the New Physics" expresses my conviction that the theories of such scientists as Physicist David Bohm open new and exciting areas of interpretation and research in Shin Buddhism. Through the adoption of new modes of language, new imagery, through our understanding the correspondences between the new physics and Buddhism, I believe we can stimulate a fresh, worldwide appreciation of the universal nature of Buddhism in general and Shinran's teachings in particular. Their unique compatibility with the 'new' physics that will be the basis of science and thought in the 21st century can give Shin studies new directions, new expressions, new style and form and a global audience.

Like many American Buddhists, I appreciate the Pure Land tradition from which Shin Buddhism has developed, I appreciate the Japanese Buddhist Shin tradition of the present, but I suggest that in the mode Shinran himself followed we not consider ourselves fettered by these traditions, that we feel free to translate our traditions in new ways, and in a fresh new vocabulary. The west no longer views Buddhism as 'exotic' or 'eastern' nor are western Buddhists regarded by their countrymen as 'fringe' people attracted by oriental culture and art. The old debate as to whether Buddhism is philosophy or religion becomes pointless. It

is what it has always been – an insight into reality that is at last being echoed and affirmed by such eminent theoretical physicists as David Bohm.

For modern men and women throughout the world, especially for those chafing under the burdens of theistic traditions, and for those non-religious people experiencing alienation, frustration, and inner despair, I suggest we Shin Buddhists and Shin Buddhist scholars now have a responsibility and an opportunity. Through our willingness to try new ways, and to see ourselves as standing on the frontiers of modern thought, we have the exciting option of spurring a fresh understanding of Shinran and Shin Buddhism among both Jodo Shinshu followers and those who have never heard of Shinran's teachings. Like Shinran we can again reach out to men and women who yearn to break free of the bondage of anthropomorphic centrism, of superstition, of the stifling atmosphere of judgmental or materialist theologies and ideologies. This, to me, is Shinshu's special 'deliverance'.

David Bohm, an American who is professor of theoretical physics at Birkhead College in London, England, has probably never heard of Shinran nor Shinran's teachings of the unconditional, universally enlightening activity of Amida's Vow. Yet, Bohm's theory of reality, of 'what is' as the inconceivable, indescribable, immeasurable 'holomovement' enfolding everything in the universe and unfolding through everything in the universe is, it seems to me, another way of explaining – or trying to explain – Shinran's perception of the 'wholeness', the 'suchness', the 'treasure-ocean' of Amida's Great Vow.

Education world-wide still teaches the classic western idea of atoms as the building blocks of all matter and ourselves as a complex collection of chemicals that function somewhat like an extraordinarily sophisticated machine. Quite otherwise, Buddhism has always quietly pursued the 'wholeness' of 'what is' in itself and been open and free about the unreliability of measure, the relativity of time and space, the changing nature and impermanence of all that exists. I would like to suggest here that the 'new' physics, such as David Bohm's 'wholeness and the implicate order', now gives us the opportunity and new vocabulary with which to better demonstrate, interpret, translate, transmit, and ourselves more clearly understand Shinran's nembutsu teaching, its Mahayana origins, the significance of Shinran's going beyond the teachings of his beloved Honen, and the timeless relevance of Shinran's insights for modern men and women.

During the few remaining years of this century, I feel it is urgent that we Shin Buddhists and Shin scholars explore, investigate and open our minds and hearts to what I perceive can become a new east-west focus, a common science and Shin Buddhist focus on what is real and true. Through such a focus, such dichotomies as religious and non-religious, sacred and secular, material and spiritual are seen to be misleading, illusory, false and arrogant. Bohm's wholeness of the implicate order stresses a 'one and yet not-one', a 'neither this nor that' and 'both this and that' insight into how things are that Shinran, in the preface to Kyo-Gyo-Shin-Sho expresses as "All things are the same and yet all things are different". (Matsumoto-Tabrah interpretation, 1985).

Bohm proposes that the common and all-inclusive ground of the universe is this dynamic what-ness in which matter and spirit, body and mind, animate and inanimate, being and non-being are at one and the same time different and yet the same – both implicit and explicit of the 'wholeness' or 'holomovement' of an implicate order which is always enfolding and unfolding, without the intervention of judgment or discrimination, and without any mechanistic grand design. For me, this corresponds to the inconceivable universal dynamism we Shin Buddhists know in mythic terms as the power of Amida's Great Vow.

In a world fraught with tension and anxiety over the spectre of nuclear holocaust, psychologically alienated by political confrontations and small ugly wars, the agonizing inner darkness of despair and meaninglessness of so many of our contemporaries can be alleviated, their existence relieved of its seeming absurdity and meaninglessness, the

terrible anxiety as to theistic judgmentalism on one's life vanquished by the decisiveness arising from awareness of this common base of meaning now shared by the 'new' physicists and ourselves.

For the past few decades an increasing number of western scientists have been exploring the inner perspectives of Buddhism, Hinduism and Tao in their search for a spiritual reality compatible with that which they began to perceive through their exploration of quarks, probability theory, relativity, atom splitting and black holes. In this regard, David Bohm (on p. 190) calls our attention to "certain new notions of cosmology" that, for example, arise in applying quantum theory to the currently accepted general theory of relativity. He states, "As we keep on adding excitations corresponding to shorter and shorter wavelengths to the gravitational field, we come to a certain length at which the measurement of space and time becomes totally undefinable. If one computes the amount of energy that would be in one cubic centimeter of space, with this shortest possible wavelength, it turns out to be very far beyond the total energy of all the matter in the known universe". Bohm concludes that "What is implied by this proposal is that what we call empty space contains an immense background of energy and that matter as we know it is a small, quantized, wave-like excitation on top of this background, rather like a tiny ripple on a vast sea." He goes on to say that "In this connection it may be said that space, which has so much energy, is full rather than empty."

This statement – for me – reverberates with strong Buddhist echoes and constitutes a scientific description – or rather a description in the language of the 'new' physics – of sunyata. On the following page of his text, Bohm goes on to say, "what we perceive through the senses as empty space is actually the plenum, which is the ground for the existence of everything, including ourselves. The things that appear to our senses are derivative forms and their true meaning can be seen only when we consider the plenum, in which they are generated and sustained and into which they must ultimately vanish." Again, this statement reverberates with Buddhistic echoes and strikes me as being a contemporary way of expressing what we Shin Buddhists call 'sesshu fwaha', the enfolding of each and every one, each and every thing in the activity of the Vow, which is tariki – the dynamism of Suchness, of things as they are karmically (that is, naturally) becoming so.

I feel Bohm is most Buddhistic also in his interpretation of the necessity of comprehending inanimate matter and life on the basis of a single ground common to both. For him, "life itself has to be regarded as belonging in some sense to a totality, including plant and environment. It may indeed be said that life is enfolded in the totality and that even when it is not manifest, it is somehow 'implicit' in what we generally call a situation in which there is no life," (p. 194 *ibid.*)

As was jinen for Shinran, for Bohm 'what is' is the general nature of reality, and 'what is' is movement – not in the traditional way from 'what is' to 'what is not' but, proposes Bohm, "In terms of the implicate order" (which is implicit in the explicate order), "movement is a relationship of certain phases of what is that are in different stages of enfoldment." (p. 203 *ibid.*) "This notion implies that the essence of reality as a whole is the above relationship among the various phases in different stages of enfoldment (rather than, for example, a relationship between various particles and fields that are all explicate and manifest).

In terms of vocabulary in which to try to describe the inconceivability of that which is indescribable, Amida's Vow, the activity of tariki, can we not clue in to Bohm's statement that "the more comprehensive, deeper, and more inward actuality is neither mind nor body but rather a yet higher dimensional actuality which is their common ground and which is of a nature beyond both." (p 209 *ibid.*) "In this higher dimensional ground the implicate order prevails. Thus, within this ground what is, is movement, which is represented in thought as the co-presence of many phases of the implicate order." And, further, "As a human being takes part in the process of this totality he is fundamentally changed in the very activity in

which his aim is to change that reality which is the content of his consciousness. To fail to take this into account must inevitably lead one to serious and sustained confusion in all that one does." (p 210 *ibid.*) This, for me, is another way of describing the transformative nature of the workings of the nembutsu in one's life.

In his memoir, *Out of My Later Years*, Albert Einstein wrote (p. 29), "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." For me, David Bohm resolves both the lameness of science and the blindness of religion through his 'new' physics as outlined in his *Wholeness and The Implicate Order*. Through such ideas as the 'rheomode', a freeing style of language that breaks with the grammatical tyranny of subject/verb/object of most western languages, he offers provocative research areas for Buddhist linguists and provides inspiration for fresh ways of translating and interpreting Shin Buddhist texts and sutras. Thus in both form and content the 'new' physics, and in particular Bohm's 'wholeness and the implicate order' can suggest to Shin Buddhist scholars not only new avenues of research in comparative analysis, interpretation, translation, and transmission, but a totally fresh 'global' style and imagery, an opportunity to address contemporary issues without resort to historicity or cultural misunderstanding, and the chance to emphasize Shin Buddhism's universality and ongoing relevance.

My yearning wish is that one day soon we can begin to engage in dialogue with those outside our own specialized academic or interest fields and that collectively as well as individually we can share with the global community the bases on which the 'new physicists', 21st century science, and ourselves stand inter-dependently in a oneness of common perception, on common existential ground (in which term I include the not at all different but intrinsic and implicate/explicate dimension of spiritual). In Bohm's terms, this common base, this common existential ground of all being is 'what is' – holomovement, wholeness and the implicate order. In Shin Buddhist terms we describe this awesome inconceivability as Suchness, a ceaselessly dynamic, transforming and all-embracing wholeness we know as the activity of Amida's Great Vow.

Once we recognize these correspondences, and acknowledge the dissolution of any seeming dichotomy between Buddhism and the science whose new horizons are the 'new' physics, what is to be done? My suggestion is that now, this infinitely enfolding and unfolding present moment, we free ourselves to think, write, translate, analyze, compare, and chant in new ways that preserve tradition's important bridges from the past and yet communicate to contemporary men and women in ways they can readily understand. To offer one small example: during the past century, among Shin Buddhists in Hawaii, the standard rendition of the *Ti-sarana* has been a responsive chant, somewhat Christian in style, with the minister chanting a line in Sanskrit and the laypeople responding with an English translation that stresses going to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha for guidance. This has become so familiar in Hawaii that, like Australian George Gatenby's confession of his wrench from chanting *Shoshinge* in the original Sino-Japanese, we may be reluctant at first even to try a new version.

Gatenby writes (in personal correspondence from Welland, South Australia, to the author, 1985): "When you sent me your translation (*Shoshinge: Nagatani/Tabrah*, 1982) about 18 months ago I hesitated to use it because the old version was so pleasant to chant. However, in the last few months I have begun to use your version and find it extremely satisfactory. I just recite it in a soft voice and a meditative manner and find it commends itself very well. Not only is it structurally pleasing but it restores the didactic function, which I feel it was originally meant to have. As I live out the nembutsu teaching elucidated by Shinran, I come to think that Shinshu is a truly universal path relevant to all humanity, transcending purely cultural aspects. Not only is Japan 1985 culturally different from Kamakura Japan, and in as much need of translation as we are, but the important feature about nembutsu is that it really only grows as a way of deliverance if it is lived in the reality of each person's actual life... I increasingly think Shinshu must and can take on new idioms and our reality..."

Thus, with such encouragement, and the hope that this will encourage others to fresh experimentation, I herewith close with a suggested new version of Ti-sarana in which I have tried to link tradition and the use of 1985 imagery – and to link Shinran and the nembutsu with the roots of Mahayana Buddhism and the profound teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha. We are, after all, one undivided ongoing flow of awakening to the dharma and to our implicit and explicit connectedness.

This is my attempt at a contemporary Ti-sarana, to be chanted by both ministers and lay, simultaneously, together, with the Sanskrit pronounced in the same rhythm as the original chant:

Yearning to know life's meaning,
To taste the truth that sets one free,
I join the joyous universal chorus:
Buddham saranam gacchami,
Dharmam saranam gacchami,
Sangham saranam gacchami,
Namu Amida Butsu!