

THE AWAKENING OF SELF IN BUDDHISM

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I

At present Japanese Buddhism is exerting little influence upon people's lives. This fact is claimed as proof of the decline of Buddhism. The impact of Buddhism upon society has become feeble because it has penetrated too pervasively into our daily life; it has changed into a sort of social custom and has fallen into a state of stagnation. The major reason for this perhaps may be traced back to the religious policy of the Tokugawa Shogunate. Some people say that the cause of the decline of Buddhist influence lies in its negative doctrine of resignation. But upon looking back on its past history, we find that Buddhism has been a great force for moving society, as have been Christianity and Mohammedanism. Of course, by "moving society" it is not meant that Buddhism has a social theory of its own or that it attempts a social revolution. Buddhism is not a so-called "social movement"; it rather transforms man's inner mind radically, and develops man's most basic being into a flowering that it has never reached before. In short, it has become a moving force in society by opening up a way to transform man himself. It might be said that, so far as its religious function is concerned, Buddhism has exerted a really deep and most lasting influence upon society although, in appearance, it may seem to be an indirect and devious influence.

At present, most people think that to transform society is one thing and to transform man is another, and that the former should be achieved before the latter. But in reality, these two aspects cannot be separated from each other so easily.

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To take an example. Many "progressive" men in our country say that the present-day crisis concerning atomic warfare results from modern capitalism which obstructs the inevitable direction of history, or especially, from international capitalism which has become monopolized in the stage of its development as "imperialism." Those who think thus believe that the only way to overcome the crisis lies in a social revolution. But is this really so? Is it not rather that the crisis does not result exclusively from the capitalistic society alone but arises also from the very thought of those who think that the crisis derives exclusively from capitalistic society? The very viewpoint, from which the conflict of social ideologies is regarded as ultimate and social revolution as necessarily prior to anything else, constitutes one of the major factors in the very crisis that it is attempting to overcome. The very thought that social revolution should take precedence over man's inner transformation is not an insignificant part of the crisis itself. As we remember, for example, Malenkov, as U.S.S.R. premier, once declared that the use of the latest weapons might result in the destruction of both the Soviet and its enemies, and even of civilization as a whole. The following year when he resigned the premiership, he was severely criticized in "*Pravda*." What he had declared before, the Communist press said, was ideologically untenable: only the West would be destroyed while the Soviets would survive.

Behind such an incident, we can perceive a way of thinking which might be called a sort of "pseudo-messianism" (Berdyajev) in which the communization of the world is regarded as the inevitable direction of history, the realization of which would ensure the solution of all the problems of mankind. Such a fanatical attitude is closely bound to a black and white way of thinking in which social revolution and the transformation of man are naively regarded as two distinct problems while, in truth, the one presupposes the other. If such an over-simplified separation were not made, the conflict of ideologies could not be regarded as ultimate, and there would be opened up a way of mutual understanding between the "two worlds."

Therefore, matters concerning man's inner life are not so detached and remote as they appear to be at first sight.

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II

Since Buddhism opened up an entirely revolutionary view of the essential nature of man, it is not surprising that it should offer a more basic and permanent principle of social transformation than could ever be offered by a mere ideology. From its very beginning, Buddhism was a religion that indicated the path to transcend the "world." According to Buddhism, the only thing necessary is emancipation from the innumerable bondages which come forth spontaneously from within ourselves and tie us to things of this world, that is to say, *nirvāṇa*, the extinguishment of the fire. This Buddhistic way of transcending the "world" as well as the "self"-in-the-world, in spite of its so-called "other-worldliness," means an awakening in which we become aware of our original and authentic nature (our dharma-nature) and live in conformity to it. The possibility of attaining this enlightenment depends entirely upon ourselves; the ability to attain it lies buried deep in the dharma nature of each of us. The only thing required for us is to cut down the threads of attachment and to become "homeless" in the world. It was thus natural that the community of Buddhists, the *saṃgha*, was from its start based on the absolute negation of all sorts of "worldly" differentiations, social as well as psychological, such as the rich and the poor, the learned and the unlearned, etc., and especially the distinction of the castes, "the primal distinction that Brahmanism presumed to have originated in the mystical depths."¹

As is well known, the first disciples who gathered around the Buddha came from various castes. They must have been fully conscious of the fact that their own establishment of "brotherhood" was an historical event of revolutionary character and that it was made possible only by a wholly new basis of human relationship being opened up beyond the rigid Brahmanical framework of castes,—a basis wherein man is free from all bondage, ultimately independent and truly equal as man to man. "As the great streams, O disciples, however many they be, the Gangā, Yamunā, Aciravatā, Sarabhū,

¹ H. Oldenberg, *Buddha*, 7. Aufl. S. 172. Anm.

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Mahī, when they reach the great ocean, lose their old name and their old descent, and bear only one name, 'the great ocean,' so also, my disciples, these four castes, Brahmans, Nobles, Vaiçya and Çûdra, when they, in accordance with the law and doctrine which the Perfect One has preached, forsake their home and go into homelessness, lose their old name and old paternity, and bear only the one designation, 'Ascetics, who follow the son of the Sakya house.'"¹

This way of awakening to one's self on a plane beyond the world, and the same absolute denunciation of the caste distinction have been maintained throughout the development of Buddhism. To quote an example: there is within the *Tripitaka* a short tract entitled *Kongō Shin Ron* (Diamond Needle Tract), supposedly written by Aśvaghōṣa, who flourished as a thinker and poet from the first to the second century A. D. In this tract, he disapproved, from the Buddhist standpoint, of the class-distinction of the four castes in India. He rebuffed one by one the mythico-religious or socio-conventional assertions that defended the authenticity of class-distinction, and set up an entirely new universal and religious standard of the nobility of man's basic character based upon morality. We find herein a revolution in man's viewpoint from the external to the internal. We can also see an example of the religious reformation that has transformed the concept of man as a social being.

Needless to say, the establishment of the caste system in India is due to the historical circumstances in which the aboriginal Dravidian race was conquered and enslaved by the invading Aryan race. The enslaved aborigines were then called *Śūdras*, upon which the other three castes (*Brahmans*, *Kṣatriyas* and *Vaiśyas*) were superimposed according to the differences of their professions. As is well known, this caste system was so strict as to prevent anyone born in one caste from ascending to a superior one, and also from marrying anyone of another caste. Moreover, this fixed idea of a caste system seems to have been given various kinds of justification by the Brahmans.

As to the grounds for their justification, seven items,—life, blood,

¹ H. Oldenberg, *Buddha*, (English translation by W. Hoey), 1882, p. 152.

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body, knowledge, custom, practice, and Veda—are mentioned in the *Diamond Needle Tract*. Since it is not necessary here to dwell upon each one of these, we shall only refer to the first one, i.e. “life.”

For example, an argument advocated by the Brahmins runs as follows. Those who die in the Heavenly Realm are reborn in the Heavenly Realm; those who die in the Human Realm are reborn in the Human Realm. So is it with the beasts. According to their life philosophy, heavenly beings, humans and animals are reborn in the same realm as before. The argument seems to mean that they are predestined to be reborn in the same realm eternally.

It seems that such a philosophy was expounded on the basis of the Brahmanical canons, thereby establishing the apriority of class-distinction. Aśvaghoṣa, however, repudiates such a philosophy by quoting from the same canons in which it is stated that Indra himself was originally a kind of creature, and he retorts by asking what is meant by ‘life’ at all. In some cases he argues by producing counterevidence. For instance, he says that in spite of the Brahmins’ insistence that their superiority is maintained by “blood,” there are, among Brahmin families, not a few whose ancestors are identified with some mythological figures other than Brahman; or, again, that in spite of the Brahmins’ insistence upon their superiority by “knowledge,” there are, among the Śūdras, some people who are possessed of all the knowledge to be learnt by the Brahmins, and so forth. He observes that after all, all of their grounds for arguments are “not in accordance with the right Reason.” More important is what he maintains positively.

According to Aśvaghoṣa, what determines man’s position is “virtue.” Nothing but “virtue” is the standard for classifying man essentially as man *per se*. A man’s nobility is determined only by whether or not he is possessed of virtue. He says: “Therefore, it is to be known that one is called a *Brahmin*, not according to his lineage, conduct, practice, blood, but according to his virtue.” “Virtue,” as he called it, is that which can be developed in the Buddhistic life. He declares: “Those who have mastered their senses and extinguished their defilements, who are detached from the differentiation

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of “self” and “others”, and are altogether free from craving, anger, and ignorance, *they* are worthy of the name of *Brahmins* in the true sense of the word.” He also asserts elsewhere that those who are endowed with the five characteristics of perseverance, endeavor, contemplation (*dhyāna*), wisdom (*prajñā*), and compassion, are *Brahmins*; others who, being devoid of these five characteristics, are attached to the differentiation of “self” and “others,” are all *Śūdras*. Thus he declares conclusively that on these grounds a Brahmin can be called a *Śūdra*, and a *Śūdra* can be called a true *Brahmin*.

III

The revolutionary change expressed in this tract by Aśvaghōṣa is that human existence emerged from behind the fortified caste system which it had inherited throughout a long period of history and which it had regarded as fixed, as if belonging *a priori* to man himself. By this change, the realization of man as ‘man’ emerged for the first time. Especially to be noted here is the fact that the realization of man was brought about on the basis of none other than the Buddhist standpoint of non-ego. The event is fundamentally different from its Western counterpart which occurred at the dawn of the modern era and in which man’s realization of himself took place in the form of the realization of ego.

In the case of the West, the realization of ‘man’ came into existence mainly through the process of the so-called ‘secularization’ of culture, and through man’s separation from the religious outlook toward himself. The result was that man, rather than a God-centered being subservient to the Will of God, came to be regarded as an independent, self-centered being who has his motivation within himself. This “self” came to its own consciousness as an autonomous being whose independent existence is sustained only in relation to itself, not as a “created” being whose existence is founded upon its relationship to God. Such are the implications of my above-mentioned statement that the self-realization of man took place in the form of the realization of “ego.”

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The opinion often advanced by historians might well be justified that such a realization of man, despite its far reaching discord with Christianity, has, after all, originated in the Christian view of man. This Christian view includes man's *personal* relationship with God, the essential equality between man and man in the presence of God, man's freedom attained in the faith of being a son of God, and so forth. But it must also be noted that man's autonomous existence could be brought about only through the process of social and cultural "secularization," detaching itself from its religious background. This circumstance shows that the aforesaid "self-realization" comprised a great question-mark from the very beginning of its effectuation. It means that as man came to realize himself as autonomous 'man,' he left out the most essential moment of his being. This is the moment of "love," which is united as one with freedom and equality in the existence of religious man. Or, at least, love ceased to be an essential moment of that self-realization. This was, indeed, unavoidable. Because whereas freedom and equality can maintain their identity (although in the rather paltry guise of "liberty" and "equal right,") in spite of the transition from the religious to the irreligious and secular way of living, this can not be the case with love.

Through that transition, love undergoes a qualitative change. In Christian terms *agape* changes itself into *eros*. Religious love (*agape*) is so particular to religion that as man's realization of himself occurred apart from the religious background, this realization necessarily had its motive apart from love. Thus, liberty and equality without the moment of love came to be claimed as man's "right," inherent *a priori* in his being a man. Liberty and equality have been established in the form of the insistence upon "human right." Man's grasp of himself has been brought about as the realization of his "self" as *ego*. In the meantime, love has manifested itself as the '*fraternité*' of the French Revolution, as the 'love of humanity' expounded philosophically by Feuerbach, as the so-called spirit of 'service' of modern Americans, and in many other forms of disguise. But this love never succeeded in assuming such an essential significance as to break through the boundaries of the enclosure of *ego*;

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nor did it succeed in becoming a driving force in the formation of societies and individuals, as did the assertion of liberty and equality. In view of such circumstances, it can be said that beneath the various critical problems faced by modern peoples, there lies the fact that the realization of man by the West in modern times was effected by such a realization of ego as has been stated above.

The reason why the realization of 'man' in the modern West was only brought about in that particular fashion is that the religious (Christian, in this case) outlook of man prior to this event was dogmatically God-centered, and that it contained in itself something that made it impossible for man's autonomy to function fully. Because of this deep-seated discrepancy, it was inevitable that the realization of 'man' should finally become detached from the religious background. In this respect, it comes to assume a great significance for contemporary man that the realization of man, as discussed in the above-mentioned *Diamond Needle Tract*, was made possible by the evolution of the religious standpoint of the "non-differentiation of self and others," as expounded in Buddhism.

IV

If one phase of the vital revolution appearing in the above-mentioned tract lies in the fact that the realization of 'man' manifested itself in overcoming the caste system previously regarded as almost predestined, another phase lies in the fact that a new standard for deciding man's essential value came to be discovered within that same realization. As Aśvaghōṣa says, "on account of that reason" (i. e. on account of the presence or the absence of the Buddhist virtues), "a Brahmin can be called a *Śūdra*, and a *Śūdra* can be called a true *Brahmin*." This is a complete revolution in the estimation of value according to an entirely new standard. *Śūdras*, who have been regarded as the lowest in the rank of man, are now true *Brahmins* if only they possess the Buddhist virtue; and *Brahmins*, regarded as the highest of men, are in truth *Śūdras* if they are lacking in it.

Here we see a discovery of a new sense and a new reason in regard to the 'truth' of man. The claim that the *Brahmins* are the

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standard for the value of man undergoes a radical revolution by this discovery. The idea of the true *Brahmin* or the “man” *par excellence* is established thoroughly overturning the conventional outlook of caste-distinction. It is even stated, “If those *Caṇḍālas* were equipped with the characteristics of a king, they can be called true *Brahmins*.” *Caṇḍālas* are especially lowly men among the Śūdras. By kingly characteristics may be meant the above mentioned Buddhistic virtues. Anyone who is equipped with those virtues is said to be king-like in his essential being as a man. What it means to be a “true” *Brahmin* is clear. It means that, as regards the truly essential in man, even the lowly can possess kingly characteristics. Herein is revealed the cause of Buddhism as a religion.

It must, further, be remembered that Buddhist monks voluntarily took to the mendicant way of life. They possessed no private property at all, except an alms-bowl and a robe that consisted of rags. They imitated therein their Master who was thought to have rejected the throne of *Cakravarti-rāja*, the world ruler, and to have chosen a life of begging. And “the begging-bowl was the Buddha’s badge of sovereignty. ... He obtained it as the reward of rejecting the position of world ruler. Teachers often gave their begging-bowl to their successor as a sign of the transmission of authority.”¹ It is also asserted in the same tract that there is no essential distinction among human beings belonging to any of the four castes, just like four children born of the same parents. The author of the tract repeatedly admonishes, saying, “Having been born of the same one father, why the conceited attachment to the difference of the four castes?” The statement that even the lowly, in their essential being as man, can be equipped with a king’s characteristics should especially be noted.

The “lowly” in the modern West are the modern ‘proletariat’ who are said to have become estranged from humanity in the capitalistic society. In order to recover their lost humanity, modern revolutionary ideology preaches the way in which the proletariat, who have been exploited so thoroughly that *nothing* more remains

¹ E. Conze, *Buddhism: its essence and development*, Harper, 1959, p. 55.

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to be lost, should in turn exploit their exploiters. It is a recovery of human rights and at the same time an actualization of the movement of man's realization carried out in the form of the realization of "ego" brought into the material phase of economics. In this case also, the "humanity" whose recovery is being sought is humanity of "ego"; it is not the realization of "man" as "non-ego" referred to in the passage on the possession of kingly characteristics in terms of the Buddhistic virtues.

However materially enriched and culturally elevated the recovered humanity might be, as long as it is restricted to the realization of "ego," there remains, if that statement is viewed from the standpoint of the realization of man in "non-ego," room for the statement: "those Brahmins can also be called *Śūdras*." Even when the proletariat have reached the highest possible standard of living and have ceased to be the proletariat, seen from the more essential viewpoint, they still remain proletarian. Needless to say, the aristocracy and the bourgeois, from this viewpoint, are equally proletarian. While, on the contrary, even the lowly are capable of being possessed of kingly characteristics as a true man.

It is not only Marxism but all other modern social ideologies as well which have failed to recognize the possibility of such a paradox. They may have reached to the concept of "Nothing" in material sense, as implied, for example, in the idea of "Proletariat," but they are unable to know anything of the Nothingness as the religious Self-realization of "Human-Being"-ness. It is not in their knowledge that even the lowly who have nothing materially can be possessed of kingly characteristics in the "Nothing" of the religious sense. Hence their interpretation of religion as an opiate. Such an interpretation can only be derived from the various ideologies, in whose perspective man appears only as an "ego." They only know the realization of man on the level of "ego," not on the level of "non-ego." The way of thinking referred to at the beginning of this thesis, in which social revolution is considered apart from the transformation of man, derives also from this blind spot.

In the contemporary West, the conflict between the theocentric

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standpoint of Christianity and the man-centered realization of “ego” of the various sorts of atheism, seems to be the most *basic* problem. Would not the Buddhistic realization of ‘man’ involve something that can contribute to the solution of this difficult problem?

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