

# Consideration on American Individualism III: Buddhist Diagnosis of American Individualism

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## Introduction

This paper is the third installment of the series, “Consideration on American Individualism” in *The Bulletin of Keiwa College*. After part I (Nakamura, 2012), subtitled “Its Formation in the Early Period” and part II (Nakamura, 2013), subtitled “Individualism Transformed and its Subsequent Impasse,” this paper, part III, turns to Buddhism to examine the nature of American individualism from a totally different angle.

I discussed in part II that the virtues of American individualism have eroded, going through the rapid social changes brought by industrial capitalism. With massive urbanization spreading and obsession with money swelling, American individualism has been creating particular mental and social problems.

Buddhism gives radically different views of self from that of Western philosophy. It teaches that one suffers when one is attached to the false view of self. To live firmly and securely in life means to live an egoless now. Buddhism can provide meaningful strategies for helping America to break through the impasse of individualism.

It must be noted and emphasized that the purpose of this paper is not to assert that Buddhist dimensions are higher than American values, but to consider how Buddhism can contribute to understanding potential pitfalls of American individualism. I plan to further examine possible roles of Buddhism in American society in the next and final installment, part IV.

## 1. Buddhist View on the Self

Buddhism is the name given to the teaching of the Buddha. The Buddha, who was born around 480 BCE, was the prince of a small kingdom in North India. Descriptions of the Buddha’s personal life are often legendary and not unified. According to Rahula (1959, pp.xv-xvi), the young prince left the kingdom at the age of twenty nine, and attained enlightenment by his own

method at the age of thirty five. After his enlightenment, he became known as the Buddha, meaning “the Enlightened One,” or “Shakyamuni,” meaning “the Sage of the Shakya,” Shakya being his clan name. In this paper, I refer to him as Shakyamuni. Shakyamuni propagated his teachings to all kinds of people in his country without discriminating between castes, until he passed away at the age of eighty. When using or citing Buddhist terminology in Sanskrit and Japanese, this paper refers to *Iwanami Bukkyo Jiten (Iwanami Buddhist Dictionary) (1989)*.

Shakyamuni’s enlightenment was connected with the solution for universal human suffering. Buddhism, in this sense, can be viewed as “a personal and social therapy that can serve as the physician of any human culture (Jacobson, p.3).” The purpose of this paper is to consider how Buddhism diagnoses the sickness of American individualism. The key element for the therapy is the concept of “self.” The Buddhist perspective of self is fundamentally different from the Western perspective. It can speak to American concerns about their suffering. I start by describing the Buddhist view on self, so that I can lay solid foundations for the diagnosis.

Shakyamuni presents a view called the doctrine of the *anatman* (Sanskrit; Japanese: 無我 *muga*), which is translated as “no-self” or “no-soul.” According to Nhat Hanh (1995, p.133), this doctrine holds that a so-called “person” is really just five elements that come together for a limited period of time: body, sensations, perceptions, predispositions, and consciousness. These five elements are, in fact, impermanent and changing all the time. Not a single element remains the same for two consecutive moments. Each element is working together interdependently, and no individual element is identified with a self or a soul. This doctrine denies a permanent self and an immortal soul. It has no logic that privileges so-called soul over body, both of which are impermanent.

The Buddhist notion of *sunyata* (空 *kū*), usually translated as “emptiness” or “void,” helps to eradicate our attachment to the false view of the self. This notion was originally developed by Nagarjuna (竜樹 *ryūju*), a Buddhist monk of southern India who lived in the second century A.D.. He is known as the central person who shaped the doctrines of Mahayana school of Buddhism, which I plan to explain in detail in part IV.

The doctrine of emptiness is regarded as the extension of the Shakyamuni's teaching of *pratitya-samutpada* (緣起 *engi*), which is translated as "dependent origination." I will discuss this notion before I look at "emptiness" deeply. Dependent origination holds that all beings and phenomena exist or occur in relation to other beings or phenomena. Macy (1988, p.170) explains that everything is interdependent and mutually conditioning – each thought, word, and act, and all beings, too, exist in an intricate web of causation and connection.

Each of the five elements of the self, mentioned above, has intimate and interdependent connections not only with other elements of the self but also with all the beings and phenomena outside itself. Everything is viewed as being in a constant state of flux. Dependent origination is perhaps the broadest and most systematic explanation of reality in Shakyamuni's teachings.

In his *Middle Treatise*, Nagarjuna (1986) extended and systematized the notion of dependent origination. To simplify the concept of emptiness, he (pp.195-206) puts forth the simile about fire and firewood. One can easily understand that fire cannot burn without firewood, and in the same way, firewood cannot be called firewood without fire. In other words, each depends on the other in order to exist, and neither has any absolute existence independent from each other. Nagarjuna views each as being "empty," lacking a quality of *svabhava* (自性 *jishō*), or "own-being." It must be noted that emptiness is not the same as mere "nothingness." Neither fire nor firewood can be said not to exist at all. True emptiness is a quality that transcends both non-being and being.

Nagarjuna claims that emptiness can be applied to all things including the concept of the self. All things are linked to other beings and events and nothing exists by its own power. In other words, nothing possesses self-sufficiency and all things are empty of "own-being." The important message of this doctrine is that one should not become the prisoner of mere words. Anything which is named and labeled is necessarily limited, and has a tendency to create the illusion that it is a self-sufficient entity. Consequently, everything one sees on the surface and every conventional distinction is ultimately illusory and unreal.

If one clings to any concept meditated by language, such as "self" or "I," and interprets it as possessing some fixed nature, one automatically loses sight of the essential nature of true emptiness. What is emphasized

here is the necessity of moving beyond fixed concepts. One's perception of everything is actually the perception of contingent things which lack "own-being." Therefore, by negating every possible concept, even those of "self" and "I," one can understand the true nature of emptiness. When one negates the conventional concept of the self, one's experience becomes non-dualistic, transcending the dualism between self and other. In *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Nhat Hanh (1987, p.48) states:

To see one in all and all in one is to break through the great barrier which narrows one's perception or reality, a barrier which Buddhism calls the attachment to the false view of self. The false view of self means belief in the presence of unchanging entities which exist on their own. To break through this false view is to be liberated from every sort of fear, pain and anxiety.

## 2. Wisdom of the "Four Noble Truths"

Immediately after he attained enlightenment, Shakyamuni preached the theory called the "Four Noble Truths," which many scholars regard as the heart of his teaching (Nhat Hanh, 1998, pp.3-42). In this theory, he clearly tells us that the true nature of our life is suffering, but that suffering can be eradicated by the right kind of self-effort. He deliberated about how human beings could get out of universal human suffering. The medicine Shakyamuni prescribed for it was the wisdom of selfless detachment. It is important to examine the Four Noble Truths more closely, so that Shakyamuni's wisdom can be properly grasped before diagnosing American suffering. I give a brief explanation of each of the Four Noble Truths in turn. My explanation is mainly based on Rahula's (1959, pp.16-50) description in his book *What the Buddha Taught*.

The first noble truth is *dukkha* (苦 *ku*), which is most commonly translated as "suffering." Shakyamuni teaches that life is nothing but *dukkha*. *Dukkha* includes all kinds of suffering in life, from the inevitable experiences of aging, sickness, and death, through the tragedies of bereavement and loss, to mundane disappointments. This assertion is not equivalent to denying the possibility of joy, pleasure, and love in one's life. What Shakyamuni implies

by *duhkha* is not only suffering but also *anitya* (無常 *mujō*), or “impermanence.” All phenomena are merely products of causes and the world is a perpetual flux of interaction and change. The doctrines of “no-self” and “dependent origination,” which I have already discussed, are prime components of the first noble truth. This truth means that nothing can ultimately satisfy a person because of its impermanent nature. Shakyamuni simply points out the inherent nature of our experience.

The second noble truth explains the origin of *duhkha*. Shakyamuni regards *tr̥sna* (渴愛 *katsuai*), or “desire,” as the principle cause of *duhkha*. *Tr̥sna* refers to the very act of desiring itself, or the condition of wanting something, whether good or bad. *Tr̥sna*, therefore, includes desire not only for sensual pleasure and wealth but for ideals and beliefs. The root of desire, according to Shakyamuni, lies in *avidya* (無明 *mumyō*), or “ignorance.” As one is ignorant of the true nature of things, one desires and rejoices over things and grasps and clings to them.

A typical form of ignorance is our goal-oriented mind-set. One often thinks “If I achieve so-and-so, I will be all set.” In reality, one will never be all set. Every moment more worries and unexpected complications arise, even in pleasurable moments. They make one think: “I want to stay right here.” In reality, all things are impermanent. When one gets out of such moments, one feels unjustly deprived of things, causing *duhkha*.

The third noble truth is about the cessation of *duhkha*. Shakyamuni affirms that ignorance is not an inherent condition and can be eradicated through our own effort. What one must do is to eradicate ignorance, which is the root of desire.

Understanding the concept of *karman* (業 *gō*), *samsara* (輪廻 *rinne*), and *nirvana* (涅槃 *nehan*) helps us grasp this truth deeply. *Karman* is defined as “volitional action,” which one produces in a desirous state. *Karman* is the force that continues life, whether in a good or a bad condition. Good *karman* produces good effects and bad *karman* produces bad effects. One is obliged to go on spinning in the cycle of desiring, acting on these desires, and creating new desires over and over again. This incessant cycle of transmigration is called *samsara*. *Karman*, whether good or bad, is the fuel that keeps us in *samsara*. *Nirvana* is the state of complete extinction of dissatisfaction and the state of complete freedom from suffering. *Nirvana* is attained when one has used up all *karman* and exited *samsara*. The third noble truth is equivalent to

the attainment of *nirvana*.

The fourth noble truth lays out the means to the end of *dukkha*. The whole teaching of Shakyamuni actually deals in one way or another with the path that leads us to *nirvana*. There are three essentials of discipline in this path; *Sila* (戒 *kai*), *samadhi* (定 *jiyō*), and *prajna* (般若 *hannya*). *Sila*, or “ethical conduct,” is connected with right speech and right action aimed at peace and freedom from undesirable effects. *Samadhi*, or “mental discipline,” refers to subduing confusion by means of the practice of meditation. Most importantly, *prajna*, or “wisdom,” denotes the thoughts of selfless detachment and an understanding of things as they are. *Prajna* is the antidote to ignorance and is born from *silā* and *samadhi*.

Shakyamuni was only concerned with seeing, not speculating about, things as they are. He was not interested in discussing the existence of god or the eternity of the universe, because he was aware that those questions were not fundamentally connected with the spiritual holy life (Rahula, p.14). All of his teachings derived from his compassionate wish to help afflicted people to awake to the *dharma* (法 *hō*), or the “fundamental truth.” Buddhism may seem pessimistic in that it views everything as impermanent and unsatisfactory. However, it is reasonable to suggest that Buddhism actually takes a realistic view of life and the world. It tells us clearly what the nature of things is, and gives us the wisdom to liberate ourselves.

### **3. Dualism – the Origin of American *Dukkha***

As was discussed above, Shakyamuni attributed the ultimate cause of *dukkha* to our ignorance of the true nature of things. In the Buddhist view, all things, including self, are impermanent and non-dualistic. Western civilization, on the other hand, has a strong tendency to see things in dualistic terms. A distinctive characteristic of dualism is that each entity is singled out, distinguished as a separate thing, and categorized so that it fits into the category system at hand. Dualism creates many dichotomies such as self and other, human and nature, creator and creation, cause and effect. It is reasonable to suppose that a specific feature of “American *dukkha*” originates from Americans’ dualistic, or deluded, way of seeing things.

Dualism has been one of the foremost traditions in Western philosophy since Plato. In his book *Phaedo*, he (1954, pp.141-142) presented the theory

called “immortality of the soul.” He explains that human being exists simultaneously in two worlds: the material human world and the heavenly world of divine truth. In his view, the human soul is eternally connected to the heavenly world. That is, the individual is viewed as a temporary union of body and soul, soul having by far the higher status. It is safe to regard Plato’s thought as a philosophical root of American individualism.

Jacobson (p.118) mentions Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Marx as those philosophers who contributed to solidifying dualism after Plato. Descartes is especially notable for his dictum, “I think, therefore I am (*Cogito ergo sum*),” which privileges the thinking mind over the body. This idea emphasizes the power of reason and justifies the exploitation of nature according to human-need. It is certain that European dualism has laid a solid foundation for the idea of individualism.

As was discussed in part I (Nakamura, pp.1-5), Americans inherited Western philosophy, and combined it with the American mythology. Americans have paid a special attention to their “certain unalienable rights” such as “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” A positive outcome of American democracy is that Americans have been tolerant of difference in a diverse society, and they have developed a participatory culture.

However, as was pointed out in part II (Bellah, 1986, pp.142-151; Nakamura, pp.34-36), under the progression of industrial capitalism, they have begun to isolate themselves from others and society. It seems certain that their dualistic manner of thinking has had much to do with this process. Many Americans must have assumed that individuals are separated and autonomous from others and society as a whole.

In sum, the major source of suffering, according to Buddhism, is the illusion of a transcendent self or an immortal soul. This illusion, which one clings to hardest of all, is regarded as responsible for the tendency to ignore the interrelatedness of life. The sharp distinction of self from others helps one foster hostility toward differing points of view. It necessarily aggravates the confrontational and fragmenting aspects of individualism. Rahula (pp.51-52) views the illusion of self as originating in our self-centered fear and desire. Human beings, in his opinion, have created God for self-protection, and have conceived an immortal soul for self-preservation.

Our basic fear is deeply connected to the reality of our inevitable death.

After all, human beings all die. Dualism has great difficulty in coming to terms with death. Even if one conceives the idea of immortal soul, it is still difficult to keep the idea inside one's mind. In a sense, human beings have created and administered every society in order to suppress their terrifying anxiety about mortality. The dualistic manner of thinking necessarily motivates one to gain a sense of security by trying to master the objective world. Jacobson (p.72) states that "thick protective shields of large-scale social institutions and public myth" exist to cover over each individual's anxiety. This turning one's back upon reality, he asserts, is the fundamental source of mental and social disorders.

## Conclusion

It was discussed in part I (pp.4-6) that Americans have tried to make a society in which equal opportunities for every individual are guaranteed by fair laws and political procedures. To actualize this ideal, they have built an excellent political system called "democracy," and an excellent government system called "separation of powers." Indeed American civilization has achieved a remarkable material and social development under these systems, but the fact is that there is a widening inequality between rich and poor people in society. Many families are falling apart and the fabric of society is being torn. The sickness of American individualism seems to be growing rather than being healed.

An American way of life, in which one tries to live to the fullest extent possible, allows Americans to do what they believe is good in a distinctively open manner. This openness or freedom is in many senses positive and rewarding. It enables one to continuously challenge oneself and bravely attempt new adventures into the unknown for the sake of one's ideals. In these activities, one can acquire a higher level of dignity of the individual.

However, the excess of virtue can be a vice, as it were. As one is more preoccupied with the grandeur of life, one is more likely to ignore or devalue one's own mortality. As a result, one becomes too attached to the idea of a transcendental and permanent self. The cause of the sickness of American individualism lies here. In the Buddhist perspective, many Americans are in a delusive and distorted reality. Their false view of self can have negative effects on both individuals and society by force of *karman*. A Buddhist diagnosis of American individualism suggests that Americans should break down the self-

centeredness of individual existence.

In the sequel to this paper, I attempt to examine how Buddhist wisdom, combined with American values, can help revitalize the virtues of American individualism.

Note:

This paper is revised from part of my thesis, "American Individualism Viewed by Buddhism," submitted for my degree of M.A. to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, Georgetown University in 1996. I am grateful to Francisca Cho, professor at Georgetown University, and Mr. Mark Frank, former associate professor at Keiwa College, for their continuing assistance and insightful suggestions. Also, let me take this occasion to mention that the American sociologist Robert Bellah passed away in July, 2013. He is the leading author of *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (1986), which helped me exceptionally to enhance the quality of my graduate studies.

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