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THE  
RELATIONS BETWEEN JAPANESE  
NATIONAL TRAITS AND  
BUDDHISM

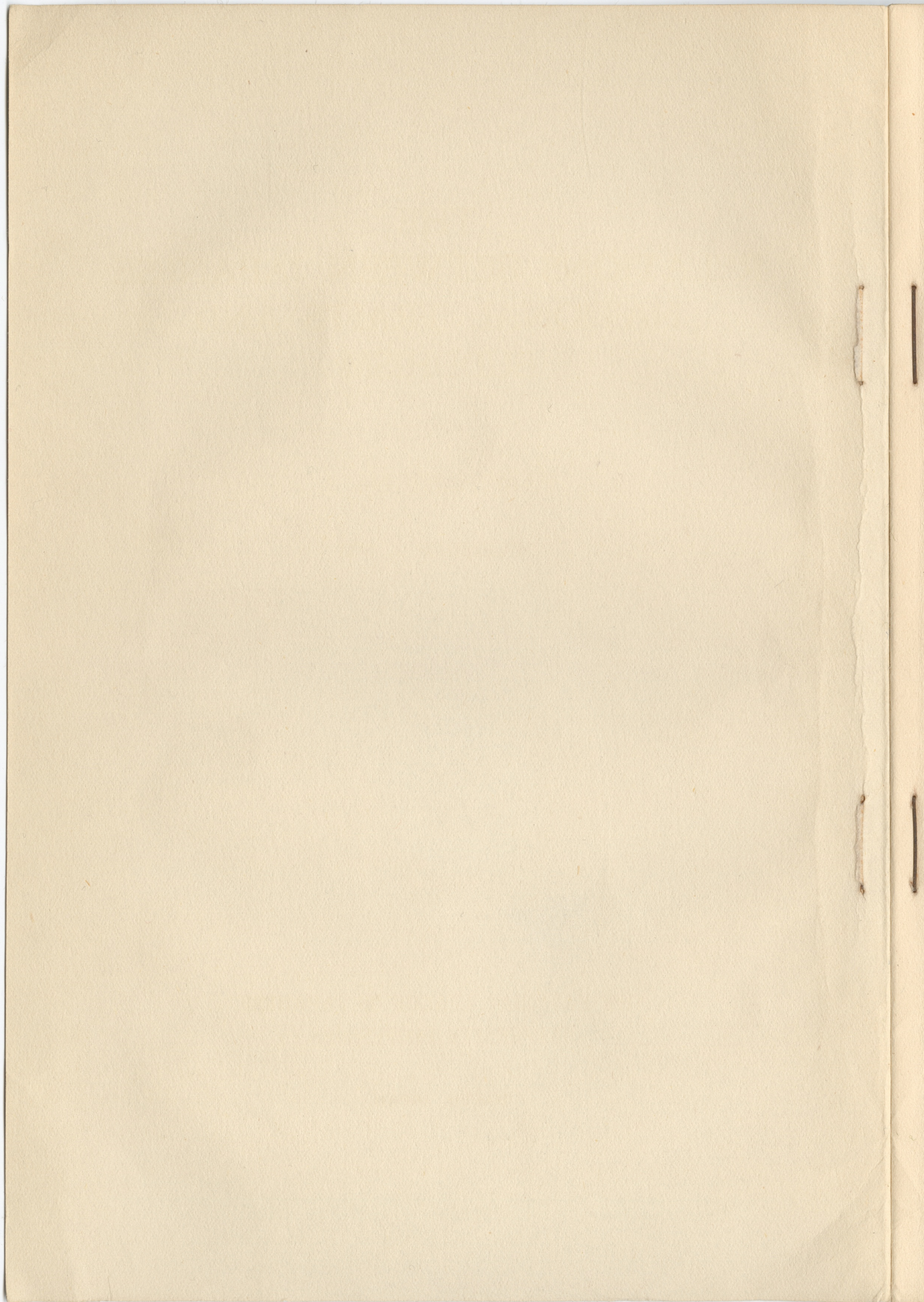
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PAMPHLET No. 3

DECEMBER 1, 1933



THE NATIONAL LEAGUE OF JAPANESE  
UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS

TOKYO, JAPAN



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## PREFACE

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The Pamphlet No. 1 published by the National League of Japanese University Professors was entitled "An Outline of the Manchurian Problem." In that pamphlet we endeavoured to elucidate the fact that the so-called Manchurian problem was not occasioned by Japan's imperialistic aggressions and that her military operations in what is now the State of Manchoukuo were dictated by the need of self-defence. We also clarified the fact that the genesis of the new State of Manchoukuo was solely to be traced to the initiative of the people of that country and that Japan only lent her helping hand to her neighbour, whose ardent friendship she held in high esteem.

In the Pamphlet No. 2 which was entitled "The Real Nature of Japan and the Japanese" we explained the unparalleled courage shown by the Japanese in their opposition to other nations at the League of Nations' meetings over the Manchurian problem. The heroic determination with which Japan carried out her Far Eastern policy and the great decisiveness with which she met every opposition at the hand of other nations and finally withdrew

from the League of Nations itself, held the entire world spell-bound, and many wondered whence the Japanese derived such a strong character. Pamphlet No. 2 was a sort of reply to this universal query.

The present pamphlet or Pamphlet No. 3 entitled "The Relations between Japanese National Traits and Buddhism" is intended to explain the deep influence which Buddhism exercised on the Japanese national traits and to show the power of assimilation possessed by the Japanese people and their willingness to improve their own conditions by borrowing whatever good points found in other civilisations.

Although Japan withdrew from the League of Nations over the Manchurian problem, she intends to remain friendly and on normal intercourse with other nations. Her withdrawal from the League of Nations was necessitated by a difference of views regarding the Manchurian problem; she is in agreement with other nations over other problems of international importance. She has every reason to be desirous of enhancing her friendship with other Powers.

It is not true that Japan is characterised by a narrow nationalism or by a spirit of exclusiveness. This is shown by the fact that she has been very solicitous to absorb whatever good points contained in the ideas and systems of other countries and

has been strictly adhering to the principle of live and let live. This was true even in ancient times. She learned from China and India. From the former she imported Confucianism, from the latter, Buddhism. She used both for increasing the happiness of her nation. Realizing that these foreign ideas and teachings in their original forms were inadequate both in quantity and quality, our ancestors endeavoured to Japanise them in order to make them conform to the domestic need of the nation. Although both China and India which were more advanced than our country unfortunately failed to utilize Buddhism to their advantage, our nation has received innumerable blessings from it.

Thus, Japan is quite willing to learn what the advanced nations of the West can teach to her best advantage. She is eager to absorb and digest what the Western nations may give her. She is willing to respect them as her teachers and benefactors. It is our ardent wish that the true intentions of our country will be rightly understood by these nations and that they will not regard us as an exclusive, unsocial people. The internationalism of the Japanese national traits, we hope, will be appreciated by the readers of this pamphlet the object of which is to elucidate the profound influence Japanised Buddhism has had on the national characteristics of our nation.

The National League of Japanese University Professors last fall sent a number of experts including its President to Manchoukuo for the purpose of ascertaining the real condition there following its formation, with the hope of making a report on their findings to the peoples of other nations. These experts have returned after having made investigations into various fields and are now engaged in preparing a report thereon. The report will be published by the League at a suitable opportunity.

November 20, 1933

Dr. Niichiro Matsunami, LL.D. President.

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## EDITORIAL FOREWORD

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Our country has withdrawn from the League of Nations in which she had participated from the time of its birth, not because she is unwilling to take part in the work of promoting the peace of the world, but because of her earnest desire to bring about real and permanent peace which shall be based on international righteousness. Any one who considers Japan as an imperialistic, war-loving nation is greatly mistaken. Those who have thoroughly studied the racial traits and ideas, education and culture of the Japanese, will have no difficulty in forming the right idea of the real nature of Japan and the Japanese; but those who have never had any opportunity of making an inquiry into our people are liable to have a mistaken view of our nation.

It was because of this need for true knowledge about our people that our League of Japanese University Professors published a pamphlet written by the late Dr. Honaga entitled "The Real Nature of Japan and the Japanese," for general distribution among the universities and prominent people in other countries. And it is with much pleasure that we now publish another pamphlet entitled this

time "The Japanese National Traits and Buddhism," written specially for the League by Professor Benkyo Shiio to be similarly distributed throughout the world.

Dr. Shiio is the foremost authority on Buddhism and the leader of a new Buddhist movement among the contemporary masses in Japan. He is now directing a revival movement and has a million followers. He is preaching a new doctrine called "Kyosei-ism" as a guiding principle for his followers. This doctrine harmonizes the religious life of Buddhists with their education and industry. He views the past and present of Buddhism in the spirit of primitive Buddhism and in the light of its historical development. He is the author of numerous works the principal ones of which follow:—

Study in the Fundamental Historical Sources of Chinese Buddhism.

The Basis of Kyosei-ism.

Religions of Mankind.

Religions for Society.

A Life of Spiritual Peace.

The Authority of Culture.

Dr. Shiio is the dean of the Department of Literature in Taisho University, Tokyo and professor at Nihon and Waseda Universities also of the same city.

November 25 YUDO KOMATSU, M.A.

*Chief Secretary of The League of Japanese  
University Professors*

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# THE RELATIONS BETWEEN JAPANESE NATIONAL TRAITS AND BUDDHISM

BY

*The Rev. BENKYO SHIIO, LL. D.*

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## I. INHERENT NATIONAL TRAITS

It is widely known that Japan's recorded history extends over a period of 2,500 years and this was preceded by several thousand years of a pre-historic period. Thus, Japan has had a long line of unbroken national development. Other nations may indeed have their own histories, in some cases, as long as that of Japan; but in the case of our history it has continued under the same social life, undisturbed by a political revolution or downfall, and has made ceaseless social and political improvements demanded at each stage of our national existence. This historical process is peculiar to our nation, and constitutes the foundation of our racial characteristics.

Man is chiefly distinguished from the beast in



that he has established civilization in the course of his social development. However, different races have not equally succeeded in their racial survival ; some of them have been unable to overcome difficulties in their natural and social relations and have declined or faced downfall or moral decadence. A nation which has succeeded in building up a culture of its own despite its natural and social difficulties, may be said to be a superior nation and its culture may be said to have merits of its own.

Much discussion has been made regarding the racial characteristics of the Japanese who have thus succeeded in building up a culture of its own. Their traits are embodied in their State life and underly the "glory of the fundamental character of our Empire." This glory is the result of our success in overcoming various difficulties which stood in the way of our national history. We have sustained our national life despite our over-population : we have shown a spirit of unity and cooperation ; and each subject of Japan is ready to sacrifice his small self in the interest of his larger self, the great Life of society, for which he would give up even his life, should necessity demand such a sacrifice. Japanese are ready to live a life of self-sacrifice because they are appreciative of the fact that their existence has been possible because of the favours they have received from Nature, ances-

tors, society and the State. Japan's national expansion has been the result of the daily endeavors of her people in their respective walks of life.

## II. IMPORTED CULTURE

The spirit of social service explained above has also developed in the Japanese the qualities of magnanimity and of flexibility in social relations, and these helped the people to assimilate cultures and institutions imported from the more advanced neighbors. Moreover, these same cultures and institutions, in turn, had the effect of cultivating the qualities of magnanimity and flexibility. It was because of these mental qualities that made the assimilation of cultures imported from foreign countries such as Korea, China, India and Persia in ancient times and Western nations in modern times.

Of the various foreign cultures and institutions imported into Japan, those from China and India have exercised the greatest influence on the development of Japanese national characteristics. From China were imported the ideas and doctrines expounded by many thinkers in ancient China, especially during the Chow Dynasty and Chinese institutions based upon those ideas and doctrines and developed during later periods, the Dynasties of Sui and Tang, in particular. These basic Chinese

ideas and doctrines embody the so-called "Three Teachings," namely, Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Confucianism was based on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, developed through the Pre-Han Period and the following six dynasties, and underlay the systems, learning and social life of the Tang Dynasty.

When imported into Japan, Confucianism was at first an art of writing. Later, it became a source of systems and ceremonies; and after being affected by the new learning of the Sung and Ming Dynasties, it became a modern system of learning, and was the controlling principle of Japanese learning, morality and the life of the middle class people of Japan. Taoism is based on the teachings of Laotze and Chuangtze and prevailed chiefly in South China. It was developed during the Han and Tang Dynasties before making its way into Japan. It made a great contribution to the religious life of the middle class people of Japan to whom it made appeals because of its emphasis on spiritual peace, patience, nurture, and willingness to abide by fate. It should be noted, however, that it was Buddhism rather than either Confucianism or Taoism that has affected the thought of the Japanese race on the whole.

### III. BUDDHISM

#### I. BUDDHISM WHICH WAS IMPORTED INTO JAPAN

Buddhism originated in India about 2,500 years ago, and after it underwent a remarkable development and proved the potent source of culture and institutions, it found its way into the China of the Post-Han Period extending for 700 years. It was then Chinanized and became the foundation of Chinese doctrines, arts and social life. It made its way into Japan during the Sui Dynasty. Such different Buddhist sects as Sanron, Hosso, Ritsu, Kegon, Tendai and Mikkyo were imported into Japan one after another. Each of these has its own characteristics and is different from others, but they all had their shares in moulding the national ideas of the Japanese race.

Of these different sects, Sanron, Hosso, Ritsu and Kegon represent the Buddhism of the Nara Period, and it is because of their being basic Buddhism that they influenced the latter day Buddhism and the people. The rise of the Tendai and Shingon sects was due to the importation of the culture and institutions in the middle of the Tang Dynasty, and these form the foundation of the Heian culture, and

paved the way for the development of new Buddhist sects during the Kamakura Period. Kamakura Buddhism may be traced to Indian and Chinese sects, but it is highly Japanese in character. Some sects of the Kamakura Period, namely, Jodo-nenbutsu, Zen and Nichiren were especially Japanese in character and they greatly influenced the life and ideas of the Japanese people during the old periods down to modern times. It is because of this historic influence on the people of Japan that it still persists to form the basis of Japanese thought even today, despite religious toleration which has been practiced, the decadence of the old Buddhist sects, the effects of the imported Western ideas and systems and various modern social transformations. We may say, in a nutshell, that it was Buddhism that saved Japan in the past and it was Japan that purified Buddhism.

The first Buddhist sutras were presented to the Japanese Imperial Court by the King of Kudara in the Korean Peninsula 1,381 years ago. Shortly after this, Japan was in a miserable condition. The resources of the land were utterly exhausted; frequent famines and pestilences befell the people; and because of this economic hardship, internal quarrels developed among the people. Sons opposed their parents, and servants fought against their masters. Villages met in battle and provinces were engaged

in bloodshed, until the Imperial Court was troubled. And this was the most calamitous event for the Japanese for whom the Emperor is inviolable and sacred. Although the Imperial Court was entitled to every respect because of its virtuous existence, it was dragged into the internal disturbance that prevailed throughout the whole land, because of the confusion in the people's thought and economic difficulties of the time. Then, there appeared the Saviour, in the person of Crown Prince Umayado or Shotoku-taishi, who acted as Regent for the Empress Suiko and who thought that Buddhism alone could save the country from the internal disturbances. In order to bring about internal harmony and unity of purpose among the people, he thought, national reverence for Sanbo or "Three Treasures" was necessary. The "Three Treasures" in Buddhism consisted of Buddha, Buddha's Teaching and Clergy. By Buddhism alone every person, however sinful, can be saved, and wrongs, however pernicious, can be rectified. Reverence for Three Treasures at times actually meant reverence for the statues of Buddhist, Buddhist sutras and Buddhist priests. However, the real meaning of the Three Treasures is something radically different. Its central idea is a wakeful social life in which every member is keenly conscious of the part he has to play in the life of the community.

To attain such a state, fairness, openness, and harmony among the members of society must be maintained, on one hand; and secrets, intrigues, darkness, unlawfulness, injustice, and the spirit of hate and destruction must be kept out of society, on the other. But, in order to assure fairness and openness among the members of society, a right education is necessary. In order to bring up people in the right direction, reverence for the Supernatural must be taught among infants of 4 or 5 years old. When their ages are between 7 and 15, physical and mental education should be given them. Those above the age of 15 must be taught the right philosophy of life. In the first place, they should be instructed that they should be engaged in agricultural pursuit as the central vocation of the whole universe. Men should rejoice in working on the fields and paddies. To live in the spiritual rejoicing of Buddhism would ultimately result in the establishment of social harmony and in the advent of social progress in the life of the State.

Shotoku-taishi worked in this conviction and his efforts were crowned with success. Those who were poor until yesterday became wealthy today. The population of land increased and there was heard a general chorus of rejoicing. When Shotoku-taishi died some 20 years later, the whole people lamented. History records that, "as soon as the demise of

this great Imperial leader was flashed and spread like wild fire, all pedestrians halted; those who were weaving threw away their reeds and people were silent like the grave, refusing to eat, as if they had lost their own parents.”

During one hundred years that followed, the splendid arts and morality of the two Eras of Nara and Heian developed. Although manifold changes took place in the life of the nation during the following eleven centuries, it is undeniable that it was Buddhism that controlled and developed Japan's culture and institutions. Thus, it is clear that Buddhism succeeded in saving Japan which was on the verge of collapse.

## 2. STRENGTH GIVEN TO BUDDHISM BY JAPAN

At the same time, it should be noted that Japan imparted a fuller life to Buddhism. Although that particular brand of Buddhism which found its way into Japan was a tributary, so to speak, of the main stream of Buddhism, it has since then broadened into a vast expanse not to be seen even in India and China. The main characteristics of Japanese Buddhism are to be found in its stress on the realism of Buddha and the practicality of the creeds and in its attempt to apply them to the life of individuals and the State. While India thinks

Buddha to have entered Nirvana and China believes Buddha is ever extant, Japan stresses on the practical phase of Buddhism, and attaches importance to the actual life of faith. Buddha's teaching is regarded in terms of human life and is not identified with either the doctrines expounded by Gautama or their meanings. In fact, Buddhism in Japan has been by far the most effective means of relieving people of their sufferings, crimes and privations. Thus, Japanese Buddhism is different from those of China and India in that we try to observe the teaching of Buddha through practices such as meditation and prayers. In consequence, Buddhist priesthood which embodies the teaching of Buddhism has been fully alive to the importance of human society, ever intent to serve the community and aiming to maintain harmony in our State life. Thus, Buddhism in Japan has become a practical religion capable of meeting the real needs of all social classes, instead of being a property of the nobility or upper class. This is seen in the different attitude of the Japanese and Chinese towards the Buddhist sutras and temples, though the two peoples agree in their reverence towards them. By their critical attitude and process of elimination, the Japanese developed the good points of Buddhism. This attitude on the part of the Japanese has been also shown in the case of other foreign cultures and

learnings imported into their land. Our ancestors imported Korean culture and then raised it to the high pitch of perfection; and it has come to be an important factor of Japanese civilization, although in Korea it had long ago lost its hold on the people there. The same may be said of Confucianism and Taoism both of which have become living moral forces in Japan, although they have ceased to exercise any strong influence over the Chinese. We have succeeded in enabling the living elements in Chinese culture and learning to develop and enrich our own culture and institutions. Herein are seen our national traits in their most complete form. We are ready to absorb whatever cultures other nations may give us and to develop them to their natural perfection.

One may point to the apparent confusion which has been created in our people's thought as the results of the importation of Western culture in modern times, for we seem to absorb Western ideas and institutions without discrimination. However, such a view is highly superficial. The principal national trait we have observed is bound to operate in our digesting of Western culture. We are certain to develop what is real, true and lasting in Western culture and use them in making our life fuller and more wholesome. For this reason, those who consider us as the imitator of Western nations only

observe our national life on the surface and fail to consider the great undercurrent in our national history.

### 3. BUDDHISM AS SOURCE OF JAPANESE CULTURE

Buddhism has made the original Japanese culture a religious and international force, by deeping and expanding it. Although we admit that the ancient Japanese national idea was based on a deep religious conviction, that conviction was not consciously expressed. And it was Buddhism that imparted a real spiritual force to Japanese culture, by insisting that all social achievements are the result of causal relations and human harmony, and by holding that nothing alone is permanent or real, and that value is created through perfection and the combination of parts into the complete whole. This characteristic idea of Buddhism in Japan is seen in the close and inseparable relations between the Emperor and the people every one of whom is regarded as a child of the Ruler and whose combined endeavors and harmony with one another is the basis of our national power. Every Japanese is conscious of his being a subject of the Emperor and is convinced that his act, however humble, will affect the general march of the State. He also feels that he has to fulfill his duties to society and to the State by way

of showing his gratitude for the great favors he has received from his ancestors, the State and Nature.

Buddhism has formed the theoretical basis of Japan's national ideas and social order and development and has been translated into her learning, morality, art and ceremonies. Although its influence on society has been different in the different periods of time, there is no doubt that it has always formed the foundation of Japanese thought throughout the history of the race.

Moreover, Buddhism widened the people's outlook of life. Before the importation of Buddhism, the national traits of the Japanese had been inevitably marked by an insular spirit. When this religion was introduced, such a narrow sentiment was manifested in opposition shown against it by the leaders of the native religion. Thus, the spirit of national exclusiveness opposed the internationalism of Buddhism, which had spread in Western India, China, Korea and which was a true universal religion whose teaching was eternal and transcended the vicissitudes of the times. Japanese ideas were made international in nature through the influence of Buddhism. Bushido or the ways of the samurai may have existed even before the importation of Buddhism, but there is no doubt that it was strengthened and cultivated by Buddhism. The Japanese may use force at times but their object would be

always to uphold justice and never to carry out any selfish design. They have formed the habit of adhering to justice even at material cost. The virtue of patriotic harmony among our people also has been intensified by the teaching of Buddha. The spirit of self-sacrifice and of great mercy so characteristic of Buddhism has inevitably created a love for peace among the Japanese people. Buddhism also gave a strong impetus to the growth of learning and art among our ancestors. To copy the sutras was thought the most effective method of attaining perfection in learning, while the making or painting the images of Buddhistic deities exercised a powerful influence on the growth of our sculpture and painting. Our ancestors built up their character by earning bread with the sweat of their brows and at the same time by leading a devout religious life. Their national characteristics, born in their fair land of lofty mountains and enchanting rivers, were further beautified by this great universal teaching.

Thus, it is clear that Buddhism has had the effect of deeping and widening whatever good qualities possessed by the Japanese. At the same time, it reconstructed the inherently bad qualities of the Japanese national traits by means of its international and critical standard. Natural tendencies for cruelty and physical violence were happily checked

and softened by the spirit of mercy and sympathies inculcated by Buddhism. Men were reminded of the punishment in the future life and urged to remain in the path of righteousness ; they were encouraged to carry out good and benevolent works by a promise for eternal happiness in store for such deeds. The story of nemesis reminded people of the fearful punishments for the doers of crimes and sins such as cruelty, murder, injustice, robbery, adultery, unlawfulness, fraud, temptation, drunkenness, etc. Buddhism taught people the Five Commandments and Ten Acts of Goodness. The Five Commandments are : Thou shalt not kill ; thou shalt not steal ; thou shalt not commit adultery ; thou shalt not lie ; and thou shalt not get drunk. The Ten Acts of Goodness are acts contrary to each of these Five Commandments. These ways are considered the ordinary ways of man. But Buddhism further urges man to offer his real self to society and to the Greater Life ; to find truth and reality in whatever place he should find himself ; to submit himself gladly to any privation ; to be ever industrious and thrifty ; and to find joy and happiness and gratitude in his daily existence. Thus, the peaceful development in this corner of Asia has been made possible under the benign influence of this great religion, as history clearly indicates.

#### 4. BUDDHISM IN PRESENT-DAY JAPAN

Buddhism prospered in outward appearances during the Tokugawa Period extending for 250 years. It was revered by the people who spent the great part of their income in erecting and maintaining temples. But Buddhism of that period was under the fetters of formalism. It prospered only outwardly. It lacked in a spiritual vigour and the clergy failed to put the spirit of progress, liberty and justice into their work. Thus, Buddhism was in a state of decadence during the several hundred years of our feudal period. The Imperial Restoration of Meiji broke down the formalism by which Buddhism had been placed in outward splendor but in inward decadence. After the Imperial Restoration, Buddhism seemed to have been greatly weakened in its social and spiritual influence. However, the fact remains that Buddhism or rather Buddhistic conceptions still form the foundation of Japanese national traits and ideas. One may truly say that the real glory of Oriental civilization is Buddhism, and that this glory is seen in its most dazzling splendor in Japanese national traits. Japan is ready to contribute towards the development of humanity and the preservation of universal peace, for pacifism and humanity are the two principal social aims of Buddhism.

I have attempted to elucidate in this pamphlet the influence which Buddhism has exercised on the Japanese national traits. If we should go deeper into our study and examine the great part played by each of Buddhist sects such as Hosso, Shingon, Zen and Nenbutsu, etc. all of which were imported through China and underwent transformations on Japanese soil—the more clearly we shall take note of the close relationship between Buddhism and our national characteristics. Separate studies into the influence this great religion has had on Japan's industrial life, on the formation of Bushido and on Japanese culture which has blossomed in splendour, will be also found highly profitable. It is my ardent hope that the scholars of other nations will make further study of this problem for the sake of world peace and international understanding.

— THE END —

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