

The Contemporary Significance of Buddhism and the Activities of Daisaku Ikeda

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DURING these two days, we have listened to 13 interesting reports which in the end did not look as separate unrelated studies but rather amounted to a consistent whole which could be briefly defined as “Buddhism as a moral philosophical teaching, and Buddhist organizations, their role and significance in the modern world.”

If we trace the origins of Buddhism and the history of its dissemination, we will discover that as early as in the first century A.D. it crossed the borders of India where it had initially emerged, and began to rapidly move to the North, East, and West. The Hindustan peninsula, Afghanistan, Burma together with entire Indo-China, islands in the Pacific, Central Asia, Tibet, China and Japan soon experienced the influence of the Buddhist and consequently Indian culture. In the West, Buddha's ideas reached as far as the area between Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya where they lost to the Arabs in the early 8th century.

Nowadays, most of the areas listed above still adhere to Buddhism, but more than that; Buddha's personality and teaching have appeared attractive for both Eastern and Western Europe, and even for America. Admittedly, in those vast spaces Buddhism has so far grasped no more than a toehold, but presently, as before, those tiny abodes are expanded by numerous preachers. Judging upon the constantly growing interest towards Buddhism revealed in those places, its positions and influence look secured enough.

The question is, what makes Buddhism so attractive for the multinational world. Its preacher in Europe and America is usually not a bell-shaking monk clad in yellow or red (even though they are there, too). As a rule, a preacher is a well-educated person who represents a certain Buddhist community and has perfect command of Buddhist literature and teachings. The community assists everybody requiring help, both morally and materially; it supports schools for the poor, abundant in the West and the East alike. The thing most people cherish the most is peace, the cessation of hostilities. As Dr. Yoichi Kawada stated in his report, Buddhist communities consistently promote all efforts aimed at

preserving peace. In today's troublesome world frequently shaken by explosions and acts of terror, Buddhism certainly is a force which contributes a lot into securing a sort of lasting stability.

Let us now address Buddha's ideas and try to understand why it was so different from the cults of ancient Indian Gods as described in Indian mythology and the epic "Mahabharatha." The Gods waged incessant wars against the demons, quarreled, and were far from moral in their everyday life. They insisted on the necessity of wars making fighting the duty of Kshatrias. The "Mahabharatha" represented them as counselors to fighting armies; their advices resulted in total extermination of whole tribes. Bloodshed, annihilation, descriptions of super-powerful weaponry, this is what one sees while reading about the battle of Bharatha's descendants, with God Krishna being the chief advisor of a competing tribe.

More than just one Sutra presents Buddha as a political advisor to local governors. However, not a single war in his time happened with his participation or was approved of by him. Naturally, India had to defend itself against enemies, but Buddha's sermons unequivocally emphasized political stability and preservation of life. I do think that the leaders of world powers seriously underestimate Buddhism and pay insufficient attention towards Buddhists, as that faith is an enormous moral reserve for the peace movement. If the proceedings of our conference get published, they will certainly draw attention of politicians and political organizations.

Thus striving towards peace is integral for Buddhism since its earliest days.

Under the circumstances of social inequality among the people inhabiting India and the caste structure supported by Gods (a good example is the popular "Bhagavadgita" included in the sixth treatise of the "Mahabharatha"), there suddenly emerged Buddha, a spiritual activist of a completely different sort who proclaimed the equality and appealed to the people's sense of morality. The Buddhist community "protected by the Teaching" could be joined by representatives of all castes and social strata; once there, they became equal and lived moral lives.

Buddhism with its ideas of kindness, love, and respect towards humans looks a good foundation for the modern human rights movement. Of an extreme importance is its standing in regard to problems of morality. It does not split people on the basis of their ethnic or racial background; it opposes all sorts of chauvinism and violence associated with nationalism. In that, like in all other respects, Buddhism unites people against mutual hatred and enmity, promoting their respect

towards each other. At this point, one should recall Chapter XX of the Lotus Sutra in which Buddha tells his disciples a parable about a Bhikshu, a Bodhisattva who used to bow to everybody he encountered, and say, "I deeply respect you." People laughed at the man and they called crazy, got enraged, threw stones at him, but he nevertheless never stopped shouting, "I deeply respect you."

The teachings of Buddha and Christ are similar not solely because of the Ten Commandments, but also due to the deeds and behavior they imply. Taken together, they become a tremendous moral force essential for the modern world virtually pushed into WWII by a variety of aggressive ideologies and political movements. The dissemination of the humanistic ideas demanded by Dr. Daisaku Ikeda is immensely important for preserving peace on the Earth. During the conference, we had a chance to get acquainted with scholarly concepts of our colleagues working at the Institute of Oriental Philosophy in Japan, which regard to the most acute problems: Buddhism and peace, Buddhism and Christianity, Buddhism and human rights, Buddhism and feminism, all of them vital for the humanity.

Equally important looks the ecological situation. Air pollution, oil and other harmful substances poured into rivers and seas, indiscriminately cut forests, the natural environment for animals and birds, together, they negatively influence the health of the humans, decrease their ability to work and shorten their life span. Naturally, nothing of the sort was known at the times when Buddha and Christ taught people to live just, honest and noble lives. However, their words sowed something which is presently growing in the preaching of modern Buddhists and Christians; that very something helps people live in the harsh conditions of today. In a lot of Sutras one can discover examples of care towards the nature, the environment, and the Buddhist shrines. Here are but a few instances. The Golden Light Sutra tells a parable about Jalavahana who saved a hundred thousand fish remaining in a dried-out pond. He gathered 100 elephants, loaded them with water bags, and refilled the pond, but that appeared to be insufficient. The fish were also hungry and attacked their benefactor. Then he loaded the same elephants with food suitable for the fish and fed them. The same Sutra praised a Bodhisattva, a governor's son, who had given his body to a hungry tigress. It had just given birth to cubs, was completely out of strength and could commit a terrible sin of eating the little ones. Thus the Bodhisattva saved the mother as well as her cubs. More than one Jatakas contain stories about sagacious and witty hermits saving beautiful trees from wood-cutters.

In the 19th century, great scholars, educators and humanists, stated that a country disrespectful to women could in no way be called civilized. For quite some time, Buddha had not allowed women into his community either, but Ananda, Buddha's aunt Pradjapathi, and other women convinced him that they also wanted pure and modest life and were worthy of enlightenment. An entire section in the "Tripitaka" canon deals with female Buddhists, Buddha's highly talented pupils who proved their superiority over their brethren-monks during disputes on philosophy. Thus the question of whether a woman could become a Buddha received a positive answer. The Lotus Sutra tells about a daughter of king Sagara who passed all stages of education in a single lifetime and achieved enlightenment. In Japan, I happened to get acquainted with a female Buddhist community and was tremendously glad to see their modesty and at the same time elegance, to hear their questions addressed to me and proving their deep knowledge of various aspects of Buddha's teachings.

Let us now have a look at Buddhology as a science studying Buddhist literature and philosophy. In Russia, the financial situation does not allow it to get raised to the position it should occupy, despite the fact that it researches the objective role played by Buddhism in world history. The humanitarian value of Buddhism as a set of ideas was appreciated 100 years ago by the great Russian Buddhologist and philosopher F.I. Shcherbatskoy; regrettably, the attitudes prevailing in Soviet Russia never allowed him and his followers to fully develop their talent, but good ideas are known to never disappear without a trace. Already before the reforms of the late 1980s (the Soviet "perestroika"), a few young scholars working at our Institute decided to continue the research initiated by Prof. Shcherbatskoy. I am speaking about E.P. Ostrovskaya and V.I. Rudoy who began working on a truly scholarly translation of and commenting upon the "Abhidharmakosha" by Vasubandhu, the source being a real Buddhist encyclopedia. Their study has in the course of twenty years resulted in a shelf length of books dealing with the basic ideas of Buddhism; some of the results they had obtained were reported at our conference. It should be noted that, while continuing Prof. Shcherbatskoy's tradition, they never stopped finding and training talented scholars who would go ahead with Buddhologist studies. By now, they have been joined by more pupils and colleagues together forming a renowned Buddhologist school based on our Institute. They provided the ground for Safarali Shomakhmadov to write and defend his thesis; these days, that scholar still conducts research on Buddhist written sources. It was only today that he relayed his ideas in regard to a topic

new for Russian Buddhology, the heritage of Nichiren, a 13th century Japanese scholar. That researcher can well be considered the forefather of the truly scholarly approach towards studying the Lotus Sutra whose work is still appreciated by those who study the text of that unique source. An almost complete manuscript containing that Sutra and written in the 7th-8th century is a treasured part of our collection; it has been exhibited abroad on quite a few occasions, and I can certainly say that it must be considered as the basic source for solving a lot of problems related to Buddhism and still remaining obscure. Thus, T.V. Ermakova, an active member of the Buddhologist team working at our Institute, participated in this conference with a report on her analysis of the laymen's moral code conducted on the basis of the Lotus Sutra.

One certainly should pay due respect to the scholarly vision of A.S. Martynov heading the Far East Department of the Institute; his life-long scholarly work concentrated on studying the history of Chinese political ideology. He is one of the few who persistently study the teachings of K'ung fu-tze understanding their historical role in forming both China itself and its culture. Prof. Martynov's report which we have heard at the conference clearly revealed the unique position of that philosophy in the history of humanity as such. It did not only influence Buddhism and other ideologies, but also underwent certain changes under their reciprocal influence. The importance of the K'ung fu-tze philosophy in the past and present surely looks an important subject for scholarly research.

To a great extent Buddhism, Christianity, and K'ung fu-tze's philosophy discussed today have appeared essential factors in the process of the so-called "humanization of humans."

Noteworthy is yet another issue I have already briefly mentioned. Dr. Daisaku Ikeda merits not only having suggested the theory of modern humanism based on Buddhist sources. That theory deserves the name of **new humanism**, and I believe that the reasons for that are quite sound. Humanism is known to have emerged as a Renaissance phenomenon, as the idea that the human beings should become the primary object of culture. Time changes, and that humanism which was proclaimed by Buddha acquires new features under new circumstances. It does not just mean decent attitude towards people anymore, but also securing good conditions for their life, protecting the society against terrorism and wars, creating an environment in which one can study, work, and rest. Maxim Gorky made a character of his play "The Lower Depths" say, "The word 'man' sounds proudly!" Dr. Daisaku Ikeda is proud of humans seeing them as would-be Buddhas, designers of a new society ruled by kindness and justice.

I would like to conclude this paper with a statement that the cooperation between the Institute of Oriental Philosophy and our Institute has proved to be a worthy scholarly project instead of a mere formality. I am sure that such conferences can well be held on a regular basis and play an essential role in the development of modern Buddhology. We might probably outline a long-term working program and follow it thus attracting the attention of the entire Orientalist community.