

MAHAYANA BUDDHISM AND JAPANESE CULTURE

Buddhism, so far known to the West, has been Buddhism whose canonical literature is written in Pali and generally known as belonging to the Hinayana. While the Sanskrit literature is not unknown yet it is to a limited extent. Even those who are acquainted with something of Mahayana are apt to regard it as a degenerated form of Buddhism. But in Japan it was from the very beginning Mahayana Buddhism that was introduced more than thirteen centuries ago, when Prince Shōtoku declared Japan to be the country most suited for the propagation of Mahayana Buddhism. Thus it came to pass that whenever Buddhism was mentioned in Japan it was the Mahayana form of it and not the Hinayana. The study of the latter was not, however, neglected, it was one of the curriculum in Buddhist colleges. The Hinayana was a study, not a religion in Japan. No wonder that it was in Japan that the Mahayana during its history of thirteen centuries has achieved most wonderful developments dividing itself into many sects which represented the many-sidedness of the Buddhist doctrine, and that it also came to be most closely woven into the texture of Japanese life and culture. If Japan has anything contributive to the civilisation of the world it is principally the product of Mahayana Buddhism.

Since the restoration about sixty years ago Japan has learned to take many things from the West, especially its industry, machinery, and political organisation. The adoption was not of course a mere imitation but assimilation which was carried out in an original manner. By this I mean that Western civilisation in Japan was modified according to the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism so as to promote life and culture in its most Oriental phase. In the adoption, therefore, there has been something quite original. To

understand this spirit of originality peculiar to Japanese life, no earnest student of Japan can ignore the signification of Mahayana Buddhism.

The rise of Mahayana Buddhism is a long history, we can say that it began to flourish at least two or three hundred years after the Buddha when the Prajñāpāramitā literature began to be compiled, nay, even when the Agamas were in the process of final redaction in which we have Subhūti as a representative of the doctrine of Śūnyatā. From this we can infer that the so-called enlightenment attained by Śākyamuni contained much of what came to be recognised as Mahayanistic though this fact never came to the surface in the consciousness of the Buddhists as distinguished from the Hinayanistic. The *Vimalakīrti*, the *Sukhāvativyūha*, the *Daśabhūmi*, the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka*, and other sutras mark no doubt stages of historical development, but we cannot deny the truth that they all endeavour to depict Enlightenment itself.

This conclusion may appear too dogmatic, but when we know the so-called Agama texts are too abstract, too archaic, too poor in content, we naturally surmise the presence of something much deeper, more appealing directly to the heart of every Buddhist. Without this surmise we cannot explain the wonderful power contained in the discourses of the Buddha which he was supposed to have given on numerous occasions. This inspiring power was not concretely grasped by those compilers of the Agamas. For instance, soon after the Enlightenment the Buddha was travelling with the group of his disciples in the neighbourhood of Magadha. When he saw a great fire he said, "O monks, better embrace this big fire than falling in love with a woman; fire burns the body but lust leads us to hell. It is like drinking boiling metal to be the recipient of a charity who has no faith, no morality in him," and so on. When this sermon was given the sixty disciples left the Brotherhood realising the difficulty of religious training, sixty others prostrated themselves on the

ground vomiting blood, while sixty others were cleaned of their spiritual defilements and attained enlightenment. The incident is told in the text in a detailed narrative, but to us there is a great discrepancy between the story itself which seems to be quite simple and the result achieved by the telling of the story by the Master. The whole narrative gives no doubt plain facts, but it utterly fails to give us the details of the most inspiring influence issuing from the personality of the Master himself.

To give another example, soon after the Enlightenment Buddha was sitting in the woods when thirty villagers each accompanied by his wife were enjoying themselves. One of the young men, however, happened to be a bachelor and his friends managed to get a courtesan for him as his temporary wife. After giving themselves to recklessness they all fell asleep. When they awoke they discovered that the courtesan had carried away all the precious stones and expensive dresses. They searched for her in all directions, and coming to the Buddha they asked if he did not see the guilty woman. Said the Buddha, "Which is more important, the precious stones or the mind that seeks them?" When they answered that the mind was more important, Buddha gave them a discourse on the subject. When this was finished, the thirty young men all abandoning their wives became at once homeless monks under the Buddha. The sermon itself was quite simple but the wonderful result which was achieved surpasses the one recorded of any great historical personage. The sermon, whatever it might have been must have been most miraculous, most inspiring sort of music, which enrapturing every listener made him lose all the barriers of ordinary consciousness, directly looking into the inmost soul-fountain with its bubbling and gushing water. To depict this soul-effect, the plain narrations of the Hinayana style fail to do justice to the inner power beaming forth from the Buddha's sermon. The Agama writers give us only an imperfect notation of the celestial music.

When the Agamas are interpreted in this way, the texts are no more Hinayanistic but Mahayanistic. The Mahayana strives to catch the spirit that has been moving not only in the utterances of the Buddha but in his whole personality. This can never be described in words. It no doubt goes beyond them. But ours is to endeavour to catch this indescribable something in whatever form that is within human power, that is to say, the enlightenment attained by Buddha must be made to reveal its content somehow. It is no doubt mystical as it transcends our limited consciousness but it is also rational because it sees everything in its aspect of *tathatā* or *śūnyatā*. *Śūnyatā*, or emptiness is something we cannot take hold of, but at the same time it is something before us that makes existence possible, that is *dharmatā*.

We generally live in the world of ideas and think this is everything. But in fact it is a kind of material which like a heap of coal requires to be ignited. We have to come in contact with facts themselves, laws that govern them, that is, we are to acquaint ourselves with a definite arrangement of things which goes under the name, "cause and effect." This is scientific reasoning, corresponding to the Buddhist world of *tathatā* or suchness. This explains how and why Buddha never contradicted science and thoughts based on it.

Mahayana Buddhism, however, goes one step beyond this by declaring that all that is discoverable by man is subject to the law of relativity, that anything explainable with words is thought-construction having no permanency in it. This is the state of things as they are. Catch a fish and dissect it to find the life-principal in it according to the so-called scientific method; but the fish thus brought on the scientific table is a dead one. What is left in your hands is after all the shell of reality and not reality itself. The living fish must be studied as it moves and swims and leaps. The scientific method of study is, therefore, only one aspect of reality, and does not exhaust it. Its value is merely temporal.

To see reality as it is, as it lives, is the teaching of Buddha. To do this it teaches to leap, to leave science and intellection behind. When this leap is effected one is in the midst of reality, one gains a life of eternity. This is what is told by all those who have gone through the religious experience. By entering into the realm of suchness and reality the dualism of being and non-being, subject and object, reality and knowledge, existence and value, is altogether obliterated; we have jumped over the abyss, gone to the other side, but at the same time we are firmly standing on the very earth. The world originally neglected is affirmed once for all, this world of Samsara is not other than Nirvana.

This is the teaching and spirit of Mahayana Buddhism. In short the Mahayana teaches us to return into suchness though this is no other than the world of particular facts. Our ordinary consciousness is under the control of science and every form of intellection, but Mahayana Buddhism wants us to realise a world of oneness which is the world of suchness, transcending idealism and materialism, realism and conceptualism. Suchness, in other words, is emptiness beyond human intelligence and discrimination, as it is on the other end of reality. When this suchness is grasped the whole domain of reality reveals its significance in the human personality, which is known as the value of religious experience.

The above delineation of the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism may appear somewhat difficult to comprehend intellectually, but an analogy may be found in art, which will facilitate our understanding. In the *Avatamsaka sutra* we read that the artist does not know what he is painting, it grows out of himself, in spite of himself; he is moved or urged by something greater than himself; and what he does is no more than offering himself to the unconscious direction. To be a great artist, therefore, means that he is capable of offering himself as a more perfect and manageable instrument to a spirit. He does not try to analyse the spirit, he

simply gives himself up to its control. When something comes between artist and spirit there is no artistic creation, for the product is maimed. The artist in this sense is an emancipated person, "one who thus comes," or "one who thus departs," that is Tathāgata.

The spirit of Mahayana Buddhism may thus be summarised in one word, *tathatā* or suchness; and those who have realised this suchness in any field of life as either a statesman or an artist or a capitalist or as a working-man, he is a true follower of Mahayana Buddhism. He will build up his own world of suchness according to his own light in response to his environment. All that is specially considered religious—repentance, humility, gratitude, worship, and so on, will have its proper function as it is stirred in the bosom of a religious person. Without this grasp Mahayana Buddhism will not yield its secrets to anybody. No scientific study of Buddhism will penetrate into this inner sanctuary of Buddhism. And when this spirit of Mahayana Buddhism is understood the central force controlling the movements of Japanese culture will be seen in its significant aspect.

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