REVIEW ARTICLE

# Buddhist Existentialism

THOMAS P. KASULIS

READERS OF THIS journal may recall my recent review article on the Kyoto School and the West (*The Eastern Buddhist* XVI, 2, Autumn 1983). Therein I suggested that we needed more materials in English representative of second and third generation thinkers in the Kyoto School. A recent book by Takeuchi Yoshinori, *The Heart of Buddhism: In Search of the Timeless Spirit of Primitive Buddhism* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), is exactly the type of publication I had in mind.

Takeuchi's thought is at the core of the Japanese tradition in the philosophy of religion as initially formulated by Nishida Kitarō and carried through by Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji. With his feet planted firmly in Japanese buddhological scholarship, Takeuchi also embraces Western hermeneutical methods and philosophical concerns. One can see, therefore, the influence of the buddhology of Ui Hakuju, the existential cultural criticism of Watsuji Tetsurō, the philosophical concerns of Tanabe Hajime, and the existential exegesis of Rudolf Bultmann. The Introduction by James W. Heisig, the editor and translator of this work, carefully explains Takeuchi's sources and inspirations, giving us an unusually sharp picture of the scholar and the man.

The Introduction is just one example of Heisig's care in bridging the gap between Takeuchi's Japanese world and this book's Western audience. Just as admirable is his careful selection of texts to include. The book is actually an anthology of seven of Takeuchi's essays originally appearing in German, Japanese, or English, and covering a span of about two decades. Nevertheless, by his acute sensitivity to the structure of Takeuchi's thinking, Heisig has merged the seven independent works into a meaningful whole. There is, admittedly, some unavoidable repetition from one essay to the next, but in general the book comes together very well and it can be read without contrivance as a single unified work. The translation is also smooth and readable, a notable achievement given the multilingual nature and subtlety of the sources involved. Perhaps the greatest compliment to Heisig is that his editing and translating are so good that his contribution can be easily overlooked. The reader is taken into direct dialogue

with Takeuchi himself. We could not ask, nor want, anything better.

My first point about the work itself concerns Takeuchi's style of thinking and writing, something that I have admired since I first read his *Shinran to gendai* (Shinran Today) (Tokyo: Chuō-kōronsha, 1974) some years ago. To put it simply, Takeuchi blends the objectivity of the scholar with the existential sensitivity of the priest. He has a rare gift for exhuming an abstruse Buddhist doctrine, analyzing it, and then transferring it into the midst of our own experiential context; that is, when he takes what at first seems distant and irrelevant and then transforms it into an object of existential immediacy. He accomplishes this feat via three techniques.

First, he is a master with metaphor, a magician with imagery. Usually these are not poetic, extended metaphors, but rather concrete pictures and comparisons sprinkled throughout the prose. If we look for the first instance of this mode of explanation, we need go no further than the second paragraph of the book wherein we find a forked tree, an underground spring, and a reference to Paul's "folly of the cross" (I Corinthians 1:18 ff.). The contrast being discussed is the relation between religion and philosophy in primitive Buddhism and primitive Christianity. The point is simply made and then Takeuchi moves on. Some Christian historians might well want to take issue with the generality, but regardless of how one takes the point being made, the images of the double trunked tree and the cross are sharply etched in the reader's imagination.

A second stylistic theme in Takeuchi's writing is the symbiotic relationship between thought and practice. No Buddhist doctrine is analyzed as being completely independent of Buddhist practice and no Buddhist discipline is given a significance unrelated to the Buddhist dharma. Thus, as complex and sophisticated as his ideas may be, Takeuchi is sure to ground them in the praxis of the Buddhist's everyday life.

Third, Takeuchi incarnates the Shin Buddhist temper of mind. There is, of course, no single mental attitude that we can attribute to fifteen million Japanese, but there is a distinctively *tariki* (other power) ring to Takeuchi's approach to philosophizing. The Shin Buddhist influence is rather difficult to characterize, but there is undeniably a difference in tone between, say, Shinran and his non-Pure Land Buddhist contemporaries like Dōgen and Nichiren. That difference carries over into Takeuchi's philosophical style. There is, first of all, a pervading sense of humility. Takeuchi approaches the study of the Buddha with self-reproach and reverence. There is not the sureness of Buddha-transmission so commonly expressed in Zen texts, but only those convictions arising from an awareness of one's own limitations. Secondly, positions are not rejected on strictly philosophical or dialectical grounds, but rather because they are not existentially satisfying to the needs of the Buddhist practitioner. In fact, ultimately

the Buddhist who must test the theories is none other than oneself, in this case, Takeuchi the Buddhist writer. This internal, practical criterion of truth is precarious—it is always open to self-deception, for example—but Takeuchi would say, as Shinran indeed did say, that there is no other alternative. For Shin Buddhists like Shinran and Takeuchi, the human encounter with the Buddha's enlightenment leads not to bliss but to awe, not to surrender but to sensitivity, not to independence but to trust. This attitude runs throughout Takeuchi's writings and no aware reader can be blind to it.

We can now consider various aspects of the content of the work itself. First, as the subtitle suggests, the book primarily focuses on primitive Buddhism or, as it is now more generally called in English, Early Buddhism. In other words, the emphasis is on the Buddhist tradition preserved in the Pāli *Nikāyas* and Chinese *Āgamas* before the interpretations of the Abhidharma schools developed. The Early Buddhist tradition has already been analyzed from various perspectives: Louis de la Vallée Poussin discussed it from the standpoint of the formation of religious community, Theodore Stcherbatsky from the standpoint of logic and epistemology, K. N. Jayatilleke and David J. Kalupahana from that of Indian empiricism, and Rune A. Johansson from that of mysticism, for example. In contrast to these, Takeuchi's approach is distinctively existential. In other words, according to his account, Early Buddhism arose out of an acute and painful insight into the fundamental structures of human existence. The purpose of the Buddhist path was, therefore, not philosophical insight, but the embodiment of a new way of living and relating in the world. Hence, Takeuchi prefers to speak of *anātman* as a centering of the self, rather than the elimination of the ego. For Takeuchi, *anātman* is the rejection of rigidity in favor of the flexibility needed for personal growth.

This existential interpretation gives Takeuchi's account a marked sense of contemporaneity. There are two distinct advantages to this. First, his vocabulary and philosophical agenda bring Buddhism into a terminological proximity to the existential trends in Judeo-Christian theology. Takeuchi, in fact, makes many passing references to Christianity, both the scriptural and the modern theological traditions. Usually, his points are well-taken and provocative, but since they are unelaborated (except somewhat in the last chapter), they are really more promissory than exemplary of any "Buddhist-Christian dialogue."

The second advantage to the existential approach is that it engages the contemporary reader who is more interested in the spirit of Buddhism as a modern religious option than in the letter of the text as understood by the ancient Indian Buddhists themselves. For example, after reading the book, the undergraduates in my class with little previous exposure to Buddhism could not give precise characterizations of such central notions as, say, *anātman* and *pratītya samutpāda*, but they did understand the general principles behind the terms.

More significantly, though, the book also gave them a clear sense of Buddhism as a continuous tradition and as a religious way of life relevant to the human predicament as they, twentieth-century Americans, understand it. That is, through Takeuchi's approach, they developed a deeper appreciation of Buddhism itself and they wanted to learn more about it.

Of course, Takeuchi's existential interpretation leaves itself open to criticism from more traditional buddhologists. In particular, the most likely objection would be that Takeuchi has his own existential definition of religion and that his reading of the Early Buddhist texts is filtered by that definition. In other words, the argument would be that Takeuchi finds existential concerns in the texts only because he looks for them. The more traditional buddhologist would maintain that while there are undoubtedly some passages that *can* be so read, the overall thrust of the corpus of Early Buddhist writings points in some other direction. On the surface at least, there is some validity to this concern. As a matter of fact, Takeuchi does tend to analyze several selected passages in detail, rather than support his case with extensive citations. To press this criticism of his approach too far, however, would be a misinterpretation of Takeuchi's intent. Though he is primarily speaking of Early Buddhism, Takeuchi's concerns go beyond the strictly historical.

In the final analysis, Takeuchi approaches Buddhist texts in a manner more akin to the methodology of a Christian theologian than a historian of religion. He is, as it were, a buddhologian rather than a buddhologist. Whereas the buddhologist looks into the text for the philological meaning of words and seeks an understanding of the historical and social circumstances under which the work was written, the buddhologian looks into the text for the light it can shed on some pertinent religious or philosophical problem. Whereas the buddhologist tries to discover what the text originally meant, the buddhologian seeks an understanding of what the text means for us today. For the buddhologist, the text reveals something about the people who authored it; for the buddhologian, the text reveals something about the people reading it.

Certainly, the two cannot be completely separated. The buddhologian is bound by tradition and cannot simply make the text say anything whatever. Conversely, no buddhologist, however "scientific," can completely escape the parameters of one's own culture and time in looking for the meaning of the text. Indeed, the very idea of the *scientific* approach to religion only developed in the intellectual milieu of the twentieth-century West.

Still, despite the fruitful interaction between the two groups, the difference in emphasis is clear and neither side need apologize for its methodology. Nor should it be the case, however, that persons are criticized on inappropriate grounds. Certainly Takeuchi is not maintaining that the Early Buddhists were, historically speaking, actually existentialists. Rather, he is saying that the con-

figuration of their thought is such that, were they living in today's situation with the vocabulary of existentialism available to them, they would have certain existentialist themes resonant with their own. Obviously, such a claim cannot be evaluated on traditional buddhological grounds alone. In the final analysis, Takeuchi must be criticized as a buddhologian, not a buddhologist. But what is involved in such a critical stance? First, we must ask whether Takeuchi's existential reading of Buddhism is consistent enough with Buddhist tradition to be considered authentic. Second, we must ask whether Takeuchi's Buddhist existentialism adequately expresses the existential concerns he raises. Let us take up each issue in turn.

First, just how Buddhist is Takeuchi's Buddhist existentialism? Takeuchi's scholarship is not at all in question. He supports his statements with the careful unraveling of passages from central Pāli and East Asian Buddhist texts. He is particularly sensitive to subtle differences in nuance between Pāli and Chinese versions of the early sutras. Still, as a buddhologian and not merely a buddhologist, he is looking for something in the texts; his attention is drawn to particular themes. Most of the time, his interpretations are completely in accord with traditional emphases by other scholars of the Early Buddhist tradition, but still his analysis is clearly informed by the existential tradition. We have already referred, for example, to his interpretation of *anātman* as the centered self, rather than a no-self. A more traditional buddhologist might find Takeuchi's approach here unusual and perhaps even anachronistic. Still, any objective interpreter of Early Buddhism would have to admit that we have only a most general idea of the theories of self current in India at the time of the Buddha. Without a clear grasp of alternative theories, it is difficult to say positively what position the Buddha's theory of *anātman* was meant to reject. Thus, Takeuchi's line of interpretation is at least arguable, even if not generally accepted. To this reader, at least, it was a refreshingly new perspective.

There are other aspects of Takeuchi's existential reading of Buddhism that are more profound, but also problematic. First, because he emphasizes the enlightenment experience as a personal *metanoia*, an idea that shows his indebtedness to his teacher Tanabe Hajime incidentally, Takeuchi tends to emphasize the individual almost to the exclusion of the social. In short, I have the feeling that the role of the sangha in his analysis is underplayed. It is odd that Japanese philosophers of religion such as Takeuchi and Nishitani often become so focused on the meaning of enlightenment that they neglect, to some extent, the critical functions of religious community. This is perhaps one of the blinders of the existential perspective on religion, in general. Takeuchi is certainly not completely unaware of this problem: he discusses Heidegger's ignoring human relationships and the significance of Buber's "I-Thou" relation, for example (pp.121-123), but his analysis is not detailed enough to address the

issue of sangha squarely. Perhaps he could do so (or already has done so) in some other works. In any case, this book, as it stands, is somewhat too heavily focused on the individual.

A second influence of existentialism on Takeuchi's analysis that I find problematic is his treatment of historicity. In this area, Takeuchi's philosophical preference leads him not so much to neglect an important topic as it does to analyze a topic that is not really there. In general, Takeuchi's line of argument is to see in Buddhism a Bultmann-like emphasis on eschatological existence. This works very well, indeed brilliantly, in the way he discusses Shin Buddhism. In fact, his existential analysis of the idea of *mappō* (age of the latter dharma) strikes so deeply into the heart of Shin Buddhism that it seems completely convincing. The wonder is that other interpreters of Shin Buddhism have not seen the parallel with Bultmann before in such a sharp manner. The problem, however, is that Takeuchi wants to fine this view of historicity in the Early Buddhist tradition as well.

Generally, he sees the eschatological view as the natural outgrowth of the Early Buddhist view of impermanence and death. This strikes me as an odd step to take and, frankly, I think the problem boils down to the fact that the Christian tradition can explicitly relate historicity and personal death because of the events of the Incarnation and Resurrection. That is, through Christ's life, death, and resurrection, the Christian finds a pattern being woven through history as well as an existential paradigm of human existence itself. There is no such tie between the personal and the historical in Buddhism (with the exception of Nichiren perhaps). At least, I know of no such symbolic connection and Takeuchi does not convince me there is one. This does not mean that Takeuchi's point is not viable, but only that he cannot follow Bultmann in seeing an obvious connection between the personal and the historical. The connection must be drawn out carefully and fully for the distinctively *Buddhist* view of the two. My own suspicion is that this connection might be understood in strictly Shin Buddhist terms with the ambiguities about the historicity and ultimateness of Amida, but I have no idea where I could find it in the Early Buddhist tradition.

This now brings us to the second part of our evaluation of Takeuchi as an existential buddhologian. Does his Buddhism illumine our understanding of general problems in the existential tradition? For this question, the last essay, "Freeing and the World Beyond," is the most revealing. There Takeuchi is at his best as a religious philosopher. Not only does he make probing points about the perspectives of Tillich, Bultmann, and Heidegger (in both his earlier and later phases of thinking), but he also comes forth most clearly on his own as a spokesperson for the existential validity of Buddhist, particularly Shin Buddhist, philosophy.

In particular, Takeuchi sees the problem of secularization as one confronting the entire world and all the world's religions. In that last essay, Takeuchi essentially investigates the reality of the Pure Land Paradise in the West. Obviously, at one time the premodern Shin Buddhist could have taken the reality in a literal, metaphysical sense: the Pure Land was actually thought to exist somewhere beyond this world. For today's modern, secularized Japanese, however, what could such a claim mean? *Where* could "beyond this world" be? In short, Takeuchi finds the need for a process of demythologizing the Western Pure Land Paradise. Yet, at the same time as he is learning from Tillich and Bultmann, he also recognizes that, ontologically speaking, the Buddhist perspective cannot follow too closely the Judeo-Christian worldview. In particular, Takeuchi recognizes that for Buddhism the relationship between the human and the sacred must go beyond the personal relationship of human being and God:

> That is to say, what is also transcendent to the world (its yonder shore) cannot be a transcendent reality simply in the sense that God is said to be transcendent to humanity: it cannot be envisaged exclusively from the viewpoint of the relationship between God and humanity. It has equally to be understood in terms of a relationship to the world, as a world that stands over and against our world as well as a Thou that stands over against an I. [p.132]

For this reason, despite his general preference for Bultmann's theology and its themes of eschatological existence and demythologizing, Takeuchi also feels drawn to the later Heidegger's notion of the fourfold harmony (*Geviert*) and to Tillich's view of God as the Ground of Being. In the final analysis, Takeuchi manages to blend those theological views with certain key passages from Shinran. The result is a position which basically uses Bultmann's eschatological theme of "advening from the future," but without its connotations of a personal God behind the process. The ultimate view, as Takeuchi himself suggests, is a Bultmann-like perspective filtered through the thought of the later, rather than earlier, Heidegger. This makes for an extraordinarily provoking worldview, one that can appeal not only to Shin Buddhists, but to secularized Christians wishing to affirm the omnipresence of the sacred in the world and in history, without also affirming a personal God. In this regard, Takeuchi fully reveals the character of his "Buddhist existentialism."

In conclusion, this book is a profound study in Buddhist thought that deserves the attention of both Buddhist scholars and Western theologians. In many respects, the book is controversial. Furthermore, because of its breadth of focus, some parts may be of more interest to one reader than another. *The Heart of Buddhism* is not so much a systematic work as a series of philosophical vi-

gnettes that jolt our comfortable assumptions about both Buddhism and Chirstian theology. It is a challenging book and I hope it achieves a readership worthy of the challenges it presents.