Confucian and Buddhist Values in Modern Context

by Alfred Bloom

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, the centennial of the immigration of Japanese contract laborers to Hawaii was celebrated. Pictures were displayed in various publications, and TV productions dramatized the difficult living and working conditions endured by the laborers. The laborers had received support in their troubles from traditional values of Confucianism and Buddhism which they brought with them. Diligence, frugality, loyalty, perseverance, duty, patience, adaptiveness and solidarity are values derived from these social and religious heritages. These values sustained the community when it was discriminated against and regarded as alien. Today, since the economic and political change of American society, it appears that these values may have spent themselves and are not as meaningful to the current generation which experiences greater social acceptance and success. The religious traditions that have promoted them have also waned, and it is more difficult now to communicate those values. This issue of values is immediate not only for the Asian-American community, but also for American society as a whole.

Let us approach the subject from the standpoint of the humanities, which stress the importance of values at the heart of every issue. In our scientific and technological age, we are apt to think only of the practical or immediate aspects of the various issues confronting us. We are always looking for methods and procedures to solve our pressing problems. Nevertheless, as the basis of our problems usually lies in the conflict of values and perspectives on the nature of life, whether conscious or unconscious, the major problems of contemporary society result from varying value priorities and interests.

We are not only confronted by conflicting value priorities, but we also live in a time of rapid social change, quickened by the pace of technological development and advances in communication. People now have many more options open to them as to how they can invest their time and resources. The level of expectation to satisfy personal interest and desires have enormously increased. Problems in the distribution of wealth have increased our social tensions and conflict. As a consequence, the traditional values of many cultures have been shaken by social change.

In our American society, the principles of individualism and independence have become uppermost in our economic goals and our personal ideals. We want to achieve as much as we can, have as large a piece of the pie as we can, and to be as completely independent of the control of others as possible. This extends from our children, who are nurtured to be independent, to the elderly who wish to maintain as independent a life as they possibly can, financially and socially.

The ideals prevalent in American society present a considerable challenge to Asian value systems by which many people have regulated their lives. In earlier times, discrimination of one sort or another required a group to maintain its solidarity by applying traditional values in its effort to preserve a sense of self-worth and to establish itself economically. As an example, we

can observe the close relationship that has generally maintained itself between the first- and second- generation Japanese-Americans who have lived through the era of plantation life and wartime situations. This relationship differs considerably from those of the succeeding third- or fourthgenerations who have not had those experiences. With the broadening of acceptance in American society, these young people find the traditional values which had given support to older generations are sometimes now the basis of misunderstanding and conflict. The Asian values based in Confucianism and Buddhism appear obsolete and obstructive when insisted upon by elders.

In contrast to American values nurtured in Western history, Confucian and Buddhist values stress group relations and the ideal of harmony based on submission to hierarchical status. It is quite common to hear that Confucian ethics is based simply on filial piety and the five relationships of husband and wife, father and son, elder and younger brother, and friend and friend. These relationships have assumed an authoritarian character as a result of developments in Chinese and Japanese societies in earlier ages. However, these relationships have become the object of criticism in modern society, which aspires to be more democratic and offers greater fulfillment for the individual.

It is the aim of this essay to survey the fundamental values of Confucianism and Buddhism and to indicate their relevance for contemporary life, despite problems in traditional understanding. When we look into the foundations of Confucian thought and Buddhist teaching, we can observe that they were not intended to become authoritarian systems. Rather, when they became institutionalized as either orthodox teaching or recognized religious traditions, there has been an alliance with social powers which employ such teachings as ways to control people. In the course of time, through training in society, in communities, and in families, people began to accept such perspectives as the natural and original meaning of

those teachings. What is required today is a reexamination of those values and their interpretations so that a more meaningful and relevant understanding of their contribution to human relations can be made. It is significant that after decades of denunciation of Confucianism by the communist government in China, it has now realized that Confucius was a great social thinker with deep insight into human affairs. Communist leaders are now calling for a more careful study of Confucianism.

CONFUCIAN VALUES IN MODERN CONTEXT

The newspaper account of the communist re-evaluation of Confucius, relates that, at the commemoration of Confucius' birthday, scholars described Confucius as "a great philosopher and educator." According to them, he taught an introspective speculation into one's own life and at the same time a sense of unity of the self with the outer universe." Here is recognition that Confucius dealt with universal problems of humanity and not merely support for some class system. We should note that the Confucian teaching, which originated in the 6th century B.C.E., is one of the world's oldest and most durable moral philosphies, along with those developed in Hinduism and the Biblical tradition. Within East Asia, its influence has been deeply pervasive, being transmitted to all cultures sharing in the Chinese cultural heritage.

While there is a long history of Confucianism—some 2,500 years or more—we want to look directly at the values stressed in his text, the Analects, otherwise known as the Words of Confucius. There are five Chinese classics and four Confucian texts which were the basis of moral training of the scholarly class. However, only the Analects contain whatever we may have of Confucius' own words. It is a book worthy of contemplation and study by all people for its deep insight into human relations. Though it was designed for training government officials, it has applications in all areas of social life. Confucianism is usually associated with filial piety and loyalty (in Japanese, chū-kō), and the sanjū, or three submissions of a woman: to her father, her husband and her eldest son. There is a common principle expressed in the phrase messhihōkō, the abolition of the self and serving the public. It implies the submission of the individual to the good of the group. Thus, Confucianism has been regarded essentially as a philosophy of subordination to authority, obligations and duty to parents and family, and the repression of individual will and aspirations in favor of harmony dictated by the group. It also tended to favor an elitism, or hierarchy, in the social order.

To discover the relevance of Confucius in the present society, we must carefully distinguish the teachings of Confucius himself from the interpretations and applications made in later times. His teaching underwent transformation into a more authoritarian character while it was being taught to the masses to encourage their acceptance of dominant political and social powers of the state and community.

The problem which Confucius himself faced was much like our situation today. He lived in a world of conflict and struggle which lacked mutual trust among the powers. Although his society operated on a smaller dimension and scope, its problem is ever present. The questions posed by his teaching are: "How can people live together without destroying each other?" "What is to hold society together when its ideals and traditions are no longer effective?" "How can a leader exert power and influence without resorting to coercion?" One of the important manifestations of the changed social situation in Confucius' day was the growing individualism which resulted from the breakdown of feudal relations. Tribalistic, communal thought which submerged the individual to the interests of the whole, gave way to selfish and personal considerations. Mere appeal to ancestors and traditions could no longer assure proper social action. Individuals had to be convinced in themselves as they saw the value of a certain way of action. Authoritarian approaches to enforce behavior were seen to have limited effectiveness.

The essential insight of Confucius lies in his understanding that the quality of life is determined by the way in which our human relations are carried out. In the background of his time, which was superstitious, or where leaders used force to gain their goals, his view was exceptional. A further insight is that the quality of a society depends on the quality of its leaders and ultimately on the character of all the members of the group. If the true welfare of the group in long-range terms is to be secured, there must be something more than merely the threat of coercive force to guarantee that welfare in the hearts and minds of the people. A later Confucian text called The Great Learning gives, in essence the reciprocal relations of the individual and the group and the foundation of social harmony and well-being in the character of all the people.

Providing a basis for the establishment of true social welfare, Confucius, in addition to filial piety, advocated the cultivation of a group of values that give substance and meaning to filial piety itself. These values are Benevolence (or humaneness), Propriety, Rightness, Reciprocity, Conscientiousness (which came to mean loyalty), Faithfulness, Learning and Wisdom, and Efficacious Character embodied in the Gentlemen or Superior Person.

Filial Piety in Confucius' thought is a twoway street as embodied in the principle of reciprocity. It has been pointed out in community studies by Prof. Yasumasa Kuroda, that while the ideal of Japanese people may be kodomo no tame ni, for the sake of the children, it is expected that the children will be obedient and submissive to the parents' wishes. Recently a student in my class, writing a review on a film on Confucianism, related her experience with her parents who have specified what she must become in her career development on the basis of her obligation to them as daughter and without regard to her wishes in the matter. As a mild-mannered child, she does not rebel, but resentment is growing over the fact that she is given no choice in the matter. The obligation of the children to the parents receives more emphasis on practical attitudes.

There was a basis in Confucius' realism for the importance of filial piety. It stands to reason that if one cannot, or will not, treat properly those with whom he is most intimately associated, he is not likely to treat others with the proper respect. While Confucius' own words deal only slightly with filial piety among the categories of values, the book of Filial Piety composed sometime from the fourth to the second century B.C.E. provides the traditional ideal of filial piety that has governed Asian thinking ever since. For the common people, it proposes:

Follow the laws of nature, utilizing the earth to the best advantage according to the various qualities of the soil, restricting one's personal desires and enjoyment in order to support one's parents—this is the filiality of the common people. So it is that, from the son of Heaven to the commoners, if filial piety is not pursued from the beginning to end, disasters are sure to follow.²

In the view of Confucius, there are five relationships which we mentioned earlier. These are basic to all societies and involve a natural distinction of superior and inferior. However, for Confucius, one must not rely on those relationships to attain one's goal. A leader is one who commands leadership as a result of one's character and not merely because of being the leader. To rely on one's given superior position means coercion which is short-lived and gives rise to efforts by others to circumvent that authority. Rather, if one is sensitive to the needs of others, giving them a sense of worth and dignity, they will respond. Confucius declares:

The Master said, Govern the people by regulations, keep order among them by chastisements, and they will flee from you and lose all self respect. Govern them by moral

force, keep order among them by ritual and they will deepen their self-respect and come to you of their own accord.³

Again:

Tzu Kung asked about government. The Master said, Sufficient food, sufficient weapons, and the confidence of the common people. Tzu Kung said, Suppose you had no choice but to dispense with one of these three, which would you forego? The Master said, Weapons. Tzu Kung said, Suppose you were forced to dispense with one of the two that were left, which would you forgo? The Master said, Food. For from of old, death has been the lot of all men; but a people that no longer trusts its rulers is lost indeed."

Leadership is a matter of example, cultivation of moral force by one's general demeanor and increasing the welfare of the people. (Analects, XIV, 45). The leader must put into practice five qualities: courtesy, breadth, good faith, diligence, and clemency. He goes on to point out: "He who is courteous is not scorned, he who is broad wins the multitude, he who is of good faith is trusted by the people... he who is clement can get service from the people." A very interesting passage which applies to the broad range of human relations is given in the following passage:

Tzu-Hsia said, "A gentleman obtains the confidence of those under him, before putting burdens upon them. If he does so before he has obtained their confidence, they feel that they are being exploited. It is also true that he obtains the confidence (of those above him) before criticizing them. If he does so before he has obtained their confidence, they feel that they are being slandered."

It is clear that all areas of human affairs require sensitivity to others in order to sustain fruitful relations. The rules of courtesy emphasized by Confucius are the lubricant of human relations. By these rules one transforms demands into requests.

Confucius' teaching can help with problems today, because it teaches reciprocity-to put ourselves in the other person's place, that is, to walk in his shoes. Through reciprocity we enter into dialogue with the other person and seriously attempt to see his viewpoint. It means also to reflect on one's own limitations. The value of conscientiousness, which later came to mean loyalty, means to be concerned for the welfare of the other person. Faithfulness means to stand by one's word. In later times it came to mean belief and was externalized to believe what one is told. Confucius does not promise that there will be no conflict, but he teaches perspectives and principles that can avert, soften, or resolve conflict. We must understand the implicit distinction in his thought between someone with authority who enforces it and another who is authoritative and attracts the service of others. If we were to put it into an American context, his thought compares in some ways to Dale Carnegie's How to Win Friends and Influence People and similar efforts by others to give guidance regarding human relations. In the context of problems of the elderly, it is important that, just as the youth are urged to understand the elderly and respect them, it is equally important for the elderly, in the course of their reflections, to understand the Confucian principle of reciprocity and the nature of leadership so that positive relations between the generations can be established and maintained.

BUDDHIST VALUES IN MODERN CONTEXT

Buddhism begins with the enlightenment of Gautama Buddha, also known as Śākyamuni Buddha, in the sixth century B.C.E. in India. In his search for spiritual liberation from the bondage to cyclic birth and death and all the sufferings involved in such repeated lives, Buddha developed a monastic system which provided the necessary conditions for his followers to attain enlightenment themselves. In the area of moral behavior, Buddhism requires five precepts for lay people, ten

for monks. These regulations deal with basic human behavior, such as not stealing, not lying, not being unchaste, not taking intoxicants and not killing. The additional five for monks have to do with luxury in living, such as not sleeping on high beds, wearing simple robes, and not handling money. Eventually the regulations expanded to 248 for men and over 350 for women. The body of rules is now contained in several volumes called *Vinaya*.

The rules of the order, or precepts, are viewed as preliminary and preparatory to the effort of meditation and concentration leading to wisdom. For lay people, good conduct brings merit which benefits their later lives, making it possible for them to attain enlightenment.

Although Buddhism was a monastic system, it did not entirely neglect the lay person. There are several texts which offer guidance for life to lay people. A social ethic is presented in the Singālovāda Sutta:

Mother and father are the eastern quarter, teachers are the southern, wife and children are the western, friends and companions are the northern, slaves and workmen are the nadir, the zenith are ascetics and brahmins. If he worships these quarters, he dwells profitably among his family.

The wise man endowed with virtue, gentle and skilled in speech, of lowly conduct, not obstinate, such a one wins fame.

Energetic, not lazy, he trembles not in misfortunes, of flawless conduct, intelligent, such a one wins fame.

Friendly, a maker of friends, kind, free from avarice, guide, instructor, and adviser, such a one wins fame.

Liberality, affability, useful conduct towards others, impartiality in affairs towards each according to his worth.

Now these elements of sympathy in the world are like the linchpin of a chariot in making it go; without these elements of

sympathy a mother would get no respect or reverence for having a son, nor would a father.

Insofar as the wise ponder these elements of sympathy, to that extent do they attain greatness and become praised.⁷

Other texts such as the Mahāmangala Sutta and Parābhava Sutta set forth basic prudential, social ethic; that is, the types of attitudes that are necessary for social harmony and prosperity in life. The Parābhava Sutta approaches the ethic from the negative side as the causes of downfall. One statement refers to the family: "Though being well-to-do, not to support father and mother who are old and past their youth—this is the cause of one's downfall." Thus, there is an emphasis on filial piety similar to what we find in the Confucian tradition.

Perhaps the most instructive and well-known Buddhist moral and spiritual text among lay people is the *Dhammapada*, or *The Way of Truth*. The opening lines of the text set the perspective which runs through the work. In Buddhism it is the state of mind that determines our actions and our destinies. Thus, it states:

All that we are is the result of what we have thought: it is founded on our thoughts. If a man speaks or acts with an evil thought, pain follows him, as the wheel follows the foot of the ox that draws the carriage . . . For hatred does not cease by hatred at any time; hatred ceases by love—this is an eternal law.

The *Dhammapada* recognizes the principle of reciprocity similar to Confucianism:

All men tremble at punishment, all men fear death; remember that you are like unto them and do not kill nor cause to slaughter.

In Buddha's first sermon, he gave the four noble truths concerning the cause and abolition of suffering. The way to be rid of suffering is through the practice of the Eightfold Noble Path. These eight requirements have frequently been given an ethical and moral interpretation for lay people. They include Right Views, Right Intent, Right Speech, Right Conduct, Right Means of Livelihood, Right Endeavor, Right Mindfulness, and Right Meditation. They move from the practical concerns of behavior to spiritual concentration.

Buddhism eventually evolved into two major traditions in the course of its history, the Theravada of South Asia and the Mahavana of North and East Asia. The Mahayana traditions possess a higher evaluation of spiritual potential of lay people, who play a greater role in its teaching. Nevertheless, in its progression through Asia, the Mahayana was also monastic. It was highly criticized in China as anti-social, because the celibacy of the monks prevented the producing of offspring to carry on the family name and line. Some Mahayana sutras exalt the lay person and express a high social ideal. The Vows of Queen Śrimālā are significant for Buddhist social awareness, as well as the Seventeen Point Constitution attributed to Prince Shōtoku in Japan. As example, we may give Oueen Śrimālā's Vows:

I will not be jealous of others or envy their possessions; I will not be selfish either in mind or property; I will try to make poor people happy with the things I receive, and I will not hoard them for myself.

I will receive all people courteously, give them what they need and speak kindly to them; consider their circumstances and not my convenience; and try to benefit them without partiality.¹⁰

Prince Shōtoku's constitution is significant for its combination of Buddhist and Confucian principles in laying the basis for a harmonious society. As examples of the Prince's social insight, we may call attention to Article Five which calls officials to resist bribery by controlling their desires and to deal impartially. He notes that if there is no impartiality, the complaints of a rich man are like throwing water into a stone. Article Ten calls for more reciprocal and tolerant attitudes among

people, because we are all common ordinary people and each has his own perspective. All of us combine wisdom and foolishness in ourselves and are not always right. In Article Two, the Prince calls for adherence to Buddhism as the means for correcting human nature, suggesting a deeper spiritual basis for morality and human relations.¹¹

Because of the social situation of Buddhism in the East Asian countries particularly, it did not develop a specifically Buddhist ethic and morality in clear form but was integrated with Confucian teachings, stressing filial piety. Buddhist ritual relating to the dead became a major means of expressing reverence for one's ancestors and a vehicle for cultivating the appropriate attitudes of social responsibility and respect for authority. In general, Buddhism tended to be passive toward the social order-accepting it as one's destiny according to the law of Karma. Buddhist emphasis on one's ego as the source of problems caused people to look inward for the source of difficulties, translating it to self-blame. With the popular development of Buddhism as the ritual and ceremonial expression of Confucian filial piety, it also became formalized and externalized. The deeper inner resources and teachings could not easily be understood by the masses.

In China, Buddhism was regarded as a folk religion along with Religious Taoism, while in Japan it was revered as a bearer of culture and a rich resource throughout Japanese history. Over time, various monks taught among the people and more popular forms of Buddhism arose, such as Jodo Shinshu, which affirmed the value of lay life and universal hope for salvation.

The fundamental basis of Buddhist social attitudes rests on the principles of interdependence of all beings drawn from the understanding of the process of causation and the Oneness of all things implied in the principle of Voidness, or Emptiness. The cosmic universality of the Buddha nature taught in Mahayana indicates the essential spiritual equality of all beings who possess the Buddhanature and will ultimately attain Buddhahood.

The underlying insight that is the basis of all Buddhist thought and practice is that the cause of our personal problems is egocentrism or egoism, the attitude of I, my and mine. It is stimulated by our belief in an eternal soul or essence. Our egoism creates delusions about our place in the world and prevents us from seeing deeper into our relationship to other beings. We are the center of our own world. This means that we only see things from our own standpoint and self-interest, and are generally blind to the needs and rights of others.

To deal with egoism, Buddhism offers disciplines which aim to deepen our awareness of our egoism and the changing nature of our existence. Thereby, we can be liberated from the attachment to ego. Buddhism, more than being a system of ethics, is a psychotherapy which deals with the foundations of action in our spiritual condition.

Buddhist inwardness has various implications. In turning away from the world, it can be passive and quietistic, focusing only on one's own inner problems. On the other hand, Buddhism can provide insight into human action and conflict and a more effective means to resolve such problems. It can motivate deep commitment to the welfare of others. The highest ideal of Mahayana Buddhism is the bodhisattva who sacrifices himself for oth-

Buddhist values can be expressed in several commonly used Japanese terms which put the ego into context. These are mottainai, okagesama-de, itadakimasu, arigatai, arigatō, dō itashimashite, perhaps even shikata-ga-nai and innen.

These expressions reflect two dimensions of Buddhist perspective. Mottainai indicates unworthiness for what we have received. It suggests that we are undeserving (through our own inveterate egoism) to expect anything from others. The phrase shikata-ga-nai, though not directly Buddhist, reflects acceptance of a situation as it is. It is a recognition, seeing things as they really are. The same applies to the term akiramemasu which means to be resigned, but originally meant to clarify a situation. it does not mean just to give up,

but to act in terms of what is possible. It is a recognition of limits to our efforts.

The awareness of interdependence can be seen in the phrases of everyday greeting. Okagesama de means we have obtained some good fortune through the aid of something hidden. It may be the compassion of the Buddha as it is expressed in all the force and influences on our lives. Arigatai means literally "difficult to be." It indicates a mystery in things and draws the response of gratitude from us. Whatever happened is entirely unexpected and is essentially a miracle. We frequently hear this term conveying the sense that something is auspicious, blessed, or edifying. The phrase arigato, or "thank you," says essentially the same thing, and do itashimashite, or "you are welcome," points in the same direction and literally means, on the part of the doer of the good, "How do I do it." It is really something else at work. Itadakimasu means "to receive" and is the expression that is said before eating as a recognition of our dependence on others for our lives.

In all of these words and phrases, there is a recognition of a larger order of things, a process, of which we are all interrelated parts. It is not just my ego that makes everything work. The causes and conditions of my life, the people who make it up, give me the opportunity to do what I do. Goen and Innen directly indicate the process within which our lives unfold. They are the Buddhist terms for the process of cause and effect and interdependence.

Buddhism is frequently regarded as pessimistic or otherworldly, passive and inward. During the long history of Buddhism, many different aspects have evolved; however, at its depth, it is none of these characteristics, so long as they are regarded negatively. Through historical and social conditions in its spread through Asia, various characteristics have become more prominent. In our contemporary society and culture, other aspects of Buddhism need to be expressed.

The Buddhist understanding of egoism and its broad vision of the life process provides a deep

spiritual basis for the values that are central in Confucius' thought. Buddhist social awareness attains a clearer expression in offering values and principles to guide contemporary people in their decision-making. Both perspectives, as expressions of Asian values, can balance the more competitive, aggressive and individualistic features of Western culture. They can mellow the problems and the relationships with our families when they are understood and taught adequately.

CONCLUSION

We have tried in this essay to suggest the nature of Confucius' teaching in the context of traditional emphases that grew up in Chinese history in order to broaden the understanding of Confucianism as mainly filial or merely filial piety. We have tried to show that it is not an authoritarian system merely advocating submission to elders and rulers, or a formalistic set of rules to be blindly obeyed. Confucius respected persons very highly and saw that all problems can find a solution if each person deals with the other in dignity and respect. The rulers and the elderly must themselves provide examples that will inspire the youth, while the youth must learn to be self-critical, extending respect to rulers and the elderly.

Buddhism points to the real problem in human relations—egoism. Only when we understand the nature of our egoism and become deeply aware of the larger world that creates and maintains our lives, physically, socially, and spiritually, can we resolve any problem. When we become aware of compassion in our own lives, then we can be motivated to realize the Confucian values in our daily lives; they integrate well together.

These ancient teachings remain relevant in the modern world. Despite technological advances, human beings and human relations are essentially what they have always been. Whatever our position in society, these values can be realized. Confucius never demanded perfection. He stressed that to walk a mile, one has to put one foot in front of the other. We must start somewhere on our path. In Buddhism as a religion, there are transcendent goals and elevated experiences. There is mythology and philosophy. However, the fundamental basis of Buddhism in grappling with the problem of the ego is accessible and understandable by all.

Finally, these two philosophies which have been the basis of life for many people in our community and for the elderly, many of whom have migrated from Asia and shared deeply in them, are immensely important for dealing with personal and social problems relating to the elderly, as well as to society in general. I hope that, just as the communist government of the Peoples' Republic of China is finding out how significant Confucius' thought is, we Americans will also discover the richness of these Asian teachings.

FOOTNOTES

1. Honolulu Advertiser, 12 October 1985.

- Mary Lelia Makra, trans. Hsiao Ching (New York: St. John's University Press, 1985), p. 13.
- 3. Arthur Waley, trans., Analects, II, 3 (New York: Random House, 1938), p. 88.
 - 4. Waley, Analects, XII, 7, p. 164.
 - 5. Waley, Analects, XVII, 6, p. 211.
 - 6. Waley, Analects, SIS, p. 226.
- 7. E.J. Thomas, ed., Early Buddhist Scriptures: Digha-Nikaya, II, 180: Singālovāda Sutta (London: Kegal Paul, Trench Trubner & Co., 1935), pp. 151-152.
- 8. E.A. Burtt, ed., The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha (New York: New American Library, 1955), p. 52.
 - 9. Burtt, p. 59.
- 10. The Teaching of the Buddha, Japanese-English edition (Tokyo: Bukkyo Dendō Kyōkai, 1966), p. 452.
- 11. William T. De Bary, ed., *The Sources of Japanese Tradition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958-59).