

Faith and Self-Awakening

A Search for the Fundamental Category Covering All Religious Life

ABE MASAO

I

WHAT HAS FAITH to do with believing this or that? What has faith to do with being human?" Raising these questions in the opening pages of his book, *Faith and Belief*,¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith tries to clarify the nature of faith as distinguished from that of belief. He understands faith as "a characteristic quality or potentiality of human life."² This is an attempt to determine the essential human quality at the basis of man's religious life which is realized beyond the surface of all religions. It is important to do this in our time, since ours one in which religious pluralism has become so prominent. An integral view of human life, though urgently necessary, is more and more difficult to achieve.

It is worth noting that Smith's approach has the following three characteristics: it is personalistic, historical-comparative, and global-and-integral. Let me briefly explain these three characteristics of his approach as I understand them.

First, the personalistic approach: Smith takes religion as a dynamic movement rather than as a static system with a fixed doctrine and practice. He emphasizes the personal involvement of religious individuals

* This paper was originally written in 1981. We wish to thank the author for allowing us to publish it, and Christopher A. Ives for assistance with documentation.

¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), preface, vii.

² *ibid.*, p. 3.

ABE: FAITH AND SELF-AWAKENING

in religious truth as essential to man's religious life. He does not want to use the term 'religion' for a pattern of observable forms. He offers two concepts, "faith" and "tradition," as substitutes. "Faith" means "an inner religious experience of involvement of a particular person: the impingement on him of the transcendent putative or real."³ "Tradition" he takes to mean the cumulative "mass of overt objective data that constitute the historical deposit . . . of the past religious life of the community in question."⁴ Tradition is nothing but a potential pattern for personal involvement, which thus becomes religious as it expresses or elicits faith. "Faith is nourished and patterned by the tradition, is formed and in some sense sustained by it—yet faith precedes and transcends the tradition, and in turn sustains it."⁵

Secondly, Smith's person-centered approach does not entail a subjective, nonhistorical understanding of the matter. His personalistic approach is combined with the historical-comparative method. As a historian of religion, Smith makes a historical and comparative study of human religious ways of life across the centuries and around the world. His emphasis on the necessity of a distinction between faith and belief is based on his comprehensive survey of humankind's religious history.

As a result of the survey Smith states that "religious beliefs have of course differed radically, whereas religious faith would appear to have been, not constant certainly, yet more approximative to constancy."⁶ He also reports two things: "One is that the variety of faith seems on the whole less than the variety of forms through which faith has been expressed. The second is that such variety of faith as is found cuts across formal religious boundaries."⁷

Smith criticizes the recent Western confusion between faith and belief as an aberration. He interprets "belief" as the holding of certain ideas which constitutes an intellectual position, historically varied in differing forms among the traditions, even within each tradition. On

³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1962), p. 156.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 3.

⁵ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, p. 6.

⁶ *ibid.*, pp. 10, 11.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 11.

the other hand, "faith" is, in his view, a spiritual orientation of the personality, a capacity to live at a more than mundane level, and man's relation to transcendence that appears constant throughout human history.

The third characteristic of Smith's approach lies in the global and integral vision of "a unity or coherence of mankind's religious history."⁸ In his recent book, *Towards a World Theology*, this global vision is evident. It is presented historically and also theologically. Smith insists that to suggest a unity of humankind's religious history "is not to propose that all men and women have been religious in the same way. . . . It is, rather, to discern that the evident variety of their religious life is real, yet is contained within an historical continuum."⁹ For the historian, "To say that *A* and *B* share a common history is not at all to suggest that *A* equals *B*, or even resembles it. Rather, it is to affirm that they are historically interconnected; that they have interacted with the same things or with each other, or that one has 'grown out of' or been 'influenced by' the other; more exactly, that one can be understood only in terms of a context of which the other forms a part."¹⁰ Accordingly, Smith takes each one's religious life, Christian, Buddhist or Muslim, as a personal participation in the ongoing process of religious history in terms of Christian, Buddhist or Muslim.

Further, on the basis of this integral, global vision of the human history of religion Smith offers a "Theology of Comparative Religion,"¹¹ which is an appealing and significant proposal in our time. It is a "theology for which 'the religions' are the subject, not the object,"¹² "a theology of the religious history of humankind,"¹³ "a theology of the faith history of *us* human beings."¹⁴ Emphasizing that truth is apprehended historically, Smith talks about the importance of the awareness of our human involvement simultaneously in the historical

⁸ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative Study of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), p. 3.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *ibid.*

¹¹ *ibid.*, see p. 121.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 124.

¹³ *ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

ABE: FAITH AND SELF-AWAKENING

and the transcendent. His personalistic approach combined with the historical-comparative method, and his new vision of a "theology of comparative religion" or a "World theology," are realized in a context which has simultaneously historical and transcendent dimensions.

II

I HOPE THIS clarification of the three characteristics of Smith's approach is not off the mark. However, with all appreciation for his approach, I must raise a question about his standpoint: This question concerns his point of view which takes "faith" as a "foundational category for all religious life, and, indeed, for all human life."¹⁵ My question is inevitable, particularly from the point of view of Buddhism, which Smith regards as an important movement within the religious history of the humankind.

Dealing mainly with the early Buddhist movement Smith says that Buddhism is atheistic in the sense that it dispenses with the idea of divinity. However, Smith continues, the concept "Nirvana" developed and emphasized by the Buddhists is "some sort of counterpart to the Western concept 'God'; or at the least, it played a role significantly comparable to that played by the concept 'God'."¹⁶ According to Smith, although the Buddha affirmed that within the ocean [of life], nothing persists, he affirmed a "further shore" or "other shore" as the transcendence. He also preached the moral law as the enduring Dharma, the truth about right living. "All else is evanescent. But the Sad-dharma, the True Law is eternal."¹⁷

Smith insists that "the [early Buddhist] movement is religious because through it men and women's lives were lived in what the Western world has traditionally called the presence of God. Through their systems of beliefs, they were enabled to live lives of faith. They tasted transcendence; and accordingly their lives were touched by compassion and courage and serenity and ultimate significance."¹⁸

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, p. 23.

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 27.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 32.

Concerning Smith's interpretation of the early Buddhist movement I have two interrelated questions: One is whether the early Buddhist movement is exhausted by using the term "faith" as Smith understands it. Does his interpretation in terms of faith really touch the core of the early Buddhist movement, let alone Mahayana Buddhism? If the answer to these questions is negative, which I am afraid is the case, then the second question is whether it is legitimate to comprehend all human religions, Buddhism included, under the single term of "faith." Smith understands it to be "a foundational category for all religious life, and indeed for all human life." This interpretation not only confuses the distinctiveness of various forms of religion but also obscures what "a foundational category for all religious life, and for all human life" is. Smith's generalization of the term "faith" is expressed by the idea that faith is the relation to the transcendent. It is only possible to comprehend all human religious movements by eliminating the characteristics of faith in the Semitic religions such as faith in Yahweh, the Father of Jesus Christ, and Allah. On the other hand, his generalization of the term "faith" is only possible by making ambiguous the authentic meaning of Buddhist notions such as nirvana, Dharma and Emptiness. Although it is urgently necessary, as Smith insists, to find a global and dynamic category to comprehend the whole process of the human history of religion, it is questionable whether we should take "faith" as the foundational category.

III

TO MAKE MY point clear, let me ask whether the core of meaning of the early Buddhist movement is exhausted by the term "faith" as Smith understands it. What is the heart of the early Buddhist movement and the Mahayana Buddhist movement? The early Buddhist movement has an aspect of faith in Dharma or faith in nirvana, as Smith argues. However, this alone does not give a central place to faith. What is central and essential to the early Buddhist and the Buddhist movement in general is not faith in Dharma or faith in nirvana, but awakening to Dharma or self-realization of nirvana.¹⁹ Gautama Buddha is none

¹⁹ Both the doctrines of *pañca-indriya* (five faculties) and *pañca-balāni* (five powers),

ABE: FAITH AND SELF-AWAKENING

other than one who awakened to Dharma or one who attained and realized nirvana with his whole existence.

The Buddhist movement launched by the Buddha is a movement in which, just as Gautama Buddha did each and every one may awaken to Dharma or attain nirvana with his whole existence, that is, become a Buddha. The Christian movement gives a central place to faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. This may be called a movement in which each and everyone pertains to the Christ but not a movement in which each and everyone becomes a Christ. Because of its emphasis on faith in Jesus as the Christ Christianity, while it may be called the "Teaching of the Christ," can never rightly be said to be the "Teaching of becoming a Christ," except for a few views which have not been regarded as orthodox. By contrast, due to its emphasis on awakening to Dharma, Buddhism can be said to be the "Teaching of becoming a Buddha" as well as the "Teaching of the Buddha." Smith insists that faith "does not vary so much as, nor quite in accordance with, the variations of overt religious pattern."²⁰ However, in the above sense it is hardly said that Buddhists live their lives only in a different pattern or form from that of Christians while their faiths do not vary so much.

It is in order to elucidate the basic standpoint of the Buddha. Shortly before his death, Gautama Buddha addressed Ananda, one of his ten great disciples, and others who were anxious over the prospect of losing the Master:

O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the Dharma as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the Dharma. Look not for assistance to anyone besides yourselves.²¹

which were expounded in early Buddhism and which provide the ground for the practice of the subsequent Buddhist movement as the necessary faculties to attain nirvana, emphasize *śraddha* (faith), *virya* (assiduous striving), *smṛti* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (concentration) and *prajñā* (wisdom) in this order. This indicates that in order to attain nirvana *śraddha* (faith) is essential as the entrance and foundation for the Buddhist practice, but that it is *prajñā* (wisdom) that all Buddhist practice aims at and ends with as ultimate. The Buddhist practice has a structure which starts from faith, goes through practice, and ends with wisdom.

²⁰ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, p. 11.

²¹ *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta*, see "The Teaching of the Compassionate Buddha,"

Obviously when he said to his disciples, "Do not rely on external help" and "Look not for assistance to anyone besides yourselves," he included himself in terms of "external help" and he excluded himself in terms of "assistance." He said this despite the fact that he, Gautama Buddha, had been a teacher of Ananda and the others for many years. It may not, however, at first be clear how the following two passages in his statement are related to each other: "Rely on yourselves" and "Seek salvation alone in the Dharma," or "Be ye lamps unto yourselves" and "Hold fast to the Dharma as a lamp." In this address, the Buddha did not identify the Dharma with himself. He identified the Dharma with the individual disciple and, further, he emphasized this identity at the very time of his death.

In Buddhism, the Dharma is beyond everyone—beyond even Gautama Buddha, the initiator of the Buddhist movement. This is the reason why it is often said, "Regardless of the appearance or nonappearance of Tathāgata (Gautama Buddha) in this world, the Dharma is always present."²² Dharma has a universality and transcendent character which is beyond time and space. However, who is qualified to talk about the Dharma in its absolute universality? Is one who does not realize the Dharma qualified to talk about it? Certainly not. In the case of such a person, through his conceptual understanding and his objectivization of it the total universality of the Dharma becomes an empty or dead universality. Hence, only one who [has] realized the Dharma with his whole existence can legitimately talk about it in its universality.

Although Dharma transcends everyone including Gautama Buddha and is present universally, there is no Dharma without someone to realize it. Apart from "the realizer" there is no Dharma. The Dharma is realized as the Dharma with its universality only through a particular realizer. Gautama Buddha is none other than the *first* "realizer" of Dharma. He is not, however, the one and only realizer of Dharma. In the sense that Gautama is a realizer of Dharma with its total universality he may be said to be *a* center of the Buddhist faith. Yet he is certainly not *the* center of the Buddhist faith, since everyone can become a center as a realizer of Dharma, a Buddha. The significance of Gau-

edited by E. A. Burtt, Mentor Religious Classics (New York: New American Library, 1955), p. 49.

²² *Samyutta Nikāya*, Vol. 12, Taishō II.84b.

ABE: FAITH AND SELF-AWAKENING

tama's historical existence is equal with that of every other "realizer" of Dharma, except that Gautama was the first.

How can we hold these two apparently contradictory aspects of Dharma: its total universality and its dependency upon a particular man for realization? The answer lies in the fact that one's realization of the Dharma is nothing but *the Self-Awakening of Dharma itself*. Your awakening is, of course, your own existential awakening. It is *your* awakening to the Dharma in its complete universality, and this awakening is possible only by overcoming your self-centeredness, i.e., only through the total negation of your ego-self. This self-centeredness, or the self-centered ego, is the fundamental hindrance to the manifestation of Dharma. Therefore when the self-centeredness is overcome and selflessness is attained, i.e., *anatta* or *anātman* is realized, Dharma naturally awakens to itself.

When Dharma awakens to itself *in you* you attain *your true Self*; the selfless self is the true Self. Accordingly the Self-Awakening of Dharma has a double sense. First, it is *your* self-awakening of Dharma in your egoless true Self. In this case one may say that you are the subject of awakening of Dharma and Dharma is the object of your awakening. Secondly, it is the self-awakening *of Dharma itself* in and through your whole existence. In this case Dharma is the subject of its own self-awakening and you are a channel of its self-awakening.

—————→ (YOU ARE THE SUBJECT)

Your Self-Awakening of Dharma

←———— (DHARMA IS THE SUBJECT)

This double sense only indicates the two aspects of one and the same fundamental Reality, i.e., the "Awakening of Dharma" in which the subject-object duality is originally overcome, or better, which is prior to the dichotomy between subject and object.

It was precisely on the basis of this "Self-Awakening of Dharma" that Gautama Buddha said without any sense of contradiction, "Rely on yourselves" and "Seek salvation alone in the Dharma." The statements, "Be ye lamps unto yourselves" and "Hold fast to the Dharma as a lamp," are complementary and not contradictions. One's self as ul-

imate reliance is not the ego-self but the "true Self as the "Realizer of Dharma." Just as Gautama's awakening is the self-awakening of Dharma in the double sense mentioned above, so anyone's awakening to Dharma can and should be the self-awakening of Dharma in the same sense.

IV

THIS IS THE basic standpoint of Buddhism. It was clarified by Gautama him through his life after his awakening and particularly, as mentioned above as he approached death. This basic standpoint of Buddhism, that is, the "Self-Awakening" of Dharma, can hardly be grasped by the term "faith" even if it is understood as "the relation to the transcendent." Smith's characterization of faith as the relation to the transcendent, I am afraid, confuses rather than clarifies the nature of human religion. *What kind of* relation a particular religion in question has with the transcendent is crucial for understanding the distinctive nature of that religion. Both faith and self-awakening may be said to indicate equally "the relation to the transcendent." Their relations to the transcendent, however, must be said to be radically different from one another. Though not necessarily theocentric, faith is usually theistic. As we see in Smith's own definition of the term, "faith is man's participation in God's dealing with humankind"²³ or "faith is man's responsive involvement in the activity of God's dealing with humankind."²⁴ On the contrary, self-awakening is clearly not theistic because in self-awakening there is no room for God to whom man must respond, although, roughly speaking, it may be said to be a kind of relation to the transcendent named Dharma.

Given this fundamental difference, further differences between faith and self-awakening may be expressed in [the following] three points:

First, in faith as man's participation or responsive involvement in the activity of God, *will* is included on the sides of both man and God as the essential factor of their relationship. Even in its generalized form, faith is a matter of man's free will in relation to the positive or

²³ Smith, *Faith and Belief*, p. 140.

²⁴ *ibid.*

ABE: FAITH AND SELF-AWAKENING

negative response to a transcendent will, although some intellectual component is also involved. On the other hand, the Self-Awakening of Dharma in Buddhism is completely free from will and intellectualization, whether human or divine. It is no less than self-awakening to *tathatā*, i.e., suchness or as-it-is-ness. The problem of free will is accounted for in Buddhism by *karma*, which is to be overcome through the self-awakening of Dharma.

Second, in faith as man's responsive involvement in the activity of God, the self is indispensable as the agent of free will, although ego-self or self-centered self must be overcome. One result is that man and nature are grasped differently in their relationship to God, the transcendent. The self-awakening of Dharma is possible only through the realization of *anātman*, or no-self. Once a man realizes his no-self, the absence of eternal self, he simultaneously realizes no-self-being or the nonsubstantiality of everything in the universe. Accordingly, in the realization of *anātman* implied in the self-awakening of Dharma the solidarity, not difference, between man and nature is realized in terms of nonsubstantiality. The teaching of dependent coorigination, instead of the doctrine of creation, comes on to scene in this connection.

Third, faith as man's responsive involvement in the activity teleological by nature. It is oriented by time and purpose. It is future-oriented and aim-seeking. Contrary to this, self-awakening is essentially free from teleological orientation. As the realization of suchness or as-it-is-ness of everything including oneself, self-awakening of Dharma is not future-oriented but absolute-present-oriented. It is transtemporal, being beyond temporality in terms of "God's time" as well as in terms of the past-present-future of secular time.

This, however, does not mean that the self-awakening of Dharma or the realization of suchness is simply timeless. Instead, therein every moment of time is realized as the beginning and the end simultaneously. This is the meaning of its being absolute-present-oriented and of its being free from teleological orientation. *Telos*, that is, the end or the purpose, is not given by the transcendent but is projected under the given situation along the flow of time through the self-determination of Dharma, i.e., through the self-development of "suchness." The principle of dependent coorigination is effective not only in terms of space but also in terms of time.

As stated in the three points above, the "Self-Awakening of Dhar-

ma'' which was realized by Gautama Buddha and which motivated the early Buddhist movement is categorically different from "faith" as characterized by Smith as man's participation in God's dealing with humankind. I would like to suggest that, throughout the religious history of humankind, there are two not easily reconcilable types of religion, the religion of faith and the religion of self-awakening. The religion of faith, which may also be termed religion of grace, is exemplified by Christianity, Muslim, some forms of Hinduism and Pure Land Buddhism. The religion of self-awakening, which may also be called religion of self-realization, is illustrated by early Buddhism, most forms of Mahayana Buddhism, and some forms of Christian mysticism.

In order to grasp the unity or coherence of humankind's religious history as Smith rightfully intends, one should not overlook the difference between these two types of religious movement. Instead of comprehending the whole of religious history of humankind by the category of faith, one must seek a more generic and more fundamental category through which both the religion of faith and the religion of self-awakening can be understood in their distinctiveness.

V

BEFORE GOING ON to ask what the most generic category to comprehend the unity of humankind's religious history could be, let me briefly discuss Mahayana Buddhism and its understanding of faith and self-awakening.

Like the early Buddhists, Nāgārjuna emphasizes the importance of faith as the entrance to nirvana and the indispensability of wisdom for attaining it. The following well-known quotation from *Mahāprajñāpāramita-śāstra* shows his understanding of this point: "The great ocean of the Buddhadharma can be entered by faith whereas its other shore can be attained by wisdom."²⁵ To reach the other shore of the ocean of Buddhadharma, you must attain nirvana by going across the flux of samsara, which is the end of the Buddhist life. However, if one remains in nirvana simply apart from samsara, one cannot be said to

²⁵ *Mahāprajñāpāramita-śāstra*, Vol. I., Taishō XXV.63.

attain the real end of Buddhist life. For he is still not completely free from selfishness and attachment in that, while enjoying the bliss of attaining nirvana, he forgets the suffering of his fellow beings still involved in samsara.

The *Prajñāpāramita Sūtra*, one of the earliest and most important Mahayana sutras, emphasizes that the real end of the Buddhist life does not lie in attaining nirvana by overcoming samsara, but rather in returning to the realm of samsara by overcoming nirvana through compassion with one's fellow beings who are still in suffering. Although it is necessary to reach the other shore (nirvana) by giving up this shore (samsara) *prajñāpāramita* (meaning the "perfection of wisdom") is not realized only by that attainment. To reach the other shore is not really "to reach the other shore." By giving up the other shore and returning to this shore one can attain *Prajñāpāramita*, that is, the perfection of wisdom. This is the reason Mahayana Buddhists emphasize, "For the sake of wisdom one should not abide in samsara: for the sake of compassion one should not abide in nirvana." Indeed, the real nirvana and the perfection of wisdom lie in the unhindered and free movement of going back and forth between this shore (samsara) and the other shore (nirvana).

It is precisely at this point that Mahayanists talk about the identity of samsara and nirvana. It is not a static but dynamic identity which can be realized only through the negation of samsara and the negation of nirvana. The realization of this dynamic identity of samsara (immanence) and nirvana (transcendence) is not faith in the transcendent. It is the self-awakening of Dharma (suchness) which is neither immanent nor transcendent and yet both immanent and transcendent. Just like the early Buddhist movement, not faith in the Buddha but to become a Buddha through self-awakening of Dharma is the quintessence of the Mahayana Buddhist movement. The difference between the early Buddhist (and Theravada Buddhist) and the Mahayana Buddhist movements is found in the static versus the dynamic understanding of nirvana. The Mahayana Buddhist movement has given rise to various forms across the centuries in China and Japan. Rich diversity among the various forms of Mahayana Buddhism stems from the different paths recommended for how to become a Buddha. For instance, Zen Buddhism emphasizes "becoming a Buddha through seeing into [one's] Original Nature" by seated meditation and kōan practice.

However, the esoteric Shingon Buddhism stresses "becoming a Buddha immediately with this body" through the attainment of the *sam-mitsu*, the three secrets of the Buddha. Pure Land Buddhism, which unlike most other forms of Mahayana, strongly emphasizes pure faith in Amida Buddha as the pivotal point for salvation, talks about "becoming a Buddha through *nembutsu*." Just like the Christian, for the Pure Land Buddhist "faith" in Amida Buddha is absolutely essential for his salvation. But unlike the Christian and the followers of other theistic religions, his final end is to become a Buddha. Here again one can see the inadequacy of trying to comprehend the whole of humankind's religious history under the term "faith."

VI

WE CANNOT COMPREHEND the whole process of man's history of religion under the term "faith," because one must recognize the existence of the religion of self-awakening which is not easily commensurable with the religion of faith. What then is the most fundamental category by which we can comprehend it? In a paper entitled "A Dynamic Unity in Religious Pluralism," which I contributed to *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, edited by Professor John Hick, I made a proposal in this regard. My proposal suggests that, given the threefold notion of "Lord," "God" and "Boundless Openness," the third is the ground of the former two. It is the most fundamental category by which we can comprehend the various religions of humankind in a dynamic unity. This threefold notion is an application of the Buddhist *trikāya* doctrine to the pluralistic situation of world religions in our time.

For the detailed discussion of the *trikāya* doctrine, the threefold Buddha-body doctrine and its application to the contemporary pluralistic situation of world religions, see my paper mentioned above. I propose the term "Boundless Openness" as a reinterpretation and generalization of the Buddhist notion of "emptiness." I suggest the possibility that it can serve as the fundamental category to comprehend the whole of man's history of religion. It may be the principle of dynamic unity for world religions today.