

## Ethics and Language in Japanese Mahayana Buddhism

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Today, I would like to inquire into the position of ethics in Japanese Mahayana Buddhism on the basis of the results of my research on Japanese Buddhism, which includes Dogen. My research deals with from the perspective of the three-layered structure of the world.

First I need to make reference to the question of religion and ethics. Generally speaking, ethics is the rules how men should act, in human relations or in society. In various cultures, religion serves as an ethical formation base traditionally. Being conscious or not, people have regulated their act based on a religious idea for a long time. However, ethics does not always have a relation of harmony with religion. In the first place religion is teachings to aim at the value that transcends this world. Religion has two contrasting sides, one is harmonious with ethics and another is antagonistic.

In this paper I want to clarify how two sides appear in Japanese Mahayana Buddhism. And moreover I will explain the significance and function of language in the three-layered structure of the world in the relations with the theme of this symposium "Language and Thought".

### 【 The Three-layered structure of the world 】

According to Japanese Mahayana Buddhism the world consists of three layers:

- 1 The mundane world
- 2 The world of ascetic practice under Buddhism
- 3 The world of Dharma ,the truth

### 【 Two attitudes toward ethics in Japanese Mahayana Buddhism 】

Two attitudes toward ethics in the Mahayana Buddhism of Japan are formalized in the following diagrams.

**Diagram of Attitude A:** a denial of mundane ethics →

non-duality and oneness 不二 of good and evil based on the theory of universal void 空観→ transcendence of (mundane) ethics (→ This leads to the advocating of a universal ethics that encompasses both the mundane and the sacred world)

**Diagram of Attitude B:** a denial of mundane ethics (To the extent that one adheres to Buddhism, this stance is to be expected, but such denial grew weaker over time. )  
→ a doctrine of an absolute affirmation of this reality

based on the Tendai theory of primordial enlightenment 天台本覚論 → non-duality and oneness of mundane beings and Buddhism → an affirmation of mundane ethics

Now allow me to explain the three worlds according to Diagram A.

In diagram A, a believer in Buddhism denies mundane ethics such as morals related to family and social relations such as those between master and servant, and enters the world of Buddhist practice. The novice practices according to Buddhist ethics. The Various precepts represent the codification of Buddhist ethics. In his practice an ascetic is required to revere the precepts, to do no evil, and to do only good.

According to Buddhist belief, however, the ultimate essence of good and evil is a void 空. Therefore good and evil are non-dualities. Sinfulness, too, is essentially void 罪性空. Consequently, what is thought of as ethics is ultimately transcended. Such a standpoint is natural for believers in Buddhism. A typical example of a Japanese Buddhist who adopts this position, for instance, is Dogen 道元, the great representative philosopher of new Buddhism, which emerged during the Kamakura period (1192-1333) 鎌倉時代, and the founder of the Japanese Soto sect 曹洞宗.

With regard to ethics, each of the individual members that make up this mundane world is given the duty of not only maintaining the order of the world but also reproducing it. Consequently, just as the individual self is taken to be fixed substance, the mundane world is required to be concretely realized, fixed and eternal. All standards and rules within the mundane world ultimately aim to maintain and reproduce the world as it is known.

Next, World No. 2, the world of ascetic practice under Buddhism, is the world of ascetics who leave the mundane world and begin Buddhist training in an effort to achieve World No. 3, the world of dharma, the world of truth. This world of ascetic practice lies between the mundane world and the world of dharma. At the same time, the world of Buddhist ascetic practice insists that it is an independent, self-contained world completely separate from the mundane world. In other words, practitioners seek to carve Buddhist World No. 2 out of the mundane world and fully establish its independence as a Buddhist realm.

Buddhist precepts for monks aim to establish the identity

of the Buddhist organizations to which they belong. However, when considering Buddhist ethics we should take into account not only the perspective obtained within the world of Buddhist ascetic practice, but also that obtained within World No. 3, the world of dharma.

Well then, how do ethics and rules appear when the world of dharma is taken into consideration? In a word, to the extent that practice is undertaken to manifest World No. 3, the world of dharma, ethics and rules become ultimately meaningless. The reason for this is that, according to the theory of primordial enlightenment expounded by the Tendai sect 天台本覚論, which strongly influenced Japanese Mahayana Buddhism, fundamentally we already possess the essence of the world that we are seeking. The theory insists that a man has already become a Buddha whenever he makes an effort to practice to become a Buddha. The ideal world is manifested in the real world whenever it is sought. As long as the ultimate aim has already been accomplished, no act need be requested.

World No. 3, the world of Dharma is the true absolute world, in other words, the "Void of Dependent Origination," 空縁起 a formation of relationships bound together by each other. Buddhist enlightenment is nothing other than the intuitive grasp of this world.

Now, let's return to the ethics and rules in Diagram A. Within Buddhist belief there is no possibility of the mundane world existing independently. The mundane world must always be led by Buddhism. Of course, Buddhism allows that all men cannot abandon the world and become priests immediately, but abandoning the world is preferable to remaining in it.

This is so because, both with regard to individuals and to communities, ethics in the mundane world is based on self-preservation. As a result, the existence of a fixed ego is assumed. However, Buddhism does not accept this assumption. The basic teachings of Buddhism are selflessness and dependent origination.

Is the mundane world, then, considered by all of Japanese Mahayana Buddhism as something that should be denied totally? Certainly, Buddhists who deny the mundane world—as in diagram A, exist. However, in the history of Japan, it is the interpretation offered in diagram B that has been overwhelmingly dominant. In diagram B, the mundane world itself is affirmed, although only to the degree that it is supplemented with Buddhism. The mundane world is not something impermanent that men should abandon, but a world to which original value is attributed, something that is worth maintaining for what it is.

### 【 Buddhism and Language 】

Language in the mundane world functions according to the logic of tautology within the system of the previously established order. This contrasts remarkably with World No. 2, the world of Buddhist ascetic practice, within which language is generating one. The basic image of language in the mundane world is one in which some manner of beings are first present, and language is needed to give them names. That is to say, language in the mundane world functions to label beings and point to them. Each of these previously existing beings is positioned within the mundane establishment. Language in the mundane world is what maps and expresses the established order. People maintain and reproduce this order by using language and acting upon it.

Next, let's consider World No. 2, the world of Buddhist ascetic practice, which is the world of ascetics who leave the mundane world and begin practice in order to attain World No. 3, the world of dharma. The world of ascetic practice lies between the mundane world and the world of dharma, which transcends all human knowledge and language. Consequently, the language of the world of Buddhist ascetic practice always indicates a world of truth that transcends language. We may think of it as a language that is generating one. New uses of paradox and irony are constantly developed, and expressions are turned on their head as soon as they become fixed. The language of the mundane world is premised on the previously established linguistic order and is created by excluding World No. 3, the world of dharma as something that is absolutely other (or utterly alien and unrecognizable). On the other hand, language created in the world of Buddhist ascetic practice only works once during the here-and-now moment that touches the absolute other.

World No. 3, the world of Dharma, the true world in its entirety, is the world of "Void and dependent origination 空・縁起" formed through inter-relationships bound together by each other. Because it transcends limited human knowledge and language, we can say that it is a world that is absolutely other (in other words, utterly alien to everything we recognize). Enlightenment in Buddhism is the intuitive grasping of this world.

### 【 Dogen's Two Types of Language 】

When we survey Dogen's works, we find that there are two remarkably different types. One is written in language that is easily understood, whereas the other is written in language that is beyond understanding. Examples of the former include the 12-volume "Shobo-genzo"『12 卷本正法

眼蔵』 and “Shobo-genzo-zuimonki” 『正法眼蔵随聞記』, books of Dogen’s teachings written by his disciples and Shingi 清規, that is rules for Buddhist temples. Examples of the latter include the 75-volume “Shobo-genzo” 『75 卷本正法眼蔵』. The difference between these two types arises from the characteristics of the languages in three-layered world that I have been pointed out.

Let’s begin by examining those works that are easily understood. They are written for people who are leaving the mundane world and entering the world of Buddhist ascetic practice. Using the language and logic of the mundane world, they lead readers into the world of ascetic practice. Therefore they explain the way of Buddhism using the language of dualism and preaching adherence to moral imperatives. The works are premised on the assumption that things referred to as the teachings and temples of Buddhism exist. The novice ascetic is instructed in established Buddhist teachings and patterns of behavior in temples.

In similar fashion, the 12 rolls of the “Shobo-genzo”, the “Shobo-genzo-zuimonki” and the Shingi are written to separate World No. 2, the world of Buddhist ascetic practice, from the mundane world and establish it as an independent world unto itself. To the extent that such

language is used to establish the independence of the world of Buddhist ascetic practice, it must of necessity be the same as the language of the mundane world, which is based on dualism and which functions to maintain and reproduce the established order. The establishing of the world as a (separate) world is demanded in the form of moral imperatives.

However, we must keep in mind that the establishment of the independence of the world of ascetic practice under Buddhism is not in itself the purpose, but is done only for the sake of the world of dharma. Therefore the language borrowed from the logic and rhetoric of the mundane world, the explanations in the form of moral imperatives and the rules that superficially overlap with the mundane world are ultimately examples of ‘Zengyo Hoben’ 善巧方便, that is useful means used to lead people to the world of dharma.

On the other hand, Dogen’s 75-volume “Shobo-Genso” uses the language and logic of the mundane world paradoxically and ironically in order to suggest World No. 3, the world of Dharma. Consequently, we can see in the text an original use of language that reflects the paradoxical condition of putting into words something which transcends language.

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