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Personal Rights and Contemporary Buddhism

TAITETSU UNNO

THE QUESTION OF PERSONAL rights, as understood in the contemporary West, has not been of traditional concern in East Asian societies. The concept of rights, as demanding one's due, arose as part of the adversarial legacy of the West. In East Asia, on the other hand, the consensual model of society prevailed, ruling out any assertions of self against recognized forms of authority, whether secular or religious.[1] In the consensual society molded by Confucian ethics, it was the principle of *duty*, felt and carried out with sincerity, rather than *rights*, that was crucial for what it meant to be human. In fact, sincerity was at the heart of *li*, rites and rituals, that reached heaven (*t'ien*). Likewise, in periods of great Buddhist influence, it was the sense of *gratitude*, rather than *rights*, that was regarded as essential for a truly human life. Gratitude was born from a profound appreciation for all of life and nature, and it was to be expressed in various acts of compassion and thanksgiving.

The fact that the Buddhist tradition in its past history has had little to say about personal rights in the current sense of the term does not mean that Buddhists were not concerned with human well-being, with the dignity and autonomy of the spirit. In fact, throughout its long history, in spite of some dark and unsavory moments, Buddhism has taught the path whereby all forms of existence, animate and inanimate, would be able to radiate and shine in their own natural light. Contemporary Buddhism, if it is to survive in the modern world and especially if it is to es-

tablish roots in the West, must clarify what it has to offer to the concept of personal rights and its realization for all people. The first task for Buddhists, then, will be to clarify the meaning and content of the basic teaching of *anātman*, translated variously as "not-self," "non-self," and "non-ego," which forms the essence of personhood.[2]

As a basic teaching or *yana* the realization of not-self is a practical method of liberation from all kinds of delusion, especially self-delusion, which requires that one *live* not-self rather than simply debating its meaning from a purely theoretical and abstract viewpoint. Moreover, "the supreme truth to be realized [not-self] is not a product of 'my' efforts, not a conceptual entity to be visualized or concocted by my mind."[3] It is an awareness that the true self is more than what the self is normally conscious of as self, an awareness that dawns upon the self as it deepens and grows in religious practice. The core of that awareness, born from the repeated realization that "this is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself," produces the power of critical analysis leading to the insight that there is no permanent, abiding entity called the self.

I

The intellectual milieu of India during the time of the Buddha in the sixth century B.C.E. is summarized by the Buddhist logician Dharmakīrti (seventh century C.E.) in the following words:

> The unquestioned authority of the Vedas;
> the belief in a world-creator;
> the quest for purification through ritual bathings;
> the arrogant division into castes;
> the practice of mortification to atone for sin;
> —these five are the marks of the crass stupidity
> of witless men.[4]

Countering these "five marks" of traditional religion, societal values, and accepted practices were the so-called heterodox (*śrāmana*) religions, among which the surviving ones are Buddhism and Jainism. These originated for the most part far from the center of the Indo-Āryaṇ cultural sphere in northwest India and incorpo-

rated indigenous pre-Āryan beliefs, such as yoga, transmigration, karma, and nirvana.

Countering the class or caste system, based on color and born from the mystical depth of the creation myths, Gautama Buddha established the Saṅgha, the community of practitioners, which was a society of equals – regardless of birth or lineage or whether one was rich or poor, man or woman. His fundamental teaching was a radical negation of the ruling Brahmanic religion. The teaching of not-self (*anātman*) was the cornerstone of a new religion which undermined the absolute authority of Ātman-Brahman and the life characterized by the "five marks." Besides not-self there were other basic teachings which directly countered the supreme values characterizing the Brahman-Ātman unity: permanent being (*sat*), knowledge (*cit*), and bliss (*ānanda*). In contrast, the Buddha's teaching emphasized impermanence (*anitya*), rather than permanent being, as the universal human condition; radical ignorance (*avidyā*) as more elemental than knowledge; and suffering (*duḥkha*, "life does not go according to one's wish") as more fundamental than bliss.

By negating the metaphysical basis of traditional religious values and practices the Buddha affirmed instead the crucial nature of human conduct and *virtus* as determining what is truly human.[5] He also stressed reliance on the powers of analysis and autonomous reason and rejected revelation, authority, and tradition as sources of knowledge. In the words ascribed to Gautama Buddha:

> Just as the experts test gold by burning it, cutting it and applying it on a touchstone, my statements should be accepted only after critical examination and not out of respect for me.[6]

The new ideal of what should be regarded as desirable in a person is found in the *Dhammapada*, one of the earliest recorded sayings of the Buddha, wherein he infuses new content into the meaning of the high-born priest caste (*brāhmaṇa*):

> I do not call a man a *brāhmaṇa* because of his origin or of his mother. He is indeed arrogant, and he is wealthy; but the poor man who is free from all attachments, him I call indeed a *brāhmaṇa*.

> Him I call indeed a *brāhmaṇa* whose knowledge is deep, who possesses wisdom, who knows the right way and the wrong, and has attained the highest end.
>
> Him I call indeed a *brāhmaṇa* who, after leaving all bondage to men, has risen above all bondages to the gods, and is free from all and every bondage.
>
> Him I call indeed a *brāhmaṇa*, the manly, the noble, the hero, the great sage, the conqueror, the sinless, the accomplished, the awakened.[7]

The new concept of *high-born*, based on the teaching of not-self and manifested in the mode of personal conduct, meant that the low-born (*śūdra*), depending on his or her actions, could be regarded as a high-born. And similarly a high-born, by ignoble and virtuous living, could become a low-born. Various criticisms are found in Buddhist texts from this early period which reject the caste system. They may be organized into seven kinds of arguments: biological – plants and animals have many different species but humans make up one species; anthropological – the caste system began as divisions of labor and occupational distinctions and has nothing to do with race or color; sociological – the four-class system is not universal, not found among neighboring kingdoms; legal – punishment for crimes crossed class lines (not necessarily true in Hindu law as it is known today); moral – we are all subject to the karmic law; ethical – we are all equally capable of good and evil; and religious – we are all endowed with the potential for enlightenment.[8]

This transformation in traditional values, freeing people from fixed stations determined at birth and enabling them to decide their own destiny, is also evident in other changes. Terms of racial connotation, such as *Āryan*, meaning "noble," were infused with religious significance as evidenced in the doctrines of the Four *Noble* Truths and the *Noble* Eightfold Path. The concept of *middle* contained in the Middle Country, Madhyadeśa, the center of Āryan culture in northwest India, was transformed into the Middle Way, *madhyama-pratipad*, the universal path to supreme enlightenment – a path that was, at the same time, the concrete manifestation in daily life of enlightenment itself. The ultimate goal of such radical changes was to open wide the gates to religious life, such that

any person could claim for himself or herself the proclamation made by the Buddha at his birth: "Heavens above, heavens below, I alone am the World-honored One." This legendary affirmation expressed the spirit of a revolutionary age when a new sense of personhood, based on the negation of *ātman*, was born, and people became truly liberated.

The community of the liberated formed the Saṅgha, composed of people from all walks of life, both men and women, who were accorded equal treatment under the aegis of the Three Gems —Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha. A remarkable degree of democratic practice was observed, especially in the rules and regulations set forth in the *Vinaya*, which were formulated to protect the individual rights of monks and nuns. Inheriting the liberal atmosphere of northeast India, the Saṅgha was modeled after the elected councils and the assembly forum. Hierarchy was based on the character and quality of the person. The *Vinaya* places a premium on the rights of the individual members of the Saṅgha. An example would be the treatment of someone accused of an alleged crime or a violation of precepts. Evidence had to be presented and confession of guilt made together with repentance and a vow to correct one's errors.[9]

Having established the historical context in which the teaching of not-self arose, we will explore its evolution in China as manifested in Hua-yen thought and in Japan as expressed in the Shin Buddhism of the Japanese Pure Land tradition. Before proceeding, several crucial points about this teaching should be made. While not-self is to be manifested in a mode of action, it is nevertheless deeply rooted in meditative practices whose primary aim is the radical transformation of the ego-self to the egoless self. Without this transformation (*parāvṛitti*) at the base of the mind system, focusing on the deep-rooted source of self-centeredness, not-self has yet to be fully realized and meditative absorption remains nothing more than another form of delusion. In the history of Buddhism the teaching of *śūnyatā* ("emptiness" or "voidness") evolved into the Mādhyamika philosophy in third-century India and deepened and expanded the awareness of not-self to include the negation of all fixations on substantial being, whether within the self or without in the external world. Second, not-self does not mean the loss of personality, individuality, or moral responsibility but

a realization of an egoless personhood that is truly human. In accomplishing the true act of giving (*dāna-pāramitā*), for example, there is no attachment to the giver, the gift, or the receiver. This is so because each exists not in isolation but in interdependence and interconnectedness with all existence, and no one should make an exclusive claim as to giver, gift, or receiver. This interdependence, transcending the bounds of the human world and involving all sentient and insentient existence, including nature, is regarded as a more elemental relationship than anything rationally conceivable. Crucial to this interdependence is the egoless self which, properly understood, rules out any kind of self-centeredness which would destroy it. The content of interdependence will be clarified in its most developed form as articulated by the Hua-yen School. However, the immense difficulty of eliminating the deep roots of self-centeredness was realized from the very beginning of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the first century B.C.E., an awareness that led to the evolution of the Pure Land tradition. This tradition, which had always gathered a large lay following in East Asia, reached its heights in thirteenth-century Japan and opened the way for the establishment of the new schools of Japanese Buddhism—the various forms of Pure Land, of Zen Buddhism, and of the Nichiren schools. We shall focus on the Pure Land tradition and see how the problem of self-centeredness relates to the realization of not-self.

II

The teaching of not-self is not simply a matter of following the dictum "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not myself" as a guide to becoming free of the fictive self. It also has a positive aspect. The true *dharma*-nature is brought to full realization in a person, manifesting fundamental reality (*tattva*) itself. What hinders this realization is the deep-rooted self-centeredness that arises from a depth below the reach of ordinary consciousness. In the analysis of Yasuo Yuasa, a Japanese philosopher who has done extensive research into the mind-body relationship from both the Western and the Eastern perspectives, there are two levels of consciousness in meditative experience. One is a bright, disembodied,

surface self-consciousness. The other is a basic structure of consciousness which is dark, hidden below the bright glance of surface consciousness, and one with the body. Conventional thinking is pursued in the surface consciousness which is light and quick, but our affective life is bound to the base structure of consciousness which is dark and heavy. Until the latter is dealt with properly, we lack true awareness of self, we are not fully integrated, and we are not completely free.[10]

Meditative practices are directed to the base structure of consciousness, to what Buddhists traditionally call the "darkness of ignorance" (*avidyā*), the source of inexhaustible self-enclosure, which weaves the net of delusion into which we unknowingly throw ourselves. When the transformation called *parāvṛitti* occurs at the base structure of consciousness, then the darkness of ignorance is illuminated, its power and energy are properly channeled, and the body becomes light and free to work in consonance with surface consciousness. Meditative practice is more than a mere subjective, psychological experience, for it involves the whole being, including the base structure of consciousness, which realizes *dharma*-nature, the fundamental reality, in the transformation of ego-self to egoless self.

When the Buddha proclaims in the *Dhammapada* that "self is the lord of self, who else could be the lord? With self well-subdued, a man finds a lord as few can find," he is referring to such an egoless personhood, liberated from the bondage of subtle self-centeredness. Such also is the self to which the Buddha makes reference in his farewell sermon to his lifelong companion and disciple:

> Therefore, O Ananda, be ye lamps unto yourselves. Rely on yourselves, and do not rely on external help. Hold fast to the truth as a lamp. Seek salvation alone in the truth. Look not for assistance to any one besides yourselves.[11]

Reliance on "self as a lamp" and on "truth as a lamp" suggests that the reference is not to the conventional self but to the egoless self manifesting *dharma*, translated here as truth.

The optimum functioning of the realized self, the integration of thinking and feeling, the unity of surface and base consciousness, is a prerequisite to realizing the goal of Buddhist life:

seeing things, including the self, as they are (*yathābhūtaṃ*), freed from any self-centered distortions. The stopping of external stimuli (*śamatha*) in meditative practice is a mere preliminary to the insight into reality (*vipaśyanā*) which is possible only when things, including the self, are seen as they truly are—that is, from their own centers, rather than from the perspective of the individual or the ego-self. This radical form of seeing, beyond any subject-object dichotomy, is true wisdom (*prajñā*), which is simultaneously true compassion (*karuṇa*). When both are active, they bring to life all things, including nature, as they truly are. Each reality is then affirmed just as it is in its nonobjective mode of being.

In the history of Buddhism this standpoint of not-self (*nairātmya*) was expanded to include not only the human self (*pudgala*) but all things (*dharma*), negating the existence of any permanent, substantial entity in the world. With the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism this evolved into the teaching of *śūnyatā* ("emptiness" or "voidness"), that which makes all phenomenal things possible. The basic meaning of emptiness is succinctly stated in the *Heart Sutra*: "Form is none other than emptiness; emptiness is none other than form." The negation of that which has form—persons, things, objects—by emptiness has two connotations: first, it negates a permanent, substantial form grasped conceptually; and second, it restores form in its essential mode of existence, manifesting emptiness.

The form thus affirmed is *dharma*, the product of dependent coorigination (*pratītyasamutpāda*). As the reality of each mode of existence, including not only humanity but all things in life and nature, *dharma* is clearly real, but it is also temporary and passing. Each *dharma* at its elemental source, then, is both real and unreal, appearing in double exposure. This is expressed in the classic Mahāyāna statement, "True emptiness is miraculous being"; and in T'ien-t'ai Buddhism reality is grasped in the "middle" mode of being, as the unity of "emptiness" and "provisional being." *Dharma* thus realized is the suchness (*tathatā*) of things, including the self, in the world and nature. On the field of emptiness, devoid even of the re-presentation of emptiness, each existence realizes its suchness, its *dharma*-nature. Life is then seen not from the human standpoint but from the nonobjective mode of each being as it is.

What this means is that each reality, *dharma*, cannot be denoted as either subject or object, nor can it be subsumed under any category of discursive thinking. Keiji Nishitani, the contemporary Japanese philosopher, denotes such a reality as an "in-itself" (*jitai*) – also called "selfness," "be-ification," "*samādhi*-being," etc. – to differentiate it from the notion of substance (*jittai*—"grasped objectively") which has been standard since the time of Aristotle in Western philosophy, and from the subject (*shutai*) which is central to the critical philosophy of Kant. Both are established on the field of dichotomous consciousness which contains within it the paradox of representation. This occurs when a thing is lifted up from the elemental mode of being and transformed into an object re-presented to the subject. A thing thus known in re-presentation is grasped conceptually and abstractly but never as it is.[12] What all this implies is that true appreciation for a person, other living things, or inanimate objects in nature means seeing each in its own nonobjective mode of being, from its own center, and not from an anthropocentric or egocentric standpoint. Such a realization in Zen is exemplified in Lin-ch'i's "True Person of No Rank."

When not-self is manifested, when each reality reveals itself in suchness, one realizes the interdependence and interconnectedness of all life, the true form of existence more real and elemental than anything conceivable by human consciousness alone. In this understanding human beings are *not* the center of the universe; each existing reality as *dharma* is the center, a center of a circle without a circumference. Such an understanding inevitably leads to the realization that what we call "rights" inheres not only in people but equally in all sentient beings, as well as in nature itself.

The understanding of the vast interdependence and interconnectedness of life and nature, based on dependent coorigination (*pratītyasamutpāda*), received its fullest theoretical formulation in the Hua-yen School. In brief, in the words of D. T. Suzuki this school teaches that "each individual reality, besides being itself, reflects in it something of the universal, and at the same time, it is itself because of other individuals."[13] As we have already pointed out, "individual reality" refers not only to human beings but to everything in existence, including nature. Religiously speaking, this is the basis for affirming the universality of Buddha-nature, found in both sentient and insentient existence. Its logical conclusion ap-

pears in the assertion of Chan-jan of the T'ien-t'ai School, who was strongly influenced by Hua-yen thought: "A single grass, a single tree, a single dust particle, each contains Buddha-nature."[14] The Shingon School develops this even further and proclaims the Buddhahood of mountains, rivers, grass, and trees.

The traditional explication of interpenetration is found in the Fourfold Realms of Reality (*dharmadhātu*) of Ch'eng-kuan (738–839), the fourth patriarch of the Hua-yen School. The first is the realm of things (*shih*), including the self. This is the realm of ordinary experience, the world of naive realism. The second is the realm of the universal principle (*li*), suggesting an underlying order according to some transcendent reality. This "principle" in Buddhism is *śūnyatā* or emptiness which is one with dependent coorigination. The third is the realm of the unhindered interrelationship between the universal principle and phenomenal things (*li-shih*). Illustrative of this is the statement discussed earlier, "Form is none other than emptiness, emptiness is none other than form." What has form and shape is the result of multiple causes and conditions, nothing in the world being static and permanent and hence empty of "own being" (*svabhāva*); but that very emptiness makes possible the origination of countless things, including self and nature. The underlying principle – emptiness and dependent coorigination – upholds the phenomenal world. Finally, the fourth is unique to Hua-yen: the realm of the unhindered interrelationship among phenomenal things (*shih-shih*). Here any notion of an absolute or universal principle has disappeared, for it is now contained in its totality in each phenomenal thing. That is, what is absolute or universal cannot be divided up into bits and pieces to be connected with multiple things; it must relate to each thing in its totality, being contained wholly within it. Thus, each phenomenal thing is both absolute, complete in itself, and relative, related to all things, making possible "interdependence." In this way emptiness and dependent coorigination constitute the structure of interdependence, such that when A is affirmed, B, C, and D are negated, only to come alive in A; simultaneously, when B is affirmed, A, C, and D are negated, but they too come alive in B. This mutual negation and affirmation, taking place endlessly and inexhaustibly, is the interdependence that is found in the fourth and ultimate realm of existence.[15]

A more technical exposition of interdependence may be seen in two basic concepts in Hua-yen: *mutual identification* and *interpenetration*. They are made possible by the fact that in dependent coorigination each phenomenal thing simultaneously manifests emptiness (without "own being," *svabhāva*) and provisional being (real and true, although passing and temporary).

According to Fa-tsang (643–712), the third patriarch of Hua-yen, mutual identification is understood as follows: When, for example, A is the focus as provisional being, B is empty of own being and is identified with A; but when B is the focus, A is empty and identified with B. Since A and B cannot both be being or empty at the same time, everything in the world is in the relationship of mutual identification. This is not the same as mere oneness or unity, since the world of distinctions and individual uniquenesses is affirmed. Each *dharmic* reality exists in mutual negation and affirmation with all other *dharmic* realities. The concept of interpenetration is based upon a similar structure. That is, when A has the power to affect B, B is devoid of power and enters A. But when B has the power to affect A, A is devoid of power and enters B. Since A and B cannot both be with power or without power at the same time, there is nothing that does not interpenetrate with the other. Here again the world of distinctions and individual uniquenesses is affirmed as the basis of dynamic interpenetration.[16]

One of the favorite metaphors used to illustrate interdependence is that of master and servant. When one thing is master —a metaphor for the absolute uniqueness of a thing— all other things become its subordinate; but simultaneously a subordinate can become the master and all other things, including the master, become its servant. Nothing is static in the world of flux and emptiness; hence, the positions of master and servant are instantaneously interchangeable. This relationship of master and servant includes not only humanity but all sentient existence, animate and inanimate, including nature. What has to be underscored is that the world of interdependence is realized only on the basis of emptiness, where self-centeredness cannot exist. Lacking this basis of emptiness, selfishness will abound, arrogance become rampant, and violence to life and nature ensue.

In the historical context this interpenetration is understood

as the relationship of one and many. One and many are contradictory opposites, but they are also interdependent, the one entering the many and the many entering the one. First, the one entering the many means that a person is a historical product, being born, living, and dying in the world, including nature. Second, however, the many entering the one is also a reality; that is, the historical world and nature are affected by the creative powers of the individual. In sum, each person is molded by historical forces, but he or she is also responsible for the world and nature. Such a one is no longer one among the many, but one as the absolute subject, the negation of the many; and the many is not simply a collection of ones, but many as the common good, the negation of separate ones going their different ways. Here we find the absolute affirmation of the individual, irreplaceable and unique, but at the same time subservient to all things for the good of the many.[17]

In this way respect for the individual and the recognition of rights is not a static but a dynamic fact which makes it imperative that as we affirm our own individual rights we must also be willing to give up ourselves in order to affirm the rights of others. When, however, we affirm only our own rights at the expense of the rights of others – including the rights of humanity over nature, one nation or one race over another, one belief or view over others – we become tyrannical and oppressive. The proper understanding of interdependence, as the elemental form of relationship, would exclude such self-righteousness and would create a truly global society of equals.

The reality of interdependence is at the heart of the bodhisattva ideal that places the needs of others before one's own. Yet in essence there is no one who is placed above the other, for as found in the classical formulation, there exists absolute equality of self and other (*parātmasamatā*) and interchangeability of self and other (*parātmaparivarta*). Again, it should be noted that "self and other" is not limited to the human nexus; this understanding embraces the world of nature, including animate and inanimate existence.

The average person in traditional East Asia, of course, does not have such an intellectual understanding of interdependence, but he or she does live the life of gratitude which is its practical, everyday expression. The Japanese idiomatic expression "*Okage-*

sama" is a case in point. The expression is impossible to translate into English, but it may be rendered loosely as "How grateful I am." The phrase consists of the word *kage*, meaning "shade," implying protection, beneficence, kindness, assistance, and so on, with two honorifics, *o* and *sama*. It is the recognition that whatever one's present circumstances, fortunate or unfortunate, one lives by virtue of the working and sacrifices of countless others, including the blessings of nature. Whether in good times or in bad, the Japanese preface their greetings, opening remarks, and responses with "*Okage-sama*," for just to be here, to be alive, is a blessing and a gift. The sense of gratitude nurtures humility, and humility expresses a deeper appreciation for the gifts that make life possible. One is then motivated to repay society and work for the common good. Humility and gratitude are boundless.

We have discussed the teaching of not-self and the meaning of interdependence, both of which are meant to uproot the deep source of self-centeredness. But human nature is such that not everyone will undertake the discipline truly to manifest not-self or live according to the principle of interdependence founded on emptiness and dependent coorigination. In fact, history seems to be a chronicle of those who asserted their egocentric needs and exploited the powerless for their own selfish ends. Ancient people were fully aware of this human reality, as shown by the emergence of the Pure Land tradition simultaneous with the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism in the first century B.C.E.

Historically, the Pure Land path had been an adjunct to mainstream Buddhism throughout history, and even in China the Pure Land tradition never became an independent movement. This had to await the revolutionary epoch of thirteenth-century Japan, when Honen (1133–1212) proclaimed the founding of the Jodo School. He and his disciple, Shinran (1173–1262), wrought a radical change by opening the path to enlightenment to those who had hitherto been denied access for being "evildoers"—those who had failed in meditative practices, those who had violated the precepts, those who made a living by taking life (hunters, fishermen, traders, peasants), and women from all walks of life.

The Pure Land teaching proclaimed that true compassion was directed solely to the beings of karmic evil, the infinite burden of self-enclosure without beginning and without end. But through

the power of the Primal Vow of Buddha Amida, those so hopelessly lost in the darkness of ignorance (*avidyā*) could entrust themselves to the Primal Vow and thus be liberated. This entrusting to the Primal Vow of Other Power, itself the working of true compassion, is the fullest manifestation of not-self: the abandonment of reliance on the powers and accomplishments of self.

Just as the crucial point about meditative practice is transformation (*parāvṛitti*) from ego-self to egoless self, so also in true entrusting there occurs a fundamental transformation (*ten*) from a being of karmic evil (ego-self) to a being of highest good (egoless self). Through the power of the Primal Vow, "karmic evil, without being nullified or eradicated, is made into the highest good."[18] In the words of Shinran,

> Having gained true entrusting majestic and profound
> By virtue of Amida's Unhindered Light,
> The ice of blind desire melts without fail
> To become the water of enlightenment.
>
> Evil hindrance becomes the substance of virtue
> As is the case of ice and water;
> The more the ice, the more the water;
> The more the hindrance, the more the virtue.[19]

The roots of self-centeredness in the unfathomable depths of karmic evil require the working of the Primal Vow. Neither human awareness nor human effort can reach the bottomless depth; only the working of true compassion can have any effect. Such is the thought expressed by a disciple of Shinran, writing several years after the death of his teacher: "How grateful I am that Shinran expressed this in his own person to make us realize that we do not know the depth of karmic evil and that we do not know the height of Tathāgata's benevolence, all of which cause us to live in utter confusion."[20] Such a realization led Shinran to assert: "Even a good man attains birth in the Pure Land, how much more so the evil person."[21]

This "evil person" is the existential realization of the finite being that Shinran is, but having realized it from the very bottom of his existence, reality is manifested in him and a personhood that

no one can deny or take away is attained. The self truly and really becomes itself. In his own words:

> When I ponder on the compassionate vow of Amida, established through five kalpas of profound thought, it was for myself, Shinran, alone. Because I am a being burdened so heavily with karma, I feel even more deeply grateful to the Primal Vow which is decisively made to save me.[22]

This radical affirmation of personhood echoes the proclamation of the Buddha at the beginning of Buddhist history: "Heavens above, heavens below, I alone am the World-Honored One." The manner of awakening to true personhood is also reminiscent of the salvific process described in early literature. *Magga*, in the following quotation, means "path" but also the moment of spiritual transformation from ego-self to egoless self:

> This insight [arises and] subsides, as if signalling to *magga*: "Now be born!" and *magga* too, as if not failing the given signal, follows on that flash of insight and arises, penetrating and breaking through the mass of greed and ill-will and delusion that hitherto was unpierced. . . .
>
> This *magga* not only breaks through the mass of greed and ill-will . . . but also dries up the ocean of ill in the round of existences . . . brings the seven noble treasures into one's presence . . . quietens all enmities and fears, leads one to the cherished sonship of the supremely perfect Buddha. . . .[23]

The working of *magga* parallels the working of the Primal Vow breaking through the darkness of ignorance, melting the ice of blind passion into the water of enlightenment.

III

When we apply some of the principles discussed above to the traditional understanding of personal rights, we gain a new meaning of and a fresh appreciation for this concept.

First, the question arises whether it is sufficient to speak of personal rights from a strictly human standpoint alone. Of course

personal implies the human, but when *rights* are seen from a purely anthropocentric or egocentric perspective, can we ever do justice to other forms of existence, animate and inanimate? Even more problematic, however, is that such a self-centered viewpoint, which is already a distortion, blinds us to true reality, both the reality of our own self and that of the external world. In short, it is nothing more than subjectivism. If we are ever to go beyond self-delusion, we must break through our self-enclosure and affirm all things, including the self, as they are from the field of emptiness wherein each mode of existence may radiate in its own natural light. All things deserve to be affirmed not from the standpoint of the "darkness of ignorance" (*avidyā*), which is subjectivity at its worst, but from that of enlightenment, which makes possible the radical objectivity that gives life to all things, including the self.

Second, as a natural corollary of the above, shouldn't the concept of *rights* also be extended to nature? We can no longer treat nature purely objectively and continue to exploit it simply as a source of human sustenance. We are already aware of the tenuous ecological balance that threatens life on earth. Can we correct the imbalance simply with the understanding and efforts of people of good will? Or with the power of scientific know-how and technology? Is it not time to undertake a fundamental shift in our basic attitude toward nature, a shift so drastic as to appreciate nature from the standpoint of nature, rather than from the human standpoint? This does not devalue the human place in the universe; it simply puts it in the proper perspective and enhances the capacity for wisdom and compassion of human beings. In sum, only by a radical change in our relationship with nature can we reverse the acceleration toward ecological self-destruction, the ultimate de-naturalization of nature, as well as the complete dehumanization of humanity.

Third, the most difficult problem in considering the nature of personal rights is the ego-centeredness that lurks in its background. Unless this is properly dealt with, it can easily lead to another form of subtle oppression. This implicit self-centeredness also appears frequently in disguised form in the name of a higher principle—whether social, political, ethical, or religious. Our life may be dedicated to some significant social cause, political ideol-

ogy, or ethical and religious movement in which we are expected to curb, and even negate, our selfish concerns. Yet, too frequently in the course of events do we find self-centeredness resurfacing in some noble guise.

The most subtle forms of disguised self-centeredness appear in all world religions; we see it in sectarianism and triumphalism, classism and sexism, and the idea of the religious elite, whether individuals or nations. How can we root out this radical egocentricity, all the more difficult because it is affirmed in noble language? How can we affirm plurality, cherishing our own beliefs without negating those of others? Good will and tolerance have been inadequate as evidenced in the world today. What is necessary is a new understanding of reality, a new vision of the ideal community, based on the interdependence and interconnectedness of life, such that each reality becomes simultaneously master and servant to all others. When this is realized on an elemental level, there is no room for any form of ego or self-assertion – one claiming superiority over all others – for that goes against the true nature of reality and spells self-destruction.

Finally, having raised these questions, I feel that it is necessary for contemporary Buddhism to come forth with a clear and unequivocal statement on personal rights, incorporating some of the issues raised here. It has the necessary foundation and ample examples demonstrating respect for all life, including individual – in Buddha's own history, in the lives of the countless bodhisattvas, in the taming of people's passions, in the politics of compassion, and in countless other ways. More concretely, if we take Japanese Buddhism as an example, even a cursory review reveals the advancements in human welfare that Buddhists contributed to in various ways.

Beginning in the sixth century C.E., the teaching of not-self not only inspired great art and architecture, but its representatives transmitted knowledge of astronomy, medicine, and calendars; taught people irrigation methods, agriculture, and sericulture; built bridges, dams, and roads; dug wells; founded infirmaries, orphanages, leprosariums, and public bathhouses; cared for the elderly, beggars, and abandoned domestic animals; planted trees and built way-stations; held special ceremonies to release captured animals, fowl, and fish; and taught people to respect all life and

to give proper burial rites to the dead. Whenever Buddhist influence was pronounced, it made a distinct contribution to a more civilized society. During the Heian Period (794–1185), for example, not a single case of capital punishment was recorded; and during the Tokugawa Period (1600–1868), in areas of strong Shin Buddhist faith the crime rates were lower than in any other provinces.

But in the complexity of our modern world in which the advancements in technology and communication have brought greater efficiency in denying personal rights, and in causing wanton death and destruction, what has contemporary Buddhism to offer? The answer remains to be seen; but an interesting historical phenomenon is emerging as Buddhism, with its teaching of not-self and universal compassion, nurtured in consensual society, begins to take root in the adversarial legacy of the West, which has increasingly stressed individual rights – personal, human, and civil. In the Buddhism growing in the United States, for example – much more than in the Asian forms where it is an establishment religion – we see greater concern with social issues, such as the role of women (*Kahawai: Journal of Women and Zen*), the question of poverty and hunger, the desire for peace (the Buddhist Peace Fellowship), and respect for animals (Buddhists Concerned for Animals). Although these movements are youthful and small in number, they struggle to encounter these problems from the classical Buddhist standpoints of not-self, compassion, and enlightenment.

NOTES

1. James C. Hsiung, ed., *Human Rights in East Asia: A Cultural Perspective* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), pp. 3–30.

2. For the most recent study on Buddhist "not-self," see Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1982).

3. Mahinda Paliwahadana, "A Theravada Buddhist Idea of Grace," *Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World*, ed. Donald G. Dawe and John B. Carman (New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 193.

4. Padmanah S. Jaini, "*Śrāmanas*: The Conflict of Brahmanical Society," in *Chapters in Indian Civilization*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph Elder (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendell/Hunt, 1970), p. 41.

5. For an illuminating article on the subject see Keiji Nishitani,

"The Awakening of Self in Buddhism," in *The Buddha Eye*, ed. Frederick Franck (New York: Crossroad, 1982), pp. 22–30.

6. V. Krishnamacharya, ed., *Tattvasaṃgraha* (Baroda: Gaekwad Oriental Series, 1926), v. 3588.

7. Edwin Burtt, ed., *The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha* (New York: New American Library, 1955), pp. 71–73.

8. K. N. Jayatilleke, *The Principles of International Law in Buddhist Doctrine* (Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, n.d.), pp. 516–17.

9. For examples see ibid., pp. 519–33.

10. Yasuo Yuasa, *The Body: Toward a Japanese Mind-Body Theory* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

11. Burtt, *Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha*, p. 49.

12. Keiji Nishitani, *Religion and Nothingness* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 113–18, 131–40.

13. D. T. Suzuki, "The Gandavyuha," in *On Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism*, ed. Edward Conze (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 62.

14. Taitetsu Unno, "The Buddhata Theory of Fa-tsang," in Transactions of the International Conference of Orientalists in Japan, no. 8 (1963), p. 40.

15. Historically, the usurper empress Wu Chao in China (reign 690–705) and Emperor Shomu in Japan (reign 724–49) attempted to establish their empires based on Hua-yen ideology.

16. *Hua-yen i-ch'eng-chiao-i fen-ch'i-chang*, *Taisho Daizokyo* (Tokyo, 1927), 45:503b.

17. Yoshifumi Ueda, "The Status of the Individual in Mahāyāna Buddhist Philosophy," in *The Japanese Mind*, ed. Charles A. Moore (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1967), pp. 164–78.

18. Yoshifumi Ueda, ed., *Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone,"* (Kyoto: Hongwaji International Center, 1979), p. 32.

19. Shoho Takemura, ed., *The Koso Wasan: The Hymns on the Patriarchs by Shinran*, Ryukoku Translation Series, no. 6 (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1974), pp. 62–66.

20. Taitetsu Unno, trans., *Tannisho: A Shin Buddhist Classic* (Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center, 1982), p. 36.

21. Ibid., p. 8.

22. Ibid., p. 35.

23. Quoted in Paliwahadana, "Theravada Buddhist Idea of Grace," pp. 190–91.