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# Think Humbly, Act Mindfully

## - A Japanese Buddhist Perspective -

By Inoguchi Takashi

Let me start by placing Buddhism in a comparative perspective. In comparison to other major religions such as Islam and Christianity, Buddhism keeps a low profile. Using Ronald Inglehart's World Values Survey data of 2003, Miguel Basanez contrasts and validates empirically the existence of two types of religions: one is assertive and proactive, and the other is accommodative and reflective.<sup>T1</sup> The former type includes Islam, Christianity and Judaism while the latter includes Buddhism, Hinduism and Confucianism.

It would be too presumptuous to dwell on those major characteristics of these religions in one paragraph. Following the comparative spirit of Inglehart and Basanez, however, I might as well note that Buddhism tries to see oneself only as an ever changing, always empty component in a great cosmos which encompasses not only human beings but all the species on Earth as well and the whole of nature itself. Since your existence is ever changing and empty when conceived as an ego sitting autonomously on the soil, you must think humbly. Since your existence is dependent on the great cosmos, and thus not autonomous, you must act sincerely. Thus, Hannya shingyo (The Heart of Perfect Wisdom Sutra), one of the most frequently recited Buddhist Sutras in Japan, says:

Oh! Shariputra (one of Buddha's 10 disciples)! Form is none other than emptiness, emptiness is none other than form. Form - it is, in fact, emptiness. Emptiness - it is, in fact, form. To sense, to imagine, to will, to conceive - they too are all like this. Thus, Shariputra, all these are, in character, emptiness. They are not mere things that appear or disappear. Nor are they things impure or pure. Nor do they merely increase or decrease. And so, within that emptiness, there is no form, there is no sensing, no imagining, no willing, no conceiving. There are no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind. There are no sights, no sounds, no smells, no tastes, no objects felt, no realms conceived. There are no worlds, from "there is no world of eyes" to "there is no world conceived by mind." There are no 12 causes of pain, from "there is no ignorance, and there is no extinction of ignorance" to "there is no decay and death, and there is no extinction of decay and death." There are no four truths - of pain, of

desire that is the origin of pain, of the obliteration of that desire, of the path to that obliteration. There is no enlightenment, and there is no attaining of enlightenment, because there is no attaining of enlightenment. Because one who quests for enlightenment relies on the Perfect Wisdom, his heart is free from obstacles. Because he is free from obstacles, he has no fear. Released from all inverted thought and dreamlike delusion, he enters into the ultimate Nirvana. All Buddhas, all awakened beings of past, present and future, relying on the Perfect Wisdom, attain the supremely correct, universal wisdom, and thus realize that the Perfect Wisdom is the great mantra, the great mantra of enlightenment, is the peerless mantra, the mantra beyond compare. It can relieve all suffering. It is true, it is not mistaken. And so he chants the mantra of Perfect Wisdom. Thus does he chant: He who goes, he who goes, he who perfectly goes to the other side, may pray be filled with happiness.<sup>T2</sup>

It is clear that this Buddhist sutra focuses on death and Nirvana. You always start with your place in the world. It is not the world of individualism. You are merely nothing which appears and disappears into Nirvana if you are truly embraced by Buddhist practice. It is a bit like the scientific belief that all living things like a human body are nothing, which merely come and go, and what really continues is a particle called DNA.<sup>3</sup> It is why Richard Dawkins, for one, portrays the picture of DNA or its component living in human bodies continuously like a parasite. What you need to do is to realize that it is not you but these particles that are living and to realize that once you set yourself free from inner-worldly desires and worries, you will be able to reach enlightenment when your body dies but your soul continues. Buddhism gives the wisdom not to be afraid of death. It does not matter too much as long as you can reach the understanding of death and Nirvana.

Furthermore, this and other Buddhist sutras tell us that the recognition of your being enables you to interact with other persons with mindfulness.<sup>4</sup> Because your being is after all non-being or nothing. You are merely a phenomenon, not an entity. Like a rainbow, which appears only for a few minutes and disappears, you are ephemeral. At best, your being is an inter-being as Thich Nhat Hanh explained. Your being is only possible with other beings constituting your being. If you want to see yourself as meaningful, you had better be mindful of other beings. You must develop mindfulness. You must understand other's sentiments from their own perspectives. Understanding is only possible when you are mindful of other persons. It is a bit like the Kantian maxim of doing unto others what you want them to do to yourself.

Hanh lists five trainings to enhance mindfulness. First, pay respect to living bodies, human beings, animals, plants and minerals. Make up your mind not to kill anybody and not to let anyone kill anybody. Second, be tolerant. Be magnanimous. Be kind. Share pain and sorrow with other persons. Third, be mindful of the pains associated with not being able to fulfill sexual responsibilities. Pay respect to the security and dignity of individuals, partners, the family and the society. Fourth, be mindful of your thoughtless and careless words hurting

other persons. Listen deeply to other persons, speak with love. Make every effort to ameliorate disputes and discords of any kind. Fifth, be mindful of careless consumption that only creates the ill health of your mind. This includes alcohol, violent TV programs and poisonous books.

Given all these admittedly brief expositions of Buddhist belief and practice, the title of this article, "Think Humbly, Act Mindfully," conveys the thrust of the religion. The most important explication of Buddhist belief and practice is that it is somewhat far from those religions which stress individualism and the autonomy of individuals. You are able to live because all others constitute your being. Your being is ephemeral because it is not you that lives. It is the understanding of this mechanism which makes you enter Nirvana and be continuous. Being humble and being mindful of others are the core precepts of Buddhism.

Right now, as I am concluding this small piece, I am recalling the Charter of UNESCO. It has the famous passage, which goes: wars begin in the minds of men. In a world where all kinds of difference in religions give excuses to use violence, let us reflect on the basic thrust of Buddhism, think humbly, act mindfully.

**(This is the text of an article by Prof. INOBUCHI Takashi, Professor at Chuo University and Policy Council Member of the Japan Forum on International Relations, which originally appeared in the January / February 2006 issue of the "Feature" column of the "Japan Spotlight.")**

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Post-modernization*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Miguel Basanez, "Values: Impact, Change and Trends Around the World," Inoguchi Takashi et al, eds., *Values and Life Styles in Urban Asia*, Mexico City: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Hideo Levy, translation of Hanrya Shingyo, in Yanagisawa Keiko, *Ikite Shinu Chie (The Wisdom of Dying while Alive)*, Tokyo: Shogakukan, 2005, pp. 34-41 \*The author has skipped a few initial lines and called Sharishi Shariputra.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.

<sup>4</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh, *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in Yourself, Your Family, Your Community, and the World*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003.