

Rethinking Nature in Contemporary Japan

From Tradition to Modernity

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Japanese Buddhism and Nature Man and Natural Phenomena in the Quest for Enlightenment

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Abstract Japanese Buddhism developed a debate on the role of nature based on the imported schools from China, from where the name itself of nature was taken. However, in the 13th century, Dōgen gave an original turn to the conception of nature as the locus of enlightenment. The Sōtō school evolved from his teaching recently developed a new perspective influenced by Western concerns for nature and its relation with society.

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Keywords Japanese Buddhism. Dōgen. Nature. Sōtōshū.

1 Introduction

If we inquire into the ancient Japanese texts, we cannot find the description of how nature was created. In the oldest text describing the myths of the creation of Japan, *Kojiki* 古事記, where a great number of gods (*kami* 神) make their appearance, none of them is responsible for the creation of the natural environment. This is in strong contrast with the Western Christian assumption that God is the creator of the natural world.

One of the possible explanations is that in ancient Japan there was no clear concept of ‘nature’ as an object of speculation. Until the arrival of Chinese culture, there was not even the word for ‘nature’, which was conceived as the manifold concrete manifestation of mountains, rivers, trees, and so on.

When, under the impact of Chinese culture, the Japanese started to conceive of ‘nature’, they expressed it with the noun *ametsuchi* 天地,¹ or

1 See Takagi et al. 1962, poems nos. 20/4392 (433) and 20/4426 (447).

‘heaven and earth’. Also *ikitoshi ikerumono* いきとし生けるもの, that is ‘all living beings’, is to be found in ancient texts.² Later, *tenchi manbutsu* 天地万物 ‘all the things of heaven and earth’ taken from the Chinese tradition, *sansui* 山水 ‘mountains and rivers’,³ *kenkon* 乾坤 ‘heaven and earth’,⁴ *monomina* 物皆 ‘all things’⁵ and similar.⁶

In the West, the scientific approach towards nature led to speculation about it, and in the end promoted the philosophical and scientific attitude that gave a great contribution to the development of Western culture.

2 The Word *shizen* 自然

It is not until very recently that did Japan find a word to express what in the West we mean by nature; as a matter of fact, it was only in the Meiji period that under the stimulus of the impact with Western culture the word *shizen* 自然 was adopted from ancient Chinese and given a new meaning.⁷

In China, we find this word both in Confucianism and Daoism with the meaning of ‘something not produced by human hands’, or ‘that which is as it is by itself’, ‘not being produced’. Lǎozǐ 老子, in the chapter 25 of *Dào dé jīng* 道德經, says 「人法地, 地法天, 天法道, 道法自然」: “Man’s law is the earth, the earth’s law is heaven, heaven’s law is the Way and the Way’s law is *to be as it is*” (emphasis added).⁸

In Meiji Japan this word was chosen to express the meaning of ‘nature’ because in the Sinitic world nature was considered to be “unproduced” and having existence by itself independently from any external source. The difference in the meaning of the words for nature in the West and in the Sino-Japanese culture leads to different visions of nature. While in the Christian world the human being is the lord of nature and uses it for his purposes in a hierarchical structure where God is at the top, man intermediate and nature at the lowest level, in Japan (with differences compared to China) Gods (*kami*) are part of nature and the expression of

2 One of the earliest is in the Japanese introduction (*kanajo* かな序) of *Kokin wakashū* 古今和歌集 (905). Regards the latter see Saeki 1958, 93.

3 In *Kaifūsō* 懷風藻 (751). See Kojima 1964, 83.

4 In *Wakan rōeishū* 和漢朗詠 (1018). See Kawaguchi et al. 1965, 188.

5 In *Man’yōshū*, poem no. 10/1885. See Takagi et al. 1960, 68.

6 In the Hindu tradition of India, there was the word *swayambhu* meaning “self-manifested, that which is originated by its own”. It may have influenced the Buddhist tradition of China.

7 In Japan at an early date it is found in the Chinese introduction 真名序 of *Kokin wakashū* 古今和歌集 (905) and in *Ōkagami* 大鏡 (1189). For the first see Saeki 1958, 335; for the latter see Matsumura 1960, 412.

8 Author’s translation.

its forces (Ōno 1976, 125). Therefore, they are supposed to cooperate in harmony, each one fulfilling its own role. In any case, as Lǎozǐ says, the fundamental law that governs both man and the inanimate is *shizen*, that is, each phenomenon of the universe should follow its natural inclination, i.e. the natural law that is the great model and mould for anyone.

In the Shintō view, the *kami* are not above, but within the natural world, or better they are manifestations of the phenomena of nature, which is pure in contrast with man's society that is corrupt. In order to approach nature in harmony, man must purify himself from the dirtiness of his artificial world. Purification (*harae* 祓い) is performed to reestablish order and balance between nature, humans and deities, all of which are interdependent since the social and the natural environments are interrelated.

3 The Word for 'Nature' in Japanese Buddhism

In Japan, the word 自然 is also read in *go'on* pronunciation as *jinen*. This version basically has the same meaning, but has also a strong Buddhist connotation, meaning 'that which is as it is by itself and not produced by the karmic law of 'cause-and-effect'' or *inga* 因果. In the Buddhist world this meaning has been often taken to be an unorthodox view, or *gedō* 外道, since nothing is supposed to escape from the inflexible law of *kārma*, though there are no source showing which is the *causa prima*.⁹

This very meaning is quite central to the Buddhist doctrine of Shinran (1173-1262), founder of the Jōdo Shinshū school 浄土真宗. As a matter of fact, one of his key teaching is *jinen hōni* 自然法爾, which means 'without calculations', 'spontaneously'. In Shinran's school, the karmic law of 'cause-and-effect' is often negated, since salvation comes from the Buddha Amida without any effort, or cause, on the part of the believer and, therefore, the 'no-cause and effect' called *muin uga* 無因有果 is preferred. That is to say that salvation comes naturally. In *Mattōshō*, one of his fundamental texts, Shinran says:

As for *jinen*, *ji* means 'of itself' – it is not through the practitioner's calculation. *Nen* means 'one is made to become so' – it is not through the practitioner's calculation; it is through the working of the Vow of Thatagata. As for *hōni*, it means 'one is made to become so through the working of the Vow of the Thatagata. (Ueda 1978, 29)

In short, *jinen hōni* means to reject any effort in view of salvation (*jiriki* 自

9 "According to Buddhist doctrine, this word is an un-orthodox (*gedō* 外道) view in contrast with the law of cause-and-effect". See Nihon Daijiten Hakkōkai 1985, 20.

力) on the part of the man and to give oneself up completely to Amida who will come to save him. It is a way to avoid producing (bad) *karma* and return to a state of “non-productiveness”, abandonment and renunciation. In a sense, it is to return to a state of primordial or natural innocence. It is a kind of natural paradise where, as stated in the *Amida kyō*, “all the infinite things of nature whom you desire to obtain are already in front of you”.¹⁰

However, in most of the other Buddhist schools, it was the law of cause-and-effect *inga ōhō* 因果応報 that was believed to correspond to nature (Kanaoka, Yanagawa 1989, 12). Nature is considered to be a complex mechanism where the karmic law of reward is inescapable and, as a matter of fact, it is the most important law that governs the entire universe. In a sense, in the world and in our lives, there is nothing else than this severe law of cause-and effect – everything works according to it, including man: it is how nature functions, or better, it is nature itself.

4 ‘Nature’ in Buddhism

The Chinese Buddhist master Sēng zhào 僧肇 (374-414), a disciple of Kumārajīva (334-413) in his *Zhào lùn* 肇論, says 「天地與我同根，萬物與我一體」, that is “heaven, earth, and myself have the same root; all things are one corpus with me”.¹¹

In Mahāyāna Buddhism (to which I will limit the discussion), since the early stages, a contrast between man and the natural world, that is animals and the inanimate realm, arose due to the principal objective of the Way: the chance of reaching *nirvāṇā*, or ‘Enlightenment’. The main question concerned the fact that *nirvāṇā*, Enlightenment, or anyway the final stage of liberation, was reached by means of the mind *kokoro/xīn* 心. It is the mind that is defiled and needs to be changed: the transformation of mind, be it to be purified or not is unavoidable. In brief, the supreme goal of Buddhism was to be achieved realising the deceptiveness of our own ego, which is insubstantial and unreal. Once this illusion is abandoned, our true self, a non-self, will manifest in its full purity and brightness.

10 See *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 [online], 12: 301. URL http://21dzk.l.u-to-kyo.ac.jp/SAT/index_en.html (2017-06-12). All quotations from Japanese and Sino-Japanese in this essay are Author’s translations from original texts.

11 See *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 [online], 45: 159.

Now, the question into which many Buddhist masters inquired was: if animals and inanimate objects do not have a mind (which is not to have 'no-mind!'), they should be excluded from the realm of Enlightenment. They cannot reach *nirvāṇā*.

However, this view contrasted with the basic principle of Mahāyāna teachings according to which the chance of Enlightenment is given to all sentient beings and, even more problematically, that Buddha-nature 佛性是 universal. As regards 'sentient beings', there were masters who included the natural world and others who excluded it. However, the universality of Buddha-nature could not cut off 'nature' and, since Buddha-nature is the hidden potentiality of evolving in manifested and full Enlightenment, everything – animals and inanimate objects, mountains, rivers, flowers, etc. – in principle should have the capacity of becoming enlightened.

In China, famous masters such as Fǎzàng 法藏 (643-712) of Huāyán 華嚴 school, Jízàng 吉藏 (549-623) of Sānlùn 三論 school, and Zhànrán 湛然 (711-782) of Tiāntái 天台 school debated the question. They all tried to find arguments in favour of the inclusion of nature into the world of Enlightenment. Fǎzàng, from the point view of Huāyán teaching of the universal mutual interdependence and mutual identity of all phenomena, asserts that nothing should be excluded. Jízàng also supported the possibility of Enlightenment for plants, and Zhànrán said that the whole universe manifests Buddha-mind, which is the foundation of all phenomena, and therefore nothing could be excluded.

As a matter of fact, the most important Chinese schools supported the idea of the universality of the capacity of Enlightenment, though from different points of view. Mahāyāna, that is literally the 'Great Vehicle' on which everybody could mount on to be transported to the final liberation, proved to be faithful to its name.

5 Nature in Japanese Buddhism

A detailed discussion of how nature was dealt with within Japanese Buddhism exceeds the scope of this essay, which will limit itself to a synthetic approach to Shingon, Tendai and a more detailed discussion of the founder of the Sōtō Zen school 曹洞宗, Dōgen 道元 (1200-1253).

In the Japanese Shingon school 真言宗, starting from its founder Kūkai 空海 (774-835), the phenomenal world in every aspect is regarded as the manifestation of the universal Buddha Mahāvairocana or Dainichi 大日 (literally 'the Great Sun') and, consequently, nature itself is an expression of Vairocana's presence in the world. All phenomena, including those belonging to nature, and of course human beings, are in the realm of buddhahood. All the elements of the universe are composed of six basic elements, that is earth, water, fire, wind, space, and mind or conscious-

ness. This means that man, and nature, plants, trees, rivers, etc. share the same origin, belong to the same dimension, and only the composition of the elements among them make the difference. This explains the reason why, Shingon believes that all phenomena exist in buddhahood equally, without distinction between animate and inanimate beings. They all are equally manifestation of Dainichi, have a Buddha-nature without distinction and can reach Enlightenment when the oneness with Dainichi, or the Absolute Reality, the Dharmakāya,¹² is realised. In its extreme formulation, i.e. Kūkai's, natural phenomena are already in possession of the Buddha-nature simply by virtue of their being in the phenomenal world (Callicott 1989, 186-7).

In his most famous work, *Sokushin jōbutsu gi* 即身成仏義, we find the following sentences:

1. "In the natural world all phenomena naturally manifest their presence as they are";
2. "In the principle of nature there are no artifacts";
3. "Wisdom is naturally present (in all beings)".¹³

On the Tendai side, Ryōgen 良源 (912-985), abbot of Enryakuji, engaged in the discussion about the buddhahood of things within the natural world. He maintained that for inanimate natural objects, buddhahood was only a potentiality, though this potentiality would be actualised in the normal course of the life of their existence. This is a much less radical position if compared to Kūkai's.¹⁴

However, it was Chūjin 忠尋 (1065-1138), a Tendai monk, who exhaustively dealt with this subject in his work, *Kankō Ruijū* 漢光類聚, where he summarised the debate up to that time and supported the opinion that

of their own nature, the myriad things are Buddha, and 'Buddha' means Enlightenment. In their inner nature the things of the three thousand worlds are unchangeable, undefiled, unmoved, and pure; this is what is meant by their being called 'Buddha'. As for trees and plants, there is no need for them to show the thirty-two marks (of buddhahood); in their present form [...] each in its own way has buddhahood. (La Fleur 1989, 192)

12 In Mahāyāna Buddhism the Dharmakāya, or 'Body of the Law' represents reality in its true and absolute form.

13 See *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經 [online], 77: 384, 382, 383, respectively.

14 A category of beings, called *icchantika*, according to some Mahāyāna Buddhist scriptures, were the most base and spiritually deluded of all types of beings. They were the only ones who could not reach liberation.

These words have much more the meaning of natural phenomena having already reached buddhahood, than just having its potentiality. Plants and trees are considered to be enlightened as they are: they do not need to strive to acquire liberation. In a sense, plants and trees reach Enlightenment in their own way, that is not as human beings do. This may be due the fact that man has the illusion of an ego, a strong ego that leads him towards delusion, while inanimate beings have no illusion and therefore no ego and no mind, and therefore are free from the very beginning.

Chūjin expressed his view on the basis of one of the fundamental doctrines of Tendai, that of *hongaku* 本覚, or “Original Enlightenment”, as opposed to *shikaku* 始覚 “Acquired Enlightenment”. *Hongaku* means that man, though taken by passions, still has Buddha-nature at the bottom of his heart, which nature remains undefiled and ready to be aroused. Buddha-nature, which is intrinsic, is only obscured by defilement just like a mirror, but its original nature remains pure and, once the mirror is cleaned, it will be bright again.

There is quite a difference between the position of Shingon and Tendai schools and, generally speaking, that of Kūkai and his school is more radical in that nature, as it is considered to be a part of the manifestation of universal buddhahood, without any difference in respect to man (Selin 2003, 168).

6 Dōgen and his View of Nature

As far we have seen that, in the schools of Japanese Buddhism that have developed an elaborated doctrinal thought, the natural phenomena have been treated in the same manner as animate beings. In synthesis, animate and inanimate have both equally the capacity of achieving enlightenment.

The considerations on natural phenomena depend in large part on the conception of Enlightenment and its acquisition. Where the whole universe is intended as the realm of buddhahood, or of Buddha-nature, any element of the universe be it animate or inanimate, having a mind or not, is advancing towards buddhahood naturally.

Both Shingon and Tendai schools shared the view that Buddha-nature is a permanent and eternal substance pervading the universe, immanent in all phenomena, and that beings will attain buddhahood earlier or later by virtue of its possession.

However, at the dawn of the 13th century in Japan, Dōgen introduced a drastic change to this view elaborating a very original conception of buddhahood and, consequently, stimulating a fresh and radical approach to inanimate nature.

The originality of Dōgen is that of considering Buddha-nature not as something possessed, but as the phenomena themselves, just as they are. This non-dualistic attitude rejects the existence of beings on one side and Buddha-nature on the other, which are in some way related, in favour of their complete

identity: phenomena are Buddha-nature and vice versa. As a consequence, Buddha-nature ceases to be permanent and eternal and is considered in the same way as natural phenomena, i.e. impermanent. Buddha-nature, he concludes, is nothing else than the impermanence of the phenomena. In the chapter “Busshō” (Buddha-nature) of the *Shōbōgenzō*, he says:

The impermanence of countries, lands, mountains and rivers is such because they are Buddha-nature. The supreme and perfect enlightenment is impermanent because it is Buddha-nature. The great *nirvāṇa* being impermanent is Buddha-nature. (Etō 1986, 3: 325)

For Dōgen, the difference between animate and inanimate is completely rejected since both *are* equally Buddha-nature, and since the whole universe is originally enlightened. Again in the same chapter, he says “therefore, mountains, rivers and the great land all are the ‘Ocean of Buddha-nature’”. And a few lines after, “things being like that, to see mountains and rivers is to see Buddha-nature, to see Buddha-nature is to see a donkey’s jaw and a horse’s mouth” (Etō 1986, 3: 319).

Dōgen is unique in Japanese Buddhism for urging to learn buddhahood from nature. He believes that since natural phenomena are the realisation of buddhahood, we can learn from them how to realise ourselves. As a matter of fact, he is convinced that the problem of man is the illusion of his ego. When the individual ego is dropped, the true aspect of reality will be manifested. The natural phenomena being without mind, and without ego, are therefore the true aspect of reality: they are the body of Buddha.

Take in your hands a blade of grass and make it a golden 6 *jō* high body, or take a grain of dust and with it build an old Buddha, a *stupa*, a sanctuary. (Etō 1986, 2: 402)

Or a poem of his:

*Mine no iro
Tani no hibiki mo
Mina nagara
Waga Shakyamuni no
Koe to sugata to*

The colours of the mountains
the echo of the valleys.
Each one as it is
is the voice and the form
of my Shakyamuni.
(Ōkubo 1970, 411)

He is not saying that nature, mountain and valleys, or else, reminds him of Shakyamuni, or that they manifest Buddha-nature. Rather, he says that they *are* Buddha-nature, just as they are.

Nature – with its impermanence, mutability, the passing of the seasons, life and death – is the realm of religion; in a sense, it is sacred because it is the full realisation of Enlightenment. Therefore, Dōgen does not give nature human sentiments: its caducity is not to be lamented, as other poets do; instead, he just describes nature’s Enlightenment.

Nature can transmit its teaching to man: of course, using its own communicative tools, which are not words, still, nature has the ability to teach Enlightenment to those who are able to understand its language.

*Haru wa hana
Natsu ototogisu
Aki wa tsuki
Fuyu yuki saete
Suzushikarikeri*

In spring the flowers
In summer the cuckoo
Autumn with the moon
Winter with snow is clear
And cold.
(Ōkubo 1970, 412)

Nature here is described just as it is, without any anthropomorphism, or indulgence in sentimentalism. Nature, just as it is, is Enlightenment.

According to Dōgen, nature being ‘just as it is’, without a deluded mind and without defilements is, ‘just as it is’, the realm of the realised Enlightenment from which we can learn and have guidance, whether we are able to listen to its voice or not.

Two chapters in *Shōbōgenzō*, in particular, are centred on the description of nature and its manifestation of Enlightenment: “Sansuikyō” (The *sūtra* of Mountains and Streams) and “Keisei sanshoku” (Sound of the Stream, Form of the Mountain).

In “Sansuikyō”, Dōgen describes nature as the realm of liberation and realisation:

These mountains and waters of the present are the expression of the old buddhas. Each, abiding in its own dharma state, fulfils exhaustive virtues. [...] they are liberated in their actual occurrence. (Etō 1986, 1: 217)

And he insists on eliminating any distinction between man and nature: “the blue mountains are not sentient; they are not insentient. We ourselves are

not sentient; we are not insentient” (Etō 1986, 1: 218), the whole universe is the land of realisation, without separation and any single phenomenon is manifesting buddhahood: “incalculable buddha lands are realized even within a single drop of water” (Etō 1986, 1: 224).

In “Keisei sanshoku” again he stresses the fact that human beings and nature belong to the same buddha-nature and reach together Enlightenment “because of the virtues of the stream sound and mountain form, ‘the earth and sentient beings simultaneously achieve the way’” (Etō 1986, 1: 139).

7 The Ecological Turn of Sōtōshū

The school that evolved from Dōgen’s teaching, the Sōtō Zen school 曹洞宗, after the World War 2, in contrast to other Japanese Buddhist schools that remained rather deeply rooted in their traditional teachings, introduced a new approach based mainly on the role of the school in present-day society. The declared three main tenets are clearly and largely stated:

1. 人権,
2. 平和,
3. 環境、省エネルギーへの取り組み¹⁵

That is “Human rights; Peace; Environment and policy of saving energy”. These objectives were not, stated as such, a cultural heritage of the Zen schools, not even of Buddhism at large, at least not in such a clear manner. As a matter of fact, instead, Buddhism has always traditionally had scarce attention to society and its problems and focused mainly on the individual. However, the Sōtō Zen school felt that in our modern society, social issue cannot but be in the front line and strove to adapt and evolve.

As to the third point, “Environment and policy of saving energy”, it is of course strongly related to the subject dealt with here, i.e. nature. In the official site of the Sōtō school it is also stated that “the Sōtō school will defend the environment of the earth and develops a movement called ‘green plan’ in view of living together with nature”. And

There is a meaning in the involvement of religious schools in the problems related to environment, by spreading a religiosity which supports the sensibility of men for an increased preservation of the environment. We, Sōtō school consider the movement for environment a central task

15 See the official website of Sōtōshū. URL <http://www.sotozen-net.or.jp/#> (2017-06-12).

that of enlarging the sphere in practical life as to how to spend a life preserving the environment and considering it precious in our everyday behaviour.

The official site also reports a long list of statistics related to pollution in the various districts of Japan as a practical contribution to enhance the sensibility of the population towards environment problems and improving the life standard.

It is evident that this policy that includes a consistent ecological attitude has been devised in order to cope with the challenges that present-day globalised society poses. In a sense, it is a way for finding a meaningful position in modern Japanese society and to enlarge the scope of activity of the Sōtō school also outside Japan, and to partake the problems of common people. In fact, the Sōtō school has, for centuries, developed a strong sensibility towards the problems of common people and has had an active role, especially in the countryside, so as to improve the conditions of the population.

The “ecological turn” may be also considered a reply to the claims that come from the Western world and to its approach to Sino-Japanese thought and in particular to Buddhism. In the West, especially in the USA, Buddhist schools like Zen have received great attention and have been enthusiastically appreciated among the movements that promote ecology, peace and non-violence. The interpretation and approach of those movements to Sino-Japanese thought and religions at large has fostered the idea of a teaching that celebrates the beauty and wisdom of the natural world, and that promotes the defence of naturalness, simplicity and spontaneity, often in contrast to the aggressive attitude towards nature by the Western world.

The ‘pure attitude’ found in many Zen texts and dialogues towards nature has kindled the idea that the teaching of non-self leads to consider everything, animate and inanimate, as a part of a larger self that should be treated with reverence. In this perspective, nature plays a central role, since it becomes a part of the larger self in a unity where distinction and boundaries cease to exist.

In the West, the idea that Buddhism is a fundamentally ‘green’ and an environmentally friendly religion has been supported by various reasons, among which, in particular, the fact that human beings are not elevated above the rest of the natural world, but are part of it, or the fact that in Buddhism the anthropocentric attitude found in Christianity and its dominative or exploitative attitude towards nature is replaced by respect and co-participation. Another reason lies in the non-instrumental attitude towards natural beings on the part of Sino-Japanese thought, Buddhism, Daoism and Shinto included. The appreciation of nature has a central place in Zen, partly because of its incorporation of Taoist and Shinto ideas on the spiritual significance of the natural world.

In Zen letting the self and its clench fade away implies the overturn

from an individual-centred perspective to a universal one where man is a part of the interrelated net, as the Indra's Net taught in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (*Kegonkyō* 華嚴經) of the Huāyán school 華嚴 (in Japanese Kegon school), where all phenomena in the universe are related to each other and the existence of any single phenomenon depends on the participation of all the others in a system of mutual co-dependence. The image of a net composed of jewels, each of which is reflected in all of the other jewels, is a metaphor to illustrate the concepts of emptiness, dependent origination, and interpenetration.

This is, as evident, the *Weltanschauung* of a true ecologist for whom, reaching self-realisation means a return to an uncontaminated, innocent and engaged vision of nature.

Besides, Buddhist environmentalists assert that the mindful awareness of the universality of suffering produces compassionate empathy for all forms of life, particularly for all sentient species. For them, loving-kindness and compassion extend beyond people and animals to include any inanimate form of existence in the natural world. At the root of the equation between Buddhism, especially Zen, and ecology is the common non-dualistic view of the fundamental identity of subject and its surroundings.

Buddhism views humanity as an integral part of nature, so that when nature is defiled, people ultimately suffer. Negative consequences arise when cultures alienate themselves from nature, when people feel separate from and become aggressive towards natural systems. When we abuse nature we abuse ourselves. (Kabilsingh 1996, 140)

8 Engaged Buddhism

The social and ecological turn of the Sōtō Zen school can be related to a vast movement that is taking place in recent times in the Buddhist environments, called “Engaged Buddhism” now spread all over the world and exerting a strong influence on the modern view of Buddhism as a leading force in present-day society.

“Engaged Buddhism” is a term that came into use in the Buddhist world in the later part of the 20th century. The term was coined by the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist master Thích Nhất Hạnh, inspired by the “Humanistic Buddhism” reform movement in China led by Tàixū 太虛 and Yīnshùn 印順導師, who advocated the reform and renewal of Chinese Buddhism in terms of a greater engagement of the Dharma teachings and practice in society in order to respond to the challenge posed by modern society. In Sino-Japanese it is translated as *shakai sankaku bukkyō* 社会参画仏教, *nyūse bukkyō* 入世仏教 or *jinkan bukkyō* 人間仏教.

The term “Engaged Buddhism” refers to this kind of active involvement by Buddhist in society and its problems. Participants in this nascent movement seek to actualize Buddhism’s traditional ideals of wisdom and compassion in today’s world. (Kraft 1996, 65)

In time, it also developed a sensibility towards the ecological and environmental fields where it became engaged in a renewed interpretation of Buddhism and its teachings as a source of inspiration for a return to nature. Criticising the tendencies within Buddhism towards a withdrawn and passive attitude, they gave nature a central position as a source of inspiration for a renewal of the individual on the basis of a communion with it. According to Engaged Buddhism, the belief in an individual substantial self, which is considered to be the source of illusion and suffering in traditional Buddhism, will vanish in the process of expanding the self to include the whole of natural phenomena. The above-mentioned Indra’s Net has become one of the fundamental Buddhist interpretation of reality for the supporters of “Ecological Buddhism” (or “Deep Ecology” based on Buddhist teachings). The Ecological Buddhists see in this Net the principle of ‘interconnectedness’ and mutual dependence between nature and the individual and derives the idea of a necessity of a return to and a melting with nature derives from it (Kraft 1996, 66).

Ecological Buddhism considers such figures as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold as pioneers of the fusion between the ecological consciousness and Buddhism. The idea of healing the individual and our society is very strongly posed. Mindfulness and responsibility towards nature, the individuals, and at large towards society, is stressed and becomes the centre of the practice of Dharma so as to reach Enlightenment within nature and together with nature.

It is easily understandable that these positions arouse open criticism on the part of traditional Buddhist schools, which dispute the social attention and insist on asserting that Buddhism is for individual salvation as taught by traditional teachings. Of course, also the ecological attitude is considered outside the scope of Buddhism by them. In this modern view, Buddhism is considered primarily as a redeeming teaching neglecting the emphasis on the development of the spiritual and ethical transformation of the individual, as attested in the traditional sources and its history.

In conclusion, it may be argued that the Western approach to Buddhism, with its insistence on pacifism, human rights and ecology gives Buddhism an alternative interpretation with strong social connotations, and is now influencing also the traditional Buddhist schools of Asia such as, for example, the Japanese Sôtō school.

9 Final Remarks

The traditional view of nature in Japanese Buddhism, based on the teachings of the imported Chinese schools, evolved with an original stand in the Kamakura period (1185-1333) with Dōgen who taught that human beings and nature belong to the same Buddha-nature and reach Enlightenment together, and in recent times with the “ecological turn” of the Sōtō school, which suggests responsibility for the natural environment. This last interpretation is certainly due to the influence of the so-called Engaged Buddhism that has gained popularity especially in the USA. At the same time, the attention of the Sōtō school for social problems is a way of putting forward a new role of Buddhism in the modern world. Japanese Buddhism still largely based on tradition has begun to understand the necessity to re-interpret its role in the changed dimension of present society. Perhaps the “ecological turn” of Sōtō school might be interpreted as a modern evolution of the radical view of Dōgen’s teaching.

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