



A Thai View of Japanese Buddhism

By Prasert Yamklinfung*

I have long been interested in Japanese society as a subject matter for sociological theorizing and explanation and as a contrasting case for the study of Thai society. I am particularly interested in comparing Japanese and Thai Buddhism and feudalism and in studying their different consequences for the development of value systems and the course of modernization in the two countries. As traditionally Buddhist, wet rice-growing societies, Japan and Thailand share some similarities in beliefs, ideas, customs and problems. Still, there are many differences in Thai and Japanese value systems and patterns of social relations which I think can be traced to, aside from ecological and geographical factors and historical circumstances, differences in the way Buddhism has been understood and practiced, in the nature of feudalism in the premodern period, and in the nature of the family and community system.

As a visiting research scholar at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of Kyoto University, I have had an excellent opportunity to pursue this interest. I have learned a great deal from discussion with my Japanese colleagues at the Center, who have been very kind in helping me understand various aspects of Japanese values and customs and in introducing me to several useful books on Japanese society. I have also had the privilege to meet Japanese scholars of religion and to visit several religious organizations, including the

Nishi Honganji temple in Kyoto, the Tokyo Branch of the Shinshu Ohtani Sect, the Soka Gakkai, the Reiyukai, and the Tenrikyo, whose leaders were very kind to me in explaining the beliefs and activities of their organizations and answering my questions about the role of religion in present Japanese society in general.

From what I have read and observed, I have come to the conclusion that Buddhism in the pre-modern period exerted a strong influence on the Japanese value system. Concerned with human salvation and providing a metaphysical explanation of the ultimate meaning of life, I think that Buddhism, integrated with elements of Confucian and Shinto thought, formed the deepest foundation on which the Japanese value system developed. Many important Japanese values can be traced to Buddhism or were at least supported by Buddhist metaphysical teachings. I find it difficult to agree with the opinion that Buddhism had little or no influence on the Japanese value system. It may be true for modern generations but was not so in the pre-modern period, as evidenced by the long history of Buddhism in this country, the many temples built, the active role of many great religious teachers in the past who refined and propagated its messages with a great zeal, its integration with ancestor worship, the spiritual concern of the masses for salvation, and the correspondence between many Japanese values and Buddhist ideals.

In Buddhist metaphysical teachings, whether of the Mahayana or Theravada branch, the three important characteristics of all worldly existences are impermanence or transience, suffering, and

* Department of Sociology and Anthropology,
Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn
University, Bangkok, Thailand

not-self. It seems to me this conception of life has deeply influenced the Japanese way of thinking and thus Japanese values and behavior patterns. In this sense it is not an overstatement to say that the true essence of Buddhism has been more appreciated in Japan than in other countries under Buddhist influence. In Thailand, most Thai Buddhists know about these principles but they either lack a deep understanding of their real meaning or pay them little attention. Thus in many respects Thai values and patterns of behavior are just the opposite or deviate greatly from what one would expect if Buddhist teachings were followed seriously.

Whatever its shortcomings, I think the strength of Mahayana Buddhism lies in its belief that attainment of Buddhahood or enlightenment leading to Nirvana is possible for anyone who has a complete faith in the Buddha in His various manifestations. Every person has an innate Buddha nature in his character and is thus capable of attaining wisdom and practicing Buddhist ideals. Priests and laymen differ little in the behavior expected of them as good Buddhists. In Theravada Buddhism, on the other hand, it is popularly believed that enlightenment is impossible for most people, who by necessity cannot extricate themselves from worldly involvement. It is only the monks who are expected to follow Buddhist teachings and precepts seriously, while laymen are allowed a wide degree of freedom of behavior. Given this interpretation, one can hardly expect the teachings on impermanence, suffering and not-self, which are the most abstract in meaning and the most demanding of human nature, to be seriously believed and followed by the masses.

Certain conditions in Japan, both natural and man-made, may have promoted the ready appreciation of the basic teachings of Buddhism. The idea of impermanence, for example, can be easily grasped in light of natural events. Seasons change with contrasting scenery and beauty.

Flowers like *sakura* blossom in unison in radiant colors and then in a few days fall, and all the beauty is gone. Earthquakes, fires, typhoons, and landslides can come at any time and destroy all one's possessions. For the ruling class, wealth, power and even life were made uncertain by constant conflicts with rivals. All these occurrences served as reminders of the transient nature of things and the futility of attachment to external things. Realization of this helps one to live through difficult periods in life, to maintain courage in the face of coming disasters, to feel determined to overcome one's problems and to be resilient in starting a new life.

This appreciation of impermanence might also be related to Japanese aesthetic preferences for simplicity, tranquility, refinement and unpretentiousness over extravaganza, luxury and grandeur. The much-talked-about Buddhist economics based on the idea that "small is beautiful" appears to be nothing new to Japan. This idea has already been practiced here to some extent. Nature may have forced the Japanese to live on a small scale — small houses, small farms, miniature gardens, tiny cups of *o-sake*, small amounts of food and no waste, etc. This style of life is exactly what is advocated in Buddhist teachings, which, among other things, enjoin men to practice moderation and avoid material indulgence.

The idea of suffering must have been very real indeed to Japanese peasants in the feudal period, for the feudal authorities imposed heavy taxes and severe restriction on them, and a relatively large population occupied a limited land area. Their ability to endure this hardship without assuming an attitude of passive fatalism can only, I believe, have been because they found in Buddhist teachings a meaningful explanation and the spiritual comfort of being saved by the grace and compassion of Amida Buddha. The "Mappo" theory of a degenerating world with declining

virtues prepared them to accept the suffering and at the same time inspired in them the determination to live on, to overcome their difficulties and always to feel compassion in return for the promise of Amida to save them. One might argue that this kind of teaching bred an attitude of fatalism; but more important, I think, is that, if so, it was an *active* rather than passive fatalism. It induced, of course, an attitude of submission and obedience to authority and an acceptance of one's lowly status, but at the same time it encouraged one to work hard, to achieve, to devote oneself totally to one's work, to be satisfied with one's work whatever it might be, and not to be jealous of others. It also encouraged a positive response to the moral exhortations issued periodically as orders by the feudal authorities requiring one as peasant or townman to adhere strictly to the virtues of hard work, diligence, honesty, frugality, obedience, and group responsibility, and to stay away from such vices as gambling and drinking. These virtues were internalized as values not only because of the drastic nature of Japanese feudalism and the existence of strong social pressures in typical village communities but also because of the influence of Buddhist teachings, which predisposed people to accept any hardship.

The idea of not-self also appears to be relevant to the facts of Japanese history and to fit in well with social realities and requirements here. This idea rejects mind as an illusion, because it has been deluded by cravings, greed and evil thoughts. The individual must rid or empty it of all these impurities so that the self will attain its true state, i.e., nothingness or not-self. This idea was given prominence by the Zen sect, but I think it could also be found in the popular sects as the unintended consequence of the emphasis on total surrender of oneself to the miraculous power of the Buddha or his numerous sutras. Realization of this idea results in the elimination of selfishness and egoism and bestows the capacity for strong self-discipline,

self-abnegation, self-sacrifice and selfless devotion to duty. In Japanese history, this capacity was required of the warrior, who was constantly faced with death and was expected to display absolute loyalty to his lord. In Japanese patterns of social relations in which group solidarity is highly valued, this capacity also allowed the individual to lose his identity in that of the group and to submit totally to its demands. He has no self to begin with, so it is easy for him to feel, think and act the way the group requires of him. Imbued with the value of not-self, it is easy for the individual to accept harmony, consensus, solidarity, social obligations, duties, politeness, humility, and helpfulness as the most important principles of social relations. Groups in Japan always take precedence over individuals.

In Thai Buddhism it is unfortunate that the idea of not-self is often forgotten. The emphasis on self-reliance as a method of attaining wisdom and salvation, though a rational belief, has had the inadvertent effect of enhancing the value of individual autonomy in Thai society. There is always a danger that this will lead to excessive individualism and lack of self-discipline. The situation is further compounded by the strong influence of magical beliefs and practices in Thai folk Buddhism, leading to the problem of irrational behavior found not only among the uneducated but also among educated people. Compared with Thai Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism seems to be much freer from this influence. Priests here are not called upon to play the roles of magicians and fortune tellers, nor need they resort to the practice of magic to increase their appeal. Buddhism is thus able to retain its true spirit and to guide the masses along the right path.

In Thailand the weaknesses of present-day Buddhism have been made obvious by the decline of public morality and have led some religious leaders to question the traditional method of teaching and practicing Buddhism. The need to

purify it of magical elements has been widely recognized. One reform movement has advocated a return to the original teachings of the Buddha, among which, reflecting the influence of Mahayanic thought, the idea of not-self is felt to be most important and most needed in Thai society.

It is interesting to speculate on the future of Buddhism in Japanese society. The modern generations in general seem to have little or no interest in Buddhist teachings and a low regard for Buddhism. This can be understood in the light of the influence of science and anti-religious political ideologies presently prevailing not only in Japan but in many other countries of the world. The catastrophic experience of the Japanese people in the modern period leading to the Pacific War must also have contributed to their disillusionment with any matter concerned with religion. Buddhism here also suffers from being divided into many sects that are incapable of working together. In the past, Buddhism was criticized by the Confucianists, and at times, for political reasons, was suspected by the ruling class. It has had to share its spiritual authority with Shinto, which has managed to maintain its identity and develop its own theology. In addition, Buddhist priests here do not seem to stand in high regard among laymen, their roles being limited and uninspiring. The situation is quite different in Thailand, where Buddhist monks form a single organization under state protection and support and enjoy high veneration and material support from laymen.

To maintain values which support good work ethics, Buddhist teachings may no longer be necessary, since such values have been well internalized, and secular social pressure in Japanese society is very strong to make sure that they will always remain so. More important is the question of the ultimate meaning of life, which only religion can answer. One can work hard, enjoy and suffer, but there will be moments when one wants to know the meaning of all these experiences. One

needs an explanation to sustain one's effort and spirit. This might be found in the ideology of ultranationalism, i.e., everything for the glory of one's nation; or in Marxism, the struggle for the success of the coming socialist revolution. Either way, the consequences would be very dangerous for world peace as well as for the real peace of mind of the individual. Another choice is to escape into one's own small world, thinking only of immediate material pleasure and always demanding more from society. This is sheer selfishness and hedonism.

I think a return to religious explanation is safest, and also necessary for the sake of both society and the individual. Many people here appear already to have realized this, and this may be one of the reasons why many have joined the so-called new religions. In the Buddhist-inspired ones, I found a genuine interest in reviving the message of Buddhism and making it more relevant to the present world. At present these people constitute only a small percentage of the total Japanese population, but they have convinced me that Buddhism is still a living force in Japanese society. There must be many more people here who to some extent feel the same sense of confusion, spiritual void and lack of direction, and are groping for some kind of answer. I do not know if this will lead to a renewal of interest in Buddhism. I believe religion is very much needed in modern society to counter-balance the corrupting influence of materialism and individualism as well as to ameliorate the distressing sense of anomie and alienation consequent upon increasing differentiation and bureaucratization of modern society. It is gratifying to learn that Buddhist tradition is being maintained here and that in it many people with the spirit of universalism and human brotherhood have rediscovered answers to the crisis facing the modern world. (Visiting Scholar, 1983-1984, The Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University)