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The Two Types of Buddhism **—Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism and Dharma-Centered Buddhism—**

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Introduction

In this essay I would like to discuss the two types of Buddhism: Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism and Dharma-centered Buddhism. In his final message before his passing, Shakyamuni told his disciples that they should consider the Dharma, i.e., nondualistic truth, the center of Buddhism and should not consider him, a human being, its center. These words meant that his disciples should view him not as a liberator but as a person whom the Dharma liberated.

Although this was Shakyamuni's teaching, his disciples, after his passing, developed Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism (that is known as Hinayana Buddhism). It became the mainstream tradition. The spiritual basis of Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism was dualistic human wisdom (or thinking) that people usually use in their lives. This wisdom divides things into positive values and negative values. On the basis of dualistic wisdom, the followers of Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism viewed Shakyamuni's sainthood as positive and passions, such as anger and greed, as negative. They thought that his sainthood was the goal of Buddhism and passions were obstacles to the goal. Thus, they engaged in various difficult and lengthy practices to eliminate passions in order to attain sainthood. But they failed to understand Shakyamuni's message that gaining immediate insight into the Dharma, or nondualistic wisdom, liberated them. Then as time went by, Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism gradually lost its vitality and became a highly academic and monastic tradition, a set of lifeless doctrines.

Several centuries after Shakyamuni's passing, another Buddhist tradition called the Mahayana appeared in India. Mahayana Buddhists challenged the Hinayana tradition that had become lifeless. They attempted to restore Dharma-centered Buddhism, the Buddhism that was based on nondualistic wisdom. They emphasized the importance of gaining insight into the Dharma, or nondualistic wisdom. For them, gaining immediate insight into the Dharma, not difficult and lengthy practices, was the core of Buddhism. Mahayana masters, such as Nagarjuna, emphasized the importance of understanding the truth of nonduality, or "neither arising nor perishing." They taught that nondualistic wisdom, not practices to eliminate passions, liberated people.

This conflict between Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism and Dharma-centered Buddhism that we can see in India took place also in the Buddhist history of China and Japan. Thus we can say that in Buddhist history the two types of Buddhism competed against each other.

In this essay I will attempt to show that Dharma-centered Buddhism is authentic Buddhism by discussing the differences between the two types of Buddhism. This essay consists of the following five parts.

In Part One, I will discuss the content of Shakyamuni's awakening experience. I want to point out that the core of his awakening was his insight into the Dharma, i.e., the truth of impermanence (or dependent co-arising). His insight into nondualistic truth liberated him. In his teaching activities the teacher desired to share this insight with people.

In Part Two, I will discuss the differences between the two types of Buddhism, Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism and Dharma-centered Buddhism. Before I do so, I will first talk about the last message of Shakyamuni that he left immediately before his passing. In this message, he told his disciples that they should rely on the Dharma, not on him, a human being. This final message implied that there were two types of Buddhism among his followers. Then, I will explain the differences between the two types of Buddhism. I will particularly underscore the fact that Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism was based on dualistic human wisdom and Dharma-centered Buddhism was based on nondualistic wisdom. The former emphasized the importance of

attaining liberation through practices and the latter emphasized the importance of attaining liberation through immediate insight into the Dharma.

In Part Three, I will discuss a historical development after Shakyamuni's passing. Although the teacher emphasized the importance of Dharma-centered Buddhism, his disciples forgot the message and developed Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism (that is known as Hinayana Buddhism) during the first several centuries after the teacher's passing. It became the main tradition. But it gradually lost its original vitality and became lifeless and stagnant as time went by.

In Part Four, I will discuss Mahayana Buddhism, which appeared in India several centuries after the passing of Shakyamuni. Mahayana Buddhists attempted to restore Dharma-centered Buddhism by criticizing Hinayana Buddhism. In an attempt to restore Dharma-centered Buddhism, Mahayana Buddhists created concepts, such as "Amida" and "Hongan (Innermost Aspiration)," as symbols of the Dharma. By saying that Amida liberated people, they wanted to say that Amida (or the Dharma), not Shakyamuni, a human being, liberated people. They wanted to claim that authentic Buddhism was Dharma-centered Buddhism. But unfortunately, when the Mahayana that challenged Hinayana Buddhism became a predominant Buddhist tradition in India, it lost its vitality and became lifeless and stagnant just like the Hinayana.

In Part Five, I will discuss the historical development of the two types of Buddhism in China. It was in seventh century China that Pure Land Buddhism came to be formed as an independent Buddhist tradition. Chinese Pure Land masters criticized the established mainstream Buddhist traditions for having become lifeless and stagnant. Those masters called the mainstream Buddhist traditions "the Path of Sages" (i.e., Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism). They advocated the alternative Buddhist tradition, "the Pure Land gate" (i.e., Dharma-centered Buddhism), by emphasizing the importance of concepts such as "Amida" and the "Hongan (Innermost Aspiration)" as synonyms for the Dharma. Here I will discuss the three Chinese Pure Land masters, T'an-luan (476-542), Tao-ch'o (562-645), and Shan-tao (613-681), who contributed to the formation of the Chinese Pure Land Buddhism.

PART ONE

Shakyamuni's Awakening Experience: Insight into the Dharma That Liberated Him

Here let me discuss the content of Shakyamuni's awakening (or enlightenment). When we study his awakening experience, we can know that insight into the Dharma was its content. Shakyamuni was liberated when he understood the Dharma. In discussing the content of his awakening, let me also explain the meaning of the Dharma, the content of his awakening.

I. Shakyamuni's Awakening Experience

Tradition tells us that Shakyamuni (ca. 460-380 B.C.) grew up without knowing the reality of human misery. But, when he grew up and went out of the three gates that surrounded the palace, he learned that suffering, such as aging, sickness, and death, was absolute and beyond his control. He was scared by the prospect of getting old and sick, and of dying. Then, on another occasion he went out of the fourth gate and met a traveling mendicant whose face was shining because of his wisdom. Deeply moved by the mendicant, Shakyamuni awakened his aspiration to become a person like him. Because of this aspiration for Buddhahood, he left his family to seek the way when he was twenty-nine.

After Shakyamuni left his family, he studied various traditional doctrines and practices under the spiritual leaders of his time. Here the basis of his spiritual search was his belief in the existence of a permanent, substantial, and independent self (*atman*). After having spent six years in traditional meditation practices and ascetic practices, he renounced all of them because they did not lead him to the ultimate peace he was seeking. Then, he sat under a tree and meditated.

When Shakyamuni looked at the morning star on one morning not long after he started to meditate, he attained the great awakening. He was then thirty-five years old. He clearly understood the Dharma, i.e., the truth of impermanence (or dependent co-arising), and became the Buddha. His immediate insight into the Dharma was the content of his awakening.

II. The Content of Shakyamuni's Awakening: His Insight into the Dharma

Let me explain the content of Shakyamuni's awakening, i.e., his insight into the Dharma, i.e., the truth of "impermanence [*anitya*]" (or "dependent co-arising [*pratitya-samutpada*]").

Because of the Dharma, the truth of impermanence, Shakyamuni realized that the permanent and substantial self that he thought he had did not actually exist. In his meditation Shakyamuni examined whether he had a permanent and substantial self. He examined his body and his mind. Then he learned that all of the things that formed the body—things such as skin, muscles, bones,

and blood—were constantly moving and changing. He also learned that all of the things that formed his mind—things such as sensation, conception, volition, and consciousness—were moving and changing. He realized that there was nothing permanent and substantial in his body and his mind. Thus, insight into the truth of impermanence was the content of his awakening.

Because of the Dharma, the truth of dependent co-arising, Shakyamuni also recognized that the independent self that he thought he had did not actually exist. Although people usually believe in existence of an independent self—a self that has a dualistic subject-object relationship with the environment, Shakyamuni considered their view a mistake. People mistakenly think of the existence of the independent self in this way: They think that the six sense organs (i.e., eyes, ears, a nose, a tongue, a body, a mind) exist as *independent subjects* and the six sense objects (i.e., form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and ideas) exist as *independent objects*. They also think that the independent self (i.e., the six sense organs) recognizes the independent objects (i.e., the six sense objects) and says, “I am seeing a tree” or “I am hearing a dog bark.”

Shakyamuni, however, said that the independent self that people usually believe to be real was an illusion or an imagined concept. He said that because of the truth of dependent co-arising, the independent self did not exist. He said that this truth was the absolute truth that underlay all existing things. He explained the truth by saying, “When this exists, that exists. When that exists, this exists. When this ceases to exist, that ceases to exist. When that ceases to exist, this ceases to exist.” With these words, he meant that all existing things are interdependent and nothing can exist by itself. Thus he said that it is a mistake to think of the existence of the independent self.

Shakyamuni taught that the true self does not have a subject-object relationship with its environment; it exists as *contact-points* or *interdependent functions* between the six sense organs (such as eyes and ears) and the six sense objects (such as form and voice). The six sense organs and the six sense objects are dependent on each other. Since the two parties exist interdependently, they cannot function separately or independently. Those *contact points*, or *interdependent functions*, between the six sense organs and the six sense objects are the actual contents of the true self. Thus Shakyamuni said that it was a mistake to think that there was an independent self outside those *contact points*.

Thus Shakyamuni would say that it is not “I am seeing a tree” but “an image of a tree is being reflected on the retinas of my eyes.” He would also say that it is not “I am hearing a dog bark” but “my ear drums are vibrating because of contact between my ear drums and a distinctive sound wave.” He says that there is neither “I (or the independent subject)” nor “the independent objects”; there are only *contact points* called “seeing” or “hearing” without any independent subject or object.

I have talked about the content of Shakyamuni’s awakening experience. When he gained insight into the Dharma, he became the Buddha. It is said that he attained awakening not long after he renounced his practices and started to meditate under a tree.

Now I want to explain the twofold (i.e., negative and positive) aspect of the Dharma, or the twofold content of Shakyamuni’s awakening. The Dharma initially appeared to Shakyamuni as a negative truth that totally negated the independent, substantial, and independent self. But, when the Dharma totally negated the substantial self, it turned into a positive, dynamic, and creative truth. Now he realized that the Dharma was actually the universal flow of life. It was the gigantic flow of life, the constantly fresh, new, and creative flow of life. All existing things, not only animate things but also inanimate things, were manifesting the newness and freshness of life. Shakyamuni saw them as fellow participants in the universal flow of life.

The fact that Shakyamuni became one with the Dharma, the dynamic and creative reality, means that he started to live his life as a constant seeker and learner. Because all things were constantly new and fresh, he was unable to be complacent about anything. He was liberated from all kinds of fixed ideas, viewpoints, and opinions.

After his awakening, Shakyamuni travelled to many places in India and shared his teaching with people. Then, at the age of eighty he entered *parinirvana* at Kushinagara. His attainment of *parinirvana* (complete extinction) means that he had fulfilled his life. The goal of Buddhism is attaining perfect fulfillment of human life.

Buddhism spread all over India mainly because Shakyamuni, who embodied the Dharma, lived his life in a powerful and creative way. People were deeply impressed by his Dharma-penetrated spirit—his humble, selfless, free, liberated, dynamic, and creative spirit. His spiritual qualities were not so much his inherent personal qualities as the qualities of the Dharma that was selfless, dynamic, creative, and ever new. He believed that all people could have the same spiritual qualities if they gained insight into the Dharma and became one with it.

I have discussed the content of Shakyamuni’s awakening experience. We have seen that it was the Dharma, or immediate insight into it, that was the most important thing in his life. Thus he emphasized the exclusive importance of the Dharma in his teaching. His teaching was Dharma-centered teaching. Now let me discuss a historical development that took place within Shakyamuni’s sangha after his passing. His disciples developed Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism that departed from Dharma-centered Buddhism.

PART TWO

Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism and Dharma-centered Buddhism

I. Shakyamuni's Admonishment to His Disciples: "Rely on the Dharma, Not on a Human Being."

One episode is reported in the *Sutra of the Final Teaching of the Buddha*. When Shakyamuni was about to pass away, many people surrounded him. Among them there was Ananda, a disciple of Shakyamuni who accompanied the teacher for over thirty years and was a kind of retainer for him. Sitting beside the dying teacher, Ananda said, "O, my teacher is going to die. What will happen to me? I will lose my refuge and will be totally lost." The sutra records Shakyamuni's response to Ananda's words:

When Shakyamuni was about to enter nirvana, he said to the monks, "From this day on, rely on the Dharma, not on a human being who teaches it. Rely on the meaning, not on the words."

(*Collected Works of Shinran* [hereafter abbreviated as *CWS*], p. 241, with modification by N. Haneda)

The words, "Rely on the Dharma, not on a human being who teaches it," meant that Ananda should rely on the Dharma, the universal truth that exists at any time and in any place, not on Shakyamuni, a human being who passes away. This episode tells us that the teacher never claimed to have created the Dharma. Shakyamuni saw himself as a person whom the Dharma awakened and liberated. Thus he told his disciples that they should rely on the Dharma.

Further, Shakyamuni's words, "Rely on the meaning, not on the words," meant that his disciples should not be attached to his words but should understand the living and vital spirit that his words were expressing. His words were like a finger pointing at the moon, the ultimate truth, or the dynamic spirit, that was beyond words. He cautioned his disciples not to be attached to his words, identifying them as the center of Buddhism, but to embody the same spirit that the Dharma realized in him.

II. The Two Types of Buddhism: Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism and Dharma-centered Buddhism

A. Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism and Dharma-Centered Buddhism

The above-mentioned episode tells us that Shakyamuni saw two types of Buddhism in his sangha: Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism and Dharma-centered Buddhism.

Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism was a form of Buddhism in which his disciples viewed the teacher, a human being, as the center of Buddhism. They viewed him as a liberator. In other words, they viewed him, a sage or an ideal human being, as the goal of Buddhism that they should emulate through practices. They also identified the whole set of his words as Buddhism. In this way, his disciples became attached to his person and his words, neglecting to appreciate the Dharma that was the content of his awakening and his spirit.

Dharma-centered Buddhism was a form of Buddhism in which people viewed the Dharma as the center of Buddhism. They viewed Shakyamuni not as a liberator but as a person that the Dharma liberated. They thought that the goal of Buddhism was not emulating his sainthood through practices, but gaining immediate insight into the Dharma that was beyond words and becoming one with it.

B. The Basic Differences between Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism and Dharma-Centered Buddhism

1. Two types of wisdom: dualistic human wisdom and nondualistic wisdom

In order to understand the basic differences between the two types of Buddhism, I must first explain the differences between the two types of wisdom, i.e., dualistic human wisdom and nondualistic wisdom, that Buddhism teaches us. The differences between them are as follows.

Dualistic human wisdom is the common sense wisdom that we usually use in our daily lives. This wisdom is what our parents and schoolteachers have taught us. It divides things into plus values (such as good, right, pure, beautiful, and happy) and minus values (such as evil, wrong, impure, ugly, and unhappy). Having established these two sects of values, we find meaning in the former values and do not see any meaning in the latter values. We try to obtain and maintain the former, and try to eliminate or evade the latter.

Nondualistic wisdom is the wisdom that buddhas (i.e., those who are awakened to the Dharma) possess. It is insight into the truth of impermanence (or dependent co-arising). It is

insight into the emptiness of the impermanent, substantial, and independent self. It is also insight into our original reality—suchness (*tathata*) or “things as they are.” It is insight into the truth of oneness, or non-duality (or “neither arising nor perishing”) that precedes dualistic thinking. When we recognize the emptiness of the dualistic self, we can recover our original reality. We are liberated from the dualistic self that has been covering the original reality.

2. Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism is based on dualistic human wisdom and Dharma-centered Buddhism is based on nondualistic wisdom.

Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism is based on dualistic wisdom that divides things into positive values and negative values. On the basis of this wisdom, the followers of Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism view passions, such as anger and greed, as “evil” and “defiled; they view them as the cause of human suffering. They consider themselves imperfect and unsatisfactory because they possess passions. They also view Shakyamuni as a “perfect” and “ideal” human being because he eliminated “evil and “defiled” passions. They think that attaining his sainthood is the goal of Buddhism. In order to attain the goal, they engage in various practices. In this way, dualistic wisdom is always accompanied by efforts (or practices) to realize a wonderful future goal.

Unlike Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism that is based on dualistic human wisdom, the followers of Dharma-centered Buddhism that is based on nondualistic wisdom do not view passions as “evil” and “defiled” or as the cause of human suffering. They rather view attachment to dualistic wisdom the cause of human suffering. They think that suffering is caused by dualistic human wisdom—by the fact people compare two realities, such as past and present realities and present and future realities, without understanding that there is always one reality here and now. If people understand that true reality precedes dualistic thinking and identify with true reality, they can be liberated from the suffering that dualistic thinking creates.

Thus, for the followers of Dharma-centered Buddhism, the only thing necessary for spiritual liberation is not the performance of practices to improve the self but gaining immediate insight into the Dharma, nondualistic reality, that is already perfect. This insight alone can fully liberate them. They have only to know that they have always been living in this perfect reality. They have only to know that the dualistic self, the unreal self, is the obstacle that separates them from true reality. If the obstacle is removed, they can immediately recover their original reality.

Here we can say that these two types of wisdom were at the basis of the two paths that Shakyamuni undertook before his awakening experience. His first path, i.e., his six year efforts to realize an ideal goal through intense practices, was based on dualistic human wisdom. Dualistic human wisdom convinced him that he had an unsatisfactory self in the present and could realize an ideal self in the future, so he strove to realize the latter by eliminating passions. But, he eventually realized that his first path was a mistake. After renouncing his first path, he realized, in his meditation under a tree, that what was crucially important was not the first path of practices, but the second path of gaining immediate insight into the Dharma, or gaining nondualistic wisdom. His immediate insight into the Dharma liberated him.

3. Monks and lay people were liberated equally by hearing Shakyamuni’s talk.

Shakyamuni believed that all human beings shared the same suffering and can all be liberated by gaining insight into the Dharma. He also believed that the Dharma, something perfect, was at the basis of all human beings and that all people, when properly guided, would be able to recognize it. Thus, he wanted to tell them that they all could attain the same Dharma he attained and could receive the same spiritual qualities that he possessed.

Some of the early Buddhist sutras tell us that Shakyamuni gave his teaching to all people, monks and lay people. They tell us that not only the five monks to whom Shakyamuni gave his first sermon at Benares but also ordinary lay people attained awakening by only hearing the teacher’s talk. For example, it is said that a young wealthy merchant by the name of Yasa attained awakening by hearing Shakyamuni’s talk. Yasa, then, went back home and brought his mother and his wife into the presence of the teacher. When they heard the teacher talk, they immediately attained awakening and became his followers. This episode tells us that the most important thing in Buddhism was gaining immediate insight into the Dharma—attaining nondualistic wisdom, not difficult and lengthy practice that was based on dualistic wisdom. As I will discuss later in this essay, after the passing of Shakyamuni, Buddhism came to be monopolized by monks and to be identified with a whole set of difficult and lengthy practices to emulate Shakyamuni’s sainthood. The episode about the layman Yasa, however, shows us that even ordinary lay people attained awakening just by hearing the teacher’s talk; they did not have to take up difficult and lengthy practice to eliminate passions.

PART THREE

The Development of Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism—Hinayana Buddhism—After the Passing of Shakyamuni

I. The Establishment of Hinayana Buddhism

We have first discussed the content of Shakyamuni's awakening and then talked about the two types of Buddhism whose existence Shakyamuni's last message implied. Now let me discuss the Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism that developed after the teacher's passing. Not long after the teacher's death around 400 B.C., Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism (called Hinayana Buddhism) appeared in India. It became the mainstream Buddhist tradition in India until another Buddhist tradition called Mahayana Buddhism appeared around the first century B.C. and later became the predominant Buddhist tradition in India.

Hinayana Buddhism developed in this way. When Shakyamuni passed away, his disciples lost their beloved and revered teacher. Their adoration and respect for the teacher became deeper and deeper. They regarded him as a genius who founded a new religion. In this way, after the passing of the teacher, his disciples developed Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism out of deep respect for him.

In spite of the fact that Shakyamuni admonished his disciples that they should rely on the Dharma (i.e., nondualistic truth), not on him, they considered him their refuge. On the basis of dualistic human wisdom, they thought that they should have him, a sage and an ideal human being, at the center of Buddhism. They thought that the goal of Buddhism was to emulate his sainthood through practices. In this way, they established Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism.

II. The Formalization of Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism: the Loss of the Dharma-Penetrated Spirit of Shakyamuni

As years went by, the followers of Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism gradually forgot the lively, creative, and powerful Dharma-penetrated spirit of the teacher. They remembered only his teachings, his ideas and concepts. They thought that the teacher left a perfect and definitive teaching—"finished products." So they considered it their mission to faithfully memorize his teachings, preserve them, and transmit them. They became attached to his words, ideas, and concepts—something he produced. They forgot that the essence of Buddhism was the teacher's creative and dynamic spirit, not words and concepts.

The followers of Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism respected the teacher's words and concepts because they had deep respect for him. Of course, having deep respect for the teacher is an admirable thing. But at the same time, there is often a danger involved in it. His followers started to classify, categorize, and dogmatize his teachings. They turned his teachings into a fixed system of thought. During the first several centuries after the teacher's passing, his teachings became fixed and formalized. And, to use a stronger expression, they became fossilized. Hinayana Buddhism, Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism, became a highly monastic and academic tradition; the teacher's Dharma-penetrated spirit, the lively, dynamic, and creative spirit, was gradually forgotten and lost.

PART FOUR

The Development of Dharma-Centered Buddhism—Mahayana Buddhism

I. Mahayana Buddhists' Criticism of Hinayana Buddhism

Around the first century B.C., another major Buddhist tradition called the Mahayana appeared in India. Mahayana Buddhism appeared as a challenge to and criticism of Hinayana Buddhism that had lost its vitality and become a lifeless tradition.

Mahayana Buddhism was not only a critical movement but also a revivalist one. Mahayana Buddhists claimed that the authentic Buddhism was Dharma-centered Buddhism and Hinayana Buddhism, Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism, was the wrong one. They viewed Shakyamuni not as a liberator but as a person whom the Dharma liberated. They thought that the teacher's contribution was the discovery of the Dharma, not the creation of it. They claimed that the Dharma, not Shakyamuni, should be considered the center of Buddhism.

In the eyes of Mahayana Buddhists, Hinayana Buddhists were interested in ideas and concepts that Shakyamuni produced, not in the Dharma, the source of inspiration, that produced Shakyamuni. Mahayana Buddhists believed that the most important thing in Buddhism was not Shakyamuni's ideas and concepts, the finished products that Shakyamuni produced, but his Dharma-penetrated spirit, the creative and producing spirit that produced Shakyamuni. In the eyes of Mahayana Buddhists, Hinayana Buddhists were seeing only the footprints of a rabbit—something left by a rabbit; they were not seeing the dynamic and lively life of the rabbit itself.

Thus Mahayana Buddhists desired to restore Shakyamuni's original dynamic and creative spirit by emphasizing the importance of the Dharma that awakened and liberated the teacher.

II. Mahayana Attempts to Restore Dharma-Centered Buddhism

A. The Mahayana Concept of “Amida” as a Symbol of the Dharma

Mahayana Buddhists composed the Pure Land sutras, such as the *Larger Sutra*, in which a Buddha by the name of “Amida” liberates people. “Amida” is a Japanese abbreviation of the two Sanskrit names of this Buddha: Amitabha (Limitless Light) and Amitayus (Limitless Life).

Mahayana Buddhists came up with the concept of “Amida” as a symbol of the Dharma. They wanted to say that the true Buddhism was Dharma-centered Buddhism by saying that Amida, the Dharma, liberated people. They wanted to say that the Dharma was the liberator and Shakyamuni, a human being, was a person that the Dharma liberated. Mahayana Buddhists created “Amida,” a personal symbol of the Dharma, to facilitate understanding of the meaning of the Dharma, because the idea that the Dharma liberates people might sound a little abstract and be difficult to understand.

B. Prof. Ryojin Soga's Book, *The Buddhism before Shakyamuni: His View of the Hongan as the Basis of Buddhism*

Here I want to talk about Prof. Ryojin Soga (1875-1971), one of the most important Shin scholars in the twentieth century. Soga wrote a book, *The Buddhism before Shakyamuni*. In it Soga claims that Buddhism did not start with Shakyamuni; it began when the Hongan (Innermost Aspiration) started. He says that the Hongan (that is synonymous with Amida or his dynamic spirit) symbolizes the Dharma. He says that the Hongan is the universal spiritual basis of all historical buddhas—that it produced all of them. It is the common denominator that underlies them. It is also the primordial pattern (or prototype) for them. Soga says that the Hongan preceded all historical buddhas that included Shakyamuni. He also says that Buddhist history is the history of the Hongan.

Soga tells us that the specific meaning of the Hongan is explained in the *Larger Sutra*, in the story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara's becoming Amida Buddha. The sutra teaches us what it means for us to be liberated by the Dharma or to become one with it. Dharmakara's becoming Amida Buddha means that he becomes a dynamic student, a perpetual seeker of limitless wisdom and compassion. His continuously seeking and learning spirit never becomes complacent with any fixed answers. The sutra teaches us that the goal of Buddhism, our ultimate spiritual liberation, is that we become one with the dynamic Hongan (or Dharma)—that we become Amida Buddhas, continuous seekers and learners.

C. The *Larger Sutra's* Teaching of the Two Main Buddhas—Shakyamuni and Amida

One of the most unique features of the *Larger Sutra* is that it talks about the two Buddhas: Shakyamuni Buddha, a historical buddha, and Amida Buddha, the spiritual basis of all historical buddhas. The sutra says that Shakyamuni is one of the many historical buddhas whom Amida, or the Dharma, liberated. It also says that all those historical buddhas are praising Amida as their spiritual basis. In this way, the sutra teaches us that it is Amida, not Shakyamuni, that liberates people. We can say that this view of Shakyamuni is based on Shakyamuni's words, “Rely on the Dharma, not on a human being.”

Because of this view of the Amida as a liberator and Shakyamuni as a liberated one, we usually see a statue of Amida standing on the altars of Shin Buddhist temples. We do not see any statues of Shakyamuni there. Other Buddhist traditions, such as Theravada, Zen, and Nichiren, do not talk about the two Buddhas; they usually talk about Shakyamuni as the one main Buddha.

D. Dharma-Centered Buddhism Turning into Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism

When Mahayana Buddhism arose in India, it challenged Hinayana Buddhism. But, when it became the mainstream Buddhist tradition in India, it came to have the same retrogressive and reactionary elements that Hinayana Buddhism had.

Mahayana Buddhism also turned into Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism—a teaching in which people thought that emulating Shakyamuni sainthood was the goal of Buddhism. It became a lifeless tradition just like the Hinayana. Mahayana teachings became systematized, categorized, and eventually fossilized. Although Mahayana was originally a lay Buddhist movement, it gradually became a monastic and highly academic tradition that only the elite could appreciate. Mahayana Buddhists were required to take up difficult practices. The Mahayana became a teaching that was far removed from lay people. Mahayana, Dharma-centered Buddhism, initially challenged Hinayana that had become stagnant. But when Mahayana became a mainstream tradition, it was transformed into a stagnant tradition just like the Hinayana it had challenged.

PART FIVE

Shakyamuni-Centered Buddhism and Dharma-Centered Buddhism in China: “the Path of Sages” and “the Pure Land Gate”

Buddhism went to China in the first century A.D. Indian Mahayana Buddhism became established as various Chinese Buddhist traditions during the seventh and eighth centuries. There was no independent Pure Land Buddhist tradition in India. It was in China that Pure Land Buddhism became an independent tradition. In India there were so-called Pure Land texts like the *Larger Sutra* that talked about Pure Land concepts, such as Amida and the Pure Land. But those texts were part of general Mahayana Buddhism. Indian Mahayana Buddhists studied Mahayana sutras, such as the *Larger Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Heart Sutra*, equally without any sectarian orientation. Mahayana masters, such as Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, composed writings that discussed Pure Land ideas, but they did not create any independent Pure Land tradition. They discussed Pure Land ideas within the framework of the general Mahayana bodhisattva path.

I. T’an-luan’s Emphasis on the Importance of “the Path of Easy Practice” (i.e., Dharma-Centered Buddhism)

Now let me discuss the transition from Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism to Amida-centered (or Dharma-centered) Buddhism that took place in Chinese Buddhist history. First I want to talk about T’an-luan (476-542) in whom we can see a discussion on the transition. T’an-luan commented on the two paths (i.e., “the path of difficult practice” and “the path of easy practice”) that Nagarjuna discussed in his *Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages*. The Chinese master claimed that people of his time should take up “the path of easy practice.” He says,

Reverently contemplating the *Commentary on the Ten Bodhisattva Stages* of Bodhisattva Nagarjuna, I find it stated that there are two paths by which bodhisattvas seek the stage of nonretrogression [i.e., the stage that assures the final attainment of enlightenment]—the path of difficult practice and the path of easy practice.

With the path of difficult practice, it is seeking nonretrogression in this world of five defilements *at a time when there is no Buddha* that is difficult... Thus the path of difficult practice may be compared in its hardship to journeying overland on foot.

In the path of easy practice, one aspires to be born in the Pure Land with solely one’s entrusting oneself to the Buddha as the cause, and allowing oneself to be carried by the power of the [Amida] Buddha’s Vow, quickly attains birth in the land of purity... Thus the path of easy practice may be compared in its comfort to being carried over waterways in a ship. (*CWS*, pp. 25-26)

Here in commenting on Nagarjuna’s two paths, T’an-luan says that since a long time has passed from the time of Shakyamuni, it is difficult for the people of his time to travel on the path of difficult practice. He says, “With the path of difficult practice, it is seeking nonretrogression in this world of five defilements *at a time when there is no Buddha* that is difficult.” T’an-luan says here that in his corrupted time when people’s practical abilities have become degraded, Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism—the Buddhism in which people must take up difficult practices to emulate Shakyamuni—is no longer valid. He says that if his contemporary people had lived at the time of Shakyamuni and could have directly received the teacher’s spiritual influence, they

could have attained their goal. But since his time is far away from the time of the teacher and they could no longer receive his personal influence, they could not attain their goal.

T'an-luan also claims that the path of easy practice is the right path for the people of his time. He says that people can experience spiritual liberation immediately without difficult and lengthy practice, by entrusting themselves to Amida. He says, "In the path of easy practice, one aspires to be born in the Pure Land with solely one's entrusting oneself to Amida Buddha as the cause, and allowing oneself to be carried by the power of Amida Buddha's Vow, quickly attains birth in the land of purity." Here T'an-luan talks about Amida-centered Buddhism as Dharma-centered Buddhism. He says that in Amida-centered Buddhism the only thing necessary is not difficult practices that people should take up to emulate the sainthood of Shakyamuni but entrusting oneself to Amida, the Dharma. According to T'an-luan, "entrusting oneself to Amida (or the Dharma)" means saying (or hearing) the Name of Amida Buddha (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu* [i.e., a calling voice from the Dharma saying, "Come to me!"]). He says that immediate insight into the Dharma is the only thing necessary for spiritual liberation.

In this way, T'an-luan claimed that people of his time should move from Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism to Dharma-centered Buddhism by discussing the limits of the former. He prepared the way for Tao-ch'o's declaration of the independence of the Pure Land sect in China.

II. Tao-ch'o's Declaration of the Independence of "the Pure Land Gate"—Amida-Centered Buddhism (or Dharma-Centered Buddhism)

A. Tao-ch'o's Discussion of the Last Dharma Age Theory

In our discussion of Tao-ch'o (562-645), we must first talk about the Last Dharma Age Theory. This theory talks about the three Dharma ages, in which the practical abilities of people gradually deteriorate after the passing of Shakyamuni. The contents of the theory are as follows:

The True Dharma Age: Shakyamuni's Personal Influence Is Intact.

The first 500 years after the passing of Shakyamuni: Buddhists are resolute in listening to the teaching, performing practices, and attaining enlightenment. People can feel the presence of Shakyamuni and receive his spiritual influence; they can engage in practices to attain enlightenment.

The Image Dharma Age: Only the Image of Shakyamuni Remains.

The 1000 years following the true Dharma age: In this period only the image, not substance, of Shakyamuni's spirit remains. Since people no longer feel Shakyamuni's presence and receive his personal influence, they cannot attain enlightenment. They maintain only the teaching and practice, but practice gradually disappears at the end of this period.

The Last Dharma Age: Even the Image of Shakyamuni Disappears.

The 1000 years following the image Dharma age: In this period practice totally disappears, but the teaching still remains. People can listen to the teaching. People have all kinds of conflicts and strife.

The 9000 years following the last Dharma age: The teaching gradually diminishes and totally disappears. (Cf. *CWS*, p. 243)

The Last Dharma Age Theory says that in the true Dharma age Buddhists can maintain all three contents of Buddhism, teaching, practice, and enlightenment because they can feel Shakyamuni's presence and receive his spiritual influence. They can perform practices to emulate the sainthood of Shakyamuni and realize the goal.

In the image Dharma age, Shakyamuni's spiritual influence gradually diminishes and it becomes more and more difficult for Buddhists to maintain the three contents of Buddhism—teaching, practice, and realization. In this age they can maintain only the teaching and practice. They can no longer attain enlightenment.

In the last Dharma age Shakyamuni's spiritual influence totally disappears. People are unable to perform practice. Only the teaching remains. Tao-ch'o identified his time with this age.

B. Tao-ch'o's Discussion of the Two Types of Buddhism—"the Path of Sages" and "the Pure Land Gate"

On the bases of the Last Dharma Age Theory and T'an-luan's discussion on the two (i.e., difficult and easy) paths, Tao-ch'o declared that there were two types of Mahayana Buddhism—"the path of sages" and "the Pure Land gate." (Cf. *CWS*, p. 244). "The path of sages" (or Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism) refers to the path on which people attain sainthood like that of Shakyamuni through difficult and lengthy practices. "The Pure Land gate" (or Amida-centered [or Dharma-centered] Buddhism) refers to the path on which people experience liberation by the power of Amida (or the Dharma) through saying (or hearing) his Name. Tao-ch'o was the first

Buddhist teacher who talked about the two types of Mahayana Buddhism. For the first time in Buddhist history, an independent tradition called Pure Land Buddhism came into being.

T'an-luan said that people of his time should follow "the Pure Land gate." In the following passage, he gives two reasons for his claim that people should take up "the Pure Land gate."

One is the path of sages and the other is birth in the Pure Land [i.e., the Pure Land gate]. The former is now difficult to attain, because it has been a long time since the Buddha was alive, and its meaning is too profound and our understanding is too weak. Therefore, in the *Hueh-tsang* section in the *Mahasamnipata-sutra*, the Buddha says, "In the last Dharma age, myriads of sentient beings might attempt to practice the path; however, no one will attain it." Now it is no other than the last Dharma age, and it is the evil period characterized by the five defilements. Only through the Pure Land gate can sentient beings enter into Pure Land.

(*Taisho* 47, No. 1958, p. 13c 2-13. Trans. by N. Haneda)

Tao-ch'o says that the first reason the people of his time should take up "the Pure Land gate" is that "it has been a long time since the Buddha was alive" and the second reason is that "its [i.e., the path of sages'] meaning is too profound and our understanding is too weak."

The first reason is that because a long time has passed since Shakyamuni died and people are in the last Dharma age, they no longer can receive spiritual influence from the teacher and attain Buddhahood. Thus, "the path of sages" (or Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism) is no longer valid. The second reason is that because people's capacity has considerably deteriorated in the last Dharma age, they can no longer appreciate the teaching of "the path of sages." It is too profound.

In this way, Tao-ch'o declared the independence of the Pure Land gate on the basis of the Last Dharma Age Theory. This theory was instrumental in making people recognize the importance of the message of Shakyamuni, "Rely upon the Dharma, not on a human being."

III. Shan-tao's View of the Two Buddhas—Shakyamuni and Amida

Shan-tao developed the Pure Land ideas of T'an-luan and Tao-ch'o and systematized Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. In his "Parable of the Two Rivers and the White Path," Shan-tao presents the Pure Land view of the two Buddhas, Amida Buddha and Shakyamuni Buddha. He teaches us that Amida Buddha symbolizes the Dharma that is the spiritual basis of all historical buddhas and that Shakyamuni is one of the historical buddhas that Amida Buddha, the Dharma, liberated. Let us see how Shan-tao talks about the two Buddhas in his parable.

The parable talks about a traveler who is traveling towards the west. This traveler symbolizes a person who goes the Buddhist way, a seeker of happiness in his internal world. Then "bandits and beasts" appear before him and attempt to kill him. This means that those who are against Buddhism attempt to kill the traveler's aspiration to seek the way. Running away from them, the traveler comes to a place where he discovers two rivers (i.e., the river of fire and that of water) and a narrow path that is sandwiched by the two rivers. The parable describes the difficult predicament in which the traveller finds himself. It says,

There are no words to express the terror and despair that fill him [i.e., the traveler] at this point. He thinks further to himself: "If I turn back now, I die. If I remain here, I die. If I go forward, I die. There is no way for me to escape death. Therefore, I choose to go forth, venturing on this path. Since this path exists, it must be possible to cross the rivers.

When this thought occurs to him, he suddenly hears the encouraging voice of someone on the eastern bank, "O traveler, just resolve to follow this path forward! You will certainly not encounter the grief of death. But if you stay where you are, you will surely die."

Further, someone on the western bank calls to him, "O traveler, with mind that is single, with right-mindedness, come at once! I will protect you. Have no fear of plunging to grief in the water or fire." The traveler, having heard the exhortation on his side of the river and the call from the other, immediately acquires firm resolution in body and mind and decisively takes the path, advancing directly without entertaining any doubt or apprehension. (*CWS*, p. 90)

Here Shan-tao talks about the two persons, one on the eastern bank and the other on the western bank. Thanks to their words, the traveler is able to cross the two rivers and go to the other shore, the land of happiness.

Shan-tao indicates that the person on the eastern bank refers to Shakyamuni by saying, "He [i.e., the traveler] suddenly hears the voice of someone on the eastern bank encouraging and exhorting him... Shakyamuni has already entered nirvana and people of later times cannot meet him. His teachings still remain, however, and we can follow them. They are like that voice." (*CWS*, pp. 91) Shan-tao also indicates that the person on the eastern bank refers to Amida by saying, "Someone on the western bank calls to him: this is the intent of Amida's Vow."

Here Shan-tao teaches us that Shakyamuni, the person on the eastern bank, is a historical person and Amida, the person on the western bank, symbolizes the Dharma. Shakyamuni

represents historical people whom the Dharma liberates and Amida symbolizes the Dharma that liberates them.

Shan-tao talks about the two different roles that the two Buddhas play. Shakyamuni is a dispatcher who tells the traveler, “Go to Amida (or the Dharma)!” Amida Buddha, the Dharma, is a welcomer who tells the traveler, “Come to me!”

Here we must know that Shakyamuni is standing on the eastern shore that symbolizes the world of suffering. Shakyamuni was no different from us who are in the world of suffering. He was initially a totally deluded person but became liberated when he gained insight into the Dharma. If we are liberated by the Dharma, we can become a buddha exactly like him. As a person who was liberated by the Dharma, he is encouraging us to go to the Dharma. He is a guide and a dispatcher, telling us “Go to the Dharma!” No historical individual can tell us, “Come to me!”

Here Shan-tao tells us that we should not be attached to the person of Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni is behind us, and we are not even allowed to see his face. The only thing necessary for us to do is to hear his words. He is telling us that by following his words—the white path—we must go to Amida, the Dharma. It is by hearing the audible historical voice of Shakyamuni that we can hear the inaudible voice of Amida, the Dharma. Shan-tao tells us that our main focus should be on Amida. In the final analysis, Amida symbolizes the Dharma in us—the deepest reality (or true self) within us. So the ultimate goal in Buddhism is that we become Amida Buddhas. Our becoming Amida Buddhas means realization of the true self, the Dharma self.

Conclusion

I have discussed the transition from Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism to Dharma-centered Buddhism that took place in Indian and Chinese Buddhist histories. I have said that Indian Mahayana Buddhists attempted to restore Dharma-centered Buddhism as the authentic Buddhism by creating Pure Land concepts, such as Amida and Hongan. They talked about the two Buddhas, Shakyamuni as the liberated and Amida as the liberator.

In Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, the three Pure Land masters, T’an-luan, Tao-ch’o, and Shan-tao, said that since their time was far away from the time of Shakyamuni and people could no longer receive his personal influence, “the path of sages” (or Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism) was no longer valid and “the Pure Land gate” (or Dharma-centered Buddhism) should be the right teaching for the people of their time.

This transition from Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism to Dharma-centered Buddhism also took place in Japanese Buddhism. The Pure Land Buddhism that Tao-ch’o and Shan-tao systematized as an independent tradition became one of the major Buddhist traditions in Japan by the end of the twelfth century. It was then that Shinran (1173-1262) appeared and harshly criticized the stagnant Pure Land tradition; he advocated a new Pure Land teaching that he called Shin Buddhism (*Jodo-shinshu*). Shin Buddhism later became a totally lifeless and stagnant Buddhist tradition by the middle of the nineteenth century, when it was the largest Japanese Buddhist sect being patronized by the samurai government. It was then that modern Japanese Shin teachers, such as Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (1863-1903), Rev. Ryojin Soga, and Rev. Haya Akegarasu (1873-1954), harshly criticized the lifeless and stagnant Shin tradition and attempted to revive its original spirit. In this way, the transition from Shakyamuni-centered Buddhism to Dharma-centered Buddhism was repeated in Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Buddhist histories.

I believe that the basic cause of this transition is this: Dharma-centered Buddhism that is based on nondualistic wisdom always exists as a minority tradition; it never can become a major tradition. If Dharma-centered Buddhism, a minority tradition, becomes a majority or mainstream tradition, it means that its spiritual basis has been compromised. Its spiritual basis, nondualistic wisdom, is replaced by dualistic human wisdom, the common sense way of thinking. When Dharma-centered Buddhism comes to be based on dualistic human wisdom, it becomes a popular or mainstream tradition. It becomes a form of Buddhism that caters to the dualistic expectations of the general public. If Dharma-centered Buddhism maintains nondualistic wisdom as its basis, it cannot become popular among the populace. (June 10, 2024)

Notes:

We will hold 2024 Maida Center Summer Retreat July 26 (Fri.)–28 (Sun.) at the Jodo Shinshu Center. Dr. Haneda will speak on “The Two Types of Freedom in Buddhism.” He will explain the differences between relative freedom and absolute freedom that Buddhism teaches.

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