

Chapter 3

The Mahayana Background: The Sword of Wisdom

Iconoclasm and Critical Perspective in Buddhism

Shinran Shonin traced his own religious convictions back through his teacher Honen of Japan, through Shantao (Zendo) a pivotal Chinese Pure Land teacher, to Gautama, Sakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism.

In “Tannisho,” the remarkable religious classic written by Shinran’s follower, Yuiembo, this lineage of Shinran’s religious convictions is detailed and quoted as: “If Amida’s Primal Vow is true, Sakyamuni’s teaching cannot be false...” The passage continues to trace Shinran’s roots in Buddhism by logical steps. “If the Buddha’s teaching is true, Shan-tao’s commentaries cannot be false. If Shan-tao’s commentaries are true, how can Honen’s words be empty? If Honen’s words are true, what I, Shinran, say cannot be meaningless.”

Shinran’s teachings are based on Mahayana Buddhism, one of the two paths (the other path being Theravada Buddhism) that became the main streams of Buddhist tradition after Gautama’s lifetime. Both paths claim to represent the fruition of Gautama Buddha’s search for enlightenment. He had struggled in discipline and meditation to discover the truth of existence. Although, as a ruler of the Sakya kingdom of northern India, he possessed all the material benefits the world offered, Gautama rejected his inherited role for the difficulties and challenge of pursuing truth. Through his strenuous pursuit and unremitting concentration during nearly seven years, from age 29 until his enlightenment at 35, he patterned the way of Theravada Buddhism, of discipline and self effort, which became the tradition followed in Buddhism throughout southeast Asia. Within Mahayana Buddhism, this pattern was called Hinayana and in the Pure Land stream, it was called the Path of Sages (or Saintly Path).

Through his experience of Enlightenment and his decision to set the wheel of the Law in motion, Gautama began to preach the Dharma with his first sermon in Deer Park at Sarnath. For Mahayana Buddhism, Gautama provided the ideal example of the commitment to strive for the enlightenment of all beings. The Buddha, the Enlightened One, attained an understanding of existence through which he was able to guide and teach others. ‘Guide’ and ‘teach’ are key words crucial to an understanding of the religious roots of Buddhism. When we understand those roots, we understand that enlightenment or wisdom means to see through the delusions and falsities of our lives and being, and confront the reforming and iconoclastic

(idol-smashing) aspects of Buddhism which account for its relevance now, in our own mappo era. These aspects of understanding the religious roots of Buddhism rarely receive scholarly or popular attention, though they were perhaps the motivating force of Shinran's break with tradition.

In Buddhist symbolism there are numerous symbols for the quality of wisdom, which is the goal of Buddhist faith and practice. Prajna, the Sanskrit term for this wisdom, is sometimes compared to a magic gem, the magic jewel which clarifies the muddy pool. It is compared to the Lotus flower which grows in the mud, but flowers in purity. It is described as a gate, also a stream, a lamp, an eye, a mirror, a cloud. It is the sword which cuts away illusion and it is this last symbol of prajna which I wish to emphasize here.

Buddhism is frequently, as a result of its social history, regarded as a conservative, system-maintenance (preserving the status quo) religion. In Asia, for example, it has provided symbols of legitimation for autocratic regimes. Buddhism is thought by many either within or outside the tradition to be simply a religion promising happiness or higher forms of material and personal benefit. Incantations, spells and charms are widely used by many Buddhists. And, traditionally, Buddhism with its emphasis on karmic resignation and on the transiency of all that exists, has sometimes been regarded as a sentimental source of consolation in the midst of a hard life. While it may not be entirely wrong for Buddhism to serve people's interests and needs, the problem is that these practices and institutional conservatism obscure what was the primary aim of Buddhism from its beginnings.

The aim of the teachings and practices of the Buddha at their deepest levels was to break through the self-deceptions which mankind nurtures in the pursuit of permanence, pleasure, and possessions. It was an attempt to face realistically the egoism and greed which stimulate man's aggressions in the world. It was an attempt to break through the false consciousness of the ego which puts us in bondage to the many exterior competing and conflicting forces surrounding us. In a very real sense, Buddhism entered the world as a "consciousness raising" teaching. It provided a basis for self criticism and, therefore, a way to true liberation and emancipation from domination by passion. Its iconoclasm was audacious and still is; the fetters of dogmatism can always be freed by an understanding of Buddhism's basic standpoint that these fetters too are self deception.

In Mahayana Buddhism's doctrine of the Void, there is no absolute which can be totally comprehended by our limited minds or with our superficial experience. This perspective has importance in society as well as in religion. The assumption of an absolute leads to the further

assumption that one embodies or possesses it, and so gains authority over his fellow man. The doctrine of sunyata, the Void, in Mahayana Buddhism does not give credence or power to divine revelation or divine right and is the basis on which rejection of the power of the gods over man's destiny appears in Buddhism. In making contemporary application of this aspect of Buddhism, we would point out that every vital religion must have within it a self renewing principle. It must have a basis whereby its own followers may struggle to free the faith from its rigidity and complacency acquired from long history.

Paul Tillich has called attention to the Protestant Principle derived from the prophets of Israel, who refused to recognize any absolute other than God himself. To those ancient Israelites, all finite, historical institutions existed under the judgment of God. In Buddhism, the self renewing principle is the doctrine of the Void which implies there is no absolute which should impede progress to Wisdom. As concepts are Void, and nothing has its own self-nature, so all institutions and religious traditions are Void. While not rejecting institutional and formal aspects of religion, this perspective enables a community to keep its priorities and emphases in order, and permits the person's spirit to develop, freely assisted by the community. In effect, Buddhism was an ancient form of iconoclasm. Buddhism smashes the idol of a fixed, eternal ego. It smashes the idol of fear and dependence on deities and here note must be made that Buddha became the teacher of men and gods. Buddhism smashes the idols of magic and superstition. It smashes the idols of caste and class distinctions (one possible reason for the attraction of Buddhist monks to socialism in southeast Asia).

Early Buddhism made the first step in the progress to wisdom in the Eightfold Noble Path the principle of Right Views, to see things as they really are. It also built in the principle of self-criticism when it emphasized one ought not be attached to heterodox views of eternalism or nihilism. Thus, we are not even to be dominated by the idols of our own thought!

At first, this self-criticism of knowledge and attachments was directed to the world of direct experience and objects. Early Buddhism criticized our easy attachments to the physical and social elements of life, treating them as if they were permanent and the source of our value. Suffering, in Buddhist terms, was essentially psychological suffering, defined as having to part with the pleasant and meet with the unpleasant. Parting with the pleasant deceptions of the physical and social elements of our life, exchanging our hope for immortality and eternity for the reality of impermanence and transiency, accepting no absolute and realizing the doctrine of the Void, all this was and still is iconoclastic.

As Buddhist self-criticism and iconoclasm evolved over the centuries, their scope of application widened. With the appearance of Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddhist critique of knowledge turned on the thought process itself. It maintained that even our concepts and distinctions are void, empty and must be discarded if we are to attain true wisdom. Nagarjuna's method of dialectical negation is the most profound expression of this development in Buddhism. He showed that all concepts are inherently self-contradictory, hence logical statement does not yield reality. It is no surprise that all Buddhist Mahayana schools try to trace their lineage through Nagarjuna, because they wished to maintain that self-critical perspective in their own school. Buddhism is iconoclastic when it even attacks non-dualism, which may become regarded merely as the opposition of dualism.)

When we look at Buddhism, and then Mahayana Buddhism in particular, we discover that it is a reforming tradition. It attempted to restore the true spirit of Buddha in various dimensions. This tendency is particularly evident in the Lotus Sutra which describes the Second Turning of the Wheel of the Law as Buddha enunciated the universality of salvation in the face of the pretensions and conceit of the sravakas (hearers, disciples, a follower of ancient Hinayana) and pratyekabuddhas (individuals who gain enlightenment without a teacher's instruction) who at that time thought they had the whole truth of Buddhism and were complacent. They symbolize a highly individualistic approach to Buddhism in contrast to the altruistic, social Mahayana. The two major principles which gave basis for the critical perspective of the "Lotus Sutra" and set the direction for Buddhism in China and Japan were the concept of One Vehicle and that of the Universality of Salvation.

The first principle declares that essentially Buddha had one ultimate teaching, despite the seemingly various teachings of Buddhism. The principle is given graphic portrayal in the story of the compassionate father who saves his children by offering them carts to make them come out from the burning house. Though he promised each child a cart according to his likes, when they were out, he gave them identical carts of even superior character than what he originally promised. The principle of one vehicle tests any claim to be the truth of Buddhism. It is superior and supercedes all lesser ways in Buddhism.

The principle of Universality of Salvation also was a critical principle which became a test for any assertion of the truth of Buddhism. It correlates to the previous principle because the one truth is that all beings will attain Buddhahood against those who are satisfied that they alone had the qualifications for such attainment. Some schools of Buddhism held that evil, low persons did not have the seeds for Buddhahood.

The spirit of criticism and reform presented in the Lotus Sutra inspired later developments in Buddhism in China, and then Japan. In China, the T'ien-t'ai (Tendai) school does not appear to be reforming in the strict sense, but in attempting to systematize Buddhist teaching and to discover its several themes and principles, the basis for future developments was accomplished. The Lotus Sutra and its spirit was placed in the central, supreme position. In Japan, in the face of the corruption of the Nara Buddhist orders, Saicho introduced the T'ien-t'ai teaching. He struggled to gain permission for the establishment of a true Mahayana Ordination Platform. It is not without significance that the major Buddhist reformers of the Kamakura era such as Honen, Shinran, Dogen and Nichiren were initially students of Tendai (T'ien-t'ai) and absorbed its critical principles.

Ch'an or Zen Buddhism appeared as a reforming force in the face of the academic, scholastic, formalist Buddhism of the T'ang era in China. During that time, the great Chinese Buddhist schools were established and many famous monks appeared. However, the abstruse philosophy of Buddhism baffled the masses and stifled the spirit. The story of Bodhidharma's arrival and conversation with Emperor Liang Wu-ti sounds the keynote for Zen Buddhism's critique of religious complacency. When the king asked the monk how much merit he would receive because of his support of Buddhism in building temples and making offerings, the monk replied, "none," and left to meditate before a wall for nine years. The truth of Buddhism is not a matter of calculation and reward. This Bodhidharma spirit continued and attained perhaps its sharpest expression in the declaration of I Hsuan, the founder of the Lin-chi or Rinzai school:

"Seekers of the Way, if you want to achieve the understanding according to the Law, don't be deceived by others and turn to (your thought) internally or objects externally. Kill anything that you happen on. Kill a patriarch or an arhat if you happen to meet him. Kill your parents or relatives if you happen to meet them. Only then can you be free, not bound by material things and absolutely free and at ease . . . I merely put on clothing and eat meals as usual and pass my time without doing anything. You people coming from the various directions have all made up your minds to seek the Buddha, seek the Law . . . Crazy people! If you want to leave the Three Worlds, where can you go? "Buddha" and "Patriarchs" are terms of praise and also bondage. Do you want to know where the Three Worlds are? They are right in your mind which is now listening to the Law." [1]

This trend in Zen Buddhism appears also in Japanese Zen with Dogen, who refused to establish his monastery in the vicinity of political power and also emphasized that a devotee must transcend Buddhism.

“The negotiation of the Way with concentrated effort I now teach makes myriad dharmas exist in realization, and, by transcending realization practices a total Reality”. [2]

Also:

“If we cast off the wondrous practice, original realization fills our hands; if we transcend original realization, wondrous practice permeates our body.” [3]

The critical temperament stimulated by Mahayana Buddhism expresses itself in Honen when he tested each religious action current in his time by the standard of the spirit of Amida’s Original Vow, to work continuously and unceasingly for the enlightenment of all beings everywhere. Honen concluded that the Nembutsu alone (Namu Amida Butsu — the repetition of the name as an acknowledgment of the power of Amida’s Vow) fulfilled the Vow’s intention, by being available to all people regardless of their wealth, their intellect, or their spiritual capacities. Shinran followed in this perspective after six years as Honen’s disciple, and went on to declare in his later writings that, in fact, the Original Vow makes no distinction:

“As I contemplate the ocean-like Great Faith, I see that it does not choose between the noble and the mean, the priest and the layman, nor does it discriminate between man and women, old and young. The amount of sin is not questioned, and the length of practice is not discussed. It is neither ‘practice’ nor ‘good’, neither ‘abrupt’ nor ‘gradual’, neither ‘meditative’ nor ‘non-meditative’, neither ‘right meditation’ nor ‘wrong meditation’, neither ‘contemplative’ nor non-contemplative’, neither ‘while living’ nor ‘at the end of life’, neither ‘many utterances’ nor ‘one thought’. Faith is the inconceivable, indescribable, and ineffable Serene Faith. It is like the agada which destroys all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata’s Vow destroys the poisons of wisdom and ignorance.” [4]

The radicalism and iconoclastic implications of these perspectives of Honen and Shinran must be appreciated against the disciplinary and social background of historic Buddhism. They clearly break through the crust of tradition and formalism which had restricted the Buddhism of twelfth century Japan to the elite, to the court society, and through the vehicle of the Nembutsu, opened Buddhism to the masses as well. Rather than a religion of complacency and self-satisfaction or status quo, Buddhism is the religion of a restless spirit which always

questions itself as to whether it has reached the depths, has penetrated the final truth. Buddhism is a subtle awareness of knowing that one has not arrived at the moment one thinks he has., and it is this subtle, stark awareness that Shinran makes so sharp and clear. Through this awareness, we can reinterpret the popular Mahayana concept of Higan — the other shore — to mean that we must always aspire to the other shore by going beyond, by crossing over. The sword of wisdom cuts once, decisively, and then continues its process of cutting.

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Notes

[1] Wing-tsit Chan, "Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy," p. 447-48

[2] "Bendowa," trans. by Norman Waddell and Abe Masao, "Eastern Buddhist, New Series, IV," May 1971, p. 129

[3] Ibid p. 144

[4] Ryukoku Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho," pp. 113-14