

Chapter 10

Religion as Manifesting Truth

In its earnest search for truth, as a religion of enlightenment, Buddhism has a deep faith that knowledge frees and truth liberates. It has had abiding confidence in the potential of the human mind to experience truth, to break through the veil of ignorance that shrouds our being. Buddha, as the truly awakened one, has awakened to the truth of his very being. His pursuit and goal is to be our pursuit and goal.

The pursuit of truth in Buddhism gave rise over the centuries to profound analyses of being, of the nature and operation of consciousness, of the various levels and characteristics of knowledge. Buddhist thought developed epistemology (how we know), metaphysics (the nature of what appears to exist), and logic as the principles of thinking. There were theories of two-levels of truth formulated by Nagarjuna in the Madhyamika or “Middle Path” school. There was the three-level theory of the “Consciousness Only” or Yogacara school of Vasubandhu. Buddhism critiqued ordinary experience to dramatize that we can only be emancipated when we discover the true relation of the absolute truth to the relative truth of our own experience. Whatever the school, and whatever the shift of philosophical emphasis in its 2,600 years of history, Buddhism was — and is still — understood as a quest for truth.

At times, for a variety of reasons, this quest for truth became entangled in highly complex scholasticism. In China, for example, there developed great translation enterprises and diverse schools based on the great sutras and treatises. There was a reaction against these trends in the formation of Zen Buddhism which looked to spontaneous, sudden insight, (quite apart from complicated texts and schools of practice) as the emancipating truth.

In Japan’s Kamakura period, for the ordinary person, the shortcut to liberation came through the Pure Land practice of Nembutsu as well as Zen. These Chinese trends and schools, spreading to Japan and developing in the Kamakura period, eventually gave rise to the many strands of Japanese Buddhism that exist today. Still, at the heart of all of these, and of all forms of Buddhism everywhere in the world, there is that yearning to realize the truth that frees.

The quest for truth in Buddhism has frequently been obscured on the institutional level. Buddhism played the role of the defender of the state and — through its great spiritual powers — of the provider of individual wants. Buddhism, in many places and historical periods, became identified with magic. In its adaptation to the demands of supporting political powers,

Buddhism sometimes restricted the search for truth largely to the monasteries where dedicated monks individually might seek their own enlightenment. Though Mahayana Buddhism announced the ideal of sharing enlightenment with others, and working with them to achieve it, Mahayana monastic life was largely an individual endeavor to attain the goal for oneself.

The two-level theory of truth, and its accompanying “doctrine of convenient means” (hoben) was originally developed in order to point devotees to the true source of enlightenment as a means to lead people to the higher truth. However, the two-level theory of truth is elitist in structure. Experts may know about the higher level of truth, but the ordinary person is confined to the plane of relative truth. It is interesting that until very recent times, any religious education aimed at elevating and spiritualizing the religious perceptions of the masses has been rare. In Japan, despite Buddhist activity, the basic religious perspective which governs the Japanese religious world has not seriously changed from the earliest primitive times.

The degradation of the term *hoben* to the level of its use as an intellectual sop for people who are presumed unable to understand anything higher, is counter to Buddhism’s basic thrust to make the truth known. Buddhist subservience to the political forces which supported it (particularly in Japan) was at the expense of this basic task. When the Kamakura Buddhism appeared, there was a determined attempt to break through the stranglehold which the court society of Japan had forced on Buddhism. During the Kamakura period, for each teacher, the search for truth again became paramount and direct. Soon thereafter, however, compromise again developed. The truth became routinized, institutionalized, fixed. Where the disciples of old could read the texts and letters of such individuals as Shinran and Nichiren, and where Dogen wrote in the vernacular, by later generations it had all become too difficult and was considered really unnecessary since one’s status as a truth seeker or follower was guaranteed by membership in the institutions that developed from the Kamakura period of Buddhism.

Despite this process of history, the question of truth remains as the central issue of Buddhism, and of religion generally, in our 20th century. Shinran points, in the “Tannisho,” to the centrality of this question:

“If the Original Vow of Amida is true, then Sakyamuni’s sermons cannot be untrue. If the Buddha’s words are true, then Zendo’s comments cannot be untrue. If Zendo’s comments are true, how can Honen’s sayings be false? If Honen’s sayings are true, what I, Shinran, say cannot possibly be false, either. After all is said, such is the faith of this simpleton. Beyond this, it is entirely left up to each one of you whether you accept and believe in the Nembutsu, or reject it.” [1]

Though Shinran in this passage argues that since he could not actually perform the difficult practices of Buddhism which were believed to yield enlightenment, and thus he was ultimately doomed to hell, then Honen could hardly have deceived him when he taught that we can be saved by reciting the Nembutsu alone. Left at this point, it would appear that Shinran's choice was a matter of desperation — it was the only alternative left. However, if such had been the case, he probably would have given up even the practice of Nembutsu. Desperation is not a sound basis for commitment.

Shinran moves from the position of apparent desperation to the question of the truth which grounds his faith in the Nembutsu. In this he serves notice, that he believes what has been taught him is itself the truth and that truth, when followed back through the tradition, finds its roots in the Vow of Amida itself. The issue of truth was central to Shinran and his innovative interpretation of Buddhist tradition makes his teaching an issue of truth for other perspectives in Buddhism. His denial that we can do any good deed to contribute to our enlightenment is hard to square with traditional Buddhist understanding that it is through the accumulation of good deeds that we develop the spirituality and potential to achieve enlightenment through many births. Shinran's concept of "poisoned good deeds" strikes at the heart of Buddhist views of karmic retribution, for with Shinran, there could only be bad karma, as he defined it. This meant that for him, the search for truth was especially keen and necessary.

It is not without reason, therefore, that in the various sections of his "Kyogyoshinsho," the titles are all given as "Ken Jodo Shinjitsu" — "A Collection of passages revealing the true teaching, practice and enlightenment of Pure Land (Buddhism)." He announces in the introduction:

"Hence, it is clear to me that the auspicious name of the complete and all-merging supreme virtue is the True Wisdom which turns evil into merit and that the Adamantine Serene Faith which is difficult to attain is the Truth which removes doubt and enables us to realize Enlightenment." [2]

" ... How difficult it is to attain the True, pure Faith ..." [3]

" ... Veritable, indeed, are the True Words of (Amida's) 'embracing and not forsaking' and the True Teaching which is unequalled and rare!" [4]

" ... Accordingly, then, this is the clear evidence that (the Larger Sutra) reveals the True Teaching. Indeed, this is the true exposition for which the Tathagata appeared in this world,

the rare and supreme wonderful scripture, which the ultimate teaching of the One Vehicle, the Golden Words, enable one to quickly attain the complete and all merging merits, the true words praised by (Buddha of) the ten quarters, and the true teaching conforming to the time and capabilities of sentient beings. This we should know.” [5]

These passages make clear that Shinran’s faith was rooted in a perception of truth. In the Introduction to the volume on Faith in the “Kyogyoshinsho,” he comments that “the awakening of True Mind is made possible by the compassionate skilful means of the Great Sage.” Here, faith which we experience is identified with the True Mind, or the Mind of Truth which is aroused through Sakyamuni’s teaching.

In other words, the root of faith must be deeply set in the soil of truth, else it will wither in the hot sun of adversity. The anchor point of faith is truth, in the same way that a ship on a stormy ocean is held by its sea anchor so that it will not drift and be completely at the mercy of mountainous waves.

For some readers, the question will naturally occur: How did the Buddhists determine the truth that is this anchor point of faith, and the salvation of the human condition? While remembering that for Buddhism truth is essentially an experience — the attainment of wisdom — nevertheless, for the diverse people it confronted, it did attempt to establish principles which would open people to pursue the goals of Buddhism more deeply. The philosophical approaches of Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu raise questions concerning the validity of our ordinary experience. Nagarjuna attacked our logic, our concepts, and words to show that they are inadequate to depict truth directly. Vasubandhu showed that through analysis of our perceptions of the world, there is basis for doubting the validity of ordinary experience to represent the truth. By dislodging people from their attachment to the senses, and from their addiction to logic, these teachers made it possible for people to be more open, to look deeper into themselves and their experience.

In terms of competing philosophies of ancient times, Buddhism criticized theories, then current among the peoples of India, on the issues of soul and of cause and effect. As the centuries passed, within Buddhism itself the gradual development of sectarian divisions required principles to distinguish the true teaching of Buddhism from lesser expressions. This was especially so as the teachings spread beyond India. In China, for example, it was once again in competition with, and critical of, Confucianism and Taoism, both formidable opponents in those times. While respecting Confucian morality, Buddhists emphasized that Confucianism had no profound philosophy and lacked a view of human destiny.

The “Benshoron,” quoted by Shinran, states in general evaluation:

“Laotzu, Duke Chou, and Confucius may, as disciples of the Tathagata, teach people, but they are already heathenish. What they tell are but the good deeds of the secular world. We cannot cross over the fate of common mortals and attain the holy state.” [6]

In China, too, the multiplicity of schools and texts that developed in Buddhism stimulated the formation of criteria to assess the relative worth and importance of these various texts and teachings, a series of endeavors called Critical Classification of Doctrine. The most comprehensive and influential of these was the system developed by T’ien-t’ai Ta-shih, Chih-I, which in Japan was called the Tendai school and was introduced on Mount Hiei by Saicho in the ninth century. Tendai is known generally as the teaching of five periods and eight doctrines.

Another widely important and influential theory of critical classification of doctrine was that set forth by Shan tao of the Pure Land school, and this is the set of critical principles that had such significant impact upon Honen in Japan as basis for the establishment of Pure Land School of Buddhism. It was in this tradition that Shinran developed his own classification in order to clarify his experience of Buddhism, and his analysis of the true teaching, the insights that grew out of his own experience.

Buddhism was not a religion of “believe anything you want,” or a religion which simply catered to individual whim, and thus the formation of such systems was important in view of the Buddhist search for truth. Buddhism, being a religion of principle, sought to arrange principles in some order to focus upon the essential truth to which these principles could lead. In the case of Shinran, the critical classification based on Pure Land teaching, was modified to show that the final expression of Buddhism is singlemindedness and this singlemindedness is characterized as either shallow or deep. The shallow singlemindedness refers to the Settled (Meditative mind) and Dispersed minds (worldly good deeds and morality) which he calls self power, while the deep singlemindedness is the true mind of other power. In his definition of this position, Shinran went beyond the classifications of traditional Pure Land by distinguishing two types of Nembutsu.

Based on his understanding that faith is the true mind of Amida bestowed on, or aroused in, the person, there is self-power Nembutsu and Other Power Nembutsu. Other Power Nembutsu emerges as the result of faith and expresses one’s gratitude for the Primal Vow in contrast to the self-power practice which the devotee regards as his or her own meritorious act.

In this way, Shinran deepened understanding of religiosity and faith in the Pure Land tradition but at the same time, he also challenged religious understanding in Buddhism. This challenge was a rejection of egoistic employment of religion, and in "Kyogyoshinsho," Shinran expressed this by quoting from the "Nirvana Sutra" as follows:

"There are four good things which may gain one four evil fruits. What are the four? The first is one in which one reads and recites the sutras to surpass others. The second is one in which one observes moral precepts 'to profit.' The third is 'to offer alms' with things that belong to others. The fourth is one in which one who concentrates thoughts and thinks to attain 'thoughtlessness' and non-thoughtlessness.'" [7]

In our consideration of modern Shinshu, the emphasis on truth in Shinran's thought has great importance. On the one hand, Shinran was clearly in line with the search for truth which animated Buddhist faith and practice throughout its long history. On the other, however, his search for truth led him to question the accepted perspectives of his day and to formulate new interpretations. He was not merely a sentimentalist, but was capable of analytical thought and the "Kyogyoshinsho," his major work, reveals this as well as his critical temperament and systematic, but creative approach. His insertion of the volume on Faith between that on Practice and on Realization represents a view never before established in Buddhism.

In these volumes, and in their sequence as well as in his letters and other writings, there is the evidence of his constant attempt to make his principles clear and to state his case with these principles rather than appealing to sentiment or invoking his authority as a teacher. Though he possessed both sentiment and sensitivity, to a high degree, Shinran was highly intellectual. This aspect of Shinshu and of Buddhism in general, needs reaffirmation, and a re-application to our own time. In the present century, there is great religious confusion in all the traditions because a serious search for truth has been abandoned. In our times, the quest for truth has been replaced by the pursuit of taste.

It is easy to be religious today because religion demands little of us in facing the corruption and decadence that marks our mappo era. Even when there appears to be arduous disciplines, most forms of contemporary religions are basically adjustive and adaptive to surrounding conditions. They build interior worlds for their believers while leaving the exterior world of suffering untouched but even to the point of expressing a judgment. There are some religious groups which never placed themselves against the evil of the Viet Nam war, and many which have had trouble in facing up to the racism that was, and continues to be, a central problem. The ideal of the Bodhisattva's identification with beings in the full range of their sufferings in

the world of samsara would suggest that the most profound truth of religion is that it fortifies the inner person, while at the same time, the person works in the outer world to bring compassion into the lives of our fellow beings.

The great emphasis today in religion, as it has been for some time, is on peace of mind which of course we all desire and need. However, since peace of mind is merely egoistic satisfaction, it cannot be the primary value and purpose of religion. The desire for inner peace is the basis of much religious competition and exploitation in the world today. Individuals are attracted in great numbers to charismatic leaders, who promise spiritual security, salvation or material blessings in return for the submission and allegiance of the follower. This competition and exploitation certainly fits the condition of mappo as Buddhist symbolism describes.

For myself, I do not believe that religion should take advantage of human weakness in order to capture the support of the masses. It is in this way that Shin Buddhism speaks differently to modern man, for the religious truth expressed by Shinran questions religiosity itself. It directs the question to the deepest levels of our motivation. Shinran understood that we not only receive benefit through religion, but religious faith motivates our concern for others (Rita). The aim of religious faith is not to achieve fame or fulfill lust which means to assert control over others. Rather, for Shinran, a robust faith enables us to see through our own egoism and pretensions of self-sufficiency.

Thus, the truth which Shinran and Buddhism seek to illuminate is not a chauvinistic truth, a truth which asserts its superiority over other expressions of truth. There are those within the tradition who may do this, but Buddhism in its deepest dimensions has always urged its followers not to be attached to views, not to get stuck on questions which merely end in argument, but constantly to transcend towards the goal of enlightenment. Buddhism has always recognized that the pursuit of truth and the recognition of truth are quite different. It is singleminded in the pursuit, but it has been tolerant to differences in the expression of truth, sometimes to the point of indifference. Also, it realizes that truth lies beyond our limited means to perceive it. This approach of Buddhism is important today because its compassionate understanding can go far to redirect western intellectual concerns which have given science and technology the priority over truly humane and human values.

Unlike western philosophies, which became detached from religious sources of inspiration, Buddhism links the quest for truth with the development of the compassionate heart, the heart of concern for all beings. This is illustrated in the Bodhisattva path in which the practitioner starts seeking his own salvation and ends by rejecting it until all can be saved. The Bodhisattva

dedicates himself to study and knowledge in order to provide or open the way to salvation for all beings. In Buddhism, compassion and wisdom are inseparable.

In the light of our consideration that Buddhism is a quest for truth, we must understand that each tradition has formulated what it regards is its truth. Disagreement in interpretation has given rise to the religious competition and conflict which marks Buddhist history. There has been, however, a tendency in recent times among Buddhist schools to minimize differences, even at the expense (or so it sometimes appears) of setting aside the essential point of the faith. The search for truth should not, of course, be an exercise in group ego, but at the same time our attempt to maintain positive relations with others should not prevent expression of our differences with them. Shinran and the other teachers of his day were very clear about the differences which separated them from their fellow Buddhists. Dogen criticized Nembutsu. Honen and Shinran criticized what they deemed the self-power schools. Nichiren denounced all of them. Shinran pronounced his judgment on his times, stating the issues clearly and without hesitation:

“Even though the multitudinous beings in the corrupted world and the defiled evil sentient beings, having left the ninety-five wrong paths, have entered the Dharma-gates of the ‘Incomplete and Complete Teachings’ or the ‘Expedient and True Teachings,’ it is very difficult to follow the teachings truthfully and few really practice the way; many are led to falsehood and the deluded beings are quite numerous.” [8]

“As I contemplate matters, I see that the acquirement of serene Faith arise out of the Tathagata’s Selected Vow and that the awakening of True Mind is made possible by the compassionate, skilful means of the Great Sage.

“However, priests and laymen of the Declining Age and masters of these days, sunken in the idea ‘that one’s true nature is Buddha’ and ‘that Buddha’s Pure Land exists in one’s mind,’ degrade (the belief in) the True Enlightenment in the Pure Land; or, being deluded by the mind of self-power to practice meditative and non-meditative good deeds, they are blind to the Adamantine True Faith.” [9]

The guiding principle in the quest for truth is that we be sure to probe as deeply as we can, and I believe that, like Shinran, we must always test our perceptions and our understandings against the experience of life. We must always ask the compassionate question: In what way does our knowledge and wisdom enhance the lives of those about us? These were the kinds of questions that led to the developments Shinran initiated in his interpretation of Pure Land

thought and its implication for religious existence. The deepest wisdom a person can discover must be a unifying and vitalizing wisdom which confers meaning and value on even the lowliest being. It takes seriously the question of what is really good for a person and in the asking respects the personality and integrity of that person. Shinran was not pompously dogmatic in all this. After putting forth evidences for his view, he notes that it is up to the individual whether he will accept it or not. Though there are critical words in Shinran, there is no condemning word. His is a true search for truth.

In his writing, Shinran frequently uses the term Jodo Shinshu, which he derived from Honen. Shin is also read Makoto in Japanese. It means true, truth, reality and sincerity. In this context it may be interpreted as True Teaching. Many people that I have met appear confused as to the meaning and inference of the word Shin in this context. For many its true meaning appears to have been forgotten because it became a traditional teaching in which the questioning of truth is a secondary issue. Shin has largely become a term with vague and hazy dimensions.

Re-examining the term from the perspective of this unit, our emphasis on the question of the meaning of Shin is a plea to return to the awareness of the original meaning, the implications with which Shinran used the term. By refreshing our understanding from that source, we can keep the tradition from being merely a tradition simply handed over from the past. Reflection, renewal, recognition, retrospection is necessary to the ongoing criticism of religion and tradition that is a central focus in the history of Buddhism. If tradition does not manifest and make clear the truth, what is tradition? For religion to remain vital, its followers must keep the question of truth open and uppermost in their considerations. Therefore, to question the religious aspects of a tradition does not mean disrespect, but, on the contrary, a deeper respect in an attempt to understand genuine and appreciate deeply the roots which brought that tradition into being.

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Notes

- [1] "Tannisho," Ryukoku Translation Series, p. 21
- [2] "Kyogyoshinsho," Ryukoku Translation Series, p. 20
- [3] Ibid
- [4] Ibid., p. 24
- [5] Ibid., p. 36
- [6] Kosho Yamamoto, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 329
- [7] Ibid. p. 269
- [8] "Kyogyoshinsho," Ryukoku Translation Series, p. 163
- [9] Ibid. p. 84