

FAITH IN BUDDHISM

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To the memory of Archbishop-Nun KOMATSU Chiko
of Jakkoin Buddhist Temple

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at Bodhgaya by Rev. Chikō Komatsu

CONTENTS

List of Authors.....	vi
Preface by Takami Inoue	vii
Preface by Imre Hamar	ix
Kiyotaka Kimura: The Meaning and Perspective of Buddhist Studies: With Special Reference to Faith	1
Akihiro Oda: The Concept of “Faith” in the <i>Discourse</i> <i>on the Awakening of Mahayana Faith</i>	7
Gergely Hidas: References to Faith in <i>Dhāraṇī</i> Literature	15
Erzsébet Tóth: The Concept of Tibetan <i>Dad-pa</i> (Faith) in <i>Lam-rim</i> (<i>Stages of the Path to Enlightenment</i>)	25
Alexa Péter: The Two Basic Texts on Faith in the Tibetan <i>Bka’-gdams-pa</i> School	39
Melinda Pap: The Concept of Faith in Zhanran’s <i>Diamond Scalpel</i> Treatise	49
Gábor Kósa: “Trusting Words” in Pre-Buddhist Chinese Texts	67
Imre Hamar: Faith, Practice and Enlightenment in the <i>Avataṃsaka-sūtra</i> and the Huayan School	93
Takami Inoue: A Genealogy of Other-Power Faith: From Śākyamuni to Shinran	119
Robert F. Rhodes: Faith and Practice in the <i>Ōjōyōshū</i>	135
Kiyotaka Kimura: Faith and Enlightenment in Dōgen’s <i>Shōbōgenzō</i>	153
Myōshin Fujitake: The Faith Elucidated by Shinran: The Faith of Amida’s Directing of Virtue	165
Michael Conway: Dharmākara as the Subject, Not Object of Faith: The Reinterpretation of Amida’s Causal Phase in Modern Shin Thought	177
Ágnes Birtalan: The Objectification of Faith and Rational Choice: The Role of Sacred Images in Mongolian Buddhist Folk Religion	189
Melinda Papp: Some Reflections on the Use of the Concepts of “Religious Consciousness,” “Faith,” and “Religion” in the Cultural Context of Japan	205
Mónika Kiss: Buddhist Ancestor Worship at Home through the Sacred Place of the <i>Butsudan</i> ~ Faith at Home ~	219

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The Meaning and Perspective of Buddhist Studies: With Special Reference to Faith

KIYOTAKA KIMURA

Preface

Today, we have gathered for an important symposium at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, Hungary. It is my honor to present as a specially invited guest speaker. First of all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Imre Hamar, the Director of the Institute of East Asian Studies, and his colleagues for their considerable efforts to host this symposium.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect upon the history of Buddhist studies up until the present, and also consider how to promote the field in the future.

1. What is Buddhism?

One of the most frequently discussed issues with regard to Buddhist studies is the definition of “Buddhism.” I would like to first consider this issue as well.

The biggest reason that this issue is raised lies in the fact that it is uncertain what Śākyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, actually taught. Almost all sūtras in early Buddhism were memorized by his disciples in India, standardized in the three councils held after his death, and then gradually transmitted to other countries. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, many of the sūtras were edited or newly written by his successors a couple of hundred years later.

The second reason the nature of Buddhism is so frequently discussed in Buddhist studies is that throughout its approximately 2,500 year history, Buddhism has developed and spread in various (primarily Asian) nations and regions that contain different ethnicities and cultures. Under these conditions, Buddhism has changed and even qualitatively transformed. In a sense, Buddhism as a whole is the product of cultural fusion. We could call it a great systemized cultural composite.

The third reason is that Buddhist texts are written in various languages. As is well known, many early Buddhist texts have been transmitted in Pāli, and the majority of Mahāyāna Buddhist literature are being preserved in the form of Tibetan or/and Chinese translation, and part of which along with their Sanskrit version or revision.

Here, we should keep in mind the creativity that translation entails. We especially need to deal with Chinese translations thoroughly and carefully because frequently they were deeply influenced by native Chinese thought. Sometimes Chinese Buddhist texts even appear to be new texts when compared to their Sanskrit versions containing the same names and stories. Relatedly, there is also the issue of pseudo-texts produced in East Asia. However, I will pass this over for the time being.

The fourth reason is that Buddhism contains various cultural elements, and therefore can be approached from almost all fields in the humanities: philosophy, religious studies, psychology, historical studies, esthetics, folklore, and so on. This is a reflection of the extent to which Buddhism has formed as a great systemized composite of cultures.

The last reason relates to so-called “Critical Buddhism.” First advocated by Noriaki Hakamaya 袴谷憲昭 in the early 1990’s, it has become an important concept in the field of Buddhist studies today. It strictly judges whether doctrines are Buddhist based on the concept of *pratītya-samutpāda* (緣起) as understood in the Mahāyāna Mādhyamika school (中觀派). According to its proponents, something is only Buddhist insofar as it coincides with the principle of *pratītya-samutpāda*, which they understand as meaning that all phenomena are produced by causation and empty in nature. However, the theory that the “Critical Buddhism” has attempted to prove might not be persuasive in many ways. Because strictly speaking, there is no existing evidence that proves the doctrine of *pratītya-samutpāda* was taught by Śākyamuni Buddha himself.

As can be seen, it is impossible to give a singular definition of Buddhism. Therefore, I would like to provisionally define it as “a system of composite religious culture that originated in Śākyamuni’s teachings.”

2. The Modality of Buddhist Studies

When studying Buddhism following the above definition, it appears to me that, roughly speaking, there are three possible approaches: ① traditional studies, ② sectarian studies, and ③ modern scientific studies.

Among these three types, the first one primarily relies on the mutually related religious practices of *sīla* (precepts), *adhicitta* (meditation for calmness of mind), and *paññā* (basic wisdom). Study of this type includes gradual intellectual training as well as continuous somatic exercises rooted in true faith.

The second approach is called *shūgaku* (宗学) in Japanese. The most developed approach in Japan, it is characterized by an emphasis on specific patriarchs rather than the Buddha. *Shūgaku* Buddhist scholars engage in their studies based on firm faith in these patriarchs and focus on learning their action, behavior, and speech, rather than the doctrines of general Buddhist sūtras.

The third approach, the scientific study of Buddhism, shares a common base with other fields in the humanities. It is expected to be objective, logical, and clear as much as possible, despite the fact that it is impossible for researchers to completely abandon their subjectivity.

Finally, I would like to briefly discuss the relationship between scientific studies and the first and the second traditional Buddhist approaches. On the one hand, they are opposed to each other: the former requires objectivity and a scientific mindset, while the latter two are subjective and based on specific beliefs. However, on the other hand, these approaches complement each other: the former makes clear the meaning of words, the structure of sentences, and historical facts, while the latter can disclose the essence of thought that cannot be clarified with a scientific approach (although this is sometimes insufficient in a methodological sense). We should try to sublimate these two approaches, even if we have to tread a thorny path in order to do so.

3. The Present Situation and Issues to be Overcome

It is hard to be optimistic when considering Buddhist studies' present situation from a global perspective. Academic study is falling on hard times throughout the world, with the number of scholars decreasing, reduced financial support, and a slump in researchers' motivation. Furthermore, this is all taking place against the background of the violent stream of recent utilitarianism engulfing the world as a whole. However, there is still some hope, as can be seen by the fact that this symposium is being held here today.

What are the characteristics of present-day Buddhist studies? Firstly, the rapid development of computer technology has changed its methods to a considerable degree. Nowadays, nearly all Buddhist texts, dictionaries, and references materials are able to be used on a small personal computer, and many researchers use computers in their studies. In fact, some scholars rely almost entirely on computers in their research. While computers are certainly very convenient for looking up information on texts, comparing them, using indices, and so on, research that overly relies on computers cannot produce high-quality creative studies.

Secondly, Sanskrit and Chinese manuscripts of various Buddhist texts have been newly discovered and released to the public in the past several decades. This has meant that the field has had to add to or rethink its received knowledge.

Thirdly and relatedly, Buddhist studies has moved away from an exclusive dependence on printed texts, and started to take into account manuscripts. Buddhist studies that only rely on printed and published texts are becoming things of the past.

Fourthly, while this may appear to contradict my above statement, various systematized editions of Buddhist canons (called *daizokyō* 大藏經 or *issaikyō* 一切經 in Japanese) have been newly edited and published as books or electronic data by various organizations throughout the Buddhist world. We must be able to make use of these resources that allow for more approaches than exist at present.

However, I think there are issues in the field of Buddhist studies that should be pointed out. I would like to point out five of them.

Firstly, all of the scholars should make it clear about his/her purpose of research and then decide the most appropriate scope and method to carry out the project.

Secondly, as mentioned above, it is possible to study Buddhism from various viewpoints and using diverse methodologies. This means that it is easy for the process of study to fall into disorder. One must have firm awareness of the methodology being used in one's research.

Thirdly, Buddhist texts (manuscripts in particular) are not easy to read accurately and interpret appropriately. Therefore, each researcher has to always brush up on their text reading skills.

Fourthly, among the Buddhist texts, we often find writings that supposedly reflect religious experiences that can never be obtained or understood in an ordinary state. The problem is how we should deal with and present them. I believe that we need to make clear what can and cannot be understood, and logically and carefully explain the former within the scope of scientific research.

Lastly, we have to consider the mode of study. Generally speaking, close analysis of the subject at hand as well as the logical systematization and proper positioning in the field of the results obtained therein is required in the humanities.

We should not forget these matters as Buddhist studies researchers.

4. The Direction of Buddhist Studies

For a long time, Buddhist studies have produced high-quality research through both traditional and scientific methods. However, we have entered into a new era called the information age, and it is also being demanded that scientific researchers contribute to society with their research. What should Buddhist scholars do in response to such expectation in this new era? General speaking, they should 1) make efforts to promote the field's development, and 2) increase their influence in society.

With regard to the former, Buddhist texts should be reexamined as the cultural heritage of humankind and dealt with more carefully than before. They should be classified into five groups - original texts, revised texts, translated texts, interpreted texts and texts for education or civilization.

Regarding point two, I would like to propose propagating the ideas of peace, wisdom, and faith in Buddhism to people throughout the world through the English translations of Buddhist texts. Relatedly, I have advocated *kyōsei* (共成) since the 1990's, which means to stand on an awareness of *pratītya-samutpāda* as understood in Huayan Buddhism while working together for inner peace as well as peace in the world as a whole.

Buddhist scholars have studied and explained many of the significant teachings in Buddhism. However, the majority of these teachings are concerned with one's view of life and the world, and inner purification and peace. In other words, it is hard to find useful teachings for cooperating with other people and bettering society. However in the present age, people will not accept Buddhist teachings that lack a sound view on society and the promotion of social action. Therefore, I think that it is now necessary to advocate *kyōsei*. I arrived at this idea while studying Huayan teachings.