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How Avidya Leads to Suffering:

Paradigms and Transformations in Contemporary Japanese Society

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Introduction

One year ago, a sudden earthquake, and the ensuing flood waves and nuclear crisis have violently drawn the world's attention to Japan, a Japan afflicted by economic regression, staggering production and an ever widening gap between rich and poor. The Japanese society is rapidly ageing: almost one out of three Japanese is over 65 years old and the pension system is operating at its limits, just like the public sector as a whole.

It seems that a lot of people are suffering from mental disease, or torment by mental sufferings by losing hope for the future. The main sufferings of contemporary people are distress of isolation, loneliness, anxiety, distrust, inconvenience, emptiness of life (or a sense of meaninglessness), fear of death and so on. As a result, mental sufferings like depression are on the rise and more than thirty thousand people commit suicide every year, for more than ten years now.

We Japanese have to cure our mind and cope with these problems. We have to look for a way to live an energetic and hopeful life again.

In this paper, I will try to present the way to settle those mental problems from a Buddhistic point of view. I will eventually come to the conclusion that a major cause of those worries is a wrong way of thinking which is based on the scientific worldview adopted in the modern times. Although we have constructed much of our civilization through the modern scientific worldview and its way of thinking, we have to pay attention to the fact that such a way of thinking in itself must be called Avidya in Buddhism.

Avidya is what we Buddhists call the root of suffering. It means no-wisdom. What we need, and what we strive to develop, is its opposite, Prajna, or Jnana in

other words. It means the power to see things as they are, to cast light on the real facts. In order to overcome Avidya, we have to change our way of thinking. We have to recover our ties with other people, with society, Mother Nature and the universe. Once we set out on recovering ties, we are well on our way to obtaining true wisdom, Prajna, and overcome Avidya. The way to Prajna starts by recovering our relations to the world and the living beings within it. It is the way to overcome mental sufferings through true insight.

In this paper, I would like to analyze the present Japanese society from a Buddhist point of view. Japanese society, as we will see, is mostly secular and non-religious. I would also like to look behind this fact and provide some background information.

1. Japan as a non-religious society

Researchers in the sociology of religions have recently described Japan as the most secularized and non-religious country in the world. In such a non-religious society, religion has only a limited ability to influence people's lives. A "religious" lifestyle is that which grants access to the world beyond mere appearances, to the invisible and even incomprehensible world. In contrast, a 'non-religious' lifestyle puts a narrow limitation on people's lives, limiting their outlook to the world of mere appearances. In this way, the 'non-religious' approach encourages a worldly outlook on life, it encourages secularity.

Once people put their whole awareness only in worldly appearances, it does not only limit their perception, but deeply affects their values, too. When values become secularized, limited to a materialistic approach, people lose their contact with the invisible dimension, there will be no more certainty about life after death and people start to think that life will vanish after death.¹ The very idea of death is then beset with all kinds of horrors, and it becomes a taboo to even talk about death.

¹ Tatsuo Haya [2011] has commented about the way of cognition in contemporary people, "Most of the Japanese who have been influenced by modern rationalism believe only in what they see, and not in what is invisible. Since they don't believe in the invisible, they come to think that what they cannot see does not exist, thinking in a scientific manner. They will not be able to accept the existence of the Pure Land or salvation by Buddha Amitabha."

2. How did the Japanese society become secularized?

-The problem of education-

2-1. Education based on scientific thought, and the mental sufferings of contemporary people

One of the factors underlying such mental suffering is in a way of cognition which Japanese people has adopted through the education system, based on the scientific thoughts of Western modernism after the second World War. Thus, people have been trained to understand the world through the scientific paradigm, which was established by Descartes (1596-1650).

Modern science tries to achieve pure and objective understanding, and it is widely held that such understanding can only be achieved through a strict separation between matter and mind, by isolating mind and matter from their fundamental interconnection. This principle of scientific thinking has been widely adopted. On this basis, material things are held in highest esteem, and so material achievements take absolute precedence over all other values.

Nonetheless, such a way of thinking includes a mechanical view of Mother Nature, a dualism of matter and mind. It has cut the relation between humankind and Mother Nature.² Therefore, the Japanese have come to hold scientific materialism to be the only truth,³ and to be perplexed about the meaning of religion and its inherent value.⁴

² Yujiro Nakamura (1977: 138-139) points out the problem of the mechanical view of Mother Nature and says, "This mechanical view of Mother Nature is skillfully made, the view of a physically solid Mother Nature. Descartes brilliantly explains its mechanism. He distinguished between soul and physical solid as different dimensions. The actuality of the soul is to think, real substance of physical solid is not in weight, solidness of color but only in spatial expanse. A physical solid thing and Mother Nature (as an object) are completely separated from the soul (as a subject), and was restored to the spatial expanse with three dimensions. In such a mechanism, both mathematical rationalism and demonstrativeness, which are hardly connected, came to be connected in the mechanical view of Mother Nature.

³ Ryuji Ito [1999] introduces Yujiro Nakamura's opinion [1992], "Since the beginning of modern times, we human beings adopted a mechanical and analytical way of understanding, and objectified the phenomena and Nature, and come to know the universal rules of them, and tried to used them," and says "I think that, (The lost of Humanity through the development of civilization is), caused to the education influenced by soul-less psychology, which is based on the science influenced by thought of universality, objectivity, and restoring elements. Such psychology has usurped the awe and respect

To be sure, the Japanese people have accomplished unprecedented economic developments, and lead a more convenient and comfortable life with technical innovations within the modern Western scientific paradigm.

Thus, most of the people have adopted a value system which regards material progress and possessions alone. Meanwhile they have lost, slowly but surely, any sensitivity for the invisible power of the religious sphere. Such a value system has caused mental sufferings like distress of isolation, emptiness of life, the fear of death and so on.⁵

Human existence is inevitably linked to searching for meaning. He has the power of thought, and so he cannot avoid yearning for the meaning of his life. If he cannot find it, he will suffer from an emptiness which never satisfies him. But he cannot solve this problem with science, because the object of science is confined to the material dimension. And within the material dimension alone, there is no meaning. In this way, the education based on the approach of Western modern science, does not have the power to help us on our searching for meaning and fulfillment. In this way, Japanese people have lost track of a meaningful life.

for something transcendence from Human, and has weekend sensitivity of them, and has made the noble humanity a secular one."

⁴ Tatsuo Haya [2011] says, "In our case, the influence of the view of restoration to elements, which make all the phenomena to be scattered. We hardly know it, because it is very naturally attached to us. It is fixed to the base of our point of view, worldview, a view of human beings, and a sense of values while we are not aware of it. (p.195)

⁵ In Japan, the education based on modern scientific paradigm has caused not only mental sufferings in individuals but social problems. Now, Many Japanese people have come to take the theory of self-responsibility for granted. And it comes to be difficult for them to ask somebody to help, because of remote relationship with others. In education, the principle of competitions, results and adaptation to environment of school have been emphasized after the Second World War, now the most of people cannot find the meaning of life, and they have to endure the isolation, the meaninglessness of life and the fear of death. NHK, the broad casting station set to the air the program, "Persons in thirties cannot say 'Help me!'" on Oct 7th 2010. This program showed that persons in thirties cannot say "Help me!," even though they are about to die of starvation.

Because people have been educated in such sense of values, like principle of results and competitions, and the theory of self-responsibility, most of them think that all the responsibilities for their own problems are themselves, and they have to solve them only by themselves. Thus, In fact, a number of homeless persons in thirties have been rapidly increasing. SPA, an internet news pointed out that the number of isolated death has increased in persons of thirties and forties, and said " Their way of thought which brings out their own isolation in society, would be the largest problem in Japanese society," on Jan 20th 2011.

2-2. The problem of language in education

Now, I point out the problem of language in education focused on scientific worldview. With this focus, language was reduced to a tool for material achievements. We, the contemporary people have not been taught to make the connection between immediate experience and language. In school education, language has been kept aloof of real experience, focusing on abstract expressions and concepts. Thus we trust language as a semiotic system and have begun to compulsively understand all phenomena through language, but this language has no relation with our actual experience or reality.

To perceive the world through such empty abstraction does not give us the power to live. Therefore, we come to live in a world of ideas and abstract concepts. Our languages create a virtual world out of touch with reality. We have not learned how to go beyond this scientific world and connect with reality again in school.

It is thus easy to see that this trap of conceptual and abstract perception causes loss of purpose and happiness in life. It is a truly idealistic way of life, trapped in ideas and conceptions. So most Japanese have no choice but to shut themselves inside this unrealistic world. They cannot touch the real world, and lose their relation with their actual, immediate environment. This is called Avidya, lack of wisdom, the darkness of ignorance in Buddhism. Thus, we comprehend that Avidya, the unrelated way of approaching the world, lies at the root of the distress which a lot of Japanese experience these days.

2-3. A more effective approach to the meaning of life

The best way, thus, to resolve this kind of distresses, is to free oneself from Avidya through Wisdom, Prajna. Prajna is a sensitive way of understanding through mind and body, and of building a relation with the reality, an intimate relation with the world. When we regain the sense of relation with other people, with society, Mother Nature and the universe, we regain the ability to see ourselves in a balanced and objective way. It is in this way that we can find the answer to the meaning or purpose of our own life, to the meaning of our human existence. We can recover the original way of life.

In order to overcome such a situation, we have to transform the way of thinking which is solely based on the narrow scientific worldview. At a certain stage, the scientific model obstructs us from seeing the world as it is. This paradigm separates substance from soul, it abstracts and conceptualizes them.

By going beyond the world of ideas, we can build a relation with the real world. If we thus connect language with the reality of experience, whatever we learn through the language has the power to enrich our daily lives; it gives us the power to live.

When we recover the relation between ourselves and others, we can feel the suffering of others near us. We develop empathy and we begin to find ways of helping them.

If we recover the relation between ourselves and the society, we can find ways to contribute to the society on a larger scale, tackling its various problems. This will naturally fill our lives with purpose and meaning. Then our anxiety and the trifling lethargy of an undirected life will be overcome. Ultimately, the purpose of our life is finding ways in which we can help others and contribute to the well-being of society as a whole. The first step to such a purposeful life is recovering our sense of relation with others, with individuals right near us, and with the society as a whole. In the same way, we can recover the sense of relation with Mother Nature and the universe.

Life of man forms an integral part of Mother Nature. Our human body consists of the Mother Nature's elements, it is maintained and nourished by many forms of life that circulate in Mother Nature. Mother Nature is a part of earth, and earth is a part of the universe. If we look at our physical reality, the human body is always open to Mother Nature and the universe, and is intimately connected with them.

In the same way, I think, human minds have to be opened to Mother Nature and the universe, just like the body. The meaning of life is already given by Mother Nature, by our place in the universe. We cannot find the meaning of life by our own abstract ideas and conceptual thought.

Only humans are given the power to think freely, so they ask for comfort and the fulfillment of sensual pleasure in life. Once a desire is filled, they feel comfort,

and easily mistake comfort for happiness. So they tend to use their free will to satisfy their senses.

It often happens that human beings create an artificial world where their egocentric desires are satisfied. Especially, the development of technology since the Industrial Revolution was aimed at controlling and conquering Mother Nature. This manufactured environment provides us with comfort and convenience. This has, however, deeply affected Mother Nature to the point of destruction. At the same time, we see an increasing gap between rich and poor countries, and various kinds of inequality crimes against mankind. The present economy, with its compulsive obligation to ever-faster growth, burdens our earth conspicuously and it cannot be sustained forever. The egocentric way of life is on its way ruin human existence; humans have not been able to escape from this egocentric way of life.⁶

Such egocentricity is strengthened by the abstract, idea-based way of perceiving the world. Obviously, it does not relate properly to other people, society, Mother Nature and the universe. Without such relations, they cannot find the meaning of life. Instead of finding relations and purpose, people hope to find satisfaction in the fulfillment of their ever-increasing desires. Such a loss of contact with the real world brings mental sufferings to the people, because of Avidya.

While most forms of life do not act against Mother Nature, only man is given 'will' which he can employ detached from Mother Nature. Why is this so?

Animals and plants are inseparable from Mother Nature, they have no ability to create a new artificial world on their own. The power to construct his environment is given only to man. Instead of wasting this precious ability for the mere fulfillment of egocentric desire, we can use it in a truly constructive way. If

⁶ Takeshi Umehara [2012] points out that we have to innovate the civilization which pursues the egocentric desire, based on modern scientific paradigm, and he says "The accident of the Fukushima atomic power generation is the accident of civilization." "We have come to get power out of atoms according to demands of Western civilization which aims at affluent life." "Now the view of the world is on the issue, Western civilization has produced the scientific and technical civilization based on the thought that conquering Mother Nature brings happiness. But such a thought is about to cause the destruction of the environment and bring untold sufferings, ultimately breaking the human race. Now it is the time for Non-Western countries to provide advices against Western civilization. (Newspaper of Nishinihon, Feb 2nd, 2012, 'Thinking about Atomic Power Generation, My point of View).

we convert our short-sighted and narrow-minded craving into true compassion, we can find and carry out our mission to create a new world of peace and equality.

2-4. What is the effect of prajna on the mental state?

Prajna is the ability to look at reality as it is. Prajna, wisdom, is fundamental to Buddhism. Sakyamuni discovered the way to remedy trifling agony through true wisdom. To those who understood this opportunity, he taught the structured way to Prajna, which includes ethical behavior, meditation and understanding, the three points known as "the three kinds of training." The realization of Prajna is understanding things as they really are.

There are three kinds of wisdom: wisdom through listening, wisdom through reflection, and wisdom through cultivation. These three correspond to a stepwise approach. First, one develops some interest and listens to Sakyamuni's teaching. After this, as a second step, one contemplates the teachings heard before and scrutinizes them on one's own. The third and highest step is then to put it into practice in daily life, in its whole profundity. Only listening to the Buddha's teaching will not be enough to comprehend the deeper aspects of it. It takes some reflection, some time in quiet to really think it through conclusively. If we then find conviction based on our own scrutiny, we bring these teachings to our mind in very ordinary, daily life situations. This is the way to come to actual, deep insight. This blends into the wisdom through cultivation, in which we practice applying these teachings again and again. We connect to the experience of reality in our daily life.

In order to deepen our meditation, we have to direct our concentration at an object. In the teaching of early Buddhism, we concentrate our consciousness before meditation. The focus of our concentration then rests on the 'three treasures,' the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. In this state of concentration, we can overcome our conceptual thinking, our habitual construction of ideas, and come to rest in a state of meditation. Once conceptual thinking comes to a rest, we gain a connection with the real world, with both body and mind. In this way we can perceive our relation with the people around us, with society, Mother Nature and the universe as a whole. We come to know the relations between individuals and the whole, and realize that all individuals are united in one body. We come to realize that all existence is based on altruistic

compassion without self-centeredness. And we come to know that only man lives a self-centered life filled with desires. We come to feel out of place with such a way of life. We come to perceive that our egoism is wrong, comparing the universe which has no egoism, but has compassion instead. Such an understanding is Prajna, or wisdom. Through correcting errors, we will come to be what we ought to be. We can get a real feeling of the world in which we are connected to each other through meditation, not through the head, but body and mind.

Prajna is the true understanding of what we are, both subjectively and relatively. Once we begin to feel the world which connects us all, we understand just how much we have been living an egocentric lifestyle. We make our self-centered mind itself the object of our meditation, thus rectify our self-centered way of life, and recover our true Mother Nature of compassion. Ultimately, Prajna is a sensitive understanding through one's own experience rather than just intellectual and rational cognition.

The Buddha Sakyamuni taught that the way to Prajna is the way of meditation. Meditation is mindfulness, the concentration of our consciousness. The tradition of Mahayana Buddhism transmits various ways of meditation, such as samatha and vipasyana, repeating of the name of Buddha Amitabha, chanting the Nichiren prayer, Zen meditation while sitting or even while walking, to name just a few. All these practices have the same fundamental function, they are methods of meditation.⁷ They assist us in focussing our consciousness so that we can recover the feeling of relation between ourselves and others, the society, Mother Nature, and the universe. Rather than perceiving the world through abstract language and ideas, we can touch it directly with body and mind without language.

To sum up, we can say that there are two fundamental ways of relating to the world:

⁷ Hideho Arita [2011], a neurologist says "Meditation in sitting revitalizes the serotonin nerves. Increasing secretion of serotonin in the brain appears in the change of actions of the cerebrum while awakening, and positive feelings appears in emotion. Furthermore, in such circumstances, blood flow in frontal brain increases and has good influence on such actions of brain like concentration, intuition, empathy, and self-consciousness." And he corroborated that humans can get the same effects through walking practices with enchanting mantra in mountaineering asceticism, and pointed out that they will get the same effect through chanting the holy invocation in Jodo-sect and Jodo-Shin-sect of Japan."

- 1) Avidya; the perception through abstract language and concepts, through self-centered desires and focus on superficial appearances.
- 2) Prajna; the direct recognition based on experience, a relating to the world in an unbiased and direct way, through our body and senses.

These two ways of relating to the world have already been pointed out by Shinran (1173-1263), who was the founder of the Shin-Buddhism, Jodo-Shin-Sect in Japanese Buddhism.⁸

In order to follow the teachings of Buddha, it is not sufficient to just listen to the Buddha's teaching, and grasp it as an abstract concept. That is not the way out of the world of ideas, but rather another virtual world of imagination. We have to live these teachings in order to connect to our experiences in daily life.

To that end, we have to practice the three kinds of training and the three kinds of Jnana. We have to first listen to the teaching in concentration, then repeat those teaching and take them to heart, and finally master deep aspects of the teaching in life.

Conclusion

-In order to overcome the avidya in contemporary society-

Being ignorant has become a kind of fashion. Of course, it is convenient to rely on the school's textbooks as long as that fulfils one's material needs. But from a Buddhist perspective, this is nothing but Avidya. It does not help in recognizing things in the manner they actually are, but we grasp them as abstract ideas. There is no true Prajna in it. Our education is limited to a certain set of ideas, and our students are left on their own, exposed to all the distress that comes from such a way of perceiving the world. If we just look at the facts, at the state most people

⁸ Shinran denied the idealistic way of recognizing the Buddha's Prajna through abstract language and concepts, and had considered this to be the erroneous 'way of Self-Power, Avidya.' People cannot gain Prajna in such a way. And Shinran taught "the true way of Other-Power" in which people can gain Prajna. The word 'Other' here means Amitabha Buddha, or more specifically Amitabha Buddha's vows to rescue living beings. Shinran thought that people could gain Prajna by entrusting their whole existence to Amitabha Buddha through faith and His name. If people perceive Other-Power and repeat to concentrate the consciousness to it through practices in daily life, and entrust their whole existence to Amitabha Buddha, then they come to gain Prajna, the Power of the Other, the power of Amitabha Buddha.

are in, we can see that science as such has not helped us to overcome worry and distress. For that, an altogether different approach to our existence and our experience is necessary. It would require transforming the analytical and conceptual way of seeing the world into cognition by body and mind, touching the real world.

Such transformation is possible through the various ways of meditating and focusing one's mind as I described earlier, invocation, walking meditation and so on. In Japan, various Buddhist denominations, such as the Pure-Land tradition, Zen, or Nichiren have transmitted these practices for a long time, though the teachings have gradually weakened, the essence of the practices has become evasive and a lot of priests have turned to a secular life.

We Buddhists need to call out to the Japanese people to change their approach and overcome the spiritual crisis of the present society. We, the people of today, have to recover our relation with the reality. We have to recover it through obtaining Prajna by the practice of Buddhistic meditation. Then, we will be able to see the real world for the first time.

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