

13. What Is a “Buddhist”?

All views are perverted views. No view is the right view.

—*Prajna-paramita Sutra*

Ever since I came to this country from Japan, I have noticed one major difference between American Buddhists and Japanese Buddhists. The difference is that American Buddhists like to identify themselves as Buddhists, saying, “I’m a Buddhist,” whereas, in Japan people seldom identify themselves as Buddhists. As a matter of fact, when I lived in Japan I never said to my friends, “I am a Buddhist.”

Every time I hear Americans identify themselves as Buddhists, I have a mixed—comfortable and uncomfortable—feeling about it. I have this mixed feeling because I sense in their words both admirable and erroneous elements. Let me talk about these two elements.

First, the admirable element is this: Americans identify themselves as Buddhists because they take Buddhism seriously, whereas, Japanese do not do so because they do not take Buddhism seriously. They regard Buddhism only as part of their traditional culture; they do not regard it as a personal religion. But, for some Americans, Buddhism is a personal religion, an exciting new religion in which they wish to be personally involved. This is an admirable element I see in American Buddhists.

Now let me discuss what I consider an erroneous element. I feel uncomfortable when I hear people identify themselves as Buddhists because I sense some kind of religious pride or arrogance. The majority of people in this country are Christians. Thus people who take up non-Christian religions have a sense of rivalry with Christianity. Some of them believe that Buddhism is superior to Christianity. In order to assert their superiority they say that they are Buddhists, not Christians. But if people use the word “Buddhist” to feel superior to others, they are doing something unjustified in Buddhism—something totally against Buddhism. Buddhism does not allow us to be attached to any form of label or identity, or to indulge in any form of self-love or self-enhancement.

I am not saying that we should not identify ourselves as “Buddhists.” It is all right to do so. But we must have a clear idea as to what we mean by the word. What, then, is a “Buddhist”? When we say we are Buddhists, how are we viewing other religions such as Christianity? What kind of attitude are we taking toward them?

Since I cannot adequately discuss these questions without referring to my personal background, let me talk about it. In my life, three individuals have exerted considerable spiritual influence on me. I consider them my teachers. Let me start with the first teacher.

When I was a junior high school student, I met a teacher, Mr. Keisuke Itoh. Mr. Itoh had difficult experiences when he was young. During World War II he was a Japanese soldier and was put into a Russian concentration camp in Siberia. He was forced to engage in hard labor there. I heard that many of his friends starved to death. Because of this difficult experience in Siberia, he became a Christian. After he came back to Japan, he became a schoolteacher. Mr. Itoh was so different from other teachers. When he taught the class, I could tell that he was searching for meaning in his own life. He often challenged us to reflect upon our lives. He usually looked depressed and gloomy. So, many classmates of mine, young teenagers who loved cheerful teachers, did not like him

at all. He was too serious for them. But somehow I was attracted to this teacher. Since I was very young at that time, I do not think I fully understood him. But I was deeply impressed by the serious manner in which he was teaching us. Because he was a Christian, I became interested in Christianity.

Now let me talk about my second teacher, whom I met when I was a high school student. Since Mr. Itoh, a Christian, impressed me I started to attend a Christian church when I was in high school. One day, I attended a class for young adults in this church. There were several high school boys and girls. As I was attending a boys' high school, and the boys were quite rough, I needed to see some girls at least once a week; this was absolutely necessary for my mental health.

During the class, one cute girl asked me, "Mr. Haneda, what kind of novelist do you like best?" This was a tough question, because in those days I was interested only in baseball and fishing. I was not academically inclined at all; I had not read any significant books. But a really cute girl was asking me the question. I had to impress her. I could not say, "I don't read any books." If I had said so, it would have sounded so dumb. So, I seriously thought "What have I read, what have I read?" Then, I remembered that I had read one short story by Leo Tolstoy. So, I told her, "Yeah, I, of course, like Leo Tolstoy. He wrote *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*." (Although I had never read these novels, I knew he wrote them.) She was very much impressed. So it was okay at that time. But it was not okay after that, because she thought I was a specialist on Tolstoy and started asking me various questions about him. So, I had to read Tolstoy. I rushed to a bookstore and bought *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, huge books. (I really thought that I should have told her that I loved O. Henry or Jack London. They would have been much easier to read.) But, I said "Tolstoy," so I had no choice. Initially I forced myself to read Tolstoy. Then, gradually I started to love Tolstoy. So when one year had passed, I was more in love with Tolstoy than with that girl. Although Leo Tolstoy is commonly known as a novelist, he was actually a very religious person. When he was around fifty, after he wrote *Anna Karenina*, he experienced a so-called religious conversion. Most of his later writings were religious writings. I consider Tolstoy my second teacher. So, when I chose my major in college, I chose Russian. I wanted to be a translator of Tolstoy.

Now let me talk about my third teacher. I was in college in the late sixties. In 1969 I was a senior. One day I went to a bookstore and bought a commentary on Goethe's *Faust*, a famous German story. The author's name was Shuichi Maida. I had never heard of him. When I read the commentary on *Faust*, I was really impressed, not by the story of *Faust* but by what the commentator Maida said about *Faust*. Although I had not known it, the commentator was a Buddhist and was interpreting *Faust* from a Buddhist standpoint. In the book Maida used many Buddhist terms, such as Amida Buddha, Shakyamuni, and Shinran. Up to that time, I had no interest in Buddhism at all. To me Buddhism had been part of our obsolete culture. But the Buddhism that I found in Maida was so fresh, new, and relevant to my life. Then, I went back to the same bookstore and bought other books written by him. I started to study Buddhism at that time. That was the turning point in my life. From that time on, for the last thirty years, I have been studying Buddhism.

Now I have talked about the three teachers, Mr. Itoh, Tolstoy, and Maida. If I describe them with traditional labels, they are quite different. Mr. Itoh was a Christian. Tolstoy was a Russian novelist. Maida was a Buddhist. But in my mind, I cannot differentiate these three people. They form what I am today.

A friend of mine once asked me, “Mr. Haneda, how did you make the switch? How did you switch from Christianity to Buddhism and from Russian literature to Buddhism?” When I was asked this question, I did not know how to answer it because I did not feel that I had ever made a switch from Christianity to Buddhism or from Russian literature to Buddhism.

By getting to know Buddhism, I came to have a deeper appreciation of Christianity and Russian literature. I do not see any conflict between studying Christianity and Buddhism, or between studying Russian literature and Buddhism. Actually, studying Christianity and Russian literature is part of my study of Buddhism. For me, studying Buddhism does not mean reading the so-called “Buddhist writings” per se. It means studying all kinds of things, such as Christianity and Russian literature.

To me, Buddhism means realizing an all-embracing *attitude*, nothing else. It means realizing a broad and empty mind that can encompass all. It means realizing a position in which I can learn and appreciate all kinds of things—a position in which I do not assume any relative or antagonistic relationships with them.

I can talk about this with a simple illustration. Suppose there is a basket that contains all kinds of fruits such as an apple, an orange, a peach, a pear, etc. To me, religions that have fixed dogmas or creeds are like the fruits in the basket. We can compare these religions just as we can compare the fruits in the basket. But Buddhism is not a fruit in the basket; it is itself the basket that holds all kinds of fruits. Buddhism has no fixed dogma, creed, or doctrine. If Buddhism had that, then it could be compared with another dogma. But Buddhism does not have any dogma or creed that can be compared with any other. We can compare an apple with an orange, or an orange with a peach. But we cannot compare an apple with a basket.

Here some people may disagree with me and say that there are doctrines, ideas, and concepts in Buddhism. Yes, there are certainly ideas and concepts that are taught in Buddhism. But they are not “fixed” doctrines to be attached or carried around by us. They are cures for sickness. They are something like Drano that is used to eliminate a clog in a pipe. When water regains its smooth and natural flow, Drano is no longer necessary. Buddhist ideas and concepts are antidotes against the poison of human attachment. Since we are attached to various objects, Buddhist teachers challenge us with ideas such as “impermanence” and “emptiness” and destroy our attachments. These ideas are totally different from the dogmas that many other religions have.

Let me discuss the basic meaning of “Buddhism” or “Buddhist” by referring to the famous parable about five blind men who attempt to define an elephant. The first blind man touches the tusk of an elephant and say, “Now I know what the elephant is. It is like a giant carrot.” The second blind man touches its ear and declares that it is like a big fan. The third, fourth, and fifth blind men respectively touch its trunk, leg, and tail and declare that it is like a pestle, a mortar, and a rope. These five blind men are firmly convinced

that they are absolutely right in their understanding. So they start to fight among themselves.

Then what does it mean to become a “Buddhist”? Here, we must talk about another, sixth, blind man. Then who is the sixth blind man? He is a person who has touched all those five parts of the animal. He is well aware that the elephant has all kinds of parts. He knows that all those five blind men are both right and wrong. He knows that all of them are right, partially right, because they are touching a part of an elephant. But at the same time he knows that all of them are wrong in their view that they have an absolutely correct understanding.

The “Buddhist,” the sixth blind man, can identify with all those five blind men, but, at the same time, he cannot agree with them when they say that their own respective views are the only truth. Those five blind men have their fixed positions and they cannot help fighting, whereas the sixth blind man does not have any one position about which he can fight with others. A “Buddhist” is a person who can identify with all human assertions in some way or other, but cannot consider any one assertion the absolute truth.

The most important thing in Buddhism is the realization of a humble attitude, a broad and empty mind, or an all-encompassing mind. This all-embracing spirit is called “Amida Buddha.” In the *Larger Sutra*, we read a story in which Dharmakara becomes a Buddha by the name of Amida Buddha. Dharmakara initially vows that he will become a Buddha and create a land where he will encompass all beings. Then, he takes up practices to become a Buddha. His main practice is visiting and worshipping many Buddhas in the ten directions, and studying under them.

The more Buddhas he visits and worships, the humbler he becomes. The humbler he becomes, the more Buddhas he visits and worships. In this way, the number of Buddhas he discovers increases. When he discovers innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions and his whole being becomes worshipping and studying, his Buddhahood is fulfilled. He becomes a Buddha by the name of *Namu Amida Butsu* (Bowling Amida Buddha). Here “Bowling” is part of his name. In this way Amida Buddha symbolizes the spirit of a perfect student. He has realized an ocean-like mind that can study and appreciate innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions.

In one verse in his *Hymns of the Pure Land*, Shinran says, “Taking refuge in the Pure Land of Amida means taking refuge in all Buddhas.” His words mean the following. Amida Buddha is the all-encompassing spirit itself. When we go to see Amida Buddha in the Pure Land, we just meet the spirit of a perfect student. In his mind we find only innumerable Buddhas whom he is studying and worshipping. We do not find in him even one of his own ideas or thoughts. The contents of his mind are “all Buddhas.” Thus Amida is a container of all Buddhas. He encourages us to discover innumerable Buddhas, visit them, and study under them just as he has done himself.

I met my teacher Maida. This does not mean that I have learned a doctrine called “Buddhism” from him. I have not received any fixed idea or thought from him. The only thing I learned from Maida is the spirit of a perfect student. He was nothing but a student and seeker. His humble student spirit has challenged me and deprived me of all the ideas, notions, and opinions that I cherished. I have been reduced to an ignorant student. I have been given a position in which I can appreciate all kinds of teachers and teachings. Maida

encourages me to discover “innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions” such as Shakyamuni, Shinran, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Goethe, Gandhi, and Schweizer, and study under them.

In summary, there are two ways of defining “Buddhism.” One is identifying it with a fruit in the basket. The other is identifying it with the basket itself.

If “Buddhism” is a fruit in the basket—a specific doctrine, it is so narrow and limited; it is not true Buddhism. If “Buddhism” is a doctrine that can be compared with other doctrines, that is a misunderstanding of what Shakyamuni taught. If “Buddhism” means such a limited thing, I do not want to become a “Buddhist.” I do not want to be called a “Buddhist.” But if “Buddhism” means the basket itself, if it means the realization of a broad and empty mind, an ocean-like mind, an all-encompassing mind, I want to become a “Buddhist.” If “Buddhist” means a person who can respect all kinds of teachers and study under them, I want to be called a “Buddhist.”

Don’t become a fruit in the basket! Become the basket! Appreciate all kinds of fruits in the basket! Buddhism is appreciating all kinds of teachers and teachings. There are so many wonderful teachers and teachings in the world. Let’s forget labels such as Christianity, Islam, etc. Let’s forget even labels such as “Buddhism,” “Zen,” or “Shin.” Let us study from all. We are, after all, all human beings. We share the same human suffering and the same human aspirations. We do not have to be trapped by superficial labels and identities.