

Peace, Ecology and Mahayana Spirit

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I have always considered Buddhism a religion possessed of a powerful life force. The entire history of Buddhism, spanning more than 2,500 years, demonstrates how it has been propagated and developed without the aid of armed force, and with not compulsion by any state, in fact without relying even on the organization of Buddhism itself. How can we put the power of the Buddhist organization to better use, despite the fact that no other of the world's major religions is as loosely structured? This very looseness can make Buddhism appear weak in the extreme. During his lifetime, Shakyamuni Buddha was unable to protect his own tribe from extermination, while Chinese Buddhism could not stop the devastation wrought by the *sanbu-isso* (*san wu yi zong*) (persecution of Buddhist devotees by four Chinese emperors). Buddhism, which had developed to a considerable extent in many regions and among many different ethnic groups, was ultimately fortunate even to retain any of its historical sites.

All this however did not stop the advance of Buddhism. Buddhism continues to flourish today, enjoying a revival in various parts of the East, and burgeoning popularity in various parts of the West. The influence of Buddhism, particularly on people's way of thinking, extends far beyond its devotees, and cannot be readily gauged in numerical terms. In my view this influence can be attributed to the powerful life force of Buddhism.

There is nothing mystical about this life force of which I speak. In its most simple terms, it constitutes a sincere, tireless compassion for people, combined with an outstanding ability to choose the biggest problems threatening and endangering mankind and the people requiring the most compassion, at different times and in different places, and make these a serious concern of one's own. Even if this meant no more than caring for people in response to situations at certain times and places, Buddhism would still undoubtedly possess its life force. This life force is none other than bodhisattva practice.

From a monotheistic perspective, Buddhism is atheistic—because in

the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism, it appears to be not a deity of some description but humans who rank most highly. The activities of human beings create the world, and create human beings themselves. The state of the world, and the state of human lives, are ultimately determined by the activities of human beings themselves. It follows that all human activity, including movements aiming to alienate, and to liberate, is directed at humans. Hinayana Buddhism reflects the “suffering” of the world and of human lives, however in Hinayana release from this human “suffering” is found in the unknowable next world, the nirvana on the other side. This type of concern for mankind belongs, to use a popular term, in the realm of “final” concern, and has left people disappointed in the present, and resulted in them losing the present. A major factor in the ascendancy of Mahayana Buddhism was its dissatisfaction with the pessimistic nature of this concern and advocacy instead of a universal concern, at the same time shifting the focus of that concern to the realities of life, in a proactive approach to the world and to living. Buddhism is rich with ideas of this nature, and in present-day China alone, we are seeing the emergence of new doctrines such as *jìn-sei Bukkyo* (*ren sheng fo jiao* “Buddhism for living”) and *ningen Bukkyo* (*ren jian fo jiao* “social Buddhism”) (translator’s note—the Chinese “*ren jian*” although written in the same characters as the Japanese “*ningen*” [human being] refers not to human beings but to the world in which human beings live, their social reality). The overall goal of these schools of thought, which have developed with the times, is to build a wonderful world of universal happiness for all mankind, in association with everyone else concerned about the fate of mankind. If Buddhism devotes itself tirelessly to the pursuit of this ideal, it will retain its eternal youthfulness, and demonstrate and utilize its own life force.

The 20th century was a great century that saw human civilization reach hitherto unprecedented levels of sophistication. The labor of workers and advances in science and technology created unparalleled wealth in society, providing for us all materially and feeding our minds in ways our forebears could never have imagined. However, we must never forget that this same 20th century also saw the outbreak of two world wars, and a host of local conflicts that continue to this day. The global environment, on which mankind should be able to depend for its survival, has been subjected to devastation on an unprecedented scale, devastation that is growing apace. Creative human endeavor, the breathtakingly rapid advance of science and technology, and the earnest labor of billions of people are now employed irresponsibly for the slaughter of mankind itself, and to destroy the natural conditions for the survival of mankind.

This is civilization in regression, and the vestiges of barbarism.

Mankind stands poised at the beginning of a new century, and how we reflect on the experiences of the previous century and absorb their lessons, and guarantee a better way of life with more joy for mankind will be critical as we build a new civilization in the 21st century. Numerous scholars have made prescient comments about the 21st century, giving rise to many different versions of the future. All these are deserving of our attention. However in my opinion, the most important issues for our future will be stopping and preventing wars, and protecting the environment and restoring the balance of our global ecosystem—because war and the destruction of the environment are problems threatening the whole world, and the whole of mankind. If we do not find solutions to these two mammoth problems, any aspiration to build a so-called civilized world will come to nothing.

I have heard two schools of thought on these problems of war and the environment. The first contends that “the evil in the world today has its origin in the development of science and technology, which excite human greed and cause moral decay in society. Science and technology enable wars to be waged on a wider scale, and increase the capacity for slaughter. Science and technology infiltrate everything, from the heavens to the ground on which we walk, and even our bodies, destroying the natural ecosystem.” This school of thought therefore opposes science, criticizes reason, and calls for people to go back to nature and their primeval state. In my opinion however, views of this type upset the relationship between cause and effect. The whole of human civilization has been built on the ability to use tools and to make tools, and science and technology have always been the driving force behind the advance of civilizations. This century will undoubtedly see science and technology advancing at an even faster pace, and labor productivity rising in even greater leaps and bounds. These developments are inevitable, and cannot be stopped. To oppose science and reason is quite simply to risk being left behind as times move on, and isolated from society as a consequence, perhaps to encounter all kinds of new suffering we cannot even imagine. From a different perspective however, views of this type do act as a warning to us, albeit an extremely radical one, that unless we control the irresponsible use of scientific and technological achievements and the fruits of our labor effectively, mankind will in effect be bringing about its own extinction, to which returning to our primeval state and to nature is preferable. The most important issues for the new century therefore will be to develop science and technology further, and stop and prevent the irresponsible use of science and technology. We

must demand such action first of all from our politicians, but at the same time, these are responsibilities that rest with the whole of mankind.

The second school of thought is as follows: "Conflict in the world is unavoidable, so we cannot avoid war, or the destruction of the environment." This view holds that at the deepest level, the diversity of cultures in the world makes war and environmental devastation unavoidable. To a certain extent this does appear to be the case. Our globe is divided into this one, that one, this culture, that culture, with some in conflict, and others perennially at war. This is not confined to the constant use of violence within countries in the name of culture and beliefs: between countries, one country uses the supposed superiority of its own cultural values as an excuse to interfere with, pressurize and in the end invade other countries. It is easy therefore for people to make the connection between this sort of pretext and a certain type of prevailing worldview used to start wars in the last century: the idea that "some races are superior and others inferior, culture can be high or low. Superior races exploit inferior races like slaves, and 'advanced' cultures conquer 'backward' cultures. This is biology, the law of nature, so there is reason even to plundering, to burning people alive, to invasion."

Current proponents of this theory of the clash of cultures have broadened the scope of their argument to assert that in general, if there are differences in culture, this will inevitably lead to political and military clashes. It is hardly surprising that the very idea of this is enough to send a chill down most of our spines. Of course, people who argue in this vein do not all have some kind of fascist connection, and some are probably warning us with the best of intentions. Without a doubt however this view does mirror a danger signal of sorts for society, namely that there are inarguably certain people using the cultural diversity of the world to deliberately ignore the predominant trends of interaction, mutual aid and harmony between cultures, and exaggerate the differences between cultures to the extent that people cannot "live together" and coexist, creating confusion, and plotting to profit from it. Similarly there are some that use cultural differences to sell their own country's concepts of value and political ideologies. The history of all human civilizations is one of cultural diversity existing precisely because of cultural differences, demonstrating also that this is what accounts for the great variety in human lifestyles. Culture is furthermore something that develops over time, and every ethnic group and every nation, if it is to ensure the continued existence and advancement of its culture in this world, needs to and must accept the influence of cultures from other

nations and ethnic groups, use those imported cultures to cultivate and enrich itself, and incorporate their best elements organically within itself. Cultural exclusivity and arrogance signal a debility of the self. Cultural differences and diversity are therefore the conditions for interaction between the peoples of different countries, that enable them to learn from each other, and together walk the path of prosperity and happiness. They must not be used to justify viewing each other with hostility and the use of violence. However, what we should remind ourselves of here is that people must initiate interaction of their own accord, and that interaction must benefit both sides, and the power to decide what to reject and what to accept rests solely with the people, and the nation in question. Similarly, this right is sacred and not to be interfered with. Respect for other people's cultures and beliefs is also respect for the creation of mankind, and a bulwark of the dignity of mankind.

Religion is the particular form of culture affecting the greatest proportion of the world's population. While religion is confronted with numerous challenges for the 21st century, the problems of war and the global ecosystem involve the earth as a whole, and everyone on it. For this reason they are problems in which religion should perhaps take an especially serious interest. For Buddhism this means revealing and elevating its own unique Mahayana spirit to a sufficient extent, and by doing so potentially contributing incomparably more than other groups working for the benefit of society.

What then is the Mahayana spirit? If I were to describe the Mahayana spirit in detail, there are so many aspects that not even several essays would cover them all. I do believe however I can describe in a few words the nucleus of this spirit as whole. This is nothing more and nothing less than protecting and working for the benefit of all living beings. The bodhisattva practice that the Buddha gave us as a model is pure, complete altruism through and through, careful to show compassion for all living things, protecting the way of life of every life, and helping it to live in even better ways. The first of the Ten Wholesome Deeds of Buddhism is "abstention from killing," while the first of the "Five Moral Precepts" of Buddhism is a prohibition on killing. There is a saying—"It is better to save the life of one person than build a seven-story pagoda." All this is common sense in Buddhism. If we say that Mahayana Buddhism demands an attitude of great compassion to all living beings, then expanding this spirit to the mission of maintaining peace in the world to prevent all mankind from suffering the misery of war and violence becomes the obvious purpose of the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism.

Buddhism has an especially illustrious history, a history from time immemorial of protecting the ecological balance and purifying the environment. This is the Buddhist tradition most widely praised among all Buddhist traditions, in the past inspiring ancient poets and writers, and a worthy model also for environmental conservation efforts today. This tradition may be related to a certain tendency within Mahayana Buddhism toward the idea that everything under the sun has a soul, and to certain other Mahayana credos. Recently I have found myself thinking constantly about the *ichinen-sanzen* (*yi nian san qian*) (“A single life-moment possesses three thousand realms”) teaching of the wise priest Tiantai. In my view, where this “*sanzen*” [*san qian*] three thousand realms) differs importantly from “*sanzen-daisen* [*san qian da qian*] (the world)” is that while the latter is no more than a kind of scheme for the world, the “*sanzen*” of Tiantai stresses the balance of the world. This begins with the balance between people, and the balance between people and the environment. Modern Buddhism has the potential to absorb the fruits of modern science, elevate the Buddhist doctrine of balance to a new level, and at the same time, spread its tradition of protecting the ecological balance to all of society, and all the world.

In sociological terms a feature of Mahayana Buddhism is the way it unites *nyuse* (*ru shi*) (translator’s note—the opposite of *shusse* [*chu shi*] or *shusseken* [to relinquish the temporal world for the path of Buddhism] meaning to participate actively in the world and society) and *shusse*. The significance of this lies in something only possible through *nyuse*, the purpose of *nyuse* being to extend far beyond the self-interest of the temporal world, beyond political confrontation, to protect fairness, connect equally with different groups in society, bring harmony to relationships between people and between different ethnic groups and nations, and promote interaction, understanding and friendship. In terms of religion itself, for the time being holding firmly to the principle of religious freedom, and of religious tolerance, will be of paramount importance.

Under the guidance of its chairman Daisaku Ikeda, Soka Gakkai has revealed and elevated the spirit of Mahayana, in the process carving out a record of achievement that has captured the attention of the world at large. Chairman Ikeda himself is widely respected for his personal efforts to put this spirit into practice—traveling to almost every part of the globe to advocate peace and friendship and call on people to protect the environment; engaging in dialogue with representatives from various cultures from both East and West; calling for dialogue and interaction, and eliminating and opposing discrimination and hostility. China

and Japan are neighbors with a special historical relationship, and Chairman Ikeda and Soka Gakkai have hailed the special friendship and symbiotic relationship of mutual benefit between China and Japan over the generations, becoming a force for friendship in Japan working in good faith to prevent a recurrence of the tragedies of our history. No one is more aware of this than the Buddhist world and Buddhist researchers in China, so from this quarter, Chairman Ikeda and Soka Gakkai are viewed with a special respect. Allow me to take this opportunity to express once again my great esteem for Chairman Ikeda and our friends at Soka Gakkai.

My very best wishes for the success of this meeting.