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Jodo Buddhism in the Light of Zen

by

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IT is often said that Mahāyāna Buddhism is represented by Zen and Jodo (Pure Land), but how are they related to one another? I think it a deplorable fact that Jodo Buddhism has long been misunderstood by many people as being something little different from Christianity. As all serious students know, Buddhism is based on the teaching of *anattā* (non-self) or *sūnyatā* (non-substantiality), in other words, *pratityasamutpāda* (dependent origination). As far as this basic character is concerned, Zen and Jodo are equally in the line of authentic Buddhist tradition. The problem here amounts to this: What is the difference between these two streams of Buddhism?

As a man who has been brought up, consciously or unconsciously, in the Buddhist tradition in Japan, I think I might be allowed to express humble views on this point.

In this connection, I should like to describe the character of Jodo Buddhism in contrast with the Zen way of attaining the Buddhist principle, *sūnyatā*.

First of all, let me express my view about Mahāyāna and Theravada. As far as the essential doctrines are concerned, Mahāyāna is not different from Theravada. The one cannot exist apart from the other. The two are inseparable. Both are based on the principle of *sūnyatā*. Mahāyāna does not stand outside Theravada, but it embraces Theravada in its fold. This fact can easily be grasped if you read some passages from any of the Mahāyāna canons. Therein you will find how marvelously the Theravada teachings are interfused with the Mahāyāna teachings and how they are harmoniously uplifted to the universal level of expression. I think that what made Buddhism outgrow the boundaries of India and vindicated to human history the unquestionable validity and universality of the Dharma, was nothing but the subtle difference of expression between Mahāyāna and Theravada. Unlike Hinduism, by going beyond the boundary of India and by being assimilated into the totally different minds of the Chinese and Japanese, Buddhism proved the universality of its teaching. This can be compared with the acceptance of Christianity by the Roman Empire. But in the case of the assimilation of Buddhism into the Chinese mind, we witness no bloodthirsty proselytizing activities on the part of Indian Buddhists but only an overwhelming eagerness for receiving Buddhism on the part of the Chinese. On the other hand, Mahāyāna *sūtras* in the past gave rise to innumerable commentaries on them. This fact shows not only the history of dynamic progress of Buddhism and the assiduous endeavor of assimilation on the part of non-Indian peoples, but also the universal appeal of Buddhism to the depth of human spirituality. The history of incessant production of great numbers of commentaries (*sāstras*) is the history of people who accepted

and responded to the teachings expounded in the Mahāyāna *sūtras*. No teaching is alive where there is no one who is taught. It seems that the depth of the teaching is revealed to us by the depth of the understanding on the part of those who have been edified. It is the fruit that shows the nature of the tree. The history of Mahāyāna Buddhism may be said to be the history of how men have been taught and edified by the Dharma.

Perhaps one could describe the fundamental character of Mahāyāna Buddhism by saying that it always aimed at the deliverance of those who are excluded and rejected by the strict monasticism of the Theravada teachings. Its constant stress has always been put on universal deliverance.

Those who were excluded from the formal teachings were always a subject for grave concern in Mahāyāna Buddhism. Its principle is: "I am not yet completely delivered so long as there is anyone else yet to be delivered". In the *Vimalakīrti-nirdesa-sūtra*, Vimalakīrti, a lay Buddhist, declares: "A Bodhisattva is ill because all sentient beings are ill". The Mahāyāna can be said to be based upon a Bodhisattva spirit such as this.

The term *Jodo* is a translation of the Sanskrit, *sukhāvati*, a blissful land, and it points ultimately to the world of the Uncreated (*asamskrta*), that is, *Nirvāna* where selfness is completely dissolved. I presume that the practical, realistic Chinese mind accepted the abstract, metaphysical idea of 'Nirvāna' through this concrete, down-to-earth terminology.

The Chinese expressed 'Nirvāna' in terms of 'the capital of the Uncreated Nirvāna' or 'the capital of *Dharmatā* (Suchness)'. 'Capital' here means the place where we are expected to return ultimately. In this term it is clearly suggested that to seek the Way means to seek to return to the world of the Uncreated (eternity), the world of Selflessness, from which we departed.

The practice of Zen is to sit in meditation. In Rinzai Zen to sit in meditation with '*Ko-an*' (literal meaning is "Official Problem") is taught, while in Soto Zen, just "to sit" inmeditation is expounded. The practice of Jodo is to recite the *Nembutsu*, that is, to think of the Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life in the mind, and in practice to recite '*Namu Amida Butsu*' out loud. The Buddha who is called *Amida* in Japanese means 'non-measurable', that is, 'infinite', and this term contains both Infinite Light and Eternal Life. Light is the symbol of *prajnā* (wisdom) and Life is the symbol of *karunā* (compassion). So to say *Namu Amida Butsu* literally means 'I take refuge in the Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life'. The practice of Jodo consists only of reciting Nembutsu and nothing else, because Nembutsu is man's response to the call from the realm of Jodo and at the same time the voice of that call itself. Thus faith is already there in the reciting act itself. Nembutsu is the crystallization and the most focussed expression of human religious aspirations produced during the development of Dharma over the past twenty-five hundred years. Nembutsu is not only the expression of our praise of Amida's infinite virtues, Wisdom and Compassion, but also the confession of the debased character and hopeless incompleteness of our own reality when exposed in the bright light of Amida's infinite truthfulness embodied in His Original Vow. At the same time Nembutsu is the expression of our thankfulness to Amida for His all-embracing deliverance unquestionably realized in our reciting act itself. In reciting Nembutsu, *Shinshu* (Shin Buddhism) followers are hearing the call of Amida and the summons of Sākyamuni and all Buddhas to the world of Self-less-ness.

Amida is not a being like a god, or like the Other Being, but essentially he is *dharmatā* or thusness. However, *dharmatā* is often expressed in terms of a person, an embodiment of the Vow to deliver all beings. So the practice of Jodo Buddhists consists in reciting Nembutsu and at the same time perceiving its true significance. To understand the true significance of *Nembutsu,* one must go back to the Vow of Dharmakāra Bodhisattva who uttered 48 Vows and formed his Pure Land in order to deliver all sentient beings from ego-bondage by receiving them into this same Pure Land. The attainment of man's perfect freedom is symbolically expressed as 'Birth into the Pure Land.'

To the Jodo Buddhists, Nembutsu is understood as the call from the side of Amida who is bent on the deliverance of all sentient beings while at the same time it is the expression of thankfulness to Amida for having been delivered, on the part of the one who recites Nembutsu.

One must notice that not only in the Jodo canons, but also in most of the Mahāyāna canons, the essential teachings are expressed in highly metaphorical terms. Amida is called *Amida Tathāgata*, which means the One who has come from the world of *Tathatā*. In Jodo Buddhism it is understood that all sentient beings by their self-attachment have put themselves down from the original state which is identified with the Uncreated world. Here one must notice that the estrangement is not an estrangement from God but from none other than oneself in one's essential state of Self-less-ness.

The uneasiness or pain we suffer from this self-ness and our innermost longing to detach ourselves from this self-ness and return to the state of Thusness is nothing but the *bodhicitta* (aspiration for Enlightenment) symbolized as Nembutsu. The Nembutsu is, so to speak, a calling from Thusness and at the same time it is the response on the part of sentient beings to this calling. Therefore, the Nembutsu is often called 'the Mind seeking to become the Buddha' and at the same time 'the Mind seeking to deliver all sentient beings'. These terminologies were used by Tan-luan (476-542) of China in his Commentary on Vasubandhu's (330-400) *Treatise on the Pure Land* and they were handed down to Honen (the founder of Japanese *Jodo-shu* (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1262).

Jodo Buddhists are encouraged to utter the Nembutsu anywhere and at every possible time, in walking, standing, sitting or lying down. The merit of Nembutsu lies in the fact that it constitutes the highest common factor of all Buddhist practices with *samādhi* (meditation or concentration) for its core and that it is practicable to anybody, young or old, rich or poor, man or woman, at any time or any place; it is moreover and above all easy to retain not only as a minimum but also as a whole practice. To be caused to call the Nembutsu is understood by Jodo-Buddhists as the working of the Vow-power of Amida-Nyorai (*Tathagata*), that is, their own formless, essential Self, or Thusness. This working of the Vow-power of Amida-Nyorai expresses itself as a longing to part with selfness and to return to our real self, which is identified with the Uncreated, Nirvāna. Therefore, to utter the Nembutsu is an urge for us to return to our real Self, to be our primordial self, which is identified with Thusness. Therefore we night define Jodo as a movement to return to our real self by means of reciting Nembutsu, whereas Zen does so by means of sitting in meditation. In both cases, however, it is important for us to know that the object and the means are identical. Reciting Nembutsu is not simply a means of attaining salvation or Enlightenment, but also is the actualisation of Amida's Vow of universal deliverance in the reciter; sitting in meditation is not only a means of attaining *satori* or Enlightenment, but is none other than the process of *nirvāna* being realized in the meditator. Both practices have in their essence *samādhi* or cessation of all intellectualization and subsiding of all sensations. We can therefore see the common ground between Zen and Jodo in the practice of *samādhi*.

Zen Buddhism seems to have found favor with warrior classes or intellectuals, while Jodo seems to have appealed to the people at large. Honen's whole life was spent in making Jodo teaching independent of those older schools of Buddhism which regarded Jodo as a by-stream of orthodox Buddhism. He declared that although Nembutsu is the easiest way, which can be practiced by anyone irrespective of personal ability, as a teaching it is in no wise inferior, because it is not based upon man's contrivance but upon the Buddha's Vow. In a decadent age when man's eyes of wisdom and legs of practice have deteriorated, the Way of Nembutsu is the only means through which all sentient beings can be equally delivered. Shinran, a disciple of Honen, pushed this view further and declared that the practice of Nembutsu is not reducible to mere repetition since in it there is already contained the faith in the Vow, which is not man's faith but the faith rendered effective by the Great Compassion of Amida Buddha. Shinran described this faith as a great faith accorded by "the other power". The "other power" here means the working from the side of our essential being, which is Thusness itself.

According to the classification made by Nāgārjuna (c. 150-250) of India, Zen belongs to the Difficult Path and Jodo to the Easy Path. But since ancient times it has been said of Jodo that to practice is easy but to believe is difficult, indeed nothing is more difficult than this faith of the Pure Land, since a man might only too easily think that the "easy" path is cheap and inferior. According to the classification made by Tao-cho (562-645) of China, Zen is called the Path of the Holy, while Jodo is called the Path of the Pure Land. This may still be true to some extent, with the difference that recently most Zen monks have discarded the traditional monasticism and celibacy in order to adapt themselves to the conditions of contemporary civilized life. Traditionally the Path of the Holy was the way of people who renounced the world, and the Way of the Pure Land was the way of lay householders who were unable to do so. To cite a Christian parallel, Paul remained celibate throughout his life in spite of his defense of authenticity for householders while Peter was an ardent expounder of faith as a householder; Honen can be compared to Paul and Shinran to Peter, because Honen taught men to lead their lives in this world in the following way: "Those who cannot lead the life of Nembutsu without a wife may get married. Those who cannot lead the life of Nembutsu without eating meat may eat it". In order to lead the life of this world without being engulfed by it, it was the best way for men to be able to lead the life of Nembutsu. However, Honen himself passed his whole life remaining celibate and not eating meat, a worthy person who later was properly recognized as a saint.

On the other hand, Shinran called himself neither priest nor layman, and spent his whole life sharing the joy of the Nembutsu with his wife among the illiterate people in country districts.

In Zen it is taught that we get Enlightenment in this life; we are already Buddhas. The only thing we have to do is to realize that we are Buddhas. But in Jodo it is taught that we can attain Nirvāna only after death; in this life we cannot attain Nirvāna (or Buddhahood) with our sin-ridden flesh. With our acquiring of faith in this world we are assured of being among those who belong to the 'Right Established State' and who are assured of being born in the Pure Land. Shinran mentioned ten kinds of profit to be gained as a result of acquiring faith. Among these (to mention the main ones) one finds the blessing of turning adversity into virtue; this means we can accept any hardships resolutely and overcome them even with joyous mind: and also the blessing of having a grateful heart and a desire to pay back what we owe to others; the blessing of always doing works of benign compassion, and so on.

The expression 'to be born in the Pure Land' is a metaphorical expression of our returning to the state of Nirvāna. It is often noticed that Zen followers are apt to be optimistic, self-assertive or over-confident

in themselves, while those who follow Jodo are apt to be self-conscious, hesitant and too sin-conscious. These are the pitfalls into which the extremists of both schools are apt to fall. That is to say, Zen has an inclination towards over-statement, and Jodo towards under-statement.

It could be said of Zen that it is idealistic, and of Jodo that it is realistic. This is most clearly seen in the attitude of Dogen (1200-1253), founder of the Soto Zen school of Japan, and of Honen towards the so-called *Mappo Shiso* (Latter Day Thought). This thought was expounded in a Mahāyāna *Sūtra* entitled *Daishukkyo* in which it is foretold by the Buddha that the five hundred years following the Buddha's *Parinirvana* is the Time of Right Dharma in which there exist the Teaching, those who practice it, and those who attain Buddhahood. Then the next thousand years is the Time of the Semblance of Dharma, in which the teaching and those who practice it exist, but not those who attain Enlightenment. The third is the next ten thousand years which is called the Latter Age, in which only the teaching exists, but not those who practice it or who attain Buddhahood.

Dogen rejected this thought and said that any time is the time of Right Dharma and encouraged his contemporaries to practice *Zazen* (sitting meditation); while Honen believed in this thought and perceived the truth of it reflected in his own mind as well as in the conditions of his time. He taught that in the Latter Age Nembutsu is the only Way through which all people, young or old, men or women, weak or strong, can equally be delivered from the bondage of Self-ness and be born in the Pure Land; he was standing clearly upon his own existential realization. For this reason I temporarily categorized Zen, which stands upon *Sollen*, by calling it idealistic, and Jodo, which stands upon *Sein*, by calling it realistic. Dogen held aloft the torch of Dharma, while Honen considered deeply the capacity of himself as well as of the people of the Latter Age who would be the recipients of the Dharma.

Zen and Jodo equally regard sin-consciousness as a process which should finally be dissolved on the way to deliverance, but as things are it seems that Jodo is more inclined to be sin-conscious than Zen.

Zen rejects weak-minded Way-seekers and tries to lead men in such a way that they themselves resolutely seek the Way under the strict tutelage of a master. But Jodo takes people of all grades of progress on the Way into account and tries to lead them, in one way or another. If you look into the Meditation Sūtra, you will find a provisional gradation of people who are the recipients of Dharma. The fact that not only the Dharma teaching, but also the recipients have been carefully analyzed since ancient times may be the distinctive character of Jodo Buddhism. In this respect the teaching of Jodo Buddhism can be said in its structure to be standing upon the principle of interdependence of Dharma and Man, the oscillations of which, it must be admitted, have produced in the past a variety of interpretations and sometimes a teaching which was very similar, for instance, to Christianity.

This consideration for the generality of people on the part of Jodo is severely criticized by some followers of Zen as not being a true kindness; however, all followers of Zen do not share this view.

It is often said that Zen belongs to the Self-Power School and Jodo to the Other-Power School. Nothing is more misleading than this kind of view, which rests on a too superficial observation. The strenuous efforts required in seeking the Way are equally shared by both ways. The dissolution of the distinction between Zen and Jodo is beautifully expressed in the following words of Dogen to be found in his main work '*Shobogenzo*': "This life-and-death of ours is the Life of the Buddha. If you hate and discard this live-and-death, you are losing the Buddha's Life itself. While if you go on staying in it and

are attached to it, you are equally losing the Buddha's Life. The Buddha's Being should not be interfered with. You are entering the Buddha's mind only when you neither hate *samsāra* nor love *samsāra*. And don't cry to estimate it with your mind. Don't try to describe it with words. When you are detached from your body and mind and when you throw them into the Home of the Buddha resign yourself to the Working of the Buddha and just follow it; then you can detach yourself from *samsāra* and become Buddha, without exerting any endeavor and without ever consuming your mind. Why should there be any constraint in the mind?"

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

Devotee: Is society right in taking the life of a murderer?

Maharshi: What is it that prompted the murderer to commit the crime? The same power awards him the punishment. Society or the State is only a tool in the hands of the power.

Sri Ramana Maharshi

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