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BUDDHISM AND TOLERANCE

THE BUDDHA-NATURE AND THE BODHISATTVA WAY

The central teaching of the Mahayana Buddhist scripture known as the *Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law* is that everyone can become a buddha, that is, that we all possess the buddha-nature. In chapter two, "Tactfulness," for example, we read: "Even children, in their play, /Who gathered sand for a buddha's stupa .../ Have attained the Buddha-way."¹⁾ And chapter twenty, "The Bodhisattva Never Despise," tells of a bodhisattva who greeted everyone he met with reverence, joining his palms and saying, "I dare not slight you, because you are all to become buddhas." Even when others reviled him, hurled stones at him, or beat him with staves, he would simply retreat to a safe distance and continue to revere their buddha-nature. We are also told that the bodhisattva Never Despise was the Buddha in an earlier life.

Because the buddha-nature is invisible, some people may think it does not really exist. In this context, I would like to mention a most interesting study of the behavior of infants in the first week of life conducted by researchers from Kyoto University Department of Psychology and Kobe University's Department of Psychiatry some years ago. They published a record of their detailed observations. Koshiro Tamaki, an authority on

¹⁾ All quotations from the Lotus Sutra are from Bunno Kato et al, trans., *The Threefold Lotus Sutra; Innumerable Meanings, The Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law, and Meditation on the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue* (Tokyo Kosei Publishing Co., 1975).

Buddhist philosophy, commented on the study in his *Uchuishiki e no sekkin* (Approaching Cosmic Consciousness).

Tamaki related that the researchers noted that newborn babies would repeatedly spread apart their arms and legs and then bring them together, and that when they brought their arms together they would join their palms in the gesture that we in Japan call *gassho*²⁾, the Buddhist sign of reverence. The infants would also stretch the edges of their lips in what could only be considered a smile. He commented: "I am compelled to regard these two intermittent movements as a message from the world before the babies' birth. They press their palms together. I believe this motion is the *gassho* indicating their accommodation to the life of the universe itself and their oneness with that life. *Gassho* is the most natural human gesture.

"'Religious' is a label applied after the fact. But this gesture actually expresses the natural state of being at one with all life. And the smile is the expression of the ineffable bliss of that life."

Thus we realize that *gassho* springs from the fountainhead of life and expresses the essential human condition.

The *Sutra of the Feat Decease* teaches that all living things have the potential to attain buddhahood (that is, contain the buddha-nature). The *Lotus Sutra* states that everything in nature will achieve this state, and the *Tach'eng-hsuan-lun*, a commentary on Mahayana teachings, extends this to the very land itself. In short, even inanimate things contain the buddha-nature, and all are destined for buddhahood.

Returning to discussion of human beings, why is it that the buddha-nature with which we are equipped at birth is eclipsed when we grow up? The reason is that as we mature it becomes encrusted with, or obscured by our defilements. Greed, anger, hate, jealousy, welling up from within us, conceal our buddha-nature.

Nevertheless, all people feel happy when they do something good. When we perform a kindness, even a

²⁾ H and gesture, like in Christian prayer - note of the editor).

small kindness, we feel a little glow of happiness. It is the buddha-nature within us that is rejoicing.

This does not happen only when we ourselves do good. We also feel that glow when we read or hear of someone else helping people through self-sacrificing service. In this case, too, it is our buddha-nature that is happy--proof that it is indeed our essential nature.

Not only is *gassho* linked with the wellspring of life, making this gesture fosters reverence for the buddha-nature. This is a fact. The act of *gassho* burnishes our own and others' buddha-nature. When the late Taro Takemi, who headed the Japan Medical Association for many years, visited Rissho Kosei-kai's Great Sacred Hall, in Tokyo, he remarked, "This is a wonderful environment for mental health. At Rissho Kosei-kai we greet all who enter and leave the Great Sacred Hall with *gassho*, thus paying reverence to their buddha-nature. Through actions based on this spirit our members manifest the bodhisattva way.

What is the bodhisattva way? Naturally, I use the term "bodhisattva" as defined in the One Vehicle of Mahayana Buddhism. A bodhisattva in this sense is one who aspires through religious practice to awaken to the true way of living and at the same time to help others attain happiness so that all people may be saved.

Why are religious practitioners of this kind necessary? The reason is simple. Today, no one can live like a hermit, isolated from the concerns of the world. Even if you lived all by yourself in the depths of the mountains, acid rain and toxic gases borne across seas and national borders might fall on you. Even if you and your family lived alone on a tiny island, it could be swamped if global warming caused the polar ice to melt.

In short, everything in the world is linked and interacts in an ever-changing pattern. In the circumstances, each one of us, awakening to the truths that all things are impermanent and that nothing has a persisting self, must work for the salvation of all while putting our own life in order.

No matter what is going on in the world around them, however, most people think only about their own concerns. If it were not for people dedicated to selfless

service to others, the harmony of the world would be destroyed; the world and humanity would be caught in an inexorable downward spiral of misfortune and disaster. Bodhisattvas are essential if we are to avoid this doom.

The Buddha taught six virtues, the Six Perfections, that bodhisattvas should practice: donation, keeping the precepts, patience, striving, meditation, and wisdom. Put simply, "donation" means dedicating oneself to others. "Keeping the precepts" means practicing self-restraint. "Patience" means enduring. "Striving" means devoting oneself to one's appointed task. "Meditation" means being calm and centered. And "wisdom" means knowing the true way to live.

Donation comes first in the list because it is the initial step of the bodhisattva way and because the practice of donation naturally cultivates the other five virtues. Donation means doing whatever one can for others mentally, materially, and physically, motivated by the wish for their well-being. If one habitually behaves this way, one is naturally compelled to obey such reasonable precepts as not harming others, not stealing from others, and not deceiving others. In other words, one learns to restrain oneself. This is what is meant by keeping the precepts.

If one behaves in a way that anyone can reasonably accept, empathy arises. This is love in the true sense, what Buddhists call compassion. When one starts to feel this kind of deep love, one can embrace all people within it. And then one can endure all hardships without rancor. This is patience.

When this attitude of patience becomes firmly rooted, one can continue to work towards accomplishing one's true mission without being flustered or distracted by what happens around one. This is striving.

Thus absorbed in one's proper activity, one can remain calm, undistracted and unflustered by what others say and never losing one's presence of mind. This is the state of meditation. To be sure, in its original meaning "meditation" refers to practices designed to inculcate this imperturbability, such as the seated meditation called *zazen*, but in the context of daily living it indicates a calm mind.

As the attitudes and actions of these five virtues develop and interest, the truth penetrating all phenomena and underlying the constant complex play of change in the world becomes clearly evident. When that happens, one can always choose the path that accords with truth. This is true wisdom.

Practiced in a spirit of service and joy, not merely accepted theoretically, the Six Perfections are of peerless value. Even seeing another person's way of living change as a result of the most important form of donation, donation of the Law—that is, leading others to the Way of the Buddha—can give one inexpressible happiness.

The early Buddhist scripture called the *Dhammapada* contains this verse: "Happy is the birth of a Buddha, happy is the teaching of DHAMMA (the Law, this is, the Buddha's teaching), happy is the harmony of his followers, happy is the life of those who lived in harmony."³⁾ This relaxed, free, joyful image of the Buddha is a model for all people of religion—indeed, for all people. If we talk with others in smiling, pleasant manner, they will naturally open their hearts to us. The rapport thus created leads to wonderful things.

The Buddha taught that all is suffering, in other words, that suffering is the normal state of affairs in this world. He elucidated the anatomy of suffering in terms of the "four sufferings and eight sufferings." In addition to the basic four sufferings of birth, aging, illness, and death, he enumerated four more, for a total of eight: the suffering caused by separation from what we love, union, with what we hate, failure to obtain what we desire, and, finally, all elements of the physical and psychological environment. No human being can escape these forms of suffering. But essentially, suffering has no substance. The *Lotus Sutra* teaches a way of living positively rather than letting ourselves be weighed down by suffering, a way moreover that impels us to improve both ourselves and others.

In the final chapter of the sutra, "Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue", the Buddha de-

³⁾ Juan Mascaro, trans., *The Dhammapada* London: Penguin Books, 1973), p.65.

clares: "If there be any who receive and keep, read and recite, rightly remember, practice, and copy this *Law-Flower Sutra*, ... such will be content with few desires, and able to do the works of Universal Virtue". The phrase "content with few desires" is most important. Controlling our desires is crucial to the harmony of the world as a whole. Of course, grasping the spatial and temporal changes and connections underlying the causes and conditions of all things, that is, understanding karma, is the heart of Buddhism.

Above I have discussed the buddha-nature, the bodhisattva way, and human suffering. Whether or not Buddhism explicitly teaches "tolerance" is not the point: what is important is to revere the Eternal Buddha, practice his teachings without protest, and honor the community of believers--all those who practice his teachings. These practices together, I submit, reveal that Buddhism teaches tolerance.