On the Introduction of Buddhist Thought to Japan

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Prologue: Amidst the Climate of Animism

The Land of Sacred Nature

Trees speak roughly in words; butterflies, as they flit, show the turnings of spirits. Forests and mountains, just as they are, are the forms of gods; over the lake's surface the figure of its master rises. The gods descend to and arise from rocks and springs, dwelling in them.

The way of thinking that seeks to see the functioning or the form of the "sacred" in the things of nature was easy to accept for the Japanese. This mythic or folk view of nature may be said to lie at the foundations of Japanese culture.

The view that sacred energies — that is, spirits — reside in the various things of nature, or that the things of nature as such are gods, or manifestations of sacred spiritual energy, is commonly called "animism." This term is derived from the Latin *anima*, meaning spirit or soul, and since being introduced in 1871 by the English anthropologist E. Taylor (1832-1917), has come to be widely employed. There are a variety of kinds of animism, but the worship of spirits from ancient times in Japan is practically a definition of the term.

It is conjectured that in Japan, from before the introduction of Buddhism, the spirits of the ancestors of the various clans and agricultural gods were associated and worshiped as clan gods. In their own domains, powerful families built shrines where they worshiped their clan gods and at fixed times performed rites. Buddhism entered into such an environment.

Being a form of religion different from animism, Buddhism originally stood in opposition to the animistic elements that existed in Japan prior its introduction. The ancient animism of Japan and Buddhism did not, however, stand in opposition and conflict down through history. Rather, surprisingly, they have mutually complemented each other. The Buddhism transmitted from the Asian continent was gradually accepted in the soil of Japanese animism, and drawing nourishment from it, grew and developed.

When one culture takes in elements of another, there must already be some preparation on the adoptive side. There must be a form or model for

accepting the spirit of a new form of culture that had not existed previously. When such groundwork is lacking, the existing culture will completely reject the newly arrived culture, or the new culture will either expunge or exert great pressure on the old.

The Buddhism transmitted to Japan made almost no attempt to eradicate or completely suppress the old forms of worship of the Japanese. At the same time, we find no historical evidence of Japanese culture strongly resisting Buddhism. Instead, Japan affirmatively adopted Buddhism and changed it to make it its own.

Buddhism's Indigenization in Japan

Because the adaptation of Buddhism in Japan took place with its form emerging from the soil of ancient animism, Japanese Buddhism is quite distinct from Indian Buddhism. It may be said that Japanese Buddhism represents a "Japanification" of Chinese and Korean Buddhism rather than Indian Buddhism. Further, Chinese and Korean Buddhism were also quite different from Indian Buddhism. In this sense, Japanese Buddhism is twice removed from Indian Buddhist sources.

Of course, Indian Buddhism itself is not uniform. There is such diversity that one may even wonder whether the identical label of "Buddhism" should be applied simultaneously to the Buddhism of the period when the Buddha and his disciples lived, the new schools of Buddhism that followed, the Mahayana Buddhism that emerged hundreds of years after the death of the Buddha, and the Buddhist Tantrism (esoterism) that appeared more than one thousand years after the Buddha's death. The same is true with Chinese and Korean Buddhism; in those regions also, Buddhism has undergone various metamorphoses.

China and Korea, which transmitted Buddhism to Japan, did not absorb all of Indian Buddhism, just as Japan did not import all of Chinese and Korean Buddhism. Thus, the elements of theory and forms of practice of Indian Buddhism that Japan was able to import were surprisingly slight. The Japanese, at the eastern edge of Asia far from India, completely remade Buddhism into something of their own.

Of course, insofar as it is Japanese *Buddhism*, it is based on the Indian and Chinese Buddhist traditions, but it is clear that elements that easily suited Japanese culture before the transmission of Buddhism, or that the Japanese felt necessary or convenient, were taken up and a "Japanese Buddhism" was created.

The special characteristic of the Buddhism indigenized in Japan may be said to lie in the concept of "the true reality of all things" (*shohō jissō*), the idea

that all the things of the world are forms of reality. The trees and rocks before our eyes, and the bodies of human beings, directly manifest the forms of true reality. This way of thinking resembles the worship based on the belief that spirits or gods reside in trees and rocks, or that trees themselves are the embodiments of *kami*.

Or rather, taking such worship of spirits as its matrix, the philosophy of "the true reality of all things" was nurtured. Just as a child at times defies its mother, Japanese Buddhist thought did possess a side that resisted the ancient form of worship. It is also the case, however, that a child that continues to resist, without being aware, often comes to resemble its mother.

The Coexistence of Buddhism and Shintō

In the modern period, Japan adopted Western culture, which had discarded or completely suppressed animism. While in this way Japanese society became highly industrialized, however, elements of animism still remain today. These elements are far stronger and deeper than those that remain in European or American society.

In Japan, a vast number of people go to worship at Shintō shrines during the new year holidays, and there is no sense of resistance to celebrating the new year with the display of Shintō straw rope markers (*shimenawa*) or pine seedlings at gates. The construction of new buildings can only proceed after purification ceremonies have been conducted by a Shintō priest. The Japanese people drive with amulets for traffic safety hanging from their mirrors. Such animistic thinking still lies deep in the hearts of the Japanese today.

That this animistic thinking and behavior survives today may be due in part to Buddhist influence. This is because Buddhism adapted the ancient Japanese worship of spirits into a Buddhist framework and sought to impart to it an elevated theoretical structure. In turn, Japanese animism, through contact with Buddhism, came to create the system termed "Shintō" or the way of the gods or *kami*.

This systematization began in the tenth century, and although there was some conflict, Buddhism and Shintō had a history chiefly of cooperation and coexistence until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The sophisticated theoretical system that Buddhism possessed from India on influenced not merely Japanese religion and thought, but also literature, performing and visual arts, and social practices, and became a powerful force in the process of qualitative "sublimation" in these fields. In this way, through the formation of an amalgamation with Buddhism, the ancient animism has come to

be accepted without much resistance even by contemporary Japanese. It is possible to call this situation "the modernization of animism." The force in this direction has lain, in large part, in the theory and praxis of Buddhism.

Here, taking the consideration of the relationship between the conception of "the true reality of all things" and the ancient Japanese animism as an axis, I will survey the history of Japanese Buddhism with an eye to how it differs from both the Buddhism of India and Tibet, and that of China and Korea. First, we must note that the philosophy of "the true reality of all things" selected by the pioneers and forerunners of Japanese Buddhism is in fact a pivotal concept of Buddhism.

Four Central Concepts of Japanese Buddhism

We have noted that Japanese Buddhism did not faithfully adopt the Indian Buddhist system of theory and praxis, which itself underwent historical change. Nevertheless, insofar as Japanese Buddhism belongs to Buddhist tradition, it succeeded to the way of thought fundamental to the tradition from India on.

In considering Japanese Buddhism, the following four concepts of the Indian tradition may be viewed as of particular importance:

1. All things (*shohō*).
2. Emptiness (*kū* or *kūshō*).
3. True reality (*jissō*).
4. Buddha-nature (*busshō*).

Among these, (1) signifies the world as the place of our daily life, while (2) and (3) indicate two aspects of the ultimate reality sought in Buddhism.

"Emptiness" signifies that the things of the world do not have ever unchanging substantial existence, and "true reality" indicates that all the things in the world manifest the form of the true and real. Everything exists not as an ever unchanging substance, but rather as an "empty thing." Nevertheless, the form of an "empty thing" is actually the true and real mode of existence. This is the Buddhist way of thought. Thus, emptiness is the negative aspect of truth, and true reality is its positive aspect.

The fourth term, Buddha-nature, indicates the latent, fundamental nature thought to reside originally in human beings or all living things. If all human beings have Buddha-nature, their attainment of Buddhahood, though latent or only potential at present, is assured. In other words, the existence of Buddha-nature confirms the assumption that human beings or all living things are able to attain ultimate truth.

I have selected the above four concepts specifically for a consideration of the structure of Japanese Buddhism. In the case of another tradition, the list would be different. For example, in treating Thai Buddhism, it would be necessary to add the concept of precepts, and Buddha-nature would be eliminated. The explanations of the four concepts that follow are specifically to lay the groundwork for an understanding of Japanese Buddhism.

1. All Things

Dharma and All Things

The Sanskrit term *dharma* has a variety of meanings: teaching, law or rule, duty, justice, and also the things that make up the world. Mountains and rivers, flowers and human beings, as well as mental functioning and abstract concepts are all dharma, and nothingness is also a dharma.

Dharma is used in contrast with *dharmin*, which means "that which possesses a dharma," or the substance or substratum of a dharma. For example, when a book is on a desk, the desk is the dharmin of the book.

The relationship between dharma and dharmin is a fundamental concept in Indian philosophy. Not only in the case of contact such as that between book and desk, but also such relationships as that between the color red and a red apple are included. In this case, dharma as the characteristic or attribute of redness is considered to belong to (be in harmony with) dharmin as the substance, the red apple.

The relationship between dharma and dharmin is crucial in considering the world view in Indian philosophy and Buddhism. For example, in Indian philosophy there were two basic views regarding the relationship between the color red and the red apple. According to one, the attribute of redness and the substance, the red apple, belonged to two completely different categories, and according to the other, the color red and a red apple were inseparably bound and not different.

The former has been termed Indian realism and the latter, Indian nominalism. Buddhism on the whole belongs to the strain of nominalism, and Japanese Buddhism in particular may be said not only to succeed to "Indian nominalism," but to be a conspicuous manifestation of it.

Japanese Buddhists, and the Japanese in general, have not gone far in elucidating the structure of the world using such philosophical concepts as "attribute," "movement," "universality," and "substance." It is no exaggeration to say that in the thinking of the Japanese, there has been no room for the philosophical

distinction between attribute and substance. They have viewed the objects before their eyes from a stance which drew no distinction between attribute and substance.

Seeing plum blossoms, a person may smell their fragrance. The poet-monk Saigyō did not ask the relationship between the fragrance and the blossoms. Although the fragrance should exist in the petals, how is it that it is able to reach my sense organs of smell? If the fragrance is a dharma and the flower petals the dharmin, how is it possible for the dharma of fragrance to arise from the petals, which are the dharmin? For better or worse, over a history of many decades and centuries, such questions have not been taken up by Japanese Buddhists.

In Indian philosophy, however, this problem has been treated for nearly two thousand years. Indian Buddhism vanished from India at the beginning of the thirteenth century, but even in Indian Buddhism alone, debate over such questions was carried on for over a thousand years.

In Japanese Buddhism also, the term "all dharmas" occupies an important place. The understanding of it, however, is clearly different from that in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

The Five Aggregates

The most common teaching regarding dharma in the history of Indian Buddhism is the concept of the five aggregates (Sanskrit, *skandha*), which are enumerated as: 1.matter; 2.sensation; 3.simple cognition; 4.volition; and 5.consciousness.

According to pre-Buddhist Brahmanic philosophy, Brahman, the fundamental principle of the universe, exists in reality, and each individual human being possesses a soul or *ātman* that is originally identical to Brahman. In other words, Brahmanism recognized the existence of an eternal reality at the roots of the world or the universe, and viewed each human being as "backed" by this ultimate reality.

By contrast, Buddhism did not postulate the existence of a fundamental principle of the universe, or human beings as existences possessing in part this fundamental principle. It understood the aggregate or group of various things seen before the eyes as further gathering and forming our minds and bodies. In this sense, Buddhism has not recognized the existence of a spirit of the universe or a creator god, and has frequently been labeled atheistic.

The first of the aggregates, matter or material existence (*shiki* in Sino-Japanese), includes the elements that make up the world, earth, water, fire, and

wind, as well as the objects of our senses, form, sound, smell, taste, and touch. (The term *shiki* also has a narrow meaning of the objects of sight — color and form — but in the case of the five aggregates, *shiki* is employed in its broad sense of matter in general.)

It should be noted that the five aggregates refer only to the objects grasped by the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body-skin) of an individual human being, and indicate the surrounding world that can be observed by a single person. Hence, it is not that the world of nature, which repeatedly arises and perishes, is objectively grasped as alive.

In early Buddhism, when the theory of the five aggregates was taught, the material foundation of the world, for example of continents, rivers, plants, and animals, was not at issue; rather, the issue was the world of the body and mind of the individual human being. For early Buddhism, the important concern was how a human being could attain emancipation from the world of transmigration. Of course, the early Buddhists were confident that the method appropriate for one person would also be appropriate for others.

The second aggregate is sensation, the functioning of sense perception. For example, if we happen to touch a hot skillet, in the instant before the word "hot" emerges, the feel something. This something is called the aggregate of sensation. When we touch cold water, sensation is what is sensed before the concept of "cold" arises.

The third aggregate, simple cognition, refers to incipient conceptualization. For example, immediately before the concept "apple" arises on seeing an apple, there is an incipient concept when the word "apple" is just about to arise. This is the third aggregate. Once the consciousness expressed, "It is an apple," has been formed in words, this consciousness is the fifth aggregate.

The fourth aggregate, volition or will, is a kind of mental drive or momentum. People sometimes are drawn, without awareness, in a direction they would realize they should not move if they reflected rationally. The ancient Buddhists understood this to be caused by the presence of a force in the person's heart and mind brought about through the repetition of acts and feelings up to then.

Further, the fourth aggregate of volition includes all mental activities apart from the second, third, and fifth aggregates. This has been the understanding since the early Buddhist tradition. For example, the mental functions of attention, concentration, or memorization are included in this fourth aggregate.

The fifth aggregate of consciousness includes judgment and cognition. This aggregate is the discrimination and judgment of objects using language, for example, as expressed, "This is an apple."

The Central Issue in Japanese Buddhism

The gist of the theory of the five aggregates is that our minds and bodies are formed of the aggregates enumerated above. As mentioned before, the world treated in the theory of the five aggregates is not the universe, but rather the world surrounding a single human being reconstructed through the data grasped by the person's own sense organs. This fundamental attitude of reconstructing what is grasped through one's senses was never lost from Buddhism.

In Japanese Buddhism also, the theory of the five aggregates is well-known. Historically, however, it did not form a basic point of reference in thinking about the structure of the world. Even though the theory of the five aggregates was introduced in Japanese temples during lectures on Indian Buddhist treatises, this was no more than the transmission of basic knowledge for learning Indian and Chinese Buddhism, and there is no history of Japanese Buddhists creatively modifying it to make it more detailed or precise. To repeat, the chief concern of Japanese Buddhism has not been the construction of a world view.

What Japanese Buddhism focused on was the question of the value, for the mental world of human beings, of the aggregate of matter as the object of the senses, that is, the material world.

For Indian Buddhists, the aggregate of matter was no more than the object of human senses, and what significance it possessed was not an important issue. What was important was always the subjectivity that perceived sensations, possessed volition, and was conscious.

In Japanese Buddhism, however, while the importance of the conscious subject was of course to be recognized, what meaning, value, and power was flung at us by the forms of matter visible before our eyes, such as the moon and flowers and clouds, was a crucial question. The Japanese, when they saw a single dandelion blooming at the roadside, perceived in it the entire universe. They did not ask what its place was in the structure of the world.

2. Emptiness

Nothing is Permanent

In Chinese and Japanese, the Sanskrit *śūnya* (adjective) and *śūnyatā* (noun) are both generally translated by the single character *kū*.

As an adjective, "empty" literally means that something is hollow, and in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts is used as a term to indicate ultimate truth (or one aspect of it). It indicates, to begin with, that in all things whatsoever, there

exists no constant and unchanging substance. As I will discuss later, there are further implications, but this is the fundamental meaning.

Emptiness in Buddhist tradition signifies the mode of being of things, such that in no thing whatsoever is there an unchanging substance, or no thing whatsoever is an unchanging substance; it does not signify simple nothingness or nonexistence. Rather, it is thought that because of emptiness, the changes of arising and perishing are possible. The Buddhists asserted that if the things of the world were unchanging substances, it would be impossible to explain the changes and movements of arising and perishing that unfold before our eyes.

The brief *Heart of Wisdom Sutra* (Hannya shingyō) was translated into Chinese a number of times, but the version by Hsüan-chuang (Genjō, 602-664) is particularly widely-used in Japan. It begins:

> Kanjizai (Avalokiteśvara) Bodhisattva, practicing deep perfection of wisdom, perceived that the five aggregates are all empty.

What does it mean here that the five aggregates are all empty? Each of the aggregates possesses form or functioning. We can apprehend this form or working with our own eyes or bodies. That is, in some way they exist. What does it mean, then, that they are "empty."

The relationship between the five aggregates and emptiness is not only the central theme of the *Heart Sutra*, but a major issue throughout Buddhist history. It has been a central question in Japanese Buddhism also, while reflecting the special characteristics of that tradition. One of the themes of this work will be to elucidate this paradoxical relationship.

3. True Reality

Are All Things True Reality?

Chapter Two, "Expedient Means," of the *Lotus Sutra* as translated by Kumārajīva (344-413) states:

> Only Buddhas can know exhaustively the true reality (real aspect) of all things.

The phrase "true reality of all things" here does not mean the ultimate truth of things, but rather the general mode of being of things. Later, the Chinese T'ien-t'ai masters interpreted the phrase to mean "all things are true reality." In Japan, the expression "all things are true reality" has become familiar even to people not well-acquainted with Buddhism.

In the Buddhist traditions of China and Japan, true reality came to mean the form of things just as they are, their true and real aspects. Hence, "all things are true reality" came to mean that the forms or figures of all things, whether flowers or dogs, are as such true and real.

If, however, cherry blossoms that bloom and soon scatter, or dogs fighting at the roadside, just as they are manifest the form of the true and real, in order to touch the true and real we need simply see them. The question arises, then, why there should be a need to perform practices.

In asserting that "the five aggregates are all empty," meaning that one should realize that things that we commonly think of as existing are actually empty (do not exist), there lies an aspect of forcing people to an unconventional way of thought and urging them to some kind of practice for parting from attachments. "All things are true reality," however, does not appear to be based on the assumption of performing practices. It is a general affirmation of present actuality.

Do not the expressions "The five aggregates are all empty" and "All things are true reality" contradict each other? The five aggregates and "all things" may be considered synonymous. Hence, the two expressions may be sketched:

A: All things are empty.
B: All things are true reality.

"Empty" has a negative nuance, while "true reality" is affirmative. Expression A holds the implication that one should not be attached to the forms of the phenomenal world, while B lacks such an implication, and quite the reverse, asserts that the forms of the phenomenal world are true and real and possess value.

The Nonrational Inclination of the Japanese

In fact, both A and B are upheld as true propositions, expressing the truth of Buddhism. Two different aspects are presented in these two, apparently contradictory, statements. How the coexistence of these two different aspects is to be understood has been a major theme down through the history of Buddhism, including Japanese Buddhism.

On the one hand, many people understood that the negative aspect (things are empty) and the affirmative aspect (things are true reality) originally held the same significance. In this case, "emptiness" and "true reality" are regarded as equivalent, and it was natural for the view to arise that the true reality of things is emptiness.

This understanding, however, does not speak of all that is true and real. That is, merely casting the functioning or forms of all things into the assertion that all is empty, or that all attain emptiness, does not resolve all things. For human beings who live and are active, it is necessary to return to the world in which the forms of things exist.

There also appeared people who adopted the nonrational interpretation. They understood Buddhist truth to assert that the five aggregates, emptiness, and true reality were joined without mediation, and that the five aggregates and emptiness, while mutually contradictory, interfused.

On the other hand, there were those who asserted that the five aggregates and being empty were tentatively distinct, and further that being empty and true reality also held different meanings. They sought to explain the relationship between the five aggregates, being empty, and true reality rationally and intellectually.

The debate between the rationalist and nonrationalist interpretations of emptiness may also be seen in the history of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, but there, it may be said that the rationalist interpretations were commonly accepted. In Japanese Buddhism, however, the nonrationalist interpretation has been dominant. It is an important task to clarify the historical process by which Japanese Buddhism inclined toward the nonrationalist interpretation. In this way, it may be possible to illuminate one characteristic in the thinking of the Japanese.

4. Buddha-Nature

Do Human Beings Possess Buddha-Nature?

The fourth basic concept in our consideration of the characteristics of Japanese Buddhism is Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature indicates the fundamental nature of being Buddha, and those who possess it are assured of attaining Buddhahood in the future, or in the present are already Buddhas.

Japanese monks frequently give the following explanation of Buddha-nature: Human beings and living things are originally endowed with Buddha-nature, but there is also defilement of the heart and mind (afflicting passions, *bonnō*) that covers over and hides it. Therefore, if that defilement is removed, the Buddha-nature becomes manifest and shines forth. The purpose of Buddhist practice is to remove the defilement and to make manifest the Buddha-nature that each person possesses.

This understanding is commonly held in Japan. It was not, however, the mainstream understanding in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism.

The idea that each human beings is endowed with Buddha-nature is known as the theory of *tathāgata-garbha.* In the early Buddhism and scholastic Buddhism of India, and in early Mahayana Buddhism, such thinking is almost entirely absent. In India, tathātaga-garbha theory appeared in the third and fourth centuries and increased in strength thereafter, but it was never at the core of Indian Mahayana Buddhism. In Tibet also, thought stemming from tathāgata-garbha theory has consistently been regarded as heterodox.

The reason for this is clear. If what is called Buddha-nature or tathāgata-garbha exists in each human being, then in human beings formed of the five aggregates there exists something that is not empty. This contradicts the central Buddhist tradition of the concept of emptiness. Buddhist history, however, has come down to us bearing within it the theory of tathāgata-garbha, which seems a child that does not resemble its parents.

The theory of tathāgata-garbha is heretical within Buddhism that takes the concept of emptiness as central. In recent years, a debate has been carried on over the assertion that tathāgata-garbha theory is not Buddhism, but the problem lies in scope indicated by the term "Buddhism."

From the stance of intellectual history, it is impossible to eliminate the viewpoint that historically, Buddhism has existed including tathāgata-garbha thought within it. If one is constructing a systematization of teachings from a particular theological stance, one must begin by clarifying the relationship between one's own system and "true Buddhism."

Emphasis on Tathāgata-garbha Thought

Here, I take the position that tathāgata-garbha thought has historically been a part of Buddhist tradition. Japanese Buddhism, from its beginnings, has regarded this thought as consequential. It was Prince Shōtoku who determined this direction of Japanese Buddhism. He made a commentary on the *Śrīmālā Sutra* (*Shōmangyō*), which teaches tathāgata-garbha theory, and part of his Seventeen-Article Constitution is based on this sutra.

Prince Shōtoku, who was the most instrumental figure in the transmission of Buddhism to Japan, was influenced in his selection and adoption of tathāgata-garbha thought by the ancient Japanese worship of spirits. The animistic thinking which perceived spirits as residing in mountains and rivers, trees and human beings, functions in the same way as the thinking that Buddha-nature resides in each sentient being. In Indian Buddhism, when it is asserted, as in the *Nirvana Sutra*, that "in all sentient beings there is Buddha-nature," "sentient beings" refers to humans. In Japan, however, "sentient beings" came to include all living

things, and further mountains, rivers, grasses and trees as well.

The way of thinkng of Japanese Buddhism that trees and stones possess Buddha-nature and will eventually attain Buddhahood combined with the thinking of Shintō that in each thing of nature a spirit resides and became the intellectual foundation for the fusion of Buddhism and Shintō. Tathāgata-garbha theory in Japanese Buddhism developed by acclimatizing itself to the form prepared by the ancient Japanese animism and Shintō.

In the history of Japanese Buddhist thought, there were also those who criticized tathāgata-garbha thought. Just as in India and Tibet, in Japan also, we find debate between such thinking and criticism of it. This conflict, which also involved the understanding of the expression "all things are true reality," formed one axis of Japanese Buddhist thought.

Above, I have outlined for concepts basic to the understanding of Japanese Buddhism: all things, emptiness, true reality, and Buddha-nature.

On the basis of the consideration of the first three, we may make the following statements:

A: All things are empty.
B: All things are true reality.

On the basis of our consideration of Buddha-nature, we may say:

C: Buddha-nature exists in all sentient beings.

In addition to the issue of how the relationship between A and B is to be understood, there arises the question of whether statement C and being empty are contradictory, or whether, in order to avoid this contradiction, some preparation or disposition is to be made. The history of Japanese Buddhism may now be surveyed as we seek to treat these questions.

Translated by Dennis Hirota