

THE TEACHING OF SAKYAMUNI

(A lecture delivered at the Wadayama Tetsugaku-do—the Hall of Philosophy at Wadayama—in the northwestern suburb of Tokyo, on its yearly festival kept in memory of its founder, Dr Yenryo Inouye, who was also the founder of the Toyo University. Lectures are to be given, according to the founder's wish, at the annual festival, either on Sakyamuni, Confucius, Socrates, or Kant, to whom the Hall is dedicated. This year the subject was to be Sakyamuni and Professor Petzold, of the First Higher School, and Dr Kaikyoku Watanabe, a well-known Sanskritist, of the Jodo-shu College in Tokyo, were the lecturers.)

WE have met here today, in order to do honor to Śākyamuni, to celebrate his personality and his teaching, quite naturally the question arises “What did Śākyamuni teach?—What is the meaning of his teaching?”

To some of you this question may seem not at all a natural question, but a very simple-minded question. Especially amongst foreigners, as far as they are interested in Buddhism, a good many will consider such a question as rather useless, because the answer to it has been given long ago and is known to any A B C scholar of Buddhism. Such foreigner will point to the various Buddhist catechisms in German or in English and say: The teaching of Śākyamuni can clearly be seen from these excellent little hand-books, which leave no doubt about the real meaning of Buddhist teaching.

If we inquire, however, a little deeper, we find, that these handbooks are not satisfactory and that the answer to the question “What did Śākyamuni teach?” is not easy at all, but extremely difficult, for the reason that so many and so contradictory answers have been given to this question.

Let me mention only a few of these answers, the most typical ones.

There are people who say, Śākyamuni's teaching is identical with the Pali Canon; only what is contained in the Pali Canon can be considered as the genuine and true teaching of Śākyamuni.

Other people say: No! Not only the holy texts written in Pali language, but also the Sanskrit Sutras and commentaries and all the 1,662 works, contained in 6,771 books, forming the Chinese Tripitaka, are the true and genuine teaching of Buddha.

Still other people say: All these writings, no matter in what language they are written, or in what collection they are comprised, can not be considered as the proper teaching of Buddha at all, but only as the "finger pointing out the moon." That means to say: The real purport of Buddha's teaching cannot be expressed at all by words, but is revealed to us in the secret depth of our inner heart by a communion with Buddha himself, by becoming one with Buddha.

This last conception, which as you know, is proper to the Zen School, is, so to say, a "short-cut" which leads us suddenly and at a bound through the immense thicket of Buddhism to enlightenment. It is the most radical of all short-cuts, which dispenses with the study of the whole Buddhist literature, acknowledging only the transmission "form heart to heart."

Buddhism knows still other short-cuts, which are not quite as radical, but quite radical enough. It is certainly a short-cut, when only three or only one of the holy texts of Buddhism are acknowledged as truly fundamental, as is the case with the Amida Sects, namely, the Jodo, Shin, Yudzu Nembutsu, and Ji sects, and with the Hokke, or Nichiren sect. These five sects are not even satisfied with reducing the Buddhist canon to a few texts or a single text. The four Nembutsu sects make everything depend on Amitabha's oath of salvation and consider this oath as the full purport of Buddha's teaching. They say: Faith is all, besides it there is nothing, and the expression of faith is the continual invocation of the name of Amida—not of the name of Sākaymuni, as you will remember! In the Nichiren sect everything culminates in the recitation of the title of the Hoke Sutra, that means in the *unio mystica* with the Buddha of Original Enlightenment by prayer.

If intuition is acknowledged by the Zen sect as the only truth, so is faith by Nembutsu Buddhism and meditation on the mystical truth of *Hoke Kyo* by Nichiren Buddhism. According to the Zen sect the Buddha said to men: "Know me!" According to the Nembutsu sect he said: "Believe in me!" According to the Nichiren sect he said: "Seek for my essence in the *Hoke Sutra* only!"

The short-cuts which I have mentioned here, are short-cuts of Mahayana Buddhism. But already Hinayana Buddhism has found it necessary to summarise the variety of Sākaymuni's teaching into short formulas. Probably the best known is:

"Not to commit any sin, to do good and to purify one's mind, that is the teaching of (all) the Awakened."

We can call this formula of the *Dhammapada* the formula of Kai-Ritsu Buddhism, which considers morality as the essence of Buddhism, morality meaning in Hinayana Buddhism mainly self-discipline, eremitic life, conquering our own passions, in short purification of one's own self.

Another well-known formula of Hinayana Buddhism is the gatha of Aśvajit, found in the *Mahāvagga*:

"Of all phenomena sprung from a cause
The Teacher the cause hath told;
And he tells, too, how each shall come to its end.
For such is the word of the Sage."

Scarcely less famous is the stanza of the *Mahā-Parinibbāna-Sutra*:

"They're transient all, each being's parts and powers,
Growth is their nature and decay.
They are produced, they are dissolved again:
And then is best, when they have sunk to rest."

The last stanza, whose fourth line has also been translated: "To bring them into full subjection, that is bliss!" appears also in nearly identical words in the *Mahā-Sudassana Jataka* and in the *Psalms of the Brethren*. It is together with the *Mahāvagga* stanza generally described as containing the quintessence of Sākaymuni's teaching. Both are expressing

indeed the philosophical creed of the Sarvastivada school,—the most important of the Hinayana schools—and may be characterised as the theory of the three characteristics of the dharmas—or as the theory of causation of Hinayana Buddhism.

Here we become aware of the fact that the answer to the question “What did Śākyamuni teach and what is the meaning of his teaching?” is greatly influenced, if not entirely determined, by the philosophical standpoint of the various Buddhist schools. That seems to be a matter of course. But we must remember, that Gautama Sakyamuni, the itinerant teacher, in so many of his preachings which he delivered on his pilgrimages through India categorically rejected any philosophical standpoint. The philosophy in the realm of religion is metaphysics, and to metaphysics the Buddha, as he is described in the Hinayana sutras, did not like to listen. All the different metaphysical questions asked by the various philosophical schools of India—the questions as to the beginning and end of the world, as to the nature of the soul, as to the existence or non-existence of a saint who has entered Nirvana—have been disapproved of by Gautama Śākyamuni as useless questions, or as questions which lead men on the wrong track. The only question of which Śākyamuni approved, was the supremely practical question referring to individual salvation.

But scarcely some hundred years had passed after the entrance of Śākyamuni into Nirvana, when the metaphysical problems, pushed by him in the background, came more and more to the front in the dogmatical discussions. At last the metaphysical problems gained such importance, that it became the rule in all systematical discussions on Buddhism to use philosophy and religion as the two fundamental principles of classification. As a matter of fact, when we exclude the first stage of Buddhist literature, we see philosophy and religion overlap and influence each other to such a degree, that it is nearly impossible to keep them apart.

Already in the theological commentaries of the Hinayana

schools the right of philosophy to get a hearing in the religious debates is duly acknowledged, namely, on the one hand by the Sarvastivada school, the most important Hinayana school, which teaches the reality of all dharmas and the unreality of the ego, on the other hand by the Satyasiddhiśāstra school, which denies not only the reality of the ego, but also the reality of the dharmas, physical as well as psychical. There follow the two Indian schools of so-called undeveloped or half-developed Mahayana Buddhism, namely, the Madhyamika school and the Vijñānavādins, of whom the first teaches the philosophy of "Śūnyatā" or "emptiness" that means the existence of some absolute in negative formulation, while the latter by their "yui shiki" or "only mind" theory acknowledge the existence only of the subjective mind, creating the world by its own power. The schools of pure and fully developed Mahayana, which form the supreme part of the sublime building of Buddhist philosophy, teach partly a philosophy of Monism (i. e., the *Bhūtatahātā* philosophy of Aśvaghosha), partly a philosophy of identity of realistic or idealistic colour (i. e., the Tendai and Kegon schools, both of Chinese origin), partly a transcendental phenomenism and symbolism (i. e., the Shingon school, an offspring of the Indian Tantric school). These schools—with the exception of the two Hinayana schools and the Madhyamika school—are based on sutras, in which Buddha himself appears as preacher and teacher, and—very curious to say—as a preacher and teacher of metaphysics. While the Buddha of the Hinayana sutras (as mentioned before) treats all metaphysics with the greatest contempt, we see the Buddha of the *Hokke*, *Nehan*, *Kegon*, and *Dai-Nichikyō* on which the Tendai, Kegon and Shingon schools are mainly based, frankly reveling in metaphysics. This Buddha of pure Mahayana Buddhism is in *Hoke* and *Nehan Kyō* still called Sakyamuni, while in the *Kegon* and *Dai Nichi* he is called Vairochana, with the express stipulation, however, that this Vairochana is the Dharmakaya or the innermost enlightened body of Sakyamuni.

Now we are of course free to say, that this Śākyamuni of the pure Mahayana sutras is not at all Śākyamuni, inasmuch as Śākyamuni had entered Nirvana already many hundred years before these sutras were composed or "discovered." And note: By rejecting the Śākyamuni of the pure Mahayana teaching we shall not cease to be Buddhists, we shall simply be reckoned among the believers in the Small Vehicle. But shall we stand on much safer ground by confining our allegiance to the Śākyamuni of the Hinayana teaching only? Can we really, by taking our stand on the Agama suttas only, say, that we are standing upon the unadulterated words of the true and genuine Buddha? How is such pretense possible, if it is an indisputable fact, that Śākyamuni himself has not written anything and that the first Agama Sutras have been fixed at their earliest about one hundred years after Śākyamuni entered Nirvana, and moreover in a language which had never been used by Buddha, as Buddha did not speak Pali, but some Magadha dialect? Even by making the largest allowance for the strength of memory, possessed by the early Buddhists and for the faithfulness of oral transmission, it is therefore out of the question that we possess in the Pali canon Śākyamuni's real words, his *ipsisima verba*.

An honest and cool-headed consideration of the facts can only come to the conclusion, that it is impossible to determine clearly and unmistakably the real words of the master, and the whole standpoint of those who take their stand on the pure unaltered doctrine is illusory. We can only suppose and hypothetically deduce by the way of tiresome text criticism, what the Śākyamuni of flesh and blood may have said. Such text-criticism will undoubtedly acknowledge certain fundamental teachings like the four holy truths, the twelvefold chain of causation and the middle way as authentic teaching taught by Śākyamuni himself, but not the Agama suttas in their totality. These suttas are a product of later time and already greatly influenced by the development, which the religious inner life

of the people of India experienced since Buddha's Nirvana. And now I come to the positive answer to my question: "What did Sakyamuni teach, what is the meaning of his teaching?"

For the believer in Hinayana Buddhism the teaching of the Enlightened One is a petrified formula, which has been fixed for all eternity and admits only one interpretation, namely, the interpretation given to it by the Buddhist evangelists more than two thousand years ago. Those, however, who see in Buddhism, as in every true religion, a fountain of life, which—like mankind itself—is renewing itself constantly and is subject to a permanent organic development, the teaching of Buddha is a continual new revelation of the divine truth. Considered from this last point of view, the teachings of Buddha are as numerous as the sand of the Ganges river and so various that they correspond to the understanding of everyone of the innumerable living beings.

The Buddha—as we consider him—did not only speak once to men in his embodiment as Gautama Sakyamuni. He speaks from ever and for ever through the mouth of every man of good will and in the heart of every man of good will. Because the Buddha is nothing else but the Absolute expanded through the universe, nothing else than the Tathagata, which no formula can completely contain.

Anybody is free to denounce such conception of Buddha as heresy. The fact, however, is, that this heresy has been acknowledged as Buddhist truth since 2,000 years by millions of men and is still acknowledged as such. The fact is, that this conception of Buddha originated with inner necessity in the psychological disposition of men and in the needs of their souls and cannot be called a mere accident or ridiculed as a *Hintertreppowitz* (a back-stair joke) of history.

The teaching of Buddha, according to our view as stated here, coincides with the development of Buddhist religious philosophy during the last two thousand years. A clear total view of these various and seemingly conflicting theories can

only be obtained by harmonisation and strictest systematisation, as the Tendai school of Buddhism has done it in an unsurpassable way. This school tells us most clearly, what Buddha said and what is the meaning of his teaching by putting every type of doctrine in its proper place.

Of this immense and most important spiritual fabric of Buddhism which still today is containing as much life-force as ages ago, humanity, as a matter of fact, knows very little. In Buddhist countries, Buddhism is mainly a praxis—with its theory only a few selected scholars are familiar. In the countries of the West, Buddhism is wont to be considered from only one angle, so that this world religion congeals into something very insignificant; into a hobby for specialists, or into a plaything for dilettantes, or into a shibboleth for zealots, dressed into the straight jacket of orthodoxy. Only a deep and unprejudiced investigation and discussion of Buddhist problems, as it would be the task of the Mahayana Institute whose foundation I propose, can remedy this state of affairs.

The teaching of Buddha can only be properly understood if we consider it in its totality, as a living truth, which is revealing itself more and more clearly through the millenia,—that means, that we have to consider Buddhism, as it has *de facto* been in history, and not as we have arranged it to our fancy. Then we become aware that the four holy truths, the twelve-fold chain of causation, the middle way, etc., etc., have been subjected not only to one interpretation, but to various interpretations, and that all of them are derivable from Buddha's own fundamental formulas.

As a matter of fact, all principal teachings of Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism are already *in nuce* involved in primitive Buddhism. Just because primitive Buddhism was averse to all one-sided standpoints, the most different standpoints can be harmonised with it, provided that they are the offspring of true religious feeling and thought.

Therefore it could happen that to the three so-called

“seals” of Hinayana, namely :

1. All things are impermanent ;
2. Nothing has an ego-substance, that is, all things are conditioned ;
3. Eternally tranquil is Nirvana ;

a fourth seal, namely, the Seal of Absolute Reality, could be added, without contradicting in any way the teachings of primitive Buddhism and without shaking the building of Buddhism to its very foundations. Buddhism could pass from an initial state, which has often been described as Atheism, through the most differentiated shades of Pantheism and at last land in Theism, without committing any heresy. Buddhism is so large, that the most opposite tendencies, the negation of life and the affirmation of life, the ideal of the Arhat, and the ideal of the Bodhisattva, find room in it. We see in Buddhism on the one hand the “Nirvanisation” of Bodhi (Enlightenment understood negatively) and on the other hand the “Bodhisattvation” of Nirvana (Nirvana understood positively), and still, we are not entitled to say, that the one or the other conception is contradictory to the true principles of Buddha’s teaching.

The teaching of Buddha is indeed a very free teaching, but of this freedom and its saving power only a few men are conscious.

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