

Spiritual Potentials for Quality Living

by Alfred Bloom

INTRODUCTION: THE GENERAL PROBLEM

Aging and a Quality Life is a very modern and pressing question in a society that moves quickly from adolescence to obsolescence. It is particularly a problem for our technological, urbanized culture wherein primary values are productivity and efficiency, and wherein our competitive, aggressive and individualistic orientation to life has paradoxically reduced the value of the person. The impact of modern social developments, while not doing away with the family, has undermined its meaning and value as the context for experiencing the richness of life and receiving the needed support in meeting life's challenges.

The concern for aging and the quality of life arises, therefore, from the fragmentation and secularization of modern life. In earlier times, East and West, the elderly were resources of wisdom and repositories of the lore of the clan. They were functioning members of the household, sharing in its joys and sorrows.

We should not idealize the ancient order which was generally patriarchal, hierarchical and authoritarian. We should not even lament its passing or wish merely to return to the "good old days." But we should regret the loss of role respect and significance that now attends aging. In addition, the lengthened span of life made possible through modern medicine has intensified the loss when bodies frequently outlast mental competencies. We cannot reconstitute the past, and the present is what it is. In all probability, the logic of our modern development will increasingly threaten

the quality of life not only for the elderly, but for all segments of society.

Although our present concern is with the aging who are threatened with more immediate consequences in the decline of the quality of life, that decline is not simply restricted to the aged. If we look at our inner cities, the young and old alike suffer. The ideal of the American Dream, if it still exists, is available to fewer and fewer people.

QUALITY LIFE AS QUALITY LIVING

Although it may appear idealistic, it is important and urgent that we find the means to counterbalance the reductionist and destructive effects of the secularization process. In so doing, we will not only be assisting the elderly, but hopefully other age groups in society. I would suggest that with quality of life there is worthwhileness and meaningfulness of life. And what is it that makes life truly human beyond the mere fact of existing? First, I would distinguish living from quality of life. *Living* suggests some intentionality, creativity, aspiration and a reaching out in relation to significant others. *Being* means simply existing here for whatever reason, merely because one has not yet died. Thus the *quality of life* may be considered in a more dynamic way as "quality living," or "truly living." It is living inspired by a hope, a goal, and makes a creative thrust in the world and toward the world. Though we live in a tragic world where life is rarely just, there is need for joy and laughter in the sense that the Irish playwright has written:

Laughter is wine for the soul—laughter, soft or loud and deep, tinged through with seri-

ousness. Comedy and tragedy step through life together, arm in arm, all along, out along, down along lea. Once we can laugh, we can live. It is the hilarious declaration made by man that life is worth living. Man is always hopeful of, always pushing toward, better things; and to bring this about, a change must be made in the actual way of life; so laughter is brought in to mock at things as they are so that they may topple down, and make room for better things to come.¹

Living, in the sense that I am proposing, is an *interpersonal spiritual process, aspiring for a deeper level of meaning and satisfaction for the person*. I hesitate to say social process because it may only suggest our general set of social relations. It is important to recognize that quality living is not done in isolation. It can only occur through deep personal relations in shared experience and community.

BUDDHISM AND QUALITY LIVING

BUDDHIST INSTITUTIONS

My primary concern is to discuss how religious faith, particularly Buddhism, may assist people in deepening their sense of the value of the person as a necessary counterbalance to the secularizing forces that permeate our lives. I must emphasize, however, that all religious traditions create modes of community that will nurture the worthwhileness and meaningfulness of life for all age categories and social situations.

When we focus on religious traditions as a basis for developing value strategies to deal with our problems, we must understand that they have little to say directly on such issues. This is because they all arose in the pre-modern age where communal life provided a context of meaning for its members. Thus, in such times, the aged were an integral part of the family and clan.

In Buddhism, aging is seen as part of the process of suffering beginning with birth, illness, eventu-

ally reaching old age and death. It is one sign of impermanence and is associated with infirmity. There is a conversation of Rennyō Shōnin, the Eighth Patriarch of the Shin tradition of Buddhism, in which a follower remarked how miraculous it was that an aged person came at sunrise, perhaps to a service. Rennyō responded: "If one has faith, nothing can look hard to do. Clad in faith, one thinks to repay the Buddha what one owes him."²

Ancient texts generally do not raise many of the questions that modern people encounter. It is necessary to extrapolate from the spiritual principles or illustrations given in their teachings. Moreover, our considerations cannot be limited to religious institutions which seek to perpetuate that faith-tradition. All religious traditions, which have sought to maximize their social power by acquiring members and becoming large organizations, have done so at the expense of the intimate, interpersonal sharing that is necessary for quality living. Thus we must look beyond the institutions to the teachings themselves for guidance and insight.

BUDDHISM AND FILIAL PIETY

I will now focus on the Hongwanji Buddhist tradition which originated in thirteenth century Japan. The founder is Shinran Shōnin who lived from 1173 to 1262 A.D. The teaching belongs to the Pure Land tradition which was a popularly oriented teaching to provide hope of salvation for those people unable to fulfill the original high ideals of monastic Buddhism. It can be compared with those denominations of Protestant Christianity which stress the necessity of faith for salvation. It is the faith of the majority of Japanese-Americans who consider themselves Buddhists.

Buddhism, though originally a monastic religion, has constantly admonished followers to respect and care for their parents. An elaborate system of memorials developed to keep alive the awareness of one's obligations to their ancestors and to increase the solidarity of the family. And

Buddhism was greatly influenced in its practice of filial piety through the teachings of Confucianism. Two passages may be cited from the *Classic of Filial Piety* as examples of the high ideal of Confucian morality:

The relation between father and son is rooted in nature and develops into the proper relation between prince and ministers. Parents give one life; no bond could be stronger. They watch over the child with utmost care; no love could be greater. Therefore, to love others without first loving one's parents is to act against virtue.³

Also:

In serving his parents a filial son renders utmost reverence to them: while at home he supports them with joy; he gives them tender care in sickness; he grieves at their death; he sacrifices to them with solemnity. If he has measured up to these five, then he is truly capable of serving his parents . . .⁴

Buddhism lends itself readily to considering problems of the aging because it has generally been a family religion as it developed in Japan. As a result of the interaction with Confucian morality in China and Japan, Buddhist beliefs and practices have strengthened the awareness of the principles of *filial piety* that have been central to Asian societies and have been effective in Asian-American communities. A recent study of the Japanese-American community by Dr. Uasumusa Kuroda of the University of Hawaii Political Science Department shows that there is a greater awareness of filial piety among the youth than in earlier times.⁵ Observance of filial piety may not necessarily mean a deep quality living, however, if it only concerns itself mainly with the material requirements of life and not the important personal supports of usefulness and intimacy.

In the modern period, Buddhism has not adequately adjusted to changes in the nature of society which require alteration in the concepts traditionally employed to encourage such values

as filial piety. For many, filial piety still means submission to parents' demands and meets more resistance from younger generations. Consequently, for our contemporary period, the traditional modes of filial piety may not be sufficient to enable the elderly and the youth to gain meaning for their lives. Nor will it adequately inspire a deeply religious perspective on the part of those who must work in various ways in their community and temples to create a quality life for themselves or their relatives and friends.

With the development of an American Buddhism beyond the confines of the Japanese-American ethnic community, the issue of aging and the quality of life must be addressed in new and creative ways. Buddhism must show its universal relevance to society as a whole in order to maintain its inner vitality as a living faith. In order to assist in this process, I shall draw on aspects of Shin Buddhist teaching which can provide insights for quality living.

SHIN TEACHING AND QUALITY LIVING

The Example of Shinran. In view of the fact that the family is crucial in creating a context for the worthwhileness and meaning of life, I shall examine first Shinran's vision which forms the background of his marriage and subsequent missionary effort in spreading the teaching in the eastern part of Japan in the 13th century. As noted, Buddhism is essentially a monastic tradition, but in the teaching of Shinran marriage was given a spiritual meaning. Though in ancient times monks occasionally had concubines or even married, it was contradictory to monastic rules. Shinran made it a positive act in the advancement of Buddhism.

According to writings, the *Bodhisattva* of Compassion appeared to him in a dream and indicated that he would take the form of a woman whom Shinran would marry. She would be his helpmate in propagating the teaching in the frontier-like region of Japan among the peasants. The marriage was to be a means of fulfilling his mission. As a view of marriage, this dream-vision

is significant because it brings a *spiritual purpose* into marriage that contrasts with marriage as a *community affair*—an economic or social alliance of families for the benefit of the family. For Shinran, his marriage was a spiritual act and his wife was not a subordinate figure.

Each held the other in highest respect. Shinran saw his wife as the manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In turn, Eshinni, his wife, wrote in a letter to her daughter that she had had a dream in which Shinran appeared as the embodiment of the *bodhisattva*. It is common in Buddhism to regard individuals with particular capacities as manifestations of some Buddhist divine figure, thereby heightening their spiritual significance and influence. These assertions reflect the fact that each had some element of charisma and made significant contributions so that they were seen as spiritual symbols.

In this context we also see that the family was given a spiritual meaning, not merely as a biological and social unit, but as a means by which the mission of Buddhism was to be carried out. If we extend this interpretation to our modern period, we can see in each member of the family a focus of spiritual value and meaning that contributes to the whole. We must teach that family life can be experienced as a context of meaning, calling for careful consideration of the role of parenting and relations among the members of the family.

In the fulfillment of his mission, Shinran embodied the characteristics of compassion, and he exhibited attitudes that are necessary for quality living in his dealings with his disciples. As illustration of his dealings with his disciples, I would call attention to Shinran's conversation with his disciple Yuienbō in response to Yuienbō's doubt about his ultimate salvation.⁶ Shinran guided him to a deeper understanding of the Primal Vow which is a symbol for absolute compassion and the promise of final salvation given by Amida Buddha. This instruction in which Shinran also confessed that he had had the same doubts as Yuienbō resolved the doubts of the disciple. The passage exhibits the intimacy and

tenderness, the mutuality and respect which are the primary requirements for creating a sense of worth and caring which people seek. It is well-known that Shinran always addressed his followers with the polite, honorific terms of Japanese speech. He refused to stand above them as the teacher and even disclaimed that he had any disciples. He often said that, like them, he also was a mere foolish being who had been embraced by Amida's compassion. These are indispensable attitudes in family and personal relations generally if quality living is to be made real in our lives.

Shinran, himself, illustrates the potentiality of an aged person to continue to participate significantly in the activities and affairs of whatever group of which he is a member. Shinran, we might note, lived to the age of ninety. In his old age he formulated some of his most significant religious ideas and made important decisions. At the age of sixty or so he placed his movement in the charge of close disciples in the eastern area of Japan and returned to Kyoto. There he engaged in writing and helping his visiting disciples to understand their faith more deeply. He wrote numerous letters dealing with problems in the movement. In his eighty-sixth year he wrote a short but important text which gives the philosophical perspective of his religious faith.

Also, in his advanced years, he had to deal with a very tragic situation that resulted in his disowning his eldest son in order to demonstrate his sincerity in dealing with his disciples. He had the capacity to see the issues and to decide the proper course of action. It is clear that into his final years Shinran maintained a spiritual vitality and openness toward his followers that allowed him to gain more clarity into the nature of his faith. He demonstrated that aging, as a chronological category or physical condition, is not a basis for rejecting spiritual and intellectual growth. Thus, we should not define people merely on the basis of a presupposed age factor.

We tend in our society to define people out of significant experiences, suggesting they are too old and beyond such interests. In response, the

elderly also define themselves as unable to do something because they are already too old. Society is changing in regard to this issue. Work discrimination on the basis of age is now illegal. Yet it remains a problem of personal and mental attitudes on the part of the elderly and those who may deal with them.

In a film called *Fool's Dance*, we have a story of a home for the aged in which the staff had defined the residents as essentially senile. They had begun to act that way. Consequently, they were assigned to receive lessons in reality therapy. The hero of the story is a devout Buddhist gentleman. He resolved the question of his death for himself and emphasized that one must live to the fullest. He constantly reiterated that rather than this being the end of life, it was the first day of the rest of our lives. Reality for him was not learning to tell time as they were being taught, but to live time as one is capable. Views of reality clashed, but he liberated the residents from the imposed definitions and they responded with joy and eagerness. He awakened new life in the residents and eventually even touched the administrators.

It is true that the body ages and develops various problems, but the spirit and the mind need not age in the same way. Minds grow and mature. Confucius summarizes his process of growth from youth to old age as one of deeper wisdom and capability:

At fifteen, I set my heart upon learning. At thirty, I had planted my feet firmly on the ground. At forty, I no longer suffered from perplexities. At fifty, I knew what were the biddings of Heaven. At sixty, I heard them with a docile ear. At seventy, I could follow the dictates of my own heart; for what I desired no longer overstepped the boundaries of right.⁷

There is a Zen poem which may be interpreted to show the spiritual potentiality that goes beyond mere physical and temporal considerations:

When a man is born, he sits;
When he is dead, he lies.
O this ill-smelling mass of bones!
What is it to you?
The body comes and goes,
The Original Nature remains the same.⁸

Shinran indicated that the Primal Vow does not discriminate between the young and the old. In the interdependence of all members of the family and society, we should also set aside our tendency to discriminate on the basis of age and look more at the person and his or her potentials.

BASIC PRINCIPLES FOR QUALITY LIVING

There are numerous principles that make up the teachings of Buddhism and the tradition of Shin Buddhism. However, I will refer to two closely connected concepts which bear on our topic: the long-standing concept of *Buddha-nature* in all beings; and the *Primal Vow* as the symbolic expression of the concept of interdependence and community in Buddhism.

The principle of the *universality of Buddha-nature* in all beings was designed to indicate that all persons, whatever their actual condition in the world, have the potentiality to attain the final enlightenment or Buddhahood. It is a teaching of universal hope. This ideal became the basis of the various practices in the several denominations of Buddhism, both to motivate the endeavorer to reach for the ideal as well as indicating the possibility of attaining it.

In the case of the teaching of Shinran, this ideal takes form in the experience of faith which is the fulfillment of the ideal in the experience of the person. Shinran has written:

Buddha-nature is none other than Tathāgata. This Tathāgata pervades the countless worlds; it fills the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus plants, trees and land all attain Buddhahood. Since it is with this heart and mind of all sentient beings that they entrust themselves to the Vow of

the *dharmakāya*-as-compassion, this *shinjin* (faith is none other than Buddha-nature).⁹

Through this faith, according to Shinran, peddlers, hunters and all others "who are like bits of tile and pebbles are turned into gold" (p. 41). There is not only a strong *egalitarian* aspect in Shinran's teaching which argues the value of the person, as he is, as the object of the Buddha's compassion, there is also an emphasis on *transformation*, the belief that people can change when compassionate influences work on their lives. Shinran gives an account of his own stages of transformation as he matured in the understanding of his faith. He also illustrates transformation when he describes how the ice of our ego and passions are transformed to water through the compassion of the Buddha. The image of transformation is strong in Asian thinking; seasons change, buds become flowers, children become adults. There is always some inner possibility for transformation and change. It is this possibility that we must seek in all our human relations.

All great religious traditions strive through their ideals and practices to dramatize and make real the intrinsic value of the person and the potentiality of that person to transform, grow and change. Though society must deal impersonally with an abstract sense of equality and attempt to share its resources fairly, it is extremely important, on the personal level, that those who have the responsibility to provide care bring a lively sense of reality to this essential equality and potentiality for transformation. They must communicate a sense of dignity and worth to the recipients in their care.

One hears frequently that people are treated merely as bodies by the medical profession, and cases in the social work professions. The frequent, though perhaps unintended, impersonality of professionals in carrying out their duties may leave the recipient with a sense of powerlessness and valuelessness. Dr. Hayashida emphasized that on their side, recipients must prepare themselves for such situations by nurturing in themselves their own sense of value and worth, their own sense of

self-responsibility. Religious institutions must present their teachings in ways that will meet these needs on all levels. The foundation is present in the traditions but must be made clear and given reality within the religious community itself.

The second principle is the basic Buddhist teaching of *interdependence* and *oneness*. This teaching is symbolized in Shinran's teaching of the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. According to the myth that undergirds this doctrine, the Buddha pledged in the course of his attaining enlightenment that he would not accept enlightenment unless all other gained it with him. He, therefore, pledged himself to create the conditions by which people could gain enlightenment. An implication of these teachings is the ideal of a sangha community.

Interdependence suggests the solidarity of human destiny. We are all familiar with it in our national ideal of the indivisibility of freedom. To the extent that one person is shackled, we are all shackled. The fundamental principle of society is the interdependence of all members in creating orderly social life. Buddhism has made this a spiritually important fact. Salvation cannot be for myself alone, ignoring the plight of others. There can be no real salvation for humanity unless all people can share it. Thus we have constantly stressed in this paper that meaning, value and quality living cannot be attained in isolation. All of us must share to make it a reality. Our American individualism and the false claims to independence must be revised before we can make proper social and economic approaches to these problems.

The principle of sangha and community which are implicit in these teachings must be stressed in the religious institutions. Rather than attempting to become large social collectivities, we must form smaller units where people of all age levels and backgrounds come together to provide the necessary support for dealing with the crises of life. We frequently have a variety of organizations, but little in the way of deep community wherein our hopes, fears, anxieties, and our joys can be expressed openly. We need spiritual *communities*

of acceptance beyond those institutions and agencies provided by society to deal with problems that have already emerged. If we were to have spiritual communities that supported the worth and dignity of the person, we might even avoid problems of loneliness and inadequate care. The Taoist philosophy of China teaches that we should solve a problem while it is small. It is only with foresight and mutual caring that quality living can become a reality, not only for our elderly, but for all segments of our society.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to suggest the basis for *quality living* which may be derived from Buddhism. I am not at all suggesting that the ideal is easy to reach merely because we may have faith in a tradition. Unfortunately, our human nature and the conditions of society that have brought us to our present point sometimes make the problems appear virtually insoluble. Nevertheless, despite the massiveness and complications of the problems, we will forfeit our humanity if we do not share the hope that we can make progress toward their resolution. Thus I am only trying to share the vision of one tradition, Buddhism, in the hope that others will explore their traditions for the values and ideals which will assist them in coping with these issues. If we become actively concerned with our religious traditions, share experience with each other, and develop our own caring communities, we shall make great headway.

I would like to comment in closing that we are talking about a philosophy of life. This philosophy cannot be made at the last minute. Everyone must start early in life to forge an understanding of life that will support them in their later years.

There are certain requirements that must be met in any philosophy: these are a sense of well being, physically and spiritually, a spirit of acceptance of self and others, and a feeling of usefulness. We must all work together to create these for ourselves and others in our various professions and life situations.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Quoted from *Jōdo Mission of Hawaii Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No. 11 (Nov. 1985).
2. Yamamoto, Kōshō, trans., *Goichidaiki Kikigaki*. Book II, p. 62.
3. Mary Lelia Makra, trans., *The Hsiao Ching*. p. 21.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
5. Yasumasa Kuroda. Unpublished report of research made in 1983 on ethnic attitudes and values, Chapter 4, entitled "Japanese Americans, 1971-1978-1983: A Diachronical Perspective," p. 76.
6. *Tannishō* 9, a text compiled by Yuienbō from Shinran's words. Taitetsu Unno, trans., *Tannishō: A Shin Buddhist Classic*. pp. 14-15.
7. Arthur Waley. *Analects of Confucius*. II, 4, p. 88.
8. D.T. Suzuki, Sengai. p. 95.
9. Shin Buddhism Translation Series, *Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone."* p. 42.