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Consideration on American Individualism IV: Buddhist Contribution to American Society

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Introduction

This paper is the fourth and final installment of the series "Consideration on American Individualism" in *The Bulletin of Keiwa College.* In part I (Nakamura, 2012), I discussed how early European settlers generated American individualism in the New World, combining their European traditions with American mythology. Then in part II (Nakamura, 2013), I examined how this individualism has been transformed in the course of history. Having endured some major social changes, American individualism has been, in some senses, eroded.

I turned to Buddhism in part Ⅲ (Nakamura, 2014) to analyze the nature of American individualism. In the Buddhist perspective, one's false view of self is responsible for one's suffering. A Buddhist diagnosis suggests that Americans' strong focus on self has had negative effects on both individuals and society.

This paper, part IV, considers what links Buddhism and American values. I mainly focus my attention on the ideals of love and compassion that Buddhism and Christianity share. Finally, I examine possible roles of Buddhism in American society.

As in part Ⅲ, I refer to the Buddha as Shakyamuni, meaning "the Sage of the Shakya," Shakya being his clan name. He was born around 480 BCE in India, where he passed away at the age of eighty. *Iwanami Bukkyo Jiten* (*Iwanami Buddhist Dictionary*) (1989) is referred to when Buddhist terms in Sanskrit and Japanese are used and cited in this paper.

1. The Ideal of Compassion in Mahayana Buddhism

Shakyamuni presents a view called the doctrine of the *anatman* (無我 *muga*), which is translated as "no-self" or "no-soul." As was discussed in part III (p.46), Buddhism teaches that there is no such thing as a permanent self. It holds that a so-called "person" consists of *panca-skandha* (五蘊 *goun*), five ever changing elements that come together for a limited period of time.

This concept of no-self seems to place Buddhism at a great distance from Western philosophy, which emphasizes a sharp distinction of self from others. However, it must not be forgotten that Buddhism shares many common concerns with Western philosophy. Both reflect upon the nature of the world and human identity, and both express the desire for salvation. They are intimately tied up with the ideals of love and compassion.

The Buddhist virtue of compassion, translated as *jihi* (慈悲) in Japanese, consists of two concepts: *maitri* (慈 *ji*), meaning "bringing others benefit and joy," and *karuna* (悲 *hi*), meaning "helping others to relieve suffering."

To discuss the Buddhist concept of compassion further, it is essential to relate the rise of the Mahayana (大乗 *daijō*) school of Buddhism in India. After the death of Shakyamuni, Buddhism evolved from its original form into Theravada (上座部 *jōzabu*), meaning "the Teaching of the Elders," and later, Mahayana, meaning "Great Vehicle." Mahayana took shape about the beginning of the Christian era, that is, some time between the first century BCE and the first century AD (Conze, 1980, p.41).

It is important to note that the Mahayana movement arose as a reaction against the Theravada orthodoxy, which had considered *prajna* (般若 *hannya*), or "wisdom," as the highest virtue. The Theravada school, after the death of Shakyamuni, increasingly removed themselves from all secular authority. They placed emphasis on asceticism in the seclusion of monastic life. Their ideal was to be an *arhat* (応供 *ōgu*), which means, according to Conze (p.44), "a person who has non-attachment, in whom all craving is extinct and who will no more be reborn in this world." The *arhat* path, however, seemed far beyond the grasp of ordinary people.

In a sense, the Theravada followers entirely neglected the original aim of Shakyamuni's teaching: the salvation of all people. Thus, the Mahayana movement sprang up as an attempt to reform the elitist and exclusive monastic path of Theravada Buddhism.

Mahayama Buddhism presents a completely new interpretation of the concept and nature of the Buddha in the doctrine of *dharmakaya* (法身 *hōshin*), *dharma* being "the law," and *kaya*, "body." In his book *Living Buddha, Living Christ,* Nhat Hanh (1995, p.50) clarifies the concept of *dharmakaya*. When Shakyamuni was about to pass away, he reassured his disciples, who were upset that Shakyamuni would no longer be with them, by saying:

> My physical body will no longer be here, but my teaching body, dharmakaya, will always be with you. Take refuge in the Dharma, the teaching, to make an island for yourselves.

This message implies that there are two bodies of the Buddha. One is the body of the historical Buddha, the Buddha as Shakyamuni himself. The Theravada school emphasized Shakyamuni's literal teaching. Meanwhile, the other body is *dharmakaya,* which was later developed in the Mahayana teaching. Nhat Hanh (p.35) explains that this is the Buddha of the ultimate reality, the one who transcends all ideas and notions and is available to any person at any time.

This doctrine positions Shakyamuni as not only the historical Buddha but also one of many "buddhas." It asserts that the fundamental *dharma*, or Buddha-nature, is not something external or transcendental, but is present within all people and within reality beyond time and space. The belief in the Buddha for the Mahayana followers connotes the belief in the Buddha of this ultimate reality, rather than the teaching of the historical Buddha.

The Mahayana Buddhists insist that it is necessary to work not only for one's own salvation but also for the universal salvation of all people, all of whom inherently possess the nature of Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhism, the *arhat* ideal of *prajna* was integrated with the ideal of *bodhisattva* (菩薩 *bosatsu*), *bodhi* (悟り *satori*) being "enlightenment," and *sattva* (衆生 *shujō*), "being." Conze (p.44) explains that the *bodhisattva*, or "enlightened-being," is "a person who wishes to save all his fellow-beings and who helps to become omniscient Buddha." In Conze's (1975, p.128) interpretation, "compassion" now came to be valued as highly as "wisdom."

The philosophical background for Mahayana Buddhism lies in the doctrine of *sunyata* (空 *kū*), or "emptiness." As was described in part III (pp.46-48), the important part of this doctrine is that everything has the equal reality of "emptiness." Mahayana Buddhists are aware that even the Buddhist concepts, such as *nirvana* (涅槃 *nehan*) and *samsara* (輪廻 *rinne*), are named or used simply because they are necessary to explain matters to bring people to understanding. If these concepts are viewed as sacred cows or objectively and independently real, they hold that one would eventually have *duhkha* (苦 *ku)*, which originates

from falsely perceiving the truth of "emptiness."

It must be noted that the doctrine of emptiness is most important to the path of *bodhisattva*. Realization of the absoluteness of infinite relativity can be identified with the notion of *dharmakaya*, or the nature of Buddha. Conze (1975, p.145) explains:

> If Nirvana and the world are identical, if everything is the same as everything else, then there is no difference between the enlightened and the unenlightened, between the wise and the fools, between purity and impurity, and everyone must have the same opportunity for salvation. If the Buddha's compassion is unlimited, he must save also the fools. If the Buddha-nature is equally present in all, then all are equally near Buddhahood.

The path of *bodhisattva* allows diversity and multiplicity within Mahayana Buddhism, because the *bodhisattva* is committed to *upaya* (方便 *hōben*), or "skillful means" in religious practice. What *upaya* indicates, Conze (1980, p.48) explains, is the ability to bring out one's spiritual potentialities according to his or her capacity for comprehension. The central idea of the *bodhisattva* path is that all beings are unique and each has a different path to salvation.

Such flexibility allowed Mahayana Buddhism to spread outside of India. Especially in such Asian countries as China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and Vietnam, Mahayana Buddhism has had great popular appeal. Goodstein (1994) explains that each country developed its own style of Mahayana Buddhism according to the context of each indigenous culture.

2. What Links Buddhism and American thought

It is often said that Christianity is the teaching of love. Jesus gave His disciples the commandment to love God with all their being and to love their neighbors as themselves. According to the Bible:

> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (Corinthians

13:4, New Revised Standard Version).

Nhat Hanh (1995, p.111) regards the Christian concept of love as very close to the Buddhist concept of compassion. Both Christianity and Buddhism, perhaps through the power of love and compassion, have grown bigger in their significance, influence and the number of followers in the world, transcending narrow concepts of race, class, and nationality.

In the Buddhist view, true love is possible when there is the understanding that one is not separate from other beings or the environment. To be is to be related, and everything is a set of relationships reaching out to other things. To be human means to belong to the community of humankind, and to seek the truth means to take responsibility for the wholeness of life. While respecting human diversity, Buddhism focuses on our fundamental connection to fellow human beings. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama remarks in the book *The Path of Compassion* (1988, pp.3-4):

> After all, all human beings are made of flesh, bones, and blood, wanting happiness, and not wanting suffering. We all have an equal right to be happy, and it is important to realize our sameness as human beings. We all belong to one human family. We quarrel with each other, but that is due to secondary reasons, and all of this arguing, cheating, and suppressing each other is of no use.

This awareness contributes to the message of Jesus that we should "love our enemy." When we understand that our own lives and the life of the universe are one, we no longer differentiate subject and object. The suffering of others is our own suffering and the happiness of others is our own happiness.

In his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness,* Nhat Hanh (1975, p.48) says, "Perhaps one can say that we are only alive when we live the life of the world." The fruit of this awareness, he states, is freedom from afflicted feelings. It makes one more tolerant and forgiving toward enemies. Nhat Hanh would say toward an enemy:

> You, my brother or sister, have wronged me in the past. I now understand that you were suffering and did not see things clearly. I no longer feel

anger toward you (1995, p.86).

The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, in his book *Kindness, Clarity, and Insight* (1984, p.36), states that even enemies are teachers of inner strength. He explains that one can learn real tolerance and patience from an enemy whereas the strength of one's tolerance cannot be tested by one's friends, parents, or a religious teacher. Having an enemy, he says, may also make one come closer to reality, peeling off pretensions. Thus, Buddhism views love and compassion as our best asset to respond to reality, because all of us share these powers. If one's action is motivated by love and compassion, it sets one free.

The concept of *anatman*, or "no-self," is indeed important in understanding Buddhist thought, but Nhat Hanh (1995, p.55) points out that there is something more important than no-self: freedom from the notions of both self and non-self. He points out the danger of being caught by mere words or concepts. "For a Buddhist," he says, "to be attached to any doctrine, even a Buddhist one, is to betray the Buddha."

What is important is our insight into the true nature of reality and our way of responding to reality. Any Buddhist concept is viewed as merely "an instrument to help us penetrate deeply into reality and obtain liberating insight" (Nhat Hanh, 1996, p.51). Buddhism asserts that the ultimate dimension has nothing to do with concepts. In this light, Buddhism may be viewed as pragmatic thought designed to free individuals from any emotional and intellectual attachment.

As was described in part I (pp.1-3) and part II (pp.36-38), America is a country of immigrants. From the outset, it was composed of people who freed themselves from old European societies. Although Americans inherited Western civilization to a large degree, they have been mistrustful of institutional authority and philosophical intellectualism that would repress individuals. The American ethos has been centered in pragmatism, or self-directed actions through which individuals are inspired to renew their own lives day by day.

Buddhism views the present as being made of the past and, at the same time, creating the future. Every moment depends on all preceding moments, and every moment is full of a future that is always new. The point of life, therefore, is to widen one's capacity to respond to reality without being bound

by ego and convention. In doing so, one can make each moment more special and its own. Jacobson (1986, p.43) states that one's perception becomes centered in creativity to the extent that one loses ego-centeredness.

Buddhism has sought to create a moment of awareness as rich as possible in the flow of reality. It is a moment of inexpressible peace in the oneness of the world. In this context, an awareness of impermanence is considered as positive, because without impermanence one cannot make creative moments. Each moment is not immortal, and for that very reason all the more its own and precious. This is why Buddhism emphasizes faith in one's daily practice rather than faith in an idea.

American thought shares with Buddhism its emphasis on what individuals do pragmatically. The American way of life is full of mobility and change. Jacobson (p.15, p.130) suggests that American empiricism rejects permanence and accepts the transitory nature of life. Thus, Buddhist and American thought come together in respect to their emphasis on pragmatic approaches to matters.

A difference, however, lies in Americans' pervasive consciousness that an enduring transcendent self is more substantial than the present moment. Buddhism can make a significant contribution to sustaining the virtues of American individualism if it helps Americans to shift their emphasis from the "preservation of self" to the "creation of rich selfless moments." The former leads one to anxieties and frustration, while the latter brings one more openness and flexibility. As long as one is engaged in creating rich moments, one has dignity. Nhat Hanh (1995, p.179) says:

> Unless we channel our energies toward being aware of what is going on in the present moment, we might not discover the peace and happiness that is available right now. The well is within us. If we dig deeply in the present moment, the water will spring forth.

3. A Middle Way between Two Fallacies

As introduced in part II (p.32), Alexis De Tocqueville, a French traveler in the nineteenth century, observed that Americans had an essential purity of faith in their participation for the common good at the expense of private interests. Individualism has constantly inspired Americans to be virtuous citizens who voluntarily contribute to the public good.

On the other hand, as was also discussed in part II (pp.34-36, pp.38-40), the rapid social changes brought by industrial capitalism have been depriving Americans of their communalism. The increasing complexity of society, along with the exclusive emphasis on the value of the individual, has made it more difficult for Americans today to relate themselves to society.

Finally, I consider how Buddhist perspectives, combined with American values, can evolve the virtues of American individualism. The key is how Buddhism can help American individuals reconnect themselves to society, transforming their self-interested motives into public commitment.

Buddhism understands the nature of reality as social process and sees people as social creatures in a special sense. As was exemplified in part III (pp.47-48), the Shakyamuni's teaching of *pratitya-samutpada* (縁起 *engi*), or "dependent origination," suggests that all individuals are viewed as inextricably linked to all parts of the world. The corollary is that the reality of one's being is defined within one's total social environment.

In his book *The Social Face of Buddhism*, Ken Jones (1989) discusses two extremes of a person's actions in society. One is what he calls the "social fallacy." This is the belief, Jones (p.119) states, that human well-being is to be achieved primarily and solely through social development. The social fallacy has typically appeared in socialist form. Western civilization on the whole has been somewhat obsessed with the social fallacy, because it has placed its emphasis on social and political revolution.

The other extreme is the "quietist fallacy," which, according to Jones (p.99, p.123), is the belief that salvation is separated from social phenomena. Separating spirituality from active social concern, one is in danger of sinking into other-worldly quietism. The quietist fallacy has typically been seen in an Eastern tradition that focuses on meditative practice. In meditative bliss, one can possibly become irresponsible in regard to one's social connections and duties.

Jones (p.209) points out that Buddhism has been often mistakenly identified with the quietist fallacy. It is in fact true that traditional Buddhism has avoided institutional activism and political leadership. One reason for its passivity has lain in its status as a guest religion in society. Buddhism in East Asia remained a guest religion, in contrast to its traditional religions with deep popular roots, such as Taoism and Shintoism. Its acceptance and survival has depended to a

large degree on its political conformity. Buddhists, in this situation, have often been obliged to sacrifice their ideals for their survival. In this sense, Buddhists in the West today are excited about the potential that Buddhism has in the West, where religious freedom is more guaranteed.

The essential teaching of Buddhism lies between the social and quietist fallacies. Buddhism in this sense seeks a middle way between them. Shakyamuni's foremost concern was with the alleviation of human suffering. As was discussed earlier, the path of *bodhisattva* in Mahayana Buddhism aims at the universal salvation of all people, using *upaya*. The wisdom of Buddhism lies in the awareness of the interrelatedness of all individuals and things, which are all equally "empty." What should be avoided in Buddhism is delusive and dualistic separation, particularly of self from others.

Buddhism speaks to society about the danger of dogmatism and fanaticism in one of the most basic principles: the denial of the notion of absoluteness. Buddhism states that a common mistake is committed by elevating a relative into an absolute truth. If one looks at one's self as an absolute truth, it often leads to conflicts and fightings with others.

Tiradhammo (1989, p.35) asserts that Buddhism should not add another ideology to an "ideology-afflicted world." Where Buddhism can make a contribution is to point out the limits of reforms in social systems or institutions. Social reform is truly necessary, but unless individuals in large numbers are personally changed, the reform does not bring substantial change in society. If one is driven by the delusive dualism of self and other, one may not be remedying but contributing to a problem.

Human liberation, Jones (p.125) asserts, is not just an extension of the field of social liberation. He further explains:

> Buddhism implies that unless there is some significant personal and individual change in the ways we feel and think about ourselves and about others we shall try to go on evolving societies which express and reinforce the futile struggle of each of us to escape from our root fear into varieties of acquisitive and aggressive belongingness identity (p.123).

Buddhism maintains that society can be affected to the extent that individuals change. Social action and social change must be based on personal

and individual transformation. Social culture is significant to the effect that its climate helps individuals become either more "deluded" or more "enlightened." The more society is bound by a culture of delusive separation, the more individuals are required to have personal transformation.

With the power of *karman* (業 *gō*), which I mentioned in part III (p.49), socio-historical conditions are inherited by each new generation. A good action by each individual produces good effects and a bad action by each individual produces bad effects. These effects become ground for further *karman*, whether in a good way or bad way. The character of society slowly changes through interactions and accumulation of these effects.

Conclusion

The most practical and essential message in Buddhism is that one should start with making peace with oneself. In the Buddhist perspective, the violence and inequality that exists in the world is viewed as simply an extension of the violence that individuals commit towards themselves and towards those immediately surrounding them.

Buddhism does not make a distinction between the social level and the individual level. If one is hurting one's parents, family, and friends, one has already a war going on inside oneself. When one has harmony with oneself, one becomes capable of making peace with others. This is the Buddhist perspective on where real social reform should start. Nhat Hanh (1988, p.37) points out what peacemakers should be like:

> I think that if peacemakers are really peaceful and happy, they will radiate peace themselves. To educate people for peace we have two alternatives: to use words, or to be peaceful ourselves and to speak with our lives and bodies. I think the second way is more effective. One person is very important. I have seen such persons, and because of their way of living, they really influence others.

The genuine wisdom of Buddhism is manifested in compassionate action in the most basic parts of one's life. This perspective can contribute to evolving the virtues of American individualism. It alleviates a distinctive problem that Americans have traditionally suffered: conflicts and tensions between the

individuals and society. It gives a new alternative perspective for social change in America.

Buddhism focuses on enlightenment of the individual "on a high level of spiritual consciousness" (Jones, p.198) apart from one's social structure. If one sees reality clearly without getting stuck in concepts and notions, one can be peaceful right here, right now. When more Americans recognize that one's true liberation lies not beyond the "frontier," but in the present moment inside themselves, the virtues of American individualism will be maximized without harming the dignity of the individual and without destroying the ideals of democratic society.

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Corrections

Let me hereby make corrections of the words I misspelled in the previous paper, "Consideration on American Individualism II: Individualism Transformed and its Subsequent Impasse" in *Bulletin of Keiwa College,* 22, 2013.

p.36, l.1-2: "its vitality was <u>lessoned</u>" should be corrected to "its vitality was <u>lessened</u>."

p.37, l.16: "not by <u>utilities</u> and harmonies" should be corrected to "not by <u>unities</u> and harmonies."

p.37, l.26: "<u>native</u> Americans" should be corrected to "<u>Native</u> Americans."

p.41, l.1 and 3: "Bellah, <u>N. B.</u>" should be corrected to "Bellah, <u>R. N.</u>"