

THE HEART OF BUDDHISM

by Takeuchi Yoshinori (NY: Crossroad Publ. Co.: 1983; 162 pages; \$17.50 hardcover)

Reviewed by Paul Shozen Hanke

During the last 15 years I have read a lot of books about Buddhism, from simple introductions to in-depth expositions of Buddhist Dharma and practice, and *THE HEART OF BUDDHISM* by Takeuchi Yoshinori stands out as one of the most interesting. But, as editor and translator James Heisig says in his introduction, "I cannot pretend this book makes easy reading." Takeuchi Yoshinori is a Shin Buddhist priest, a prominent scholar, teacher, and one of the leading figures of the Kyoto School of Philosophy. If his subject and depth of knowledge did not combine to make difficult reading, the author's style alone would do the job.

Despite an excellent glossary of Sanskrit and Pali words, the average reader will often need a good dictionary to look up such terms as "metanoia" and "ontological hermeneutics, and there are many German words and phrases that should have been included in the glossary. Furthermore, Takeuchi's sentences sometimes run upwards of 95 words! The book also suffers a bit from being a collection of essays, despite the fine efforts of the editor to organize and relate individual chapters to each other. Nonetheless, *THE HEART OF BUDDHISM* offers a fascinating perspective on contemporary questions of Buddhist faith and practice, and makes a strong contribution to an East/West religious dialogue.

There are two major sections to the book. Section I-**Centering** focuses on the stages of Buddhist contemplation,

while Section II-**Freeing** delves into the doctrine of dependent origination. Takeuchi approaches both subjects from his own unique perspective, which he calls "Buddhist existentialism." This viewpoint provides part of the book's fascination for me, as I have long had a personal aversion to the existentialist perspective. To my limited understanding it seems that the existentialists in general realize that the Void is home, but they hate it, while Buddhism has accepted this ultimate fact of our existence. In the last paragraph of the book Takeuchi sums up by saying that "the significance and depth of meaning of the Great Practice¹ becomes all the more clear when viewed in the light of...contemporary (existential) theology and philosophy of religion," and this is the theme of the entire book.

Whether it becomes more clear or not is a question for each reader to answer, as throughout the book Takeuchi writes on several different levels simultaneously. He blends textual criticism of Sanskrit and Pali Sutras with commentary and interpretation. He frequently compares and contrasts Buddhist and Western/Christian doctrine and theology and abstracts universal dimensions of the phenomenon of religion. He also refers to aspects of Buddhist history, draws examples from everyday life, and relates it all to his own faith as a "Pure Land believer of extremely conservative stamp."

In the first chapter Takeuchi reflects on the silence of Buddha Gotama concerning metaphysical questions. He believes this silence is not a repudiation of metaphysics, or a rejection of all philosophical thought as useless for the goal of Nirvana (as is sometimes heard in Zen circles), but represents a higher insight which is cautious of being led astray by

1 He refers specifically to **Nembutsu** recitation, but the phrase could be more broadly interpreted to mean the Buddha Way.

2 My addition

the "antimonies of theoretical reason." He also argues that Buddhism is not "pragmatic" in the Western sense of relating everything to objects and utility, but rather tries to sound utility to its depth and expose the subject/object disjunction as false.

Buddhism is practical however in all ways aiming toward the goal of enlightenment. For Buddhism, says Takeuchi, the real ground of the phenomenal world is not **metaphysical** (i.e. in a reality "beyond" daily life), but is to be found in the here-and-now. Philosophy may be able to produce an **abstract** harmony between transient existence and the Absolute, but it leaves our "poor existence" in much the same condition as before—i.e. philosophy produces no individual **conversion** in the religious sense.

The stages of Buddhist (and Western) contemplation, says Takeuchi, are aimed at complete conversion of awareness and lifestyle, resulting in what we call salvation. The contemplative processes begin with Sila (the Precepts) and a spirit of conversion which involves an awareness of Nothingness and impermanence, followed by a moral/religious resolve to pursue self-transcendence, plus a radical withdrawal from the world and a turning inward. Gradual progress through the stages of contemplation (dhyana) described in the Sutras finally breaks through ignorance and goes beyond the habitual consciousness of good and evil, resulting in a new way of seeing.

Compassion, in the sense of a detached sympathy that extends to all things, is the fruit of this experience. Takeuchi sums up this section by observing that from the Pure Land point of view **Nembutsu** recitation (calling on the name of Amida Buddha) is the method by which the world "beyond" can be brought into contact with the everyday world and transform it in an age of despair and (as he later points out) decline of the Dharma.

The remainder of the book is devoted to an exposition of the doctrine and contemporary ramifications of dependent origination. Takeuchi's underlying point here is that this basic Buddhist doctrine is not some sort of idealism, but an existential tool for transformation of everyday awareness, involving the interrelatedness of **nama-rupa** (name-form) and **vijnana** (consciousness). The chain of causation described in the Sutras, says Takeuchi, finally gives way to a deeper reciprocity that is a springboard for leaping free from the fetters of existential causes altogether. The entire discussion weaves in threads of Buddhist eschatology (the 3 periods of Dharma decline) and history, Martin Heidegger's "Being and Time," and commentary on relevant Sutra passages.

Takeuchi also considers the metaphysical and existential questions that faced Buddha Gotama himself. He observes how Shakyamuni chose not to push the

anxieties he felt (when faced with the realities of sickness, old age, and death) into the unconscious, but faced them squarely in a religious context. Upon enlightenment these phenomena did not disappear, but the historic Buddha was no longer held captive by them.

Finally, argues Takeuchi, we live in an increasingly secular society where the concept of transcendence is losing its traditional meaning. He notes that some contemporary Christian theologians (i.e. Tillich and Robinson) find difficulty in accepting the notion of a God "up there," and seek transcendence in the depths of the human spirit. Takeuchi rhetorically asks if Shin Buddhists should approach the problem of the "Pure Land" in the same way. His answer is that for him transcendence must necessarily include a sense of "to...from" (i.e. the Tathagata has not only gone to the Other Shore, but returns in a reciprocal process to save suffering beings). There is, he says, a two-way encounter between the world, human existential reality, and the Absolute, that involves a world-to-world movement, but in which each of the three realms completely encompasses the others.

The transcendent, he argues, merges into the present through the vehicle of finite human beings, and is to be found in the midst of everyday life (exemplified by Bonhoeffer's phrase, the "beyond within"). Therefore, Takeuchi concludes, the Pure Land has a significance that cannot easily be replaced by any other symbol. **Namu-Amida-Butsu** recitation belongs to the absolute world where subject/object duality is finally overcome and the distinction between **tariki** (other power) and **jiriki** (self-power) is dissolved.

In this short review I have merely skimmed the surface of *THE HEART OF BUDDHISM*, and haven't even attempted a systematic presentation of Takeuchi's ideas. I will leave it to scholars and to people whose understanding of Buddhism is far greater than mine to analyze and criticize the merits of Takeuchi's arguments, but as a lay reader with a very limited background in philosophy, I suspect that this may be one of the more important books on Buddhism and East/West philosophy of religion to have been published in the recent past. Just be aware before you pick it up that the scant 143 pages of text will probably seem like a lot more as you read them. Nonetheless, the publishers and translator deserve a sincere thank you for making this work available in English, and for introducing Takeuchi to a western audience—both academic and Buddhist.

*Paul Shozen Hanke is an architectural designer, builder, teacher, writer, also a lay Buddhist and avid reader. His reviews have previously appeared in **Fine Homebuilding**, **New England Builder**, and other journals. He lives with his wife and 5-year old son in Plainfield, Vermont.*

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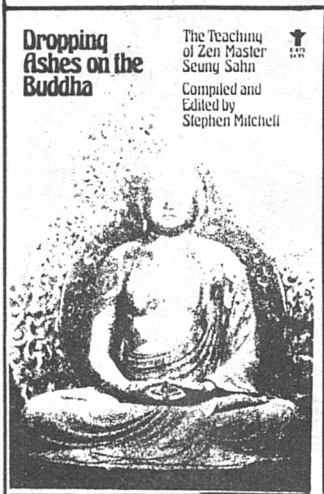
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