

Religions Derive Their Power from Authentic Spiritual Depth

by Tetsuo Unno

Early in his career, Zen Master Yamamoto Gempo was sent to the countryside to restore a once flourishing Zen temple. When he arrived there, he found a temple with tattered *shoji*, missing roof tiles, and *tatami* covered over with dust. Only the framework was intact. In the Zen tradition, he had been given no money or other material resources. Zen Master Yamamoto decided to restore the temple on the strength of his practice of *zazen*. Night and day, rain or shine, he sat in the middle of the broken down *hondo* (main hall), wearing only his straw raincoat to shield himself from the elements. At first the villagers were puzzled by his action; they thought he had lost his mind. Later, however, impressed with the force of his *zazen*, they began to offer him tea and food. In the end, they helped him to restore that temple to its former splendor. In this manner, he restored a number of famous temples: Shojuan, Shoinji, Zuizenji, etc. Moving from *satori*, Zen Master Yamamoto made enormous contributions to modern Rinzai Zen; in his lifetime, he was regarded as a reincarnation of Hakuin.¹

The Tendai priest Hagami Shocho is a younger contemporary of Zen Master Yamamoto. Immediately after World War II, Hagami happened to be standing on a platform at the San-no-miya Station. Just then a train pulled up and, out of the window, American soldiers tossed out packs of cigarettes. As he watched, men, women and even children scrambled frantically on all fours for the cigarettes. For Hagami, this scene symbolized the physical as well as the spiritual devastation of his beloved country. At this moment, he also recalled General MacArthur's humiliating comment that the Japanese as a race had the

mentality of a twelve-year-old. Hagami Shocho, who was then in his mid-forties and working as a journalist, vowed to do something that would contribute to the restoration of Japan. He then chose to shave his head and began his training as a Tendai monk. Eventually he was one of the very few Tendai monks who successfully completed the practice known as *kaihogyo* or "the spiritual practice of circumambulating the mountain peak." For one thousand days, he was required to walk around Mt. Hiei and its surroundings for distances up to forty-five miles per day. During the last nine days, he was not allowed to drink water, eat food, or sleep while he chanted sutras, drew water and burned firewood, symbolic of defilement (*bonno*). At the end of nine days, attending physicians could not detect any pupil reaction, which is a sign of death. Later in an interview, the priest Hagami confessed that he was able to accomplish this training not because of physical strength but through the sustaining power of the Other Power (*Tariki*). Through the years (he is now eighty-two), the priest Hagami has made immeasurable contribu-

utions to the spiritual recovery of the Japanese. (When asked, he often assists various projects of the Nishi Hongwanji.)²

In the Meiji Period, there is the example of the Jodo Shinshu priest, Kiyozawa Manshi. Often called the Shinran of the Meiji Period, his influence was so great he is one of the very few Jodo Shinshu priests to be named in secular histories of Japan. He grew up at a time when Jodo Shinshu had largely remained stagnant for nearly three hundred years of the Tokugawa Period. On top of that, in the Meiji Period, Buddhism faced a crisis of major proportions: the active suppression of

Buddhism by the emerging nationalistic government which was interested only in promoting Shintoism and reverence for the emperor. At this particular juncture, the priest Kiyozawa Manshi dedicated his life to the restoration of Jodo Shinshu to its original depth and power. He moved from a profound religious conviction that any religious reform must be preceded by the establishment of an authentic inward faith on the part of each Jodo Shinshuist. It must be remembered that Kiyozawa Manshi was not an imposing figure; to the contrary he bordered on the pathetic (by worldly standards): he was short even for a Japanese; he had a dark complexion, wore glasses, and suffered from tuberculosis (cancer of that period). He was decidedly ineloquent and on top of that, poor. And yet, he embodied faith in his very being, life, and thought and exerted unparalleled influence on the young students who came to him. Many of the great Jodo Shinshu priests, thinkers, scholars and laymen of later years regard him as their teacher. It is my own belief that Kiyozawa Manshi's legacy will be most profoundly felt in the years yet to come, especially in the West.³

Finally, there is the great Zennist Daisetz Suzuki ("Great Stupidity"). By general consensus, most trace the proliferation of Zen in American culture back to one man: Daisetz Suzuki. And yet his arrival on the American scene was inauspicious. In his late twenties, he was invited by Paul Carus, ostensibly to aid in the translation of Buddhist texts. In reality, much of his time was spent chopping wood, doing the laundry, shopping for groceries, cooking, doing the typesetting, and so forth. Isolated for ten long years in La Salle, Illinois, he carried on without complaining. Before that, in Japan, he sat in *zazen* and eventually attained *satori* under Zen Masters Imakita Kosen and Shaku Soen. Like Kiyozawa Manshi, outwardly, Daisetz Suzuki was not an imposing man: he was short, frail, almost impish; there were others who surpassed him in scholarly knowledge. He was not especially eloquent, often mumbling his words. The power of Daisetz Suzuki to move people originated not in the brilliance of his

scholarship nor his material wealth (he was not rich), but rather in the depth of his spirituality; i.e., his *satori* or the void (*sunyata*). Numerous men have attested to this: from the Buddhist scholar Conze to the Cistercian monk Thomas Merton to the psychoanalyst Jung and most important perhaps, numerous others who were led to the dharma and a resolution of their suffering through this great Buddhist.⁴

Ultimately, then, religions derive their power from the depth of their spirituality. The power of Zen, for example, flows out of Tokusan's "Thirty Blows" or Rinzai's "Katsu!!!" or Joshu's "Mu" ("Emptiness"). The power of Jodo Shinshu also originates from one single point of absolute depth: from the *nembutsu*. From true faith (*shinjitsu shinjin*). From the power of the Original Vow (*Honganriki*). From the Other Power (*Tariki*). From the one dharma phrase (*ippoku*). From the one mind (*isshin*). From the utterance of the Name (*shomyo*).

There are no barriers that can hold back the emerging force of an authentic spirituality. If authentic spirituality is not present, then all else, ultimately, is in vain. That which issues forth from self-power (*jiriki*) and delusive calculations of the ego (*hakarai*), in the end, has no meaning, value or permanence.

In these times when, "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,/The bold-dimmed tide is loosed. . ." ⁵ and in which, ". . . overhead . . . hung over/Those thousands of white faces, those dazed eyes,/. . . There in the sudden blackness the black pall/Of nothing, nothing, nothing . . . nothing at all" ⁶ and in which only "Purposeless matter hovers in the dark," ⁷ the urgency to move from a standpoint of authentic spirituality is infinite. In these times, Jodo Shinshu Buddhism must move from its deepest essence, its quintessence; that which is one with the Amida Buddha Himself. That need, I believe, is absolute.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Gempo Yamamoto, *Mumonkan Teisho* (Zen Sermons on the Gateless Gate). (Tokyo: Daihorinkaku, 1983).
2. Shocho Hagami, *Doshin* (The Mind that Aspires to the Way). (Tokyo: Shunjusha, 1981).
3. Kiyozawa Manshi, "The Great Path of Absolute Other Power and My Faith," in *The Eastern Buddhist*, translated by Bando Shojun, New Series, Vol. V, No. 2.
4. "In Memoriam Daisetzu Suzuki" issue,

The Eastern Buddhist, New Series, Vol. II, No. 1.

5. Yeats: "The Second Coming."
6. MacLeish: "The End of the World."
7. Gunn: "The Annihilation of Nothing."

