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This issue will contain excerpts from MA-HAYANA BUDDHISM: AN APPROACH TO ITS ESSENCE by Yoshifumi Ueda, Pure Land Publications, Los Angeles, CA copyright 1989.

Is Buddhism a Religion?

Understanding Buddhism is not a simple matter. In its history of 2,500 years, Buddhism changed forms many times, producing answers in different ways to meet the deepest needs of the people. A variety of elaborate practices and many sophisticated schools of thought developed during this time, making it difficult to understand what underlies those differences in practice and thought. Some knowledge of the proper approach to Buddhism's essence may, however, help us move in the right direction. As a first step, some mistaken notions and assumptions about Buddhism must be clarified.

Buddhism is frequently referred to as one of world's great religions. While this may be acceptable as an objective statement, it contributes to ambiguity and misunderstanding because the concept of "religion" itself is nebulous. Considering the great range of meaning that the term religion covers, it is not surprising to discover how imprecise and elastic its connotations are. In fact, I might go so far as to say that we all have our own concept of religion.

Many people believe, for example, that religion is a matter of faith in God. But both "faith" and "God" have multiple meanings, and the more these terms are debated, the greater the differences grow. This is a fundamental problem even among scholars. A multitude of complex phenomena is covered by the term

"religion," but a common denominator which accounts for all of them remains to be determined. A definition which would do justice to one "religion" may not even apply to another. For this reason I seriously doubt that the term religion can be used to refer to Buddhism without making careful qualifications.

There is, however, an even more fundamental problem about approaching Buddhism by considering it to be a religion. The word religion is a product of Western civilization, intimately connected with the great Judaeo-Christian tradition. When Westerners first came into contact with Buddhism and perceived its external forms which paralleled those in their own tradition, they immediately classified Buddhism as a religion. This was taken over uncritically by Asians, and today "religion" is a common description of Buddhism even by Buddhists.

While this may be acceptable as a general practice, the unconscious tendency when Buddhism is seen as a "religion" is to see it through the Western perspective. When Buddhism is approached in that way, the secondary and peripheral aspects are emphasized at the expense of what is primary and fundamental. The proper understanding of the Buddha-Dharma is thus hindered.

We must first try to understand Buddhism as it is and not as seen through the lens of so-called "religion." Only after we grasp the teaching of the Buddha on its own terms can we describe it, whether it is a religion, philosophy, or a way of life. When we understand Buddhism and then call it a religion, the term religion will take on a new dimension because of several unique ideas in Buddhism which

are not found in other religious traditions. A major difference is the concept of Buddha which is radically different from the concept of God.

In the West, religion is considered to be based on the relationship between man and God. Man is finite, helpless and weak, whereas God is a supernatural being, omniscient and omnipotent. Because man's life is fulfilled through the grace of God, this dependence is crucial. It rules out any possibility of man attaining the status of God. In contrast, Buddhism teaches that it is a human person who becomes a Buddha. One of the consequences of this position is that there are countless Buddhas in the cosmos.

Another important concept in this notion of religion is "faith." Whatever faith may mean in its multiple connotations, it is based on the relationship between a relative being and an absolute being. This relationship between polar opposites is the very crux of faith, and its dissolution would mean the disappearance of not only faith, but also of religion in the traditional Western sense. We can also speak of a relationship between man and Buddha in Buddhism, but it is not confrontational, for ultimately it is man who becomes a Buddha.

Man and Buddha, thus, are not two separate beings but the selfsame being at two extremes of spirituality: unenlightened and enlightened, or non-awakened and awakened. The crucial factor between man and Buddha, then, is not dependence, but the *process of becoming*. A Buddha is called Tathagata because he or she has arrived at suchness, the true state of being, that is, has awakened to what it means to be truly human. This is true even

in the case of Pure Land Buddhism which begins with the relationship between a foolish being and Amida Buddha, but ends with the foolish being becoming an awakened one, the Buddha. What this means will be explained later, but the various ways or paths by which a person realizes supreme enlightenment accounts for the different schools of Buddhism.

Another significant difference concerns the question of the existence of God and of Buddha. The existence of Buddha is self-evident for a person who has realized supreme enlightenment. This is the reason why, in the voluminous literature of Buddhism, there is no attempt to give theoretical proofs for the existence of Buddha. The ultimate goal of a Buddhist is to become a Buddha; it is not a matter of argument or proof. In contrast, the existence of God has been a problem for many in the West, requiring a variety of proofs for His existence.

While it is necessary to define more fully what a Buddha is, it is clear from the preceding discussion that "faith" in Buddhism is the process of becoming: it is found in those who are not yet but are becoming Buddhas. Thus, although the path to enlightenment may begin with faith, as in Early Buddhism which teaches the progression through the stages of faith, diligence, concentration, meditation, and wisdom, it is consummated in Buddhahood. In the case of Pure Land Buddhism. "faith" begins with truly hearing the Name of Amida Buddha, "Namu-amida-butsu," in which is embodied the Primal Vow, and culminates in the attainment of supreme enlightenment. This process of becoming occurs when the heart of man and the heart of Amida unite in a "single taste." "Single taste" implies that this unity is not a mere oneness, but oneness that does not eliminate the opposition between man's heart and Amida's heart.

In summation, when "faith" is the goal of religion, God and man exist in a dual relationship. When "becoming reality" is the final objective, however, man and Buddha are in a non-dual relationship. If "religion" is primarily the former relationship, calling Buddhism a religion is highly misleading. While the distinction between the Christian and Buddhist traditions is much more subtle and complex that I have pointed out so far, to ignore the radical differences in the so-called religions can lead

to confusion when it comes to the proper understanding of Buddhism.

There is yet another difficulty in understanding Buddhism, although it is of a different nature and on another lever. This is the problem of popular Buddhism, which in many Asian Buddhist countries is intermingled with folk religion, superstitious beliefs, and various Buddhas and bodhisattvas, hoping for miraculous blessings and mundane benefits rather than seeking the path of enlightenment which frees us from such worldly bondage.

When all of this is viewed from the outside and indiscriminately called Buddhism, the proper picture is again obscured. Distinguishing between what is Buddhism proper and what has accrued as folk religion is difficult to determine in the practice of Buddhism today. This is especially true among the so-called "new religions," offshoots of traditional Buddhist schools. The teachings of these new religious organizations should not be uncritically affirmed as manifesting the teachings of Buddha.

What, then, is the proper basis for understanding Buddhism? How can we distinguish its authentic teachings from the popularized or adulterated forms? Further, how can we fully appreciate the non-dual relationship between man and Buddha in contrast to the dualistic relationships commonly associated with religion?

I propose to answer these questions by clarifying what reality or truth is in Buddhism. First, however, I must undertake another preliminary task: distinguishing between the utility value and truth value of religion.

What change can be expected in our lives through having faith in the Hongan?

This is an excerpt from Waimea Higashi Hongwanji No. 104, May & June 2008 newsletter "How Truly Human Are We?" by Rev. Seigoro Nishiwaki.

By the way, what kind of drastic change can be expected in our lives through having faith in the Hongan? In other words, how will the Buddhist teaching be manifested in the life of the devotee? Without making it clear, we cannot persuade other people to join our Buddhist circle. What kind of physical or psychological change will we find when we are taught about or persuaded by the fact of "Now, the life is living you?" We must represent clearly what kind of change will happen or can be expected in the lives of priests and members who are propagating this theme all over the world. At the same time we must show the ideal way of life for Buddhists. Without these activities it will end up just as an impractical desktop theory. Even if the concrete change is yet to be realized, we must designate the course of action.

Shinran Shonin composed fifteen "Hymns on Benefits in Present." Among them, I will quote one which goes "When we say 'Namu Amida Butsu,' the benefits we gain in the present are boundless; the karmic evil of our transmigration in birth and death disappears, and determinate karma and untimely death are eliminated." I interpret this to mean by chanting Nembutsu, we will be bestowed with countless blessings and happiness while we are alive in this present world. It is promised that whoever has true faith in Amida Buddha, can be a future Buddha while he/she is alive. In other words, the best benefit means being assured of birth in Amida's paradise. It is the greatest joy for us to realize this idea. Some other religious sects tell you that you can be cured of sickness, can live long, can be happy or can be rich, but Jodo Shinshu never tells us such things. Though it says that Nembutsu leads you to happiness in the "Hymns on Benefits in Present," it is done by Amida Buddha, not by us. What we can do is just believe in Amida Buddha. We can do nothing but entrust everything to the will of Amida Buddha. We are surely able to be born in the Amida Buddha's paradise. It is promised in the Hongan or the Orignial Vow of Amida Buddha. This is the very basic concept of Jodo Shinshy, A final Thought:

I will continue with the book AN AP-PROACH TO ITS ESSENCE by Yoshifumi Ueda. I found this book particularly interesting in the way it examines Buddhism in general and as it pertains to Jodo Shinshu.

Rev. Henry Tanaka sent me an article & I thought you might enjoy the message contained. If you have any questions, please send them. NAMO AMIDA BUTSU