



The Buddha's Sons: In Favor of Orthodoxy

by Elson B. Snow

Unless there is a powerful overriding value in disregarding an author's intention (i.e., original meaning), we who interpret as a vocation should not disregard it.

—E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *The Aims of Interpretation*

There is a disadvantage in being a “cradle Buddhist,” for this identification brings pressure for social conformity and practically demands reformation of family allegiance and changes in religious affiliation. The convert, on the other hand, is no better off. Although he does not like the conversion label he has some enthusiasm for doctrine and feels forced in making personal interpretations at the dismay of his religious teachers and at the detriment of tradition. Our educational institutions in the United States would benefit by recognizing these forced differences and contrary religious attitudes.

However, there is a more important problem in interpretation than those distinctions made by a “family Buddhist” and a “*hakujin* Buddhist.” This distinction crosses the line of Buddhist by birth and Buddhist by adoption. The widespread opinion that systematic religious thinking has been outdated long ago, actually, is a popular notion and threatens every major world religion. It assumes all religious institutions are bankrupt and “modern science” is the new knowledge of truth. This unworthy attitude is apparent in our own Pure Land Buddhist environment as we hear in the backbiting comment, “Hongwanji, today, is a victim of Tokugawa Buddhism.” These critics are saying that we are hopelessly at odds with our secular age unless we reinterpret our orthodoxy and restate a set of beliefs committed to 20th century rationality. Some of our Buddhist leaders would propose joining with recent Protestant movements for demythologizing our texts, or at least adopting some form of ethical behavior consistent with secular morality. There are several accommodations recommended by these supporters, but the suggestions are all some form of inferiority and pessimistic feeling toward religious faith compared with scientific philosophy. Zen Buddhism in the United States during its popular post-war period nearly succumbed to a strategy of reducing its tradition to psychologism, which would have been an irreversible error that disallows any opportunity to survive. The dilemmas posed by these critics would not occur were they able to grasp the real aims and methods of science and appreciate differences between con-

ventional and traditional ethics and how religious literature transmits its message with no need for mathematical unity or speculative psychology of any kind.

Modern reformation of Mahayana Buddhism is resisted by its firm anchorage in meditative texts. Although this did not prevent beatnik poets from using some of its imagery, luckily American hippies and flower children of the fifties and sixties did not discover Pure Land literature for their psychedelic trips and mind-altering experiments. Sources for their use are in abundance in the Christian tradition, but their anti-fundamentalism prevented assimilation of these forms. Pure Land thought has not gone unnoticed by professional psychology, but these speculations have not gone far and they are a dismal failure for the authentic practice of religion. Frithjof Schuon, addressing a 1961 congress in Japan, supports the “irreplaceable legacies” of traditional religion:

Today two dangers are threatening religion: from the outside, its destruction—were it only as a result of its general desertion—and from the inside, its falsification. The latter, with its pseudointellectual pretensions and its fallacious professions of “reform,” is immeasurably more harmful than all the “superstition” and “corruption” of which, rightly or wrongly, the representatives of the traditional patrimonies have been accused; this heritage is absolutely irreplaceable, and in the face of it men as such are of no account. Tradition is abandoned, not because people are no longer capable of understanding its language, but because they do not wish to understand it, for this language is made to be understood till the end of the world; tradition is falsified by reducing it to flatness on the plea of making it more acceptable to “our time,” as if one could—or should—accommodate truth to error. Admittedly, a need to reply to new questions and new forms of ignorance can always arise. One can and must explain the sacred doctrine, but not at the expense of that which gives its reason for existing, that is to say, not at the expense of its truth and effectiveness. There could be no question, for instance, of adding to the Mahayana or of replacing it by a new vehicle, such as would necessarily be of purely human invention; for the Mahayana—or shall we say Buddhism?—is

*infinitely sufficient for those who will give themselves
the trouble to look higher than their own heads.*

There was a time we complained of a language barrier; we meant that our Japanese speakers had little expertise in English. Moreover, we complained of the lack of Jodo Shinshu literature in our native tongue, the English language. There is no longer a deficiency of our native Japanese teachers, but a language deficiency of Buddhists born in English-speaking countries. Previously we suffered from social and political deprivation and today we lack personal development in our religion and lack courage in acquiring cultural knowledge of Pure Land Buddhism. The work ahead of us should consist of translating a long list of doctrinal literature, and our temples' libraries should have shelves filled with standard commentaries made by reliable American students of Jodo Shinshu. The responsibility for this gap belongs to overseas Buddhists like ourselves, and not necessarily as an obligation of Hongwanji sponsorship.

A popular myth among *nisei* is that Buddhism had to develop very slowly in the first few centuries in China before taking root. Its slow development in the United States is not to be taken seriously for the dharma also must take time to establish itself in the English language. We do not have space here to discuss all the reasons why this is a false analogy, but it is certain that such a belief is perilous to our aspiration as American Buddhists. This attitude can even spell defeat for historical Buddhism in the world. On the other hand, Jodo Shinshu is especially suited to preserve the whole of Mahayana for the benefit of all generations, crossing over several linguistic communities. It is simply that our contemporary world is fraught with external and internal dangers for Buddhism. Some of this hostility, political and intellectual, is generated from sympathizers who are not at all dedicated to its internal success. Our carelessness as students in pursuing easy questions and easy solutions is disastrous for authentic spirituality and the very existence of Buddhism as a major world religion. We must not allow the dharma to become a cult and eventually dissolve in the sands of historical time.

The advocacy of religious conservatism has nothing to do with political illiberalism or social enlightenment. When the Japanese first recognized the figures of dharma guardians, protectors of the temples, it was not done through superstitious impulse, but of real insight into the ephemeral nature of mental and material objects. Our greatest need in the Shinshu tradition in America is the simplicity of commitment to doctrinal understanding and its study; it is our students today who must serve as protective *naga* kings. We can be proud of our annual Pacific Seminar sponsored by BCA for the last 25 years. The Seminar has served us quite well; it has not served as "*angyo*," a more classical approach to doctrine, and neither has the Institute of Buddhist Studies functioned purely as a sectarian academy. We are in need of more doctrinal exposure, not less. As for the treatment of our sutras and commentaries, we have been lightly introduced to them and we must struggle to make these studies more readily available. It is unwise to ignore popular religious

education, but to ignore the serious side of historical doctrine is fatal. The BCA program of the six aspects of *shinjin* has the advantage of imparting essential Jodo Shinshu on all levels, reminiscent of Rennyo's literary success of the *Gobunsho*, yet we are still in need of Hongwanji's presence and help to foster adequate Shin scholarship among American laity and clergy.

I sincerely believe it is a gross mistake to make light of our academic need, and that reductionist methods of interpreting historical ideology is an illusionary and precarious undertaking. I am reminded of the "Jefferson's Bible" where all the inconsistencies and supernaturalities of the gospels are deleted from the King James version. I have unsuccessfully looked for a copy of this unique deistical handiwork, but we can be sure that its demythologization process served Christianity none at all. I would not like to see the *Meditation Sutra (kangyo)* blue-penciled in this manner. What would be the result? What would be eliminated and what retained? What would be its interpretation? Relativistic interpretation or a modern fabrication is a useless task. It is more fruitful for us to know our tradition, and to know it as a viable system of imparting the highest truth for mankind. A belief that we cannot benefit from an uncut version is sheer nonsense. It is possible to know the original intent of our sacred literature. Historical knowledge of any degree of objectivity is useful, but for those who choose to ignore hagiology and doctrine will leave the world empty handed and with no spiritual descendants.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

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NOTE:

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"REIKON" AND "SOUL"

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5. Compiled by the Ryukoku University, Bukkyo Yoron, 13th ed., p. 23, Hyakkaen Publication, Kyoto, Japan, 1967.
6. King, Rev. June, "Answers to Common Questions on Buddhism," in leaflet published by North-West Buddhist Ministerial Association, 1980.
7. See Shinshu Seiten, "Kyogyoshinsho," BCA, p. 512. 1978.
8. Suzuki, D. T., translator, Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Shinshu Otani-ha Publishers, Kyoto, 1973. Kawata Press, Tokyo.
9. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, pps. 431-432.

10. Suzuki, D. T., translator, Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Shinshu Otani-ha Publishers, Kyoto, 1973, Kawata Press, Tokyo. p. 206.
11. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, pps. 10-12. See 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 22, 19, 20, and 28th vows. Also see p. 441.
12. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Rennyō's Interpretation of the Name," p. 449.
13. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Gobunsho," p. 271.
14. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 85.
15. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Shoshinge," p. 152.
16. Suzuki, D. T., Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Published by Shinshu Otani-ha, Kyoto, 1973. Kawata Press, Tokyo.
17. Ibid. p. 206.

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*and the more I listen to the Teachings, my shinjin melts away, nothing remains, everything disappears. For this, I am truly grateful to the snowman.*⁴

Once, when Osono was walking on the road of a village in Ise she was saying the *nembutsu*. A man walking nearby heard her and said, "There goes the old lady mouthing empty *nembutsu*." Osono heard what the man had said and rushed back to him saying, "Thank you for saying that, thank you! You just don't know where you'll find a good friend." The man, startled by what Osono was saying, turned to her and said, "You don't have to get mad!" To this Osono replied:

*No, no, I'm not mad. I came to thank you. If the nembutsu that comes out of the mouth of this old lady turns into merit and I'm to be saved by that, what am I supposed to do??? I'm truly grateful for this empty nembutsu that comes out of me after I've been saved. I'm really grateful to you for letting me know; I'm really grateful to you for letting me know.*⁵

Years later, when Osono was on her deathbed, a devotee came to see her and asked, "Can you explain your understanding of the Buddha-dharma to me?" Osono answered, "I don't have any understanding to explain, just that during my lifetime I have come to realize that any understanding is beyond me."

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