

## What is Lacking in "American Buddhism"

by Nobuo Haneda

Japanese Buddhism has been introduced to Americans at a rapidly increasing pace since the end of World War II. And, unfortunately, what has taken shape as "American Buddhism" generally fails to emphasize the most essential point of Buddhism: self-examination. If "American Buddhism" lacks the focus of self-examination, it will be, to use the words of William Shakespeare, much ado about nothing.

American Buddhists who advocate an American style of Buddhism should additionally be criticized for choosing to overemphasize matters of secondary importance. Furthermore, some say they want to create a new type of Buddhism by combining the spiritual traditions of Japan with the spiritual traditions of America and they are looking forward to this creation.

The naiveté of this attitude reminds me of two stories. I begin with the tale of the ambitious farmer who was eager to develop a new type of vegetable. He had the idea that if he were to cross a Japanese *daikon* radish with an American lettuce plant he could get an ideal vegetable; one that would have both the root of the *daikon* plant and the leaves of the lettuce plant. This would enable him to utilize his land more effectively and to substantially increase his profits. He was very happy with his idea and proceeded to cross the two plants and wait rather impatiently for harvest time. Did he get his dream vegetable? Of course not. He produced a vegetable which had the thorny leaves of the *daikon* and the small hairy root of the American lettuce.

In a similar vein, there is the familiar story of a famous playwright, George Bernard Shaw, and

a young and beautiful actress. The young actress told the old and not very handsome playwright that it would be wonderful if they could get married. When Mr. Shaw asked the reason why, she replied that the two of them, together, would create a child that had the excellent brain of Shaw and the beautiful face of the actress. Mr. Shaw smiled and told her that she was, indeed, an optimist, for the child from a union of the two of them might, in fact, have the brain of the actress and the face of the playwright.

"American Buddhists" are much like this. They optimistically believe that the mixture of two spiritual traditions will automatically bring about a wonderful result. Merely mixing the two does not guarantee an improved product. Chances are great that the mixture will produce something deficient in character, something unimaginably poor in content. On the other hand, if the essence of Buddhism is brought intact into the cultural environment of this country, we will have a vital and dynamic form of Buddhism.

As the core of Buddhism is self-examination, Buddhism simply cannot exist without it. The Japanese Zen Master Dōgen (1200-1253) said that "learning Buddhism is learning the self." And it is only through self-examination that we can understand the truths taught in Buddhism and awaken to our ignorance. This true "awakening" is called *shinjin* in Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism and *satori* in Zen.

Importantly, one must keep in mind that if self-examination is not taught as the essence of Buddhism, whatever is taught in the name of Buddhism is not actually Buddhism; whatever

activity is performed in the name of Buddhism is not true Buddhist activity. Both are merely means to an end which have a religious facade.

For clarification, there are three aspects of "American Buddhism" which I consider to be means to an end. The first is "American Buddhism" as an identity. It caters to the need for religious identity felt by some Japanese-Americans who live in the midst of a mostly Christian population and desire a religious affiliation which reflects their ethno-cultural background. This type of attachment to a religious identity, however, is strange when we remember that Buddhism, probably more than any other religion in the world, strongly opposes such an attachment to a fixed label or identity.

The second aspect is "American Buddhism" as a means to obtain culture. It caters to the cultural interests of some Americans and a general focus on the mysteries of the Orient by many Americans may have spurred this movement. Many Buddhist temples teach tea ceremony, flower arrangement, calligraphy, etc., in the belief that such arts can lead an individual to understand the truths of Buddhism. But these arts were developed and maintained for the most part by leisure-class aristocrats throughout Japanese history. Although many of these aristocrats claimed to be Buddhists, their religiosity can be questioned because true Buddhists have always been, in my opinion, serious about sharing Buddhism with all types of people, including the uneducated and the poor, and many Buddhists were not interested, or had the time, for such leisurely and indulgent forms of activities.

The third aspect is "American Buddhism" as a means to mental health. Some individuals search for a religious environment wherein their emotional or substance abuse problems can be cured. Zen, for example, has become particularly popular among these people. While a Buddhist environment may, indeed, provide peace and tranquility, the environment is only a temporary escape for the self. It does not provide the means for the necessary thorough examination of the self. This

is because the "cure" must come from within the individual. In Buddhism, the lack of examination of the self is the basic cause of all one's problems.

The famous modern Buddhist thinker, Manshi Kiyozawa (1903-1963) said that "Buddhism is not a path for us to become good men in this world. It is a path reaching beyond man" ("The Indispensable Conditions for Religious Conviction"). When we take these words as a definition of true Buddhism, we can only say that "American Buddhism" as a provider of peace and tranquility, is a "path to become good men in the world." It is not a "path to reach beyond man."

Now that I have discussed examples of what I refer to as "American Buddhism," I wish to clarify that I am not saying that these activities I have mentioned are useless. Rather, it is a matter of priority. I am saying that we should consider self-examination to be the most important issue in Buddhism. Compared with self-examination, other activities such as tea ceremony are superficial and insignificant.

I recently heard the following, which aptly describes the basic rationale underlying the "means to an end" type of Buddhism: "Buddhism has some negative elements and Americans don't like negative things. If we emphasize those elements in Buddhism, Americans will not understand them. We must accommodate Buddhist teachings to the American way of thinking. We must talk about positive teachings to them."

If people believe such a statement, it is a pitiful reflection of their misunderstanding of Buddhism. The statement is ridiculous since these "negative elements" are indispensable to Buddhism and we cannot eliminate them. True Buddhist "awakening" is often compared to the beautiful water lotus which grows up from the mud and into the sunlight. This analogy is made because Buddhist insight comes only from the "negative elements" of the human experience of suffering and struggle.

As religion contains the destruction of old values and the creation of new ones, the destruc-

tion of old values is certainly negative. Yet it is only after the destruction of these values that we have new ones. How can we create new values without ridding ourselves of the old ones? As the positive can come only after the negative, similarly, it is only after the negation of the self that we can experience liberation from the self. Truth first challenges and then denies us, and in doing so, liberates us. If a teaching is modified to fit selfish human needs, it no longer has truth; if a doctrine is tailor-made to fit the liking of the self and starts to affirm the self and make it comfortable, it no longer has truth.

As an analogy, good medicine is bitter on the tongue. If we eliminate what has caused the bitterness it may be easier to swallow, but by doing so we lose the effectuality of the medicine. Do those "Buddhists" I have previously mentioned still have Buddhism after they have extracted the "negative elements" and created an "American Buddhism" which is sugar coated? No. I do not believe they do. Furthermore, if the great Buddhists such as

Hōnen (1133-1212), Shinran (1173-1262), and Dōgen had taught only positive teachings, catering to the wants of the general public of their times, they would not have been persecuted. It is because they spoke of the negative truths which challenged the people that they were persecuted.

Historically speaking, it was inevitable for Buddhism to be introduced to America together with various cultural elements. But it is time we recognize that Buddhism is, first and foremost, a religion for serious self-examination. It is time we identify the real essence of Buddhism by separating the matters of secondary importance that have intermingled with it. Buddhism challenges us; it attacks, negates and obliterates the self. Most importantly, it does not serve any of our selfish human wants, whether ethnical, cultural, or otherwise. Thus, the time has come for us to move from a cultural appreciation of Buddhism to a more serious, truly religious appreciation of the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha.