

# The Dharma Breeze

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Maida Center of Buddhism

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## What Is Lacking in “American Buddhism”

Nobuo Haneda

### Introduction

Japanese Buddhism has been introduced to Americans at a rapidly increasing pace since the end of World War II. And, unfortunately, what has been taking shape as “American Buddhism” generally fails to emphasize the most essential point of Buddhism: self-examination. If “American Buddhism” lacks the focus of self-examination, it will be “much ado about nothingness.”

American Buddhists who advocate an American style of Buddhism choose to overemphasize matters of secondary importance. Furthermore, some say that they want to create a new and wonderful type of Buddhism by combining the spiritual traditions of Japan with the spiritual traditions of America and are looking forward to this creation.

The naiveté of this attitude reminds me of the story of George Bernard Shaw, the famous playwright, and a young and beautiful actress. The young actress told the old and not very handsome playwright that it would be wonderful if they could get married. When Mr. Shaw asked the reason why, she replied that the two of them, together, could create a child that had the excellent brain of Shaw and the beautiful face of the actress. Mr. Shaw smiled and told her that she was, indeed, an optimist, for a child from a union of the two of them might, in fact, have the brain of the actress and the face of the playwright.

“American Buddhists” are much like this. They optimistically believe that a mixture of two spiritual traditions will automatically bring about a wonderful result. Merely mixing the two does not guarantee an improved product. Chances are great that the mixture will produce something deficient in character, something unimaginably poor in content. On the other hand, if the essence of Buddhism, or a living Buddhist tradition that exists in Japan, is brought intact into the spiritual climate of this country, we will have a vital and dynamic form of Buddhism.

The core of Buddhism is self-examination. Buddhism simply cannot exist without it. The Zen master Dogen (1200-53) said, “Studying the Buddha-Dharma means studying the self.” It is only through self-examination that we can understand the truth taught in Buddhism and experience spiritual awakening. Shin Buddhism calls this spiritual awakening *shinjin* and Zen Buddhism calls it *satori*.

Importantly, examination of the self is the goal of Buddhism. There cannot be any other goal. The Buddha-Dharma cannot be used as a means of attaining something else. If self-examination is not taught as the essence of Buddhism, whatever is taught in the name of Buddhism is not authentic Buddhism; and whatever activity is performed in the name of Buddhism is not true Buddhist activity. Both are merely means to an end, although they may have a Buddhist facade.

To clarify, there are three aspects of “American Buddhism” that I consider means to an end. The first is “American Buddhism” as a means to forge an identity. It caters to the need for religious identity felt by some Japanese-Americans who live in the midst of a mostly Christian population and desire a religious affiliation that reflects their ethno-cultural background. American Buddhism also caters to the need for religious identity felt by some non-Japanese-Americans who assert that Buddhism is superior to Christianity. However, this type of attachment to a religious identity is strange when we remember that Buddhism,

probably more than any other religion in the world, strongly opposes such attachment to a fixed label or identity.

The second (means to an end) aspect is “American Buddhism” as a means to satisfy the cultural interests of some Americans; a focus by many Americans on the mysteries of the Orient may have spurred this movement. Many Buddhist temples teach the tea ceremony, flower arrangement, calligraphy, etc., in the belief that such arts can lead an individual to understand the truths of Buddhism. But throughout Japanese history, these arts were developed and maintained for the most part by leisure-class aristocrats. Although many of these elite people claimed to be Buddhists, their religiosity can be questioned because true Buddhists have always been, in my opinion, serious about sharing Buddhism with all types of people, including the uneducated and the poor. Authentic Buddhists were not interested in such leisurely and indulgent activities.

The third (means to an end) aspect is “American Buddhism” as a means to obtain mental health. Some individuals search for a religious environment wherein their emotional or substance abuse problems can be cured. Zen, for example, has become particularly popular among these people. While a Buddhist environment may, indeed, provide peace and tranquility, this environment is only a temporary escape *for the ego-self*. It does not realize thorough examination *of the ego-self*. This is because the “cure” must come from within the individual. In Buddhism, lack of self-examination is the basic cause of all human problems.

Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (a Japanese Shin Buddhist thinker, 1863-1903) said, “Religion is not a path to follow to become a good man in this world. It is a path reaching beyond man.” (*December Fan*, p. 20) When we take these words as a definition of true Buddhism, we can only say that “American Buddhism” as a provider of peace and tranquility is “a path to become a good man in this world.” It is not “a path reaching beyond man.”

Now that I have discussed examples of what I refer to as “American Buddhism,” I wish to add that I am not saying that activities such as cultural activities are useless. Rather, it is a matter of priorities. I am saying that we should consider self-examination the most important issue in Buddhism. Compared with self-examination, such things as cultural activities are superficial and insignificant.

I often hear the following rationale for the “means to an end” type of Buddhism: “Buddhism, particularly Shin Buddhism, has some negative elements and Americans don’t like negative things. If we emphasize those elements, Americans will not be attracted to Buddhism. We must accommodate Buddhist teachings to the American way of thinking. We must talk to them about positive teachings.”

This statement reflects a shallow understanding of Buddhism. It is ridiculous since the “negative elements” are indispensable to Buddhism and we cannot eliminate them. Discovery of negative elements—impermanence, emptiness, deludedness, and ignorance—in the self is the content of self-examination. Could there be any authentic self-examination if we eliminated the “negative elements”? True Buddhist “awakening” is often compared to a beautiful lotus flower that grows up from the mud, because Buddhist awakening means awakening to the “negative elements” in the self.

If a true religion contains the destruction of old values and the creation of new ones, the destruction of old values is certainly negative. Yet it is only after the destruction of these values that we have new ones. How can we create new values without ridding ourselves of the old ones? As the “positive” can come only after the “negative,” it is only after the negation of the self that we can experience liberation from the self. Truth first challenges and then negates us, and in doing so, liberates us. If a teaching is modified to fit selfish human needs, it no longer contains truth. If a doctrine is tailor-made to affirm the self and make it comfortable, it no longer contains truth.

Good medicine is bitter to the taste. If we eliminate what causes the bitterness, it may be easier to swallow, but we lose the effectuality of the medicine, too. If people extract the “negative elements” and create an “American Buddhism” that is sugar coated, their Buddhism does not have the power to liberate us. Furthermore, if the great Buddhists such as Honen, Shinran, and Dogen had taught only positive teachings, catering to the wants of the general public of their times, they would not have been persecuted. It is because they spoke of negative truths that challenged the people that they were persecuted.

Historically speaking, it was inevitable for Buddhism to be introduced to America in association with various cultural elements. But it is time we recognize that Buddhism is, first and foremost, a teaching of serious self-examination. It is time to identify the real essence of Buddhism by separating it from matters of secondary importance that have

intermingled with it. Buddhism challenges and negates the self. Most importantly, it does not serve any of our selfish wants, whether ethical, ethnic, cultural, or otherwise. Thus, the time has come for us to move from a shallow appreciation of Buddhism to a more serious, truly religious appreciation of the teachings of Shakyamuni and Shinran.

## **The Holey Buddhism**

**Nobuo Haneda**

### **Introduction**

In this essay I want to discuss what I consider the core of Buddhism. At the same time I wish to criticize the form of Buddhism that I call “holey Buddhism.” By this term, I mean Buddhism that has a hole in it, or Buddhism that does not have a core. What, then, is the core of Buddhism? It is self-examination and the experience of spiritual awakening through self-examination. Our Buddhist predecessors were exclusively interested in self-examination and in sharing with us their insights about it. Buddhists in our time, however, do not necessarily regard self-examination as the most important issue, and regard matters of secondary importance—accumulation of doctrinal information, performance of rituals, and engagement in cultural activities—as primary.

What, then, is self-examination, the core of Buddhism, without which our Buddhism becomes holey Buddhism? Self-examination means the process of discovering the truth of impermanence within the context of the self. Buddhism teaches one truth, the truth of impermanence. How deeply we understand it determines whether we are authentic Buddhists or not.

### **Impermanence—the Cause of Shakyamuni’s Renunciation**

First, I want to point out that Shakyamuni’s encounter with the reality of impermanence caused him to leave his householder’s life and seek the way. According to tradition, when Shakyamuni as a young man went out of three gates and saw an old person, a sick person, and a dead person, he learned that aging, sickness, and death were inherent and inevitable in his existence. Because of this experience he could no longer enjoy his life as he had before, and became extremely depressed. But, not long after that, he met a traveling monk whose face was shining because of his wisdom. Then, Shakyamuni awakened an aspiration to emulate him, and left his palace to seek the way. Here we can see that his insight into impermanence (i.e., aging, sickness, and death) was the primary cause of his decision to leave the palace and become a seeker. There is a Buddhist story about the three heavenly messengers that teaches us the importance of recognizing the reality of impermanence. The story goes as follows:

A man falls into hell. At the entrance, the man meets Yama, the king of hell. Yama asks this man who has just come to hell, “During your lifetime did you ever meet the three heavenly messengers?” The man answers, “No, my lord, I never met any heavenly messenger.” Yama asks the man, “Did you ever meet an old person walking with a cane?” The man replies, “Yes, my lord, I met many such persons.” Then Yama tells him, “You are suffering this present punishment because you did not recognize in an old man a heavenly messenger sent to warn you that you must quickly change your way of living.”

Then, Yama and the man repeat the same conversation concerning a sick person and a dead person. Interestingly enough, Yama calls aging, sickness, and death “the three heavenly messengers.” Many of us usually hate them and try to ignore them. But in Buddhism they are heavenly messengers, because they can guide us to the path of self-examination and awakening.

Further, I want to quote the words of the Zen master Dogen, which, like resounding thunder, remind us of the urgent need to recognize the reality of impermanence and to seek the Dharma:

Our teachers frequently warn: “Do not spend time wastefully” and “Do not pass your time in vain.” Students today should treasure every moment of time. This dewlike life fades away; time speeds swiftly. In this short life of ours, avoid involvement in superfluous things and just study the way.

People nowadays say, “It is difficult to discard my obligations to my parents,” or “It is difficult to disobey my master’s orders,” or “It is difficult to part from my wife, children, and relatives.”... “I don’t have the capacity to

endure study of the way.” Thinking in this way, they join the worldly pursuit of wealth and property, without separating from masters or parents and without severing ties with their wives, children, and relatives. With their whole lives wasted, they will have only regrets when they face the end.

Sit calmly and consider the principles of Buddhism; and quickly arouse the mind that seeks the way. Masters and parents cannot give you enlightenment. Wives, children, and relatives cannot save you from suffering. Wealth and property cannot free you from the cycle of birth and death. Worldly people cannot help you. If you do not practice now, claiming you are without the capacity, when will you ever be able to attain the way? Single-mindedly study the way without giving thought to the myriad things. Don’t put it off until later.

(*A Primer of Soto Zen*, pp. 83-4, with some changes by N. Haneda)

Here Dogen says that if we have insight into impermanence—the shortness of human life, we will certainly recognize that the most important thing in our lives is seeking the Dharma. In other places in his writings, Dogen teaches us that “seeking the way” means “studying the self” and “experiencing awakening through self-examination.”

### **Shakyamuni’s Awakening—Two Aspects of the Truth of Impermanence**

Now I have said that when we gain insight into the reality of impermanence, we will recognize the need to seek the Dharma and examine the self. Now let me explain how Shakyamuni examined the self and attained his great awakening.

After having engaged in various practices for six years, Shakyamuni renounced all of them, just sat under a tree, and meditated. What was his meditation? Or, what is Buddhist meditation? It is self-examination. It is not a means to enjoy the state of trance or tranquility of the mind. It is questioning “What am I?”

Shakyamuni was examining whether he had something permanent or substantial in his being, in his body and mind. After having carefully examined the self, he realized that there was nothing permanent or substantial in his being. He clearly understood that impermanence, or constant change, was the only absolute reality and his whole being was part of it. Then, one morning when he was thirty-five, he attained his great awakening. The content of his awakening was nothing but his insight into the truth of impermanence. Here I want to discuss two aspects of the truth of impermanence, or two aspects of Shakyamuni’s awakening experience. The first is the negative aspect and the second is the positive aspect.

First, let me discuss the negative aspect. Shakyamuni often described the contents of his awakening with two statements, “Everything is impermanent” or “Form (i.e., the body), sensation, conception, impulse, and consciousness (i.e., the four components of the mind) are impermanent.”

An extremely important point to be noted here is that when Shakyamuni said those words, he meant, “Everything *in me* is impermanent,” or “*My body and mind* are impermanent.” He was talking about the truth of impermanence that he discovered *in the self*. His meditation under a tree was self-examination—asking one question, “What am I?” And those two statements were his answers to the question. In short, he was saying, “*I am* impermanent.” Although those statements could be understood as a description of the objective and scientific truth, they must be understood as his *subjective* insight into the basic nature of his being. If one can become a Buddhist by objectively knowing the reality of impermanence, we must call all scientists “Buddhists” because they know the reality of impermanence—because they know that all things are in a state of flux. But “a Buddhist” actually means a person who clearly recognizes impermanence in the self. Thus we cannot call all scientists “Buddhists,” because they do not necessarily know impermanence subjectively within the context of the self. It is one thing to know objectively the truth about the world around the self, but it is quite another to know it subjectively concerning the self.

Knowing the truth of impermanence outside the self may not be difficult. We can easily see people, animals, and plants constantly moving. But seeing the truth concerning the self is not easy. Yet we must clearly recognize this truth concerning the self. When we recognize the truth within the self, the truth challenges and negates us. It shatters our pride in possessing something good and pure in the self. It makes us see the futility of being attached to ideas, opinions, and viewpoints. This is a deeply humbling experience that we could call spiritual death. When Shakyamuni talked about the concept of *anatman* (selflessness or egolessness), he was discussing the total negation of the self that was realized by the truth. Thus the truth of impermanence exerts an absolutely negative power over us.

Now I have discussed the first (negative) aspect of the truth of impermanence. Now let me discuss the second (positive) aspect of the truth.

When Shakyamuni clearly understood impermanence as absolute truth, he accepted it. His entire being merged with the truth just as a small stream merges with a huge river. Then, the negative aspect of the truth of impermanence disappeared and the truth turned into something positive and wonderful. Now he realized that the truth was actually the universal flow of life, a gigantic and creative flow of life. He realized that all things, not only animate things but also inanimate things, were manifesting the newness and freshness of life. He realized that all existing things were fellow participants and components in the universal flow of life. He now came to see the world as dynamic and creative and himself as one dynamic and creative component of the world. In this way, he started to live his life in a very powerful and creative fashion. Thus, although the truth of impermanence initially, before his awakening experience, appeared to be the worst enemy, the most terrifying destroyer, of life, after his awakening experience, it turned into the best friend, the most wonderful affirmer, of life. When Shakyamuni went against the truth, it was his worst enemy. But when he accepted it, merged with it, and flowed with it, it became his best friend.

## **Conclusion**

I have discussed what I consider the core of Buddhism. It is self-examination. It is discovering the truth of impermanence within the context of the self.

We engage in all kinds of entertainment, such as sports, music, and traveling. There is nothing wrong with those activities. But more often than not, by engaging in those activities, we are consciously or unconsciously running away from the most important and urgent issue in our lives. We do all kinds of non-religious things religiously. We play golf religiously. We watch television religiously. We drink and gamble religiously. But few of us practice religion religiously. The other day one of my friends told me, "I say the nembutsu in two places. I say it in my Buddhist temple. I also say it when I play a slot machine in Las Vegas. But there is a difference between my nembutsu in a Buddhist temple and my nembutsu in Las Vegas. The difference is that when I say the nembutsu in Las Vegas, I really mean it."

Even when we engage in various Buddhist activities, such as attending services and conferences, we may often be using those activities to run away from the most important and urgent issue in our lives. By engaging in all kinds of Buddhist cultural and ritualistic activities, we may often be convincing ourselves that we are doing something good and important and not realizing that those activities are removing us from the most important and urgent issue in our lives.

All of us have the innermost aspiration (*hongan*) for living the most meaningful and fulfilling life. But simply because the aspiration is so deeply hidden in us, we are not even aware we have it. We are so deeply immersed in our daily lives. Living complacently in our world, we do not think about the shortness of our lives. We do not pay any serious attention to the most important issue in our lives.

Although our daily lives make us forget the innermost aspiration, if we recognize the shortness of our own lives, we certainly cannot sit complacently. We cannot help distinguishing between the matter of primary importance and matters of secondary importance. We cannot help focusing our attention on self-examination and the experience of spiritual awakening through self-examination. Unless we identify the most important issue and devote our lives to it, we cannot feel easy. Unless we fulfill our innermost aspiration, we cannot experience the deepest joy and happiness.

Let me finish this essay by quoting again the words of Dogen:

Sit calmly and consider the principles of Buddhism; and quickly arouse the mind that seeks the way. Masters and parents cannot give you enlightenment. Wives, children, and relatives cannot save you from suffering. Wealth and property cannot free you from the cycle of birth and death. Worldly people cannot help you. If you do not practice now, claiming you are without the capacity, when will you ever be able to attain the way? Single-mindedly study the way without giving thought to the myriad things. Don't put it off until later.

(May, 2, 2010)

**Now available!**

**2009 Maida Center Summer Retreat, a DVD Set**  
\$ 50.00 including handling/postage

*Dharma Breeze: Essays on Shin Buddhism*

By Nobuo Haneda @ \$14.95, plus handling/postage

*Heard by Me: Essays on My Buddhist Teacher*

By Shuichi Maida @ \$20.00, plus handling/postage

## Religion and Culture

Nobuo Haneda

### Introduction

During the first half of the last century, the first generation of Japanese in this country built many Shin Buddhist temples as religious and cultural centers. Today those temples have some serious institutional and doctrinal problems. Institutional problems include a decrease in membership and a shortage of ministers. In this essay I want to discuss a doctrinal problem that those temples have. Specifically, I want to talk about a problem concerning the relationship between religion and culture.

### The Difference between Religion and Culture

In the past, Shin Buddhist temples in this country have often served a dual function as both religious centers and Japanese cultural centers. But up until now it has been ambiguous whether the temples are religious centers accompanied by culture or cultural centers accompanied by religion. I believe that it is now crucially important to clarify the basic role and function of the Shin Buddhist temple in America.

First, let me define what I mean by the “cultural aspect” of a Buddhist institution and the “religious aspect” of a Buddhist institution. By the “cultural aspect,” I mean the Japanese ethno-cultural aspect. I mean Buddhist rituals, cultural activities such as the tea ceremony and flower arrangement, and festivals such as the Obon Dance. All these things are presented in Japanese forms. By the “religious aspect,” I mean teaching and learning activities. I mean the activities related to the teachings of Shakyamuni and Shinran.

I would compare the cultural aspect to “a container” and the religious aspect to “water.” Concerning the cultural aspect or “container aspect,” it is quite natural that different ethnic groups in this country have different cultural activities. The Japanese, the Chinese, and the Tibetans have their respective cultural activities in their Buddhist temples. Thus concerning the “container aspect” of the temple, it is quite natural that each temple is different.

But concerning the “water aspect” of the temple, there should not be differences. As there is only one water in this world, there should be only one essence of Buddhism. If Buddhist temples are Buddhist temples, they must teach the same Dharma—the universal truth. They must have a common denominator; they must contain the same water. What, then, is the water, the essence of Buddhism? The water is self-examination and the experience of spiritual awakening through self-examination. What makes Buddhism Buddhism is self-examination. It is the water and the lifeblood of the tradition.

Here I recollect a couple of questions I received from a friend. He asked me, “Mr. Haneda, you seem to be differentiating religion from culture. But aren’t religion and culture inseparable? Aren’t religion and culture basically the same?” I answer “yes” to the first question. Yes, religion and culture are inseparable. Like a container and water, they are certainly inseparable. Water needs a container. Water cannot exist by itself.

I answer “no” to the second question. I strongly disagree with the idea that religion and culture are the same. The container and water are absolutely different. The basic difference between religion and culture is that culture (things such as rituals and the tea ceremony) can entertain and amuse us, *but it cannot bring about a total spiritual transformation of our lives*. However, religion (the Dharma) is not there to entertain and amuse us. When we meet the Dharma, it challenges and negates our petty selves and liberates us into the wonderful world of the Dharma. *Only religion can bring about a total spiritual transformation of our lives*.

In culture, the self is not negated; but in the Dharma, in religion, the self is negated. The self can bring culture under its control, but it cannot bring the Dharma under its control, because the Dharma is much more powerful than the self.

We must clearly understand the differences between culture and religion, between the container and water. The container *cannot* quench our thirst. It is the water that quenches our thirst and gives us life. It is sad, very sad, that some Shin Buddhists in this country confuse culture with religion, confuse the container with the water. They think culture and religion are the same.

### **The Future Direction of the Shin Temple**

The primary emphasis of Shin temples in this country has been placed on cultural activities, and only secondary emphasis has been placed on learning Shinran’s teachings, or on self-examination. Primary emphasis has been placed on the container and secondary emphasis on the water.

So far people have been seeing a container, but it has not been clear what the container contains. The living water that is supposed to be in the container has not been clearly shown or explained. Probably it has been inevitable that Shin Buddhist temples have been that way, because they had to play a historical role as Japanese cultural centers for the first and second generations of Japanese-Americans.

But now the times are changing. Now the younger generation is not satisfied with only the container aspect of the temple. They are asking where the living water is, what the living water is. They are asking if there is truly any living water—anything relevant to their own lives. They are asking about the universal meaning of the tradition.

I believe that the priorities of the temple must be reversed. The religious and educational function of the temple should become primary; cultural activities should become secondary. The water should become primary and the container secondary. It should be *water accompanied by a container*. It should not be *a container accompanied by water*. It should be a Shin Buddhist learning center accompanied by culture. It should not be a cultural center accompanied by Shin Buddhism. The Shin Buddhist temple should become a place where we seriously examine the self. I sincerely hope that the Shin Buddhist temple becomes a place where Americans are connected with living Buddhist traditions that exist in Japan.

## **“Thank You” for Your Generous Donations**

**(December, 2009–May, 2010)**

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### **Notes:**

July 30 (Fri.) thru August 1 (Sun.), 2010, we will hold the Maida Center Retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. Dr. Haneda and Rev. Patti Nakai will lecture on “The

Bodhisattva Dharmakara's Practice—An Introduction to the *Kyogyoshinsho*." Information and the registration form are found on the last page of this newsletter.

Dr. Haneda has revised his two previously published articles—"What Is Lacking in American Buddhism" and "Religion and Culture," and put them in this issue.

Every Saturday (from 2:00 to 5:00 pm) we have a study class at the Maida Center. We have been studying Shinran's *Kyogyoshinsho*. We are now studying the *Shoshin-ge*. Everyone is welcome. (T.H.)

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## Maida Center 2010 Summer Retreat

### *The Bodhisattva Dharmakara's Practice*

#### —Introduction to the *Kyogyoshinsho*—

- Date:** July 30 (Fri.) 6:00 p.m. – August 1 (Sun.) noon, 2010
- Place:** The Jodo Shinshu Center, 2140 Durant Ave., Berkeley CA 94704
- Speakers:** Rev. Patti H. Nakai, the Buddhist Temple of Chicago  
Dr. Nobuo Haneda, director of the Maida Center of Buddhism
- Texts:** (1) *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, volume II (*The Larger Sutra*), Shin Buddhism Translation Series; or *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, Numata Center. (2) *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol. I. Available at the retreat.
- Donation:** \$170.00 (which covers 4 meals [Saturday breakfast, lunch, supper, and Sunday breakfast] and other expenses). Please send the registration form to the Maida Center **by July 15, 2010**. Registrants will receive detailed information in mid-July.

If you wish to stay at the Jodo Shinshu Center, see the rate in the following registration form. Please send the registration form to the Maida Center **by July 10, 2010**.

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### REGISTRATION FORM

(Deadline: July 15, 2010)

Please print

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first last city state zip

**Phone:** \_\_\_\_\_ **E-mail:** \_\_\_\_\_

Dietary restrictions: \_\_\_\_\_

**Lodging at the Jodo Shinshu Center:** Rooms will be assigned on a first-reserved basis. For double occupancy, please find a co-lodger.

**Hotel Style**

For two nights: single occupancy \$ 170.00 ( )  
For two nights: double occupancy/per person \$ 85.00 ( )

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