

Introduction to Religion with Special Reference to Buddhism

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I. The State of Japanese Buddhism

The founder of Buddhism,¹ Śākyamuni, became a Buddha once he realized “the impermanence of all things² (*sarvasaṃskārā anityāḥ*).” He made this the core tenet of his message, and it was through this that he sought to save humanity. Even his last words before entering nirvana were on the topic of impermanence. Thus, it would be no overstatement to claim that Buddhism is “a religion that begins and ends with impermanence” and “a religion pervaded by impermanence.”

One may associate the word “impermanence” with the following lines from *The Tale of the Heike*:

The sound of the Gion Shōja bells echoes the impermanence of all things;
the color of the sāla flowers reveals the truth that the prosperous must decline.
The proud do not endure, they are like a dream on a spring night;
the mighty fall at last, they are as dust before the wind. (McCullough [1988])

As illustrated by this example, impermanence is almost always

1 This Chapter 4 is chiefly based on the first chapter of Suzuki [2016].

2 This is a tentative interpretation.

given a “regretful and gloomy” definition, in the sense of “all worldly things, including power and life, being in perpetual change, without existing indefinitely and without persisting forever, destined to fade like dreams.” Yet, in actual fact, this “regretful and gloomy” definition only expresses a small portion of the meaning of impermanence that pervades Buddhism. Nonetheless, it is the “regretful and gloomy” definition of impermanence that has always been most relevant in Japan, owing to the influences of its literature and natural conditions. As such, we have not been able to grasp the true meaning of the impermanence that forms the foundation of Buddhism. In consequence, Japanese Buddhism has never been able to achieve its true potential.

2. The True Meaning of Impermanence

A direct translation of the Sanskrit term for the impermanence of all things would be “all *saṃskāras* are inconstant.” *Saṃskāra* here indicates the power or operation that forms “the object that is perceived as ‘this is I.’” In this course, I will refer to this “object that is perceived as ‘this is I’” as “the ego.”

All people, without exception, will one day die. No human can avoid the fate of dying. I will refer to this “true I,” to whom death is inherent, as “the self.”

Nevertheless, we do not, under normal circumstances, properly acknowledge this self. I repeat that all people will one day die. It may be today or it may be tomorrow. Because the self is the true I—to whom death is inherent—the fact that I am alive today is simply “by chance” and I owe it to the “switch of death”—which I always carry with me—

having not been flicked today, for reasons unknown to me. There is nothing “matter-of-course” about my being alive today. Rather, it is the opposite; it is something “exceptional and to be appreciated.”

Even so, nobody wants to dwell on the unfortunate thought of “myself dying.” This is why we baselessly predict the future with the words, “I live today having lived yesterday and so I should live tomorrow having lived today.” Although this is nothing but an illusion, we are happy to banish that inconvenient “death” as far away as we can. It follows, then, that we think of myself being alive and my partner being alive as being “wholly unexceptional and matter-of-course.” It is this “false I within the illusion”—who takes life for granted—that is “the bad ego.”

The bad ego takes for granted that my partner and I are alive at the moment, and it is appreciative of neither party. By contrast, the self thinks it truly exceptional that it is alive and that how its husband or wife is, for the moment, alive and this stirs an awareness of the value of each and every moment one is able to live with their loved ones. It should be clear to anyone which of these outlooks is the most fruitful.

It is possible for people to regain their self for short periods of time. Indeed, there should be those who read this text and think to themselves, “That’s right! I should be grateful for myself and my loved ones being alive,” thus regaining their self. Yet, since human beings are fundamentally selfish, forgetting what they find inconvenient, it is the sad truth that they would soon revert to the earlier beliefs and behaviors of the bad ego. This “fundamental selfishness” is referred to as “ignorance (*avidyā*).” This ignorance becomes the driving force behind the bad

direction taken as a result of bad *saṃskāra* and separation from the self. In turn, the bad ego is formed, accelerating the separation. In the end, people become tormented by this gap between the self and the ego. This pain that results from the gap, born out of a feeling of dissatisfaction, is what is referred to in Buddhism as “unsatisfactoriness (*duḥkha*).”

If a person becomes aware of this suffering, rejects it, and tries to quell the ignorance that often follows, then it is possible that he or she will activate good *saṃskāra*, which forms “the good ego” that seeks to regain the self. Yet, due to the obstacles placed by ignorance, the good *saṃskāra* fails to last long, causing the person to revert to the earlier state of activating bad *saṃskāra*. In fact, it is this “inconstancy of various *saṃskāra*” that constitutes the true meaning of impermanence.

3. The True Meaning of the Three (Four) Dharma Seals

As shown above, the suppression of *saṃskāra* is able to make possible the formation of the good ego, which seeks to regain the self. Yet, our fundamental selfishness is deep-seated and difficult to uproot, obstructing the activation of good *saṃskāra*. It is no easy task to activate *saṃskāra* as one wishes. This state of “the *saṃskāra* not going according to one’s wishes” can be rephrased as “all *saṃskāra* are unsatisfactory.” The Sanskrit phrase is “*sarvasaṃskārā duḥkḥāḥ*,” but it most surely does not mean, “all things are suffering.”

We normally mistake the ego formed by *saṃskāra*—this includes both the good and bad egos—for “This is I, my true self.” Yet, there has been none save the Buddha who has fully regained his or her “true I”—that is, the self. The ego and the self are not the same. This is articulated

in the sentiment “The unenlightened are unable to discover their true I—their self—within their frame of perception,” expressed in the Sanskrit phrase “*sarvadharmā anātmānaḥ*.” This phrase does not mean that we can never find our true I—our self. Being unenlightened, we mistake the ego for the self. Buddhism strictly warns against confusing the two and teaches that we “should form the good ego by activating good *saṃskāra*, so that we one day can regain our self.”

To the one who has regained his or her self (a buddha), there is nothing more worthy of gratitude than one’s being alive and one’s loved ones being alive. I have used the expression “loved ones/partner/husband/wife, etc.,” but it does not imply that there exist two categories of people, those loved and those not so. A buddha truly knows that all life—both one’s own and those of others—are limited. Hence, any meeting with a fellow person is precious and to be cherished, and any person is a beloved. There is nothing that can threaten a buddha, who has fully realized the joy of living and the finitude of life in the now.

We call this state of mind “the extinguishing of all afflictions (*nirvāṇa*)” and the truly peaceful and wonderful nature of this state is referred to as “nirvanic tranquility (*śāntaṃ nirvāṇam*).” It is common for people to misunderstand and think that “nirvana must be a quiet and lonely state of mind,” but this could not be further from the truth.

We have now discussed the four themes of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, selflessness in the ego, and tranquility. These are referred to as the Four Dharma Seals, in the meaning “the four seals that signify what Buddhist teaching is.” Because unsatisfactoriness essentially is the same as impermanence, it is often omitted, so that we instead have

the Three Dharma Seals of impermanence, selflessness in the ego, and tranquility. In either case, it should be clear that impermanence is the starting point.

4. The True Meanings of Cessation and the Middle Way

To regain one's self and become a buddha, there has to be a "cessation" of the fundamental selfishness that is ignorance. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is the attainment of "buddhahood" and "nirvana," achieved through the cessation of ignorance.

The word cessation would seem to imply "to disappear, to vanish," so it is easy to think, "Aha, so I need to rid myself of ignorance." Yet, once one tries to get rid of it, one is made aware of how difficult it actually is to do so. It is true that it is quite possible to feel grateful for oneself and for others being alive, and to regain one's self, for a short period of time, but ignorance is extremely persistent and before long, the bad ego is once again formed. There may be those who despair, saying that "it is impossible to get rid of ignorance," and who give up on Buddhism. Yet, the Sanskrit word for cessation, *nirodha*, carries the meaning "to contain, to control," and does not originally have the meaning of "reduce to zero." Actually, even for Śākyamuni, who substantiated (realized) the cessation of ignorance, it can be shown that his ignorance did not go anywhere. Yet, it goes without saying that Śākyamuni, being one of buddhas, had his ignorance under perfect control. Even if his ignorance were to come into operation, he would be able to suppress it instantaneously. What we are asked to do, then, is not to reduce ignorance to zero, but to remain vigilant at all times to

make sure that it does not operate. This “remaining vigilant to prevent the operation of ignorance” is referred to as “heedfulness (*apramāda*)” and the opposite, to set ignorance free, as “heedlessness (*pramāda*).” Throughout his delivery of his message, Śākyamuni preached that we should not forget about the impermanence of *saṃskāra* and that we should move forward without falling under the sway of ignorance (be heedful).

I used the word “move forward.” In Christianity and other religions that have the notions of a Creator and Savior, the phrase “proceed in this manner” is framed as an instruction imparted by God or the Lord, a movement along the one true path. Yet, in Buddhism, there is no such notion. Not even the Buddha Śākyamuni’s teachings (dharma) are some form of instructions or orders that apply to all people. Each and every one can approach nirvana by the methods and in the pace suiting his or her ego. The ego is formed by *saṃskāra* and the *saṃskāras* are neither permanent nor constant, so there has never been any one-size-fits-all method or pace in Buddhism.

The method and pace suiting the ego that is formed in this moment, the movement toward the goal of nirvana—that is, the state of not forming an ego, of having regained one’s self—is referred to as the Middle Way (*madhyamā pratipad*).

The Middle Way is not the same as “if there is a right and a left, go through the middle” or “be moderate.” That is the Mean, which is entirely different from the Middle Way. No matter what form it takes, if it is a method or pace that brings one’s present ego closer to nirvana, then that is the Middle Way. Thus, whether any movement is the Middle

Way or not is determined by the extent to which it takes one closer to nirvana. To a person whose ego requires a harsh path, the harsh path is the Middle Way. To a person whose ego requires a gentle path, the gentle path is the Middle Way. Countless people are constantly activating *samskāra* in innumerable ways, constantly forming their ego. In order to help all these people walk the Middle Way, Śākyamuni's teaching had to become correspondingly extensive. The religions with notions of Creator and Savior each have their one scripture on which they rely; Judaism has its Old Testament, Christianity its New Testament, and Islam its Quran. By contrast, Buddhism has produced a vast number of scriptures (sutras), collectively known as the Tripiṭaka, or as the Eighty-Four Thousand Dharmas. This is a result of this uniquely Buddhist path that is the Middle Way.

Buddhism is not the kind of religion that says, "You and me and him are the same; we are all the same, and all correct." Buddhism is the kind of religion that says, "You and me and him are different; we are all different, and all correct."

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