

My Impression Regarding Amida Belief

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Translators' Note

The on-line edition of “My Impression Regarding Amida Belief” is based on the lecture delivered by Prof. Kōgi Kudara on March 27, 2002 as part of the Ryukoku Lecture Series at the Institute of Buddhist Studies. The lecture notes were first translated into English by Rev. Kanjō Asuka, then an M.A. student at IBS, and revised and edited by Eisho Nasu with the help of Lisa Grumbach, an adjunct faculty member of IBS. The text has been further revised for on-line publication by incorporating the discussion and comments of the participants of the Ryukoku Lectures. I would like to thank particularly Ms. Haru Matsumune, also a graduate of the IBS M.A. Program, for her kind help in revising and editing the text, without which it would not have been possible to complete this project.

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My Impression Regarding Amida Belief

by

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In March of 2001, shocking news was reported throughout the world: two great images of the Buddha, one 173 feet high and the other 124 feet high, in the Bāmiyān region of Afghanistan, were completely destroyed by the Islamic fundamentalist forces of the Taliban. In Japan, scenes of the explosions were broadcast on TV, and headlines like “Destruction of the World Heritage” emblazoned the front pages of newspapers and TV screens everyday. As far as I gathered from the TV and newspapers, the reports basically said that the Taliban regime had demolished the precious remains of Buddhist culture, and simply criticized their barbaric acts. However, there was no mention of the fact that the faces of the two great Buddhas in Bāmiyān, including their foreheads, eyes, noses, and mouths, had already been torn off about one thousand years ago. As far as I know, there were no objective comments from the historical point of view.

Shortly after the incident, I began receiving a lot of e-mails and letters requesting that Ryukoku University take the initiative

to issue a public statement condemning the barbaric acts of the Taliban. In reply to them, I wrote the following statements:

The desperate Taliban's barbaric acts of destroying the Great Buddha statues must be condemned. Although they were following the creed of their Islamic fundamentalism, their actions do not accord with the common sense of the contemporary world and are totally unacceptable.

However, not only the demolition of the great Buddhas in Bāmiyān at this time, but also the destruction of other Buddhist artifacts in Afghanistan has continued since this area was Islamicized more than one thousand years ago. When we reflect upon the original essence of the Buddhist teaching in which it is taught that everything is impermanent, we know that all forms perish. The great Buddha statues in Bāmiyān were destined to fall down sooner or later, even if they were not demolished.

Further, if we go back to the original intent of the Buddha, "all forms are provisional, and the truth cannot be revealed by forms." Therefore, if we reflect on the Buddha's teaching, the demolition of the images of the Buddha statues in Bāmiyān is not a very significant problem.

Even if we issue a public statement condemning the demolition of cultural heritage, it would be a fruitless effort because the Taliban would simply turn a deaf ear to it. The insanity of the Taliban will not end here. In order to promote their existence and attract the attention of the world, I am sure that they will provoke other incidents, which I am more worried about.

After I submitted my comments, two problems arose. The first problem relates to my last comment that "they will provoke

other incidents, which I am more worried about." Unfortunately, just as I feared, this became a reality with the tragic incident of September 11th. The second problem concerns my fourth comment, "if we go back to the original intent of the Buddha, "all forms are provisional, and the truth cannot be revealed by forms." Therefore, if we reflect on the Buddha's teaching, the demolition of the images of the Buddha statues in Bāmiyān is not a very significant problem." I received many responses expressing strong opposition to this statement. It seems that I unintentionally gave the impression that I approved of the Taliban's destruction of the statues. Therefore, I believe that I must explain more about this comment because it contains one of the most significant teachings of Buddhism.

Although it is one of the most significant teachings in Buddhism, in order for you to understand it easily, I think that it would be better to explain it first by a typological comparison of the three major world religions. Both Christianity and Islam, as well as Judaism, from which the first two originated, are all monotheistic. That is, they all presuppose the existence of a creator god, a peerless and absolute being, omniscient and omnipotent. Human beings are the creation of this god. Jesus or Muhammad appeared in history as the prophets who transmitted the gospels or the revelations of God.

Then what about Buddhism? Buddhism does not presuppose the existence of an absolute god. In this sense, Buddhism is an atheistic religion. Buddhism teaches those who are deluded to become awakened to their true selves and guides them toward the fulfillment of a higher level of self-awakening. One who has accomplished this goal is called a Buddha. In short, Buddhism is a philosophy of self-reformation through self-awakening. Buddhism teaches that "one becomes a Buddha," as opposed to the monotheistic religions, which never say "one can become God."

Among the world's religious traditions, Buddhism is a rare religion in that it does not have a story of world creation. Buddhist teaching deals neither with the process of the creation of the universe nor the issues of the finiteness or infiniteness of time and space. This point is demonstrated in the parable of the poison arrow in the *Mālunkya Sutta (Discourse to Mālunkyaṇḍita)*.¹ These issues are part of a metaphysical theory of ontology which cannot be proven objectively. Even if we were able to comprehend such things, they do not help us resolve the fundamental sufferings of life (*dukkha*: birth, aging, sickness, and death). Again, the purpose of Buddhism is the accomplishment of enlightenment through self-awakening.

Also there is a significant difference between Buddhism and monotheistic religions in terms of their understandings of language. In ancient India, there was a phrase, *ārya-tūshṇībhāva*, meaning the silence of the sage. Because holy people who achieve awareness of the truth know that this truth cannot be expressed in words, they remain silent without telling the content of their enlightenment. This is one of the Indian traditions.

According to the Buddha's biography, the Buddha did not intend to teach immediately after he attained enlightenment. He followed the Indian tradition of "the silence of the sage" and there is no question why he behaved this way. In the Buddha's biography, the supreme Indian deity, Brahma, discovered the Buddha's hesitation, and begged him to teach the Dharma. This is the well-known story of Brahma's request. The story contains the contradiction that Buddhism, which does not presuppose the existence of God, gave an important role to this supreme deity. We often find similar contradictions in other parts of the Buddha's biography. Perhaps, the authors of the biographies in the later period strategically intended to give people the impression that the Buddha was superior to the supreme deity in India. Regard-

less, the Buddha's silence reveals the basic principle of the Buddhist teaching which maintains the imperfection of linguistic expression.

Śākyamuni Buddha enjoyed his enlightenment alone in silence, yet he also must have felt a profound impulse to propagate the Dharma. The story of Brahma's request describes the Buddha's wavering mind. That is, the Buddha was struggling with the Indian tradition of the silence of the sage. This story ends up with the scene that he came to the conclusion that "although most people cannot comprehend it by words, there might be some who can understand it. Therefore I must preach it for the benefit (*artha*), welfare (*hita*), and peacefulness (*sukha*) of all sentient beings." Then he stood up from his seat. He decided to break with the Indian tradition of the silence of the sage.

It is said that the Buddha's first sermon, or the first turning of the wheel of Dharma, was preached to the five mendicants at Deer Park in Sarnath. This marked the beginning of Buddhism and established the foundation of the Buddhist sangha. The Buddha's preaching meant a breaking away from the Indian tradition of the silence of the sage. But it also meant that Buddhism embraces the absolute contradiction within itself; that is, the Buddha had to express his indescribable truth with words.

In this point, the Buddhist notion of words is very different from that of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The words recorded in the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Koran are the words of God as heard by the prophets, and they are the truth itself. Therefore, they cannot be altered under any circumstances. This is the principle of the scriptural religions. However, in Buddhism, words are considered as a provisional means, and as long as we do not lose sight of the Buddha's intent, we are free to choose our words as necessary. The important issues here are 1) both words and language are simply means of discussing the

true Dharma; 2) their use, however, introduces the contradiction that Buddhism must express in words a truth that is indescribable by words.

The above points are important for thinking about the difference between Western and Eastern thought, so let me discuss this issue on words in more detail. There is the Buddhist phrase "a finger pointing at the moon." The Buddhist teaching is compared to an index finger, and the Dharma to the moon. Suppose a person says, "Look at the moon I am pointing to with my finger." The person who hears this sees the beautiful moon in the direction that the other person's finger points. The finger does not touch the moon. It simply points in its direction. Even so, the person who hears these words will be able to see the moon. The role of words in Buddhism is the same. The Buddhist teaching expressed by words is the finger in this metaphor. It does not directly touch the truth, which is compared to the moon in the metaphor. The words of the Buddhist teaching merely guide us in the direction toward the truth. When someone hears, "Look at the moon my finger points to," yet only looks at the other person's index finger, he or she would never be able to see the moon. In short, because the mind of such a person is confined within the words of the teaching, he or she can never see the truth lying beyond the words.

Buddhism is also called a religion of texts. The number of sutras is enormous, or, adopting a more traditional expression, there are eighty-four thousand gates into the teaching. As mentioned above, however, each of those sutras is a finger pointing to the moon. Therefore, it is not a significant problem even though certain topics contained in these sutras sometimes contradict each other. Differences arose because those who point at the moon shift their viewing positions a little bit for the sake of the people they teach. In short, they changed linguistic expressions

by applying a method of preaching based on the ability of the audience.

Mahāyāna Buddhism, which emerged about two thousand years ago, was also a movement to popularize the spirit of Buddhism. Mahāyāna Buddhists transformed the manner of expressing Buddhist spirituality to make Buddhism available not only to monks and nuns who can comprehend highly abstract philosophy, but also to ordinary lay followers who were illiterate and working hard just to make ends meet. In order to accomplish this purpose, several different, new, concrete methods were invented during the same time period.

Originally, in India, there were these traditions as follows. According to Indian tradition, holy persons were not to be represented by their concrete images. Although reliefs displaying the life story of the Buddha are found on the gates and fences of early stupas erected to enshrine the Buddha's relics, the Buddha himself never appears; instead, the presence of the Buddha is expressed symbolically by a bodhi tree, a dharma wheel (*Dharmacakra*), or his footprints. In this respect, Buddhists adhered to the contemporaneous Indian tradition not to represent the physical form of holy persons.

The teachings of the Buddha were compiled after his death and edited by his disciples to create the Buddhist scriptures. Originally the teachings were transmitted orally and did not exist as written texts. Writing systems existed in India during the time of the Buddha, but, according to Indian tradition, "letters are for secular functions, not for recording the words of holy persons. The words of holy persons are to be recited aloud."

These traditions lasted for about 400–500 years while Buddhism remained within the Indian world. They were, however, broken by people outside of India, such as Greeks and Iranians. When they became Buddhists, they were not satisfied with the Indian mode of expression. This was the period of the Kushan

empire when an Iranian tribe, the Kushans, expanded their influence across Central Asia, northwest India, and even to central India in the Indus River valley. I believe that Mahāyāna Buddhism necessarily arose together with the development of these new modes of expression for its propagation.

The first Buddhist statues were carvings of the image of Gautama Buddha (Śākyamuni). In the earlier period, stupas were erected in central India in which the Buddha's relics were stored in memory of him. However, it must have been difficult to obtain genuine relics of the Buddha in the borderland of northwestern India. The suggestion that images of the Buddha might have been produced in place of relics is very persuasive.

One of the essential concepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism is the existence of multiple Buddhas and bodhisattvas. It teaches that the historical Buddha, Gautama Siddhārtha, is not the only Buddha. It is based on the idea that there must have been other Buddhas in the past and that others will appear in the future. The word bodhisattva means a "being who seeks awakening," and this word was originally used only to refer to Gautama before his attainment of enlightenment. But if we interpret the word literally, there must be other bodhisattvas, and we too are bodhisattvas. Since Mahāyāna Buddhism aimed at the popularization of Buddhism, it began to articulate Buddhist doctrines by introducing physical images of Buddhas and bodhisattvas so that ordinary people could easily comprehend its teaching.

Buddhism is a religion of wisdom and compassion. Wisdom and compassion are like two sides of the same sheet of paper. As there is no paper with only one side, there is no Buddhism with only wisdom or only compassion. It is said that the relationship between wisdom and compassion is "neither one nor two"—neither monistic nor dualistic—and this represents the philosophical system called Buddhism.

This two-sided aspect of Buddhism was often expressed by using the images of bodhisattvas. One of the best known examples is Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, who is a symbol of compassion. This bodhisattva eventually became popular among lay followers and was given the additional characteristics of accepting people's sufferings and sorrows and granting them their wishes.

The historical Buddha who perfectly fulfilled the two aspects of wisdom and compassion become more and more idealized. Then, the existence of multiple Buddhas prior to the historical Śākyamuni began to be assumed. Amida Buddha also appeared as a compassionate Buddha in that kind of context. Images of Amida were created to capture the imagination of ordinary people. But we must remember that these statues were meant merely as provisional forms directing us to the Buddhist principle behind them. However, I am not sure whether all ordinary people correctly comprehended the meaning of the existence of form as expedient means.

Transcriptions of the Buddhist texts were also created in the same manner. Greeks and Iranians broke from the Indian tradition that the words of holy persons were only to be recited aloud. Perhaps they worried that if the people who remembered the sutras died, the texts would be gone forever, and that was not practical. Considering the historical situations, it is thought that the first scripts used to transcribe the Buddhist texts were Kharoṣṭhī scripts.

My specialty is in the later period of Buddhist culture in Central Asia, particularly philological research on the Buddhist activities of the Uigur people.² And I would like to talk a bit more about the recent discoveries in Afghanistan of Buddhist texts related to the worship of Amida Buddha.

Recently, Afghan refugees, escaping the persecution of the Taliban regime by hiding in caves in the Bāmiyān valley, discov-

ered Buddhist statues and several jars containing over ten thousand ancient Indian Buddhist manuscripts. The manuscripts were secretly carried out of the country and, through a variety of routes, the majority of the manuscripts came into the possession of the Norwegian collector Martin Schøyen. A small portion of the manuscripts is also in the possession of a certain Japanese collector. The discovery of these Buddhist manuscripts (2nd–8th centuries C.E.) may well be compared with the Christian discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Although they are fragments, they are extremely important to academic studies because they were discovered within the Indian cultural area. An international research team has already been organized, and the results of its research are gradually becoming available.³

I am particularly interested in the existence of manuscripts related to the worship of Amida Buddha. First, I was fascinated to learn that this collection includes manuscripts of Bactrian Buddhist texts. Considering the historical circumstances, it was thought that there must be Buddhist texts in the Bactrian language, and it has been proven so. These fragments of the manuscript are written in cursive Greek script and contain passages praising various buddhas. It is noteworthy that the name of Lokeśvararāja Buddha is included, which implies the existence of the worship of Amida Buddha among the people.

Next, four fragments of the Sanskrit text of the *Sukhāvativyūha Sutra*, or the *Larger Sutra*, were discovered. They were written on the bark of birch in Brahmi scripts classified as the first type of Gilgit-Bāmiyān style. It is believed that they were probably copied around the 6th century C.E. The oldest Sanskrit manuscript of the *Sukhāvativyūha* is preserved at Ryukoku University. This manuscript was discovered in Nepal and is currently used as the original text for all existing modern editions of the sutra. The manuscript is believed to have been copied around the 9th–10th century C.E. Since the newly discovered fragments from

Afganistan are more than three hundred years older than the manuscripts from Nepal, the discovery is very important. Unfortunately, because they are fragments, we cannot discuss the original features of the manuscript. But it has been reported that, as far as can be discerned from the script of the remaining parts, the text must have been written in a very concise form compared to the Sanskrit text discovered in Nepal. I have heard that this is because the fragments contain many fewer adjectives. For instance, the Sanskrit text discovered in Afghanistan uses very simple adjectives in the part where the Sanskrit text discovered in Nepal uses scores of flowery adjectives.

The differences in the texts discovered in Nepal and Afghanistan reveal the typical way of understanding Buddhism in the Indian cultural area. In short, although they are sacred scriptures, the form (in this case, script) is provisional and what is to be said exists behind the expressed form. Therefore, as long as one does not miss the main discourse, passages can be added or removed.

Because of this cultural situation, there were many different editions of the *Sukhāvatīvyūha Sutra*, which was recorded to be translated into Chinese twelve times. Even the number of primal vows varies depending on the editions (i.e., 24, 48, or 49 vows). As time went by, people began to teach Buddhism by using forms as expedient means to make the teaching easier to understand. One such example of expedient means is the production of statues; another is the use of abstract ideas such as “Pure Land” or “Hells.”

Sometimes I hear some lecturers speaking about Amida Buddha or the Pure Land as substantial existences as if they are the same as God or heaven in Christianity. But that kind of explanation is beside the point. Amida Buddha is like a mirror that shows one’s true self in order to fulfill the supreme self (the expression of the concept of compassion in the form of the personified Buddha). Certainly, Amida is not a substantial God.

But because it is easier for ordinary people to comprehend Buddhism in a personalized way, Amida Buddha is expressed in the manner we know as skillful means. Images of the Pure Land or Hells are the same.

The truth that Śākyamuni Buddha revealed is something beyond forms or words. This point is also reiterated by Shinran (1173–1262), the founder of Jōdo Shinshū in Japan, who understands that Supreme Buddha is formless.⁴ We have to understand that “forms without content are meaningless, and content without form is disorder.” Living in the modern world, we should not lose the content and not be constricted by forms or formality.

NOTES

1. The outline of the parable of the poison arrow in the *Mālunkya Sutta* is summarized by Kogen Mizuno as follows:

Mālunkyaputta, a young philosopher, had studied Brahmanic doctrines before becoming a disciple of the Buddha. He was greatly concerned with the ontological questions that were central to non-Buddhist sects and schools of his time and asked Śākyamuni to elucidate his position on these questions. Saying that he did not feel he could begin practicing the Buddha's teaching before receiving satisfactory answers, he addressed four questions to the Buddha: Is the world eternal or not, is the world finite or not, are body and spirit identical or separate, and does the *tathāgata*, the person who transcends birth and death, exist after death or not?

In answer, Śākyamuni related the parable of the poisoned arrow. If struck with a poisoned arrow, he asked, does a person demand to know the name of the archer, the archer's clan and caste, or the type of bow and arrow used before agreeing to accept treatment for the wound? That person would die before the arrow could be removed and the poison neutralized. In the same way, a person who refuses to undertake religious practice to eliminate the defilements and attain release until such ontological questions have been elucidated would die and be subjected again to the suffering of transmigration, for such questions are inherently unanswerable. Mālunkyaputta realized his error and committed himself to religious practice. (Kogen Mizuno, *Essentials of Buddhism* [Tokyo: Kosei Publishing, 1996], pp. 126–127.)

2. Regarding this topic, please see the following two articles by the author: Kōgi Kudara, "A Rough Sketch of Central Asian Buddhism," *Pacific World*, Third Series, 4 (2002): pp. 93–107; Kōgi Kudara, "The Buddhist Culture of the Old Uigur People," *Pacific World*, Third Series, 4 (2002): pp. 183–195.

3. The first two volumes of the manuscript collection have been published in 2000 and 2002 as *Buddhist Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection*, vol. 1 and vol. 2, edited by Jens Braarvig, Jens-Uwe Hartmann, Kazunobu Matsuda, and Lore Sander (Oslo, Norway: Hermes Publishing, 2000 and 2002).

4. Shinran, in a letter to his followers, says, "Supreme Buddha is formless, and because of being formless is called *jinen*. Buddha, when appearing with form, is not called supreme nirvana. In order to make it known that supreme Buddha is formless, the name Amida Buddha is expressly used; so I have been taught." (*Mattōshō* 5, in *The Collected Works of Shinran* [Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997], p. 530). The same passage is found in the *Shōzōmatsu Wasan* (*The Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 428).

In the *Note on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* he also says, "For this reason there are two kinds of dharma-body with regard to the Buddha. The first is called dharma-body as suchness and the second, dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it. From this oneness was manifested form, called dharma-body as compassionate means." (*The Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 461.)

Following Shinran's tradition, the eighth abbot of Hongwanji, Rennyō, teaches his followers that, as for an object of worship of Jōdo Shinshū tradition, "A painting [of Amida Buddha] is preferred to a wooden image. A scroll of the Name [of Amida Buddha] is preferred to a painting." (*Rennyō Shōnin goichidai ki kikigaki*, in *Jōdo Shinshū seiten: Chūshaku-ban*, 2nd edition [Kyoto: Hongwanji Shuppansha, 2004], p. 1253.)