

WISDOM AND COMPASSION AS ENDURING VALUES IN SHIN BUDDHISM

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The Buddhist tradition represents, perhaps, the only major Eastern religion that offers itself to all aspirants, regardless of circumstances or caste. As a living faith with approximately 500 million adherents, it promises spiritual emancipation, not only for monks, but for lay people as well. In its Mahāyāna phase, especially, the ‘Greater Vehicle’ caters to every conceivable human disposition and temperament, thus opening a path to a truly universal approach to awakening. The particular focus of this presentation—Shin Buddhism—represents the consummation of the ‘Pure Land’ current within the Mahāyāna and offers itself as a compelling option for ordinary individuals living in the midst of worldly distractions away from the serenity of monastic enclosures.

This essay will focus on some key features of the Shin school—the largest denomination of Buddhism in Japan—that distinguish it as an important exemplar of the cardinal Buddhist virtues of wisdom and compassion. By demonstrating a holistic metaphysical vision that is philosophically rich and readily accessible, it will be shown that it also has much to offer contemporary seekers looking for a deeper form of spiritual and intellectual sustenance, without having to sacrifice the need for devotion. In doing so, we hope to serve another objective and that is to challenge the widespread misconception that Buddhism is not, in fact, a religion but rather a variety of atheism—broadly considered—in that it does not subscribe to a higher reality. Many in the West take the view that Buddhist beliefs are essentially compatible with secular rationalism insofar as they lack any religious or mystical elements; in other words, that they are bereft of a transcendent dimension. In dispelling such misunderstandings, we will come to see that Buddhism firmly belongs to the great family of world religions within which it rightly holds its place as a beacon of profound and unique insights into the human condition and its place in the spiritual universe.

Given that a number of Western Buddhists have come from Christianity (often having fled from unhappy or disappointing experiences), it is difficult to broach the topic of a ‘divine’ reality without provoking a strong reaction, inasmuch as anything that smacks of ‘God-talk’ is resentfully dismissed as un-Buddhist. This is rather unfortunate and surely a case of throwing out the baby with the bath-water. Let us be absolutely clear about this: Buddhism does not abandon the notion of an ultimate reality although it does refine it in order to avoid many of the troubling limitations that so bedevil certain theistic notions of God. Even from its earliest days, Buddhism recognised a realm that transcends this world, blissful and free from suffering; a sphere of enlightenment possessed of the highest happiness, described (in the early *Samyutta Nikāya*) as:

... the far shore, the subtle, the very difficult to see, the unageing, the stable, the undisintegrating, the unmanifest, the peaceful, the deathless, the sublime, the auspicious, the secure, the destruction of craving, the wonderful, the amazing, the unailing, the unafflicted, dispassion, purity, freedom, the island, the shelter, the asylum, the refuge ... (SN 43:14)

This is no earthly reality to which one can point. There is nothing in our world of flux, uncertainty and unhappiness that corresponds, even remotely, to such a description. It is quite deliberately depicted as *other*-worldly in that it offers the strongest possible contrast to our situation in this life. In that sense, the earlier Theravādin tradition was strictly dualistic—there was Nirvāna (our final goal) and there was this world, with no connection between them whatsoever. With the emergence of the Mahāyāna, this hard dualism was gradually abandoned and its understanding of Nirvāna became more nuanced as it began to be viewed under the various aspects through which it was experienced: Suchness, Emptiness and Buddha-nature. No longer was this reality viewed as distant and merely transcendent. It was also envisaged as dwelling at the heart of all things, in that the plenitude of life and its teeming forms were seen as a reflection of it; as its embodiment in the transitory phases of the material universe. Nāgārjuna even went so far as to equate Nirvāna with

samsāra in order to make the point that they were inseparable. We are never divorced from this reality as it encompasses all things while remaining beyond anything we can conceive.

In the Pure Land tradition, the attributes of Nirvāna developed even further such that it became invested, not only with the qualities of wisdom and blissful liberation, but active compassion as well; a reaching out to suffering beings that are only so many aspects of itself, which is what accounts for the indissoluble bond between them.

We are able to respond to this compassion in everyday life through a form of awakening embodied in the practice of *nembutsu* (or invocation of the Buddha's name) which, at the end of our lives, becomes the vehicle for returning to our true state. Such a realisation cannot be generated within the confines of our cramped and petty egos or through the ephemeral concerns of this passing world. This is why one should not simply identify Nirvāna with the world without any qualification. The world both 'is' and 'is not' Nirvāna ('not' in the sense of being riddled with ignorance and suffering of which Nirvāna is free and 'is' in the sense that it is a manifestation or 'crystallisation', at a lower level, of this same reality).

In any event, to dismiss a belief because it resembles (in part) something you have already rejected, does not make it false. Yes, Shin does indeed have features in common with other religions—how could it not?—but it also distinguishes itself from them in very important ways that are unique to it. The renowned Buddhist thinker, D.T. Suzuki, once remarked that all religions have their origin in the Absolute which has dispensed their saving teachings in a way that conforms to the countless needs and frailties of ordinary people. He also remarked that:

The highest reality is not a mere abstraction; it is very much alive with sense and intelligence and, above all, with love purged of human infirmities and defilements¹.

¹ Daisetz T. Suzuki, *The Essence of Buddhism* (Kyoto: Hozokan, 1948), p.47.

Once that which is formless takes on salvific forms to express itself, it must also assume the shortcomings that come with it (and in a plethora of ways according to the endless varieties of human nature) such that differences—often deep-seated—are inevitable. If ultimate reality is truly compassionate, it will leave no sector of mankind without guidance and illumination, despite the strife, conflict and mutual incomprehension to which the varied religious forms often give rise. In this sense, much more separates Buddhism from contemporary atheism than it does from other faiths, which—at the very least—recognise primacy of the spiritual.

It is quite apparent that Mahāyāna Buddhism openly acknowledges the existence of a supreme reality that, as we have seen, is not only known as Nirvāna (being the state of complete liberation from ignorance and suffering) but also the *Dharmakāya* (or ‘Dharma-Body’), characterised by the attributes of ‘eternity, bliss, true self and purity’². The Dharma-Body is transcendent in the sense that it cannot be identified with the world of the senses or the rational intellect; that is, it lies beyond anything we can perceive or apprehend. However, it is also immanent in all things which is what allows us to have experiential knowledge of it (in that we become aware of its existence through that part of us which shares in its nature). To put it another way, we gradually come to know it as the very act of this reality knowing itself through us. The Hua-yen school, which arose in China and was founded on the famous *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, provides one of the most explicit understandings of the highest reality in Buddhism in which all phenomena are ‘expressions of an originally pure and undifferentiated mind’.³ According to Hua-yen:

² *The Awakening of Faith: Attributed to Asvaghosha*, tr. Yoshito S. Hakeda (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p.65.

³ Jacqueline Stone, *Original Enlightenment and the Transformation of Medieval Japanese Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p.7.

The full diversity of sentient experience and the experienced world—the subjective and the objective, the true and the false, the pure and the defiled, the latent and the manifest—is seen to rest upon, or to grow from, a common noetic source.⁴

This view of reality became very influential in the development of doctrines that subsequently flourished in China, Korea and Japan. One can see the genesis of this doctrine in the Eternal Buddha of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the Buddha of Infinite Light (Skt. *Amitābha*; Jp. *Amida*) of the popular Pure Land sūtras and the cosmic ‘Great Sun’ Buddha (Skt. *Mahāvairocana*; Jp. *Dainichi*) prominent in the esoteric school of Shingon. The latter, in particular, views all reality as a manifestation of this Buddha—which it identifies with the Dharma-Body itself—considered as:

... the centre of the cosmos ... the point toward which all integration moves and from which the multiplicity of the phenomenal world comes into form.⁵

So how is the Dharma-Body different to theistic conceptions of God? Without wishing to be comprehensive, it would be fair to say that, according to the Mahāyāna, the world is a spontaneous expression of this reality—there is no conscious design or willed creation *ex nihilo*. This manifestation is an eternal and cyclical process that does not have an origin in time. Similarly, samsāra, which is ultimately grounded in the Dharma-Body, is also without beginning. Some might argue that the two realms should not be linked in this way but if one is committed to non-dualism (which I think one must be as far as the Mahāyāna is concerned) then, logically, we cannot avoid the conclusion that samsāra—as an impermanent realm—must, in some way, be dependent on the Dharma-Body as an eternal reality. There really is no other option. Short of considering samsāra as a completely separate reality (which only a Theravādin could do) or as somehow identical as Nāgārjuna claimed (but in a way that is, arguably, incomprehensible to the unenlightened), one is

⁴ Robert M. Gimello, *Chih-yen (602-668) and the Foundation of Hua-yen Buddhism* (PhD dissertation, Columbia University, 1976), p.411.

⁵ E. Dale Saunders, *Buddhism in Japan* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), pp.161 & 168.

compelled to acknowledge this dependence. Furthermore, it is this very non-duality that also renders intelligible the central Mahāyāna notion of the interconnectedness of all things, for beneath the deceptive and dream-like world of appearances, we find that there is nothing substantial that truly separates one being from another.

At this point, one could ask: If Buddhism goes down this path, is it not also in need of a ‘theodicy’, so to speak, or an explanation of how a world riddled with unfathomable suffering has arisen from a realm of purity and bliss?⁶ If the Hua-yen formulation can be allowed to serve as our standard, it would appear that the world is, in some sense, a reflection or disclosure of the Dharma-Body itself. It is as if this reality manifests itself in a mode that is limited and fractured but one that remains, nevertheless, a dimension of its own boundless essence. The Absolute, as a consequence of its infinite nature and the dictates of karmic necessity, adopts countless finite forms through which it expresses itself as the world. Suzuki has stated:

The *Dharmakāya*, being ‘emptiness’ itself and having no tangible bodily existence, has to embody itself in forms and is manifested as bamboo, as a mass of foliage, as a fish, as a man, as a Bodhisattva, as a mind. But these manifestations themselves are not the *Dharmakāya*, which is something more than forms or ideas or modes of existence.⁷

However, this comes at a cost. By unfolding itself in this way, the Dharma-Body also assumes the forms of imperfection and evanescence as the price to be paid for this manifestation. On one level, therefore, the need for a theodicy is avoided because this process is seen as spontaneous and not a deliberate divine act. The reality of evil and suffering is a direct consequence of living in a finite and disfigured world where things are incomplete, fragmented, not

⁶ Peter N. Gregory, ‘The Problem of Theodicy in the *Awakening of Faith*’ in *Religious Studies* (No.22, 1986).

⁷ D.T.Suzuki, ‘The Buddhist Conception of Reality’ in *The Eastern Buddhist* (Vol. VII, No.2, October 1974).

fully realised and ‘empty’ as Nāgārjuna would say; that is, not possessed of ‘own-being’ (*svabhāva*), always dependent on other causes and conditions for their existence and thus in a constant state of unstable flux.

Furthermore, as the Dharma-Body is not omnipotent (as God must be in theistic religions), the conditions of samsāra as we experience them cannot be other than what they are; neither can they be changed arbitrarily by divine fiat. Samsāra, by definition, is restless, fugitive and unsatisfactory — it can never become an earthly paradise for it does not possess the attributes of Nirvāna; namely eternity, bliss and purity which are reserved solely for that which is unconditioned. The real question for Buddhists, therefore, is not ‘Why is there evil?’ but ‘Why is there manifestation?’ Why did the immutably serene state of Nirvāna, a realm of pure being, become this vale of tears? Beyond replying that it is in its nature to express itself as the infinitely varied and complex world of samsāra with all its joys, horrors, beauties and perplexities, there is no answer that can readily be given, for how does one account for essential spontaneity and its consequences? Notwithstanding its illuminative power, how can the sun also not burn? How can snow resist being cold or a rose withhold its scent? Indeed, how can even nightmares not arise— involuntarily and as a universal possibility—from a latent impure consciousness. The implication, of course, is that this unwilled manifestation of the Absolute is a necessary corollary of ‘Infinite Life’ (*Amitāyus*, one of the names of the Buddha in the Pure Land tradition) and not the outcome of divine contrivance. One could say, then, that this is the ultimate mystery that Buddhism leaves unresolved rather than the problem of evil (which is largely addressed through the doctrine of *karma*).

After all, a major stumbling block for theistic faith is the difficulty of reconciling the goodness and omnipotence of God with the incomprehensible suffering and unhappiness we find in the world. In fact, one could argue that it is well-nigh impossible. Buddhism offers the distinct advantage of not positing an all-powerful deity that brings creation into being through a conscious

act of will. And yet, in the non-dual scheme of the Mahāyāna, the supreme bliss of Nirvāna is not severed from the miseries of samsara but, clearly, neither are they identical. To be sure, this is a profound mystery at the heart of reality but it cannot be avoided. A conclusion we can reach is that this world is, in some respects, a broken image of a better one (that cannot be fully realised in this life and of which the reality of *dukkha* or suffering is a constant reminder). Its unsatisfactory nature reflects an estrangement from our origin while the joy, love and beauty we do find in it reveal Nirvāna's luminous presence at the core of everyday life, prompting us to pursue a higher awakening. Evil is a consequence of living in a flawed reality that is evidently not a realm of bliss; however, this world is not entirely bereft of its light either. The ubiquity of suffering is no reason, therefore, to doubt the reality of Nirvāna — our very capacity to recognise suffering as such, and to want to free ourselves from it, is proof enough of its opposite.

So far, our discussion may seem a little one-sided or even negative. We have focused more on the features of transcendence and little, it seems, on the perspective of immanence. Both, of course, are required in order to maintain a balanced and orthodox view despite the challenges that this might present, so what are we to say about immanence? This concept was largely absent from Theravādin doctrine but the Mahāyāna insisted on the presence of the Buddha-nature in each sentient being as the means through which enlightenment was possible. According to this view, one cannot become a Buddha except through the agency of the Buddha within. If the infinite did not dwell in the heart of the finite, then the latter cannot be liberated and attain realisation of its true self as Nirvāna. However, there are some other dimensions to immanence that need to be addressed and they concern our experience of love and beauty.

While an extended discussion of these aspects is not possible within the constraints of this paper, the key thing to note is that, from the perspective of non-dualism, the *Mahāsukha* ('Great Bliss') of Nirvāna cannot but permeate the realm of samsara. In *The Awakening of Faith*—a deeply influential Mahāyāna text—we find an important distinction made between the 'essence' of

Suchness which is immutable, inconceivable and eternal, and the ‘attributes’ of Suchness which serve to infuse the opaqueness of samsāra with the radiant influences and qualities of Buddha-nature. Accordingly, it is possible to consider all those instances when we are confronted with an experience of profound love, joy or beauty in life as traces of Nirvāna’s bliss in our everyday world:

For Kūkai (founder of the Shingon school), what is beautiful partakes of the Buddha.⁸

Such experiences compel us to transcend the infirmities of our brittle nature by seeking union with a higher reality at the heart of existence, as well as serving to remind us of the extent to which we are also often alienated from it.

In summary, the doctrine of non-duality enables the reconciliation of two seemingly contradictory notions in that it preserves the ultimate transcendence and inconceivability of Nirvāna while, at the same time, stressing—not so much the strict identity as Nāgārjuna claimed—but the ‘non-difference’ (to use an awkward expression) between it and samsāra. In *The Awakening of Faith*, we read:

Just as pieces of various kinds of pottery are of the same nature in that they are made of clay, so the various magic-like manifestations (*māyā*) of both enlightenment and non-enlightenment are aspects of the same essence, Suchness.⁹

In other words, the world is ‘not other’ than Suchness or the Dharma-Body and this by virtue of it being an extension of this very same reality; yet, paradoxically, it must also remain ‘remote’ given its impermanence and manifold imperfections.

⁸ Saunders, p.161.

⁹ Hakeda, pp.45-46.

We now need to address, albeit belatedly, the connection of the foregoing discussion to Pure Land Buddhism. The rise of this school of Buddhism was in response to a number of factors that would have weighed heavily on people during the time of its inception, namely: (a) the need to make the Buddhist Absolute as accessible as possible to ordinary people through the use of a wealth of rich and positive symbolism designed to heighten the aspiration for enlightenment; and (b) an acute recognition of the difficulty of attaining full enlightenment in the present life during the Decadent Age of the Dharma (what the Hindus call the ‘Age of Kali’).

More than any other Buddhist tradition, the Pure Land school has been the most sensitive to the implications of suffering and samsāric life for sincere individuals who are struggling with personal weakness and the seemingly insurmountable barriers of anger, greed and ignorance in the pursuit of enlightenment. In the face of the ineradicable shortcomings and paradoxes of the human condition, these teachings offer hope to those for whom spiritual perfection seems hopelessly elusive. It does so through the assurance of ultimate liberation and enlightenment via the agency of Amida Buddha—the personal and active dimension of Nirvāna—which is manifested in us through the invocation of His Name as the activity of what the tradition calls ‘Other-Power’ (*tariki*); that is, a force that transcends the debilitating confines of the ego and which constitutes the wellspring of all spiritual endeavour.

The world is, indeed, a reflection of the ultimate reality (*Śūnyamūrti*, ‘Manifestation of the Void’) but it cannot, by virtue of this fact, be considered as merely identical with it. This may very well be the key to unravelling the mystery of non-duality. Samsāra is ‘not other’ than Nirvāna for the Mahāyāna only recognises one reality which manifests itself through infinitely varied forms and possibilities but samsāra cannot be experienced *as* Nirvāna because of the inherent limitations of everything that is other than the Unconditioned. However, direct experience of this reality—in the midst of samsāra’s turbidity—is still possible while remaining bound to our status as ordinary unenlightened beings (Skt. *prthagjana*; Jp. *bombu*). This experience, known as *shinjin* (‘true

heart/mind'), marks the entry into our deluded consciousness of the Buddha's 'Infinite Light' (*Amitābha*). Far from turning us into completely enlightened individuals, such an awakening reinforces the deep awareness of our own turpitude while permitting us to experience something of the joy and illumination of Nirvāna in this very world of birth-and-death. Perhaps this is how we might understand Shinran (founder of the school we are considering) when he says:

When Faith is awakened in the minds of deluded and defiled ordinary people, they are made aware that 'birth-and-death is Nirvāna'.¹⁰

At this point, we find ourselves at an impasse as we approach the very limits of what language can convey, where paradox is inevitable and at which point it is, perhaps, best to remain silent in face of the ineffable.

In conclusion, we can see that this tradition offers a compelling response to the challenge posed by the pernicious tide of contemporary nihilism. It does so through urging us to re-discover and assert our spiritual nobility in seeking the deepest truth there is despite our all-too-human flaws and vulnerabilities. The paramount crisis afflicting the modern world today is the absence of meaning, a lost awareness of the transcendent and a corresponding diminution of our dignity as beings who must fulfill their true vocation as wayfarers on a journey back to our divine source. This quest for who we really are lies at the heart of this liberating wisdom, our love and yearning for which is not merely a philosophical pursuit but a response to the beckoning call of the ultimate reality whose inconceivable yet steadfast compassion makes us come to know it as immeasurable light and unending life.

¹⁰ *The Shōshin Ge* tr. Daien Fugen et al. (Kyoto: Ryūkoku University, 1961), p.36.