



BUDDHISM: THE LIVING PHILOSOPHY

The Most Amiable and Meritorious

Gift of

Field Marshal Thanom and

Thanpaying Chongkol Kittikachorn

of Thailand.

19-3-1981.

BUDDHISM: THE LIVING PHILOSOPHY

by Daisaku Ikeda

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Chapter One

Buddhist Philosophy of Life 19

Chapter Two

Early Flowering of Buddhism 45

Chapter Three

Life and Mission of Nichiren Daishonin 59

Chapter Four

Nichiren Shoshu Philosophy Alive Today ... 88

Introduction

In this book I have tried to explain the Buddhist interpretation of the basic laws of life and to give a brief historical sketch of the way of Buddhist thought—particularly the Mahayana tradition from Sakyamuni, the first historically recorded Buddha; through Chih-i, the founder of T'ien-t'ai Buddhism; to Nichiren Daishonin,* the founder of Nichiren Shoshu and the Buddha of the Latter Day of the Law. Before doing this, however, I have

* Daishonin is a title of great respect for wisdom and holiness. It does not carry the connotations of the word *saint*, by means of which it is sometimes translated.

BUDDHISM: THE LIVING PHILOSOPHY

examined the question of meaning in human life in an attempt to show why I believe that Buddhist philosophy is the way to help man find meaning and dignity in life and thus to bring about the kind of revolution that must take place if the world is to be saved from disaster.

Today, in many parts of the world the dignity of life is overlooked. Industrial technology has so polluted the environment that the rosy prospects once held out for civilization have vanished, and man now is having grave doubts concerning the very nature of technological civilization. It has been borne home on him that the civilization he has built is not the perfect thing he believed it to be and that, in the universal view, the course of human civilization is not very long after all.

The greatest of all contemporary problems is finding answers to two vital, unresolved questions: how to stave off the impending disaster incurred as a result of what has been—perhaps mistakenly—called technological progress and how to find values to replace the trust in technology that has prevailed till now.

The first question, which involves the basic nature of civilization, ultimately concerns the behavior of the individual human being in everyday life since it is the sum of individual lives that constitutes the total human consciousness of which civilization is the manifestation. The salvation of civilization from imminent disaster must de-

INTRODUCTION

pend on whether individual beings and social organizations within that civilization live in accordance with the fundamental laws of life. Similarly, the basic values of a civilization must derive from the values of individual human beings composing the civilization. In short, life and the way it ought to be lived are the key to both of these questions. The only way to solve the issues is for individual human beings and organizations to deepen their understanding of the basic laws of life in order to make possible vital living in accordance with those laws.

A Japanese man who was taken prisoner by the British during World War II relates the following story. He says that of all the unpleasant things experienced by the prisoners, the most intolerable was work piling bricks. When told by their captors to pile bricks in a certain place and in a certain way, the prisoners set about their task with determination and eagerness. Though they of course had no idea why they were doing the work or what they were building, they felt sure that the job had some meaning. And this made it possible for them to complete their work. But, on the following day, the prisoners would be ordered to dismantle the pile of bricks they had made and repile them in another place and in another shape. Their belief that the task they were performing had some meaning was completely betrayed. Ordered to execute the same futile task time in time out the men became very

BUDDHISM: THE LIVING PHILOSOPHY

disheartened. It was not the work itself that the men found difficult to accept; it was its meaninglessness that sickened their spirits.

Of course human beings need not be conscious of a clear meaning in everything they do. We perform many acts, like unconscious habits, without considering their meanings; and in some cases, meaningless actions are necessary since they relieve tensions. But human beings need to be able to recognize the significance of undertakings involving suffering and effort, because meaning is the only thing that makes the suffering and effort worthwhile.

As long as human beings are conscious of the meaning of what they are doing, they can withstand almost unimaginable hardships. In both the East and the West there have been martyrs who happily embraced suffering because they believed in the supreme meaning of the faith for which they sacrificed themselves. But for people who do not perceive meaning, suffering, no matter how slight, is difficult to bear because it is pointless. For them meaninglessness itself is pain.

From their own ideals and from a sense of relation with a larger set of circumstances, human beings are able to assign meaning to their individual actions and situations. In the final analysis, however, all of man's attempts to assign significances to things are for the sake of life itself.

INTRODUCTION

Life is the absolute condition regulating and giving meaning to everything.

Sometimes, however, people question the very reason for living and the meaning of life. Doubts of this kind inevitably arise when people realize the uncertainty and transience of human life. When it is recognized as fragile and brittle, human life can no longer serve as an absolute basis for the meanings of human activities and beliefs.

The higher religions developed to provide human life with a basis for immutable meaning. For this reason, some of them establish an absolute being transcending the realities of human life and teach that this absolute being illuminates all things and thus clarifies the meaning and order existing in the universe.

Before the emergence of higher religions primitive man devised gods that were symbolizations of the forces of nature. After the agricultural revolution made possible settled group living, nature gods were transformed into protective deities of groups of people or embodiments of the life force of those groups. For example, Amaterasu, the ancient Japanese goddess of the sun, later became the ancestral goddess of the Japanese people. The chief deity of the Grecian pantheon, Zeus, was originally the god of thunder. This shift in the nature of deities occurred in conformity with changes in living styles of the people worshipping them. In the hunting and gathering stage,

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BUDDHISM: THE LIVING PHILOSOPHY

power to become a Buddha if the human being will but recall and recognize it. The Lotus Sutra, in relating how the historical Buddha achieved Buddhahood, teaches the way for human beings to manifest the supreme dignity of the Buddha nature inherent in their own beings. By relating his own experiences, the Buddha clearly explains how to manifest the dignity of life on an actual plane.

Chapter One

Buddhist Philosophy of Life

Life and Matter: Shikishin Funi and Esho Funi

Intuitively we all know the difference between animate and inanimate, but explaining wherein the difference lies is extraordinarily difficult. It is almost impossible to describe what life is in terms of life itself; but by relating life to inanimate matter, it is possible to describe life phenomena. Even in such descriptions, however, it is hard to produce an accurate account that is free of contradictions.

Chapter Two

Early Flowering of Buddhism

How can the human being live as meaningfully as possible? The answer to this question involves a second question: how can one draw strength from essential life, the source of all life? Since ancient times religions have put forward many different methods whereby the individual may relate to the vital essence. But immense effort is required to establish such a relation, and life is not easy. History has therefore seen a current of fatalism dismissing such efforts as futile.

Chapter Three

Life and Mission of Nichiren Daishonin

The major part of the text of this book deals with the Buddhist philosophy of life in accordance with the teachings of Nichiren Shoshu. Here I shall examine briefly the life and mission of Nichiren Daishonin, the founder of Nichiren Shoshu. In no other human being has the power and compassion of this faith been as vividly manifest as in the life of the man who brought its philosophy to magnificent fulfillment.

