

Ethics and Social Responsibility in Buddhism

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Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions

ANY RELIGION, if it is authentic, is concerned not only with the salvation of the individual person, but also with the salvation of all humankind. Needless to say, these two aspects are inseparable. When religion is concerned with the salvation of the individual, however, it opens up a most fundamental dimension which is beyond time and space; that is, the religious salvation of the individual person is not possible in a merely humanistic, secular, and relative dimension which is limited by time and space, but only in a transhuman, sacred, nonrelative, eternal dimension. In this regard, religion is concerned with a “vertical” dimension which elucidates the height and depth, or transcendent and immanent ground, of human existence. On the other hand, when religion is concerned with the salvation of all humankind, even while deeply rooted in a vertical dimension of human existence it is involved in the “horizontal” dimension of breadth and chronological length, or world and history. In its vertical dimension, then, religion is involved in social transformation and the development of history.

Although these two aspects of individual salvation and the collective

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emancipation of humankind are inseparable from one another and are included equally by all higher religions, the *relation* between transcendent individual salvation and social liberation—that is, the *relation* between vertical and horizontal dimensions—differs among the various religions. Some religions tend to place stronger emphasis on the transcendent ultimate ground, while some others give greater priority to liberation in history. Buddhism, for instance, which emphasizes self-awakening through meditation, may be said to lay less stress on the horizontal, socio-historical dimension than does Christianity, which places much weight on God's rule of the universe and the divine plan for creation. The issues involved in this regard, however, need further detailed clarification, for the apparent difference in stressing the horizontal dimension in contrast to the vertical is deeply related to the difference in the *understanding* of the vertical dimension itself—that is, the understanding of the nature of the transhuman divine reality and the ultimate ground of human existence.

In Christianity, the transhuman divine reality is the God who is creator, judge, and redeemer, and who is believed to be the ruler of the world and history. Although Jesus as the Christ or saviour takes human form as the incarnation of God, the Christian understanding of the human divine reality is fundamentally transcendent, hence is essentially different from man. Human beings are not creator but creature, not judge but the judged, not redeemer but the redeemed. This is because human beings are finite and originally sinful, and cannot be saved by their own acts, but only through pure faith in the self-sacrificial love of God. Although God is believed to be the ruler of the whole universe, God is also believed to express himself through Logos (the Word) to human beings, while nonhuman creatures, especially in Protestantism, have no direct connection with God's Word but are dominated by human beings and participate in the divine administration through them. This is the reason why human history rather than nature is, in Christianity, understood to be the stage of God's work. Furthermore, the Christian notion of God indicates a God of love and righteousness as seen from Jesus' words: "Seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

By contrast, in Buddhism what corresponds to the transhuman divine reality is not the one God who is the ruler of the world and history, but the Dharma, that is, the law of dependent co-origination. The

law of dependent co-origination stipulates that everything in the universe, human and nonhuman beings included, is interdependent. Nothing exists independently or can be said to be self-existing. Accordingly, in Buddhism everything without exception is relative and relational, impermanent and changeable. There is nothing absolute, eternal and unchangeable. And so, not only samsara but also nirvana is not eternal and unchangeable, not substantial. Nirvana is also without an unchangeable substance. Therefore, we should not cling to, attach to nirvana as a goal. We should be free, even from nirvana; we should be returning to samsara, to save our fellow beings who are still attached to samsara.

Thus, in this dynamic movement from samsara to nirvana, from nirvana to samsara, not only samsara in the secular dimension, but also nirvana in the sacred dimension, are done away with. For in Buddhism not only attachment to samsara but also attachment to nirvana must be overcome in order to attain true emancipation and liberation. This means that the Buddhist understanding of transhuman divine reality is significantly different from that of Christianity. In Christianity, the vertical dimension of human existence is understood finally to establish its root-source in God, who is fundamentally transcendent and supernatural, who is love and justice. But in Buddhism the vertical dimension is rooted in vast emptiness. It is neither transcendental nor immanent, but is a source of both transcendence and immanence, wisdom and compassion.

Different Approaches to History

On the basis of their differing understandings of the ultimate reality to be realized in the transpatial and transtemporal vertical dimension, Christianity and Buddhism also have different approaches to the issues occurring in the spatial and temporal horizontal dimension of human history. In Christianity, if I am not mistaken, God is believed to be the ruler of the world and history: Creation and the Last Judgement are the beginning and the end of the world established by God. God is also believed to reveal Himself directly in the midst of human history through the person of Jesus as the Christ, and Jesus' death and resurrection, being the centre of history, is the historical event crucial to human salvation. Personal salvation, as well as the collective salvation of

humankind, is possible in Christianity only through the historical event of Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. In short, history is understood to be the work of God whose purpose is centred on and fulfilled in Jesus as the Christ. In this scheme, nonhuman nature is regarded as something peripheral, for it is the divine-human relationship which is central for Christian salvation.

By contrast, in Buddhism, *sunyata*, or emptiness as ultimate reality, is entirely unobjectifiable and nonsubstantial in that *sunyata* is neither immanent nor transcendent, being beyond even the one God. In the realization of *sunyata*, both immanence and transcendence, the secular and the sacred, are paradoxically one. Each and every point of the world is fully immanent and fully transcendent, fully secular and fully sacred at one and the same time. Again, in the realization of *sunyata*, world and history are understood to be without any beginning, such as Creation, and without any end, such as the Last Judgement. The world and history are seen as entirely beginningless and endless; thus eternity is not realized beyond the end of the world and history, but right here and right now. This is because the beginningless and endless process as a whole comes to converge into the absolute present which constitutes the locus of awakened selfhood. This realization of the paradoxical oneness of immanence and transcendence, of time and eternity, in the here and now, however, is not the goal of the Buddhist life, but rather its ground and its point of departure. Without this realization, Buddhist life and activity do not properly and legitimately begin.

The problem of human living and dying cannot be resolved apart from the problem of impermanency common to humankind and nature. Unless the boundless dimension is opened up—this being the dimension in which the liberation of both inorganic nature and sentient beings occurs—human emancipation from transmigration is not conceivable. However, the opening up of this limitless dimension common to humankind and nature does not preclude the special significance of human beings in the universe. This is because it is only in human beings, who are endowed with self-consciousness, that the boundless, trans-anthropocentric dimension is consciously opened up. Only human beings can go beyond their own centrism and *actualize* the trans-human boundless dimension common to humankind and nature.

This transhuman, boundless dimension common to humankind and nature is the basis or ground for Buddhist salvation; Buddhist life and

activity are therefore established on this basis. In this way, Buddhists are involved in the socio-historical events of the horizontal dimension while deeply rooted vertically in the realization of emptiness which is beyond time and space. Buddhist activity on the horizontal dimension is motivated by compassion, a soteriological concern with the other's awakening which is rooted in wisdom. Soteriological concern with the awakening of others and self-realization of one's own awakening are not two different things, but fundamentally one. Just as true nirvana is the dynamic movement between samsara and nirvana without attaching to either, true awakening consists of the dynamism of self-awakening and awakening others. The endeavour to awaken to self without awakening others is selfish, whereas the attempt to awaken others without awakening to self is powerless.

Wisdom and Compassion, Compassion and Wisdom

Wisdom without compassion is still self-centred whereas compassion without wisdom is feeble. Accordingly, every step of the Buddhist activity on the socio-historical horizontal dimension is based on the dynamic *intersection* between self-awakening and awakening others, between wisdom and compassion. Indeed, the Mahayana notion of the bodhisattva emphasizes the fundamental necessity of the compassionate work of awakening others even more than it emphasizes self-awakening, as can be seen in the Four Great Vows which are recited by all Buddhists after every service:

However innumerable sentient beings are,
 I vow to save them;
 However inexhaustible the passions are,
 I vow to extinguish them;
 However immeasurable the dharmas are,
 I vow to master them;
 However incomparable the Buddha-truth is,
 I vow to attain it.

Some of my American friends told me they found these vows somewhat arrogant, as they vow to master the immeasurable Buddhist teaching and so forth. This may indeed sound arrogant if you believe that time and history have a beginning and an end. But, in Buddhism, since

time and history are without beginning and without end, then it is possible to say: However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them. And as I said, the beginningless and endless process of time and history is concentrated into the present moment *if* we clearly realize the beginninglessness and endlessness of time and history.

The first vow, directed toward innumerable sentient beings, concerns the salvation of others. Only the second, third, and fourth vows, which pertain to passions, dharmas and the Buddha-truth, point to one's own awakening. Thus, the bodhisattva idea expressed in the Four Great Vows gives first priority to the salvation of others as the necessary prerequisite for one's own awakening.

In this connection I would like to mention my teacher, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi (1889–1980), and his idea of FAS. Hisamatsu was the most outstanding Zen philosopher of twentieth-century Japan. He was closely related to D. T. Suzuki, although he was about twenty years Suzuki's junior. Hisamatsu was Professor of Buddhism at Kyoto University during the period around World War II. But far more than a scholar of Buddhism, Hisamatsu was a living personification of Zen, a person who in living his daily life performed his various functions deeply from the ground of his clear-cut Zen awakening. An excellent tea master, calligrapher and poet, and yet a reformer of traditional Zen in Japan, all aspects of his personality and activities stemmed directly from that single religious realization he called Awakening, and his notion of FAS was no exception. For Hisamatsu, FAS represented his basic understanding of human existence on which his philosophy, religion, art, and particularly his ideas on the reformation of traditional Zen were firmly established. Hisamatsu used the English acronym, FAS, because he felt there was no suitable Japanese form to express this threefold notion.

What then is FAS? "F" stands for AWAKENING TO THE FORMLESS SELE, referring to the depth dimension of human existence, that is, the true Self as the ground of human existence. "A" stands for STANDING ON THE STANDPOINT OF ALL HUMANKIND, referring to the breadth of human existence, that is, human beings in their totality. And "S" stands for CREATING HISTORY SUPRAHISTORICALLY, referring to the dimension of the chronological length of human existence, that is, awakened human history. Accordingly, the three aspects of FAS indicate a threefold structure of human existence: the depth, breadth and

length of human existence, or, more concretely, self, world, and history. This threefold notion may correspond to some extent to the traditional western threefold notion of soul, world, and God. However, in Hisamatsu's threefold notion God is absent. In the notion of *fas*, these three dimensions of human existence are grasped dynamically, and though different from each other they are inseparably united with each other.

The first dimension, the "F," which stands for AWAKENING TO THE FORMLESS SELF, signifies nothing other than *satori* in the Zen sense. Traditionally it has been said that the primal concern of Zen is *koji-kyūmei*, or "the investigation of self," that is, to seek out what is the true Self. This is Zen's main concern: to inquire into and awaken to one's true Self. Hisamatsu calls the true Self the Formless self—"formless" in that one's true Self, being entirely unobjectifiable, is without any form which can be objectified.

Unlike Zen masters in the past, Hisamatsu studied western philosophy thoroughly and had a high esteem for "autonomous reason" as elucidated by modern western philosophy. At a certain period in his life Hisamatsu took modern autonomous reason as his own basic principle and through it criticized religious faith as something heteronomous. But he came painfully to realize that, however much he deepened the standpoint of autonomous reason, he could never solve the problems of evil and death. The more he tried to utilize autonomous reason to break through these problems the deeper he fell into self-contradiction and self-entanglement.

Finally he fell into what Zen traditionally calls "the Great Doubt." This was not an intellectual doubt which could be overcome by another philosophical theory, but a total existential doubt realized at the extreme point of the self-contradiction inherent in autonomous reason as such. In this Great Doubt, it is not that one's self doubts something external, or even something internal to one's self, but rather it is the self itself which radically doubts itself to the extent that the doubter and the doubted are one, not two. It was at the point of breaking through this Great Doubt by means of severe Zen practice that Hisamatsu awakened to his true Self. Traditionally it has been said in Zen that "at the bottom of Great Doubt lies Great Awakening." In the long history of Zen before Hisamatsu, however, the kind of self-contradiction found in modern autonomous reason had never before constituted the

dynamic force underlying the actualization of Great Doubt.

Traditionally, the true Self as awakened to in Zen satori has been called “the original face before the birth of one’s parents” or “the true person of no rank.” Hisamatsu calls the true Self the “Formless self” in that it is completely unfettered by any form, physical, mental or spiritual, including the forms of life and death, good and evil, form and matter, subject and object, divine and human. “Formless self,” however, is not simply “formless” as distinguished from form, for formlessness as distinguished from form is nothing but another kind of form, simply called “formless.” True Formlessness is free not only from form but also from formlessness, without attaching to either one. Further, true Formlessness in this dynamic sense must not be realized outside of oneself because Formlessness thus realized outside of oneself is grasped as an object and thereby turns into a [relative] form. To Hisamatsu true Formlessness is always Self and true Self must always be Formless. True Formless Self is the ultimate reality for him and AWAKENING TO THE FORMLESS SELF is the basic requirement for human salvation.

Hisamatsu is very critical toward traditional Zen. Although traditional Zen also stresses helping others to awaken to the true Self as the wondrous activity, he criticized the traditional way of Zen. He said that if the so-called wondrous activity signifies only the process of leading other individuals to awaken to their true Self, this activity remains limited in the monastery to the problem of self without penetrating more widely beyond it. If their activity starts and ends only with the so-called practice of compassion involved in helping others to awaken, such activity will remain unrelated to the formation of the world and the creation of history; it will be isolated from the world and history. . . .

In Zen, the all-out compassionate practice ought to be: to have a human being awaken to his original true nature, that is, to the solitarily emancipated, nondependent, Formless Self, who will form the true world and create true history.

The Scope of FAS

And so, the formation of the true world necessitates the second dimension of human existence, that is, the “A” which signifies STANDING ON THE STANDPOINT OF ALL HUMANKIND. For unless we grasp racial, na-

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tional, and class problems from the perspective of all humankind, we cannot solve any of them adequately. Thus, in addition to the investigation of the self, an investigation of the world is needed to find out the nature and the structure of the world.

Moreover, the creation of true history requires the third dimension of human existence, that is, the “S” which stands for CREATING HISTORY SUPRAHISTORICALLY, because true history cannot be created by an approach simply immanent in history, such as class struggle in Marxism or social reform in humanism. Unless we take as our basis a suprahistorical religious standpoint we cannot create true history. Thus, an investigation of history is necessary in order to break through the contradiction of history, and grasp the real meaning of history in its origin and purpose.

Currently, we have different peace movements, human rights, and various other social reform movements. If these movements are pursued only from a political and social standpoint without a basis in our deep realization of the true Self, however, such an approach may not yield adequate solutions. Even though those who participate in such movements are full of good intentions and possess a strong sense of justice, if they lack an awakening to the original nature of the self and others, their actions are without real power—or worse, create more confusion. On the other hand, if only the internal religious aspect of the human being is emphasized and priority is given to one’s own salvation to the neglect of the affairs of the world, however serious an individual may be in his or her religious quest he or she cannot arrive at a profound religious resolution. Mere concern with self-salvation is contrary to the bodhisattva’s Four Great Vows. Nevertheless, contemporary Buddhism is apt to be removed from social realities and confined to temples, and engrossed only in the inner problems of the self.

For this reason, Hisamatsu, together with his group of disciples, formulated “The Vow of Humankind” which they proclaimed publicly in 1951, shortly after the Korean War. The Vow of Humankind reads as follows:

Calm and composed,
awakening to our true self;
being fully compassionate humans,
making full use of our abilities

according to our respective vocations,
discerning suffering both individual and social,
and its sources.

Recognizing the right direction
in which history should proceed,
joining hands as kin beyond the differences
of race, nation, and class.

With compassion, vowing to bring to realization
humankind's deep desire for emancipation,
let us construct a world which is true and happy.

Concluding Remarks

To conclude my talk I would like to bring in my dialogue with Professor Paul Knitter of Saint Xavier College, Chicago. The dialogue took place at Villanova University, in Philadelphia, and the theme of our discussion was "Spirituality and Liberation." As he made a very clear and insightful comment on Buddhism and my approach, I would like to introduce here his criticism and my response.

What Professor Knitter said was: "We cannot know God or experience God unless we are working for justice." I would like to clarify further the implications of this statement. Does Professor Knitter mean by this statement that working for justice is a necessary worldly and practical *condition* for experiencing God, or is it an essential *ground* for experiencing God? It seems to me that by that statement, based on liberation theology, he is indicating that working for justice is not merely a practical condition for experiencing God, but rather an essential ground or source for experiencing God. It makes such an impression on me especially when he states that by getting involved in some form of action for justice and social transformation we discover and see things not only about the world and history but also about God and the ultimate—things that we could never see through our traditional venue of prayers and meditation, or our traditional understanding of religious experience.

If Professor Knitter means by this statement that our religious experience of God is deepened and expanded by our actions for justice, I can understand and agree with it. However, if he and other liberation theologians mean that our action for justice is the *ground* of a new

religious experience of God himself, this I cannot agree with. For the authentic religious experience of God must come from God himself, because God is the ground and the source of liberation. Is the thesis, then, that the character of religious experience of God may be conditioned by our actions in time and space? Our actions in time and space, however serious and important they may be, cannot be a ground or source of God-experience, though they certainly can deepen and expand it.

The same is true with the Buddhist notion of awakening to the true Self. Awakening to the true Self is self-awakening, not awakening caused by something outside the self. This is the reason why the true Self, to which one must awaken, is called the "Formless" self, because the true Self can never be objectified in anything. But just as God's liberation is never separate from human activities in time and space, awakening to the Formless self is never apart from human activities in the world and history. Human actions in the world and history are indispensable for our God-experience or for our self-awakening. They are indispensable, however, not as the ground or source of our God-experience, but as a practical condition or worldly occasion for that experience. We should not confuse what should be *ground* with what should be *occasion*, what should be *source* with what should be *situation*. If we take our practice of transforming the world not as an occasion, but as the source of religious experience, that would be a mistake.

Professor Knitter asked me about religious experience without activities for justice. In answer, I say this: However essential religious experience may be as a ground of activities, mere ground without a *particular context* is abstract. For this reason I said earlier: if only the internal religious aspect of human beings is emphasized and priority is given to one's own salvation, thereby neglecting the affairs of the world, however serious individuals may be in their religious quest, they can never arrive at a profound religious resolution. On the other hand, however important actions to transform the world may be, if they are not based on God-experience or awakening to true Self, they are also inauthentic. And for this reason I said earlier: if these movements—peace movements, human rights, and the various other social reform movements—are pursued exclusively from a political and social dimension without a basis in a deep realized true Self or in God-experience, such approaches may not yield adequate solutions. To be precise, the

ground and condition, the source and occasion, must always be combined, such that in the depths of human existence the ground of the self, the ground of the world, and the ground of history are inseparably interconnected with one another. Thus we must realize that we are always standing and working at the very node intersecting these dimensions of self, world, and history.