

## Religion in Transformation: A New Dialogue between Buddhism and Christianity

Michael von Brück

It might be useful to start with some biographical remarks, because they are essential to understand the urgency of this existential dialogue which is suggested here. Originally, I was brought up in East Germany. I studied Protestant Theology, Indology and Comparative Linguistics. I then went to India for about six years altogether and stayed in South India in Madras in order to study Indian philosophies – first, Advaita Vedanta and later Mahayana Buddhism on the basis of Nagarjuna studies. One of the fruits of this work are a couple of books on Buddhism and Hinduism, such as a new translation and commentary of the Bhagavad Gita. This is a seminal book in Germany now because it gives not only the interpretation of the text in its context but also the long history of the reception in India and in the West. Then, together with a Chinese professor, Whalen Lai, I brought out a book on Buddhism and Christianity, containing the history of encounter as well as a philosophical dialogue, including a new view on what I call historical hermeneutics. I have also written a book, which provides an extended introduction to Buddhism in all its different historical developments as well as another book on Buddhism, which provides an anthology of some Mahayana sutras, including some chapters of the Lotus Sutra with commentary. The book is an introduction to Buddhism, which is quite popular in Germany. Though it is complicated, it gives some of its philosophies. Finally, the most recent is a book called *The 101 Most Important Questions to Buddhism*. I had been asked to write a more popular book based on 101 questions. So, I asked my students, what questions they would have about Buddhism today and then tried to answer those 101 questions.

I lived a couple of years in India, associated with the University of Madras, and then later returned to Germany. I was a professor in Hamburg, then in Tübingen, and then I went to Regensburg University. For the last 20 years, I spent at Munich University, and right

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Michael von Brück (ミュンヘン大学元教授)

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now, after retirement, I am still a professor at Munich University in the doctoral program on Buddhist studies and an Honorary Professor at the Catholic University of Linz in Austria. I am also the director of an Academy for the Education in Palliative Spiritual Care. We train doctors and nurses and everyone is interested in the question of how to deal with people dying and with one's own death. You see, this offers a spectrum of different perspectives and meets with my interest in transpersonal states of consciousness, i.e., I am teaching yoga and Zen-meditation. I studied in Kyoto at Tenryuji under Hirata Seiko *Roshi*, who was also a philosopher at Hanazono University and connected with the so-called Kyoto School of Philosophy (Nishida, Tanabe, Nishitani, Ueda, etc.). But because he spoke German (he had studied with Heidegger), I did my *Koan* studies with him in German and that is why I did not learn Japanese. Excuse me for that, please.

### **Cross-cultural encounter of Buddhists and Christians as an existential renewal**

Cross-cultural encounter is a transforming experience. It includes a challenge to personal identity on all levels of being – language, cultural habits, rituals, beliefs and personal relations. It is not only a study and comparison of ideas codified in texts, but it is also a living experience.

Since the 19th century, starting perhaps with Schopenhauer, and then, of course, philosopher Nietzsche, and the great composer Wagner with his big operas, we have had a tremendous influx of Buddhism. And though there are not many Buddhists in numbers in Central Europe, Buddhist thought, Buddhist ideas, and Buddhist practice, such as meditation and Buddhist philosophy, play a prominent role in Western secular or post-secular environments. Buddhism is seen by many scientists, by psychological practitioners, by intellectuals of all kinds, such as writers and also poets, as a source of inspiration, which might be more challenging than just the Western philosophy and Western tradition. By the way, one of the great poets of Germany, Rainer Maria Rilke, who was writing at the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, received many influences from Buddhism. Buddhism has many different aspects which receive different streams of reception in worldwide contexts. Buddhism can be seen as a philosophy (especially a theory of cognition), a psychology and/or a religion with rituals and practical application in day-to-day life. It is all of this and more.

However, most important now is the question: What can Buddhists and Christians contribute today? Humanity faces the most difficult problems, and the most striking ones are ecological disasters and violence all over. Are religions part of the problem or part of the solution? Probably both. On the one hand, the present-day religions came into being about 3,000 years ago with the formation of cities and later states along the great rivers of the

earth. They gave identity and stability to social and political formations. They told stories (myths) and created rituals that formed identity and citizenship as well as legal systems so that communities had written rules or customs to integrate individual and social interests. On the other hand, religions became also social systems engaged in segregating peoples from each other. That was the situation our religions grew out of 4,000 to 2,500 years ago. Religions changed with changing circumstances. In so far as separate states merged into empires (by force or non-violently by trade and cultural mergers), religions also developed into universalist systems with more or less universal and general claims.

But, the religious quest is more. It is a quest of the human being asking, “Who am I?” and “What is the purpose of all this?” , “Is there a purpose?” , and “What are the right ways to respond or to get correspondence or resonance with reality?”

According to physical and cultural circumstances, in adaptation to different environments, we have inherited different forms of religion. Types of religion differ also within one culture; they depend on special constructs and levels of education. We have the popular religion of the people trying to cope with misery, death and dying, trying to cope with the problem of chance and necessity, trying to deal with the psychological frustration of human beings, especially with anxiety, and the need for security and identity. Humans have developed religious rituals of all kinds in order to meet this situation. But then, we have also more sophisticated religion, intellectually reflected and advanced. This holds true for Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism (not to talk about Confucianism and Taoism), but we have strong and specific philosophical traditions also in Judaism and Islam. People all over ask the questions: “What is consciousness?” , “What is the property of human beings?” , “How do we generate and harvest knowledge?” , “What is the proper way of action with regard to our relationship with one another and with nature?” and so on. Most important is the problem: “How do we know (and could perhaps agree on) what the right way is to act in this world?”

To my students, I usually explain in a very simple way what religion is: Religion is the horizon of hope and sometimes the experience that the world is cosmos and not chaos. These are two Greek terms. Today, we use the term “cosmos” usually for all that is. But in Greek, originally, it means beauty or order; that is, the ordered, the structured world. And “chaos” , of course, is the unordered world. Our life experience, the historical experience of humankind, is very much shaped by trying to cope with chaos, to cope with chance and life, that is unpredictable. But somehow, we need the trust or the belief and the experience sometimes, that there is beauty, cosmos, and order in the world. And this is what I would call the source of religion.

On that universal anthropological basis, we now can take a look at the specific

conditions and expressions of single religions, and here, we talk about Buddhism and Christianity as historically conditioned appearances. Buddhism and Christianity came into being at a time when societies, both in India and in Palestine, were in tremendous transformation. I will not go into detail because this would take the rest of the day. It is sufficient to analyze, that both religious movements are movements against the mere ritual of religions, the priesthood, which you had in the Jerusalem temple, or the Brahmanic establishment in India. Both priestly establishments were diagnosed as being superficial, divisive or even oppressive. Both Gautama Shakyamuni, who was called the Buddha (the awakened one), and Jesus of Nazareth, who was called Christ (the anointed one) reacted against it and pointed out that real religion is the transformation of the mind. It is not by rituals, not by all kinds of beliefs and so on, but by transforming your mind or developing the real potentials of your mind that you are religious. In the language of the early Christians, this is expressed as *metanoia* (complete turnaround or change of the *nous*, heart-mind, Mk 1, 15-16). In terms of Buddhism, this is expressed as realizing your true nature, which is called Buddha-Nature (*buddhatva* or *tathagatagarbha*), the potential of all sentient beings. In Christianity, you need to realize that you are very close to God, as Jesus says, or your open (converted) innermost being (face) mirrors the glory of God (as Paul states in 2 Kor 3,18). In Buddhism, you awaken to the truth which is within you, and you develop your Buddha nature, which is in yourself. In other words, both religions point to the development of the hidden human potential.

We have different metaphors: *metanoia* and *awakening*. Both point to different states of mind which can and need to be attained. *Awakening* is like awakening from sleep to waking awareness: the world around you has not changed, but your mind has changed completely, because the one who *awakes* from sleep sees (and cognizes) differently. *Metanoia* is like turning around the core of your deepest level of consciousness, the very source of cognition, emotion, memory and subtle awareness. We can demonstrate this by looking at Tanabe Hajime's seminal book, *Philosophy as Metanoetics*. He takes the term from ancient Greek philosophy and transforms it into a cross-cultural category. *Metanoia* (jpn. *zange*) contains the word *noia*, which is a derivative of *nous*, a neo-platonic word for the source of consciousness; it can be understood as the One reflected in itself. And "meta" means turn around. So, turn around your *nous*, your mind-source. In the Buddhist perspective, of course, you have the cultivation of *shin*, consciousness (you also can read in Japanese as *kokoro*, the heart, or the mental basis). You also have the same sign or Chinese character, *shin*, which you use for the basis of the mind and also for the heart. So, you can read it both as mind and heart. This term is a translation of Sanskrit *citta*, the very root-level of consciousness that comprises both intellect and emotion. So, it is not just intellectual knowledge or abstract knowledge, which is to be changed in both traditions,

but the complete mental structure. Now, this refers all back to *citta*, the very basis of the mental apparatus. When Jesus talks about *metanoia*, or actually in the imperative *metanoete*, he means that you really should turn your mind from the scattered thoughts and contradictory emotions, from the scattered impressions and experiences, into a mind which is totally directed to the oneness of God, in Christian terms. In Buddhist terminology, this would be the oneness of consciousness, or perhaps the oneness of the three bodies of the Buddha (*trikaya*), ultimately reflected in the *dharmakaya*, or to the oneness of the mind in Buddhist terms.

Human beings are distracted by contradicting emotions based on sensual impressions, which are processed in such a way that a certain Ego-consciousness is created. This is diagnosed as a false fabrication, or ignorance (*avidya*). In order to maintain this false construction, humans tend to deny the impermanence (*anitya*) of everything and desire some kind of stable and unchanging order (including a fixed mental construction), which is solid and mirrors the desire for security. This gets frustrating, because everything is impermanent. The discrepancy between the desire for permanence and the reality of impermanence is the source for frustration and suffering (*dukkha*).

This frustration is deep. It causes sufferings of all kinds, which we cannot analyze here in detail. But this condition or predicament is the root for mental constructions of a better world, a better life, a better emotional and social balance, etc. This is called *utopia*, or a “no place” , or a better world humans can imagine and should strive for.

## Utopia

I like to make a distinction between three types of utopia. They have to do with space, time and consciousness, so we have a spatial utopia, we have a temporal utopia, and we have a mental utopia. The *spatial utopia* is there as a good world, a beautiful land, a flowering region somewhere else on Earth. It has been called Atlantis, or “the land, where milk and honey flows” , Shambhala or El Dorado. Sometimes it has more spiritual connotations; sometimes it is a materialistic supermarket. Even the Buddhist Pure Land (*sukhavati*, *jodo*) is full of pleasing material objects. It is not quite on Earth, rather it is more a space in the intermediate realm of reality or somewhere else. The spacial utopia is outdated, however, because the earth is known today; Google Maps can track every spot on the globe, and there is no space any more for an ideal realm. So, what do we do? We foster the spatial utopia by ET, extraterrestrial worlds. People dream of emigrating to Mars or somewhere else. That is the same attitude as the one displayed by earlier generations in their myths. Today, we realize to have destroyed our world, so let us move out. Rockets are being built already, and the movies are filled with possible star treks.

The second utopia is a *temporal utopia*, which projects the idea that in the beginning, everything was good and at the end of time, it will get good again. In between, the world got corrupted, but in the end, it will be good again. This is the Biblical utopia, which has shaped a Christian understanding of history, to some extent: In the beginning, you have the paradise, then the corruption period (history of the world), and the eschatological paradise (and the heavenly Jerusalem coming down from heaven) again. In a secularized form, this is the Marxist utopia. To some extent, it is in some conceptualizations, such as the Tibetan Kalacakra myth of Shambhala and/or the Chinese White Lotus Sects; this myth is even there in Buddhism. But as we all know, the temporal utopia did not materialize. The second coming of Christ was postponed time and again, the ideal of the Communist society has been discredited, because it did not work, and the end of the world has not yet happened. It has become difficult to be patient and wait, because we do not have the time to wait anymore.

The third utopia is the utopia concerning the yet *undiscovered land of consciousness*. It is about the change of the mind and the heart. This is the type of utopia the Buddha and the Christ had in mind when they started to spread their respective messages. Both share an optimistic view concerning human beings; they live in ignorance or sin, to be sure, but this can be changed. Purification, healing and recovery of the mind are possible. What the Buddha is concerned with is both realistic and optimistic: The first insight expressed in the First Noble Truth is the recognition of universal suffering or unlimited frustration: *sarvam dukkham*. Yet, the second truth states that this diagnosis is not apt to lead us into mental depression, but to find out causes and reasons, the analysis needs to go on. We cannot describe the evil and stop there, but we need to analyze what the causes are to find out whether this nexus can be overcome. This is precisely what the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Noble Truths are about. Clearly, according to Buddhist analysis, suffering has its root in craving and endless desire. This, however, has its root in the assumption of a false Ego; for if one needs to stabilize this false Ego, one will try to boost and inflate it by craving for material or mental goods in order to inflate this Ego. Since others are doing exactly the same, one's own claims are conflicting with the claims of others. This leads to frustration, for the Ego remains fragile, subject to defeat and decay, and therefore, humans start to develop hatred. Desire and hatred are two sides of the same coin, and both are rooted in the fundamental ignorance concerning the status of the Ego. The Buddha is very clear: The Ego is a psychological construction, useful for daily dealings, but it has no ultimate reality. It believes to be an independent eternal entity, but in reality, it is not. It is a fabricated, impermanent, relational, and a changing conventional entity. To realize this truth is the beginning of an awakening, the beginning of a change of consciousness. This is what the Buddhists again and again have stressed, and what Buddhist reformers, such

as Nichiren Daishonin, repeated in much later times: Impermanence is not a curse, it is the possibility and precondition to change and to grow. Everything is in evolution. Therefore, the mind also is convertible. The mind can be trained, redirected and changed. This is the very idea and experience of spiritual practice. It is the core of what the Buddha discovered against the Brahmanic stratification of society, which is more static and oriented on the performance of rituals. Rituals might be useful, but only in so far as they further the spiritual practice of cultivating the mind. What the Buddha actually discovered, and what is new in the philosophical history of India at his time, was what is expressed in the term *pratityasamutpada* (jpn. *engi*), the interconnectedness of everything or co-dependent arising. It is not only the interconnectedness of the eight or 12 angles of the Buddhist path as in early Buddhism, but also as later in Mahayana, the interconnectedness of all that is. In other words, when you look at the world, according to the Buddhist intuition and experience, it is not that we have single substances and individuals, which later on intermingle and get coopted so that composition occurs out of which new things would emerge. Rather, the very basis of reality is relationship, not substance, and out of these relationships, things will emerge: things like subatomic particles, energy waves, atoms, molecules, cities, animals, humans, worlds and so on. They too will dissolve and decay again and emerge anew in a different way. So, relationship, or the very interrelatedness of reality, is at the heart of Buddhism, the heart of everything (and this is why Buddhism is so attractive today to scientists, especially to physicists and neuroscientists, because this is exactly the idea they discover when they interpret their experiments). The basis of reality is not atoms intermingling and playing with each other, but virtual spaces, such as information patterns, which then form something we call elementary particles and atoms and so on. This is fundamental.

Christianity frames and expresses the human predicament in a different language for reasons we cannot analyze here. Suffice it to say that the myth of a creator God and the beginning of human freedom are related to what is called sin: the human search for independence (from God or the Whole). The price of freedom is sin, or, philosophically speaking, duality. Duality hurts, as well as creates competition, self-awareness and the sting of otherness. All this leads to fear and insecurity, which again are the reason for hatred and despair. Only by unconditional trust in God can this situation be overcome, which again is the source for unconditional love towards other beings. It is a different language and different story here, but one fundamental insight is similar in Buddhism and Christianity: The mind or heart can be changed. In Christian parlance, this happens by opening up to God's presence and grace. The term grace, however, in Greek is not a juridical, but an aesthetic term: *charis*. We still have it in charisma or charismatic personality. It is being touched by a special transforming

quality, being taken into the aura of beauty and goodness. It is something that happens to the person when they have opened up. This is very similar to the realization one is to realize in the Buddhist perspective. It is neither an active effort nor a passive let-go; it is a passive activity and an active passivity. It would be impossible to explore this here in detail, but it is clearly a way to express the fundamental attitude for meditation and spiritual practice everywhere.

As we can see, early Buddhism expresses its message more in analytic terms and epistemologically as well as through psychological insight, while early Christianity expresses itself not so much in concepts but in images or stories. Thus, the image Jesus uses for this interconnectedness is love, and this is the unconditional love of a total giving himself to the world. This is the image of incarnation and co-suffering with humans until death – complete solidarity. God is not up there somewhere but is in every human being. For Buddhists, it is all sentient beings, whereas Christians speak more about humankind, though on some rare occasions, other creatures are included as well. Anyway, God is in all human beings, irrespective of age, race, sex, religion, cultural conditioning or whatever. “God all in all” (*panta en pasin*, as Paul has it in 1 Kor 15, 28) – this is the way early Christians expressed it, and to some extent, this idea developed also in Judaism and later in Islamic mysticism: Everything is interconnected. The mystery of reality, or the source of reality, is not far away. It is in every single event of reality.

This was a short historical comparison. It may be interesting to the historian and the specialist in Comparative Religion. Yet, is there any relevance for our contemporary world? What do these interpretations and insights mean to us today? For us, what does this mean in the context of these dangers and these fallacies or problems, which I mentioned in the beginning? Of course, the deepest disaster we are facing today is the ecological disaster. The tragedy is that this war, which we have now between Russia and Ukraine, or Russia and the United States and the European Union, is that it not only destroys human life, but it is also an ecological disaster. This is terrible. This war and all the other wars and conflicts take effect on economic resources which we would need to rebuild by means of technology, our society, so as to make it ecologically mature. What can we do in this situation? I have sorted out a few points or areas of concern. I shall select just three of them to discuss with you.

### **Individualism, secularism and the need for a new education**

The first problem is destructive *individualism*. We do have this more in the West, whereas in East Asia it is not (yet) as strong or it appears in different forms, but it is there and highly destructive for the whole globe. Buddhism has a remedy, and this is the experience and concept of no-self (*anatta/anatman*), and the noble practice of *karuna*, a term which

should not be translated as compassion only, but it is an activity, it is, as I like to translate, “healing dedication to all sentient beings” . It includes compassion but does not exhaust it. The insight into no-self and compassion are closely connected. I will not go into philosophy right now, but this is the very basis of Buddhism, not only of Buddhist ethics but also of Buddhist anthropology. This healing attitude on the basis of no-self, which is an experience of joy and connectedness, is the basis of dealing with the problems mentioned above, especially the overexaggerated individualism.

Christianity talks about love, but what is love? Love is not just an emotional event between two persons. As such, it may have many forms and usually it disappears after some time, after the first excitement. But love is something more fundamental or basic. Love is an expression or the very reality of interconnectedness, in all its dimensions of the human consciousness: cognitive, emotional, and also a matter of willpower. It is *the* expression of this interconnectedness of all things. So, if one only loves exclusively – this person or this special thing – then this love is biased and conditioned by an egocentric perspective. For here, I love what pleases me, and I hate what challenges me. I might be neutral and disinterested in other situations. But this is not love, it is desire. It is not the overarching attitude of life, which is in tune with the realities of life. This is why the Greeks (and here the Christian tradition, too) differentiate between *eros* and *agape*.

In some ways, individualism may be something which is needed in evolutionary processes since it makes sense in the context of regulated competition. The individual needs to grow, needs to mature, needs to be in competition with others. But here, I want to point out that the basic structure of living entities is cooperation and symbiosis. Competition and cooperation are built into all living beings, but they are not on the same level. Cooperation is the encompassing model, and competition is one way to create the most efficient way of cooperation. Why? If competition were the general frame, the competing bodies would extinguish the losing side, and competition would come to an end. Efficiency, or a benefit, might be reached at this point for the winner, but this is temporary and a short gain only. For the competing partner has been eliminated, and this is why the system breaks down: One of the competing sides has disappeared. However, if cooperation is the wider goal, competition in regulated ways will allow for a lasting process. Regulation means that no side should go extinct. This holds true for biological competition, economic competition, and cultural and political competition. Competition is the fuel of individualistic egotism and vice versa. Therefore, individualism is one-sided. It may have a point, but it needs to be tamed or regulated so that society, as the larger body, does not suffer.

In summary, all life systems, including human systems, such as societies, are

cooperative systems. Competition is needed but it is only one way to express the overarching reality of cooperation. As long as cooperative systems, such as a whole economy, function, competition is needed to stimulate ever-better solutions. But if competition eradicates the other, it eradicates the very foundation it stands on. Because the other is gone, and you have only one left, the whole thing collapses. It is the same situation, of course, in the educational system: Insight into interconnectedness will overcome individualism. On that basis, we have to understand that the overarching structure is the structure of cooperation, and competition is one way to make the cooperation better and better. I think this is a very important insight, which we need in the economy, which we need in the financial systems, which we need in the ecological systems, but also in our personal relations. The cultural heritage of East Asia, both the Buddhist and the Confucian heritage, has a much deeper and much clearer understanding of interconnectedness than Western societies do. Western perspectives are much more based on the realization of the individual against other individuals. The Darwinian evolution theory is understood often as the survival of the fittest and not adaptation to the circumstances, which makes the fittest. There are two ways to interpret Darwin, and I think it is very important that we do not stick to one only. Actually, the very foundation of the evolution theory is that it is a continuous adaptation and not just a matter of strength. Buddhist and Christians do have their own practices and their narratives or stories and practices to overcome mere competition and to integrate differences, both in the personal mind and in society.

This brings me to the second point: *secularism* in modernity. What is the function of religion? The great sociologist, Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology in France in the late 19th century, wrote a book in 1897, *Le Suicide*, on suicide. What is suicide? He wanted to understand suicide, but also wanted to make sociology a science, a real science. So, he said, what we have to rely on is statistics, and statistics only. Statistics was the tool of his time and was newly invented as it were. He had all these statistics and found that there were hardly any suicides in Jewish communities. There were few suicides in Catholic communities. There were many suicides in Protestant communities, and he felt the challenge to look at the situations, and find reasons. He came to the conclusion that it is a socially binding factor that prevents Jews from committing suicide. This is because of their religion and also because of their minority status, which generates a strong binding in their society. Catholics, due to the unity of the Catholic Church, which is both a unity in ritual and belief, have also a great binding factor as cohesion, we could say, or integration. Durkheim used the term "integration". Protestants are based on individual faith, on individual conscience, and they do not have so much communal binding. Whether this analysis is valid in different social situations of the three religious groups is another question and is not our issue here, but this is what Durkheim found

for his time in France. He argued that religion is what gives a society or a group of people cohesion, coherence, and integration. It is interesting to note that this work on suicide was the blueprint for his later books, which generalized some of these findings into a comprehensive sociology of religion: most important was his book, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* Paris 1912. Here, he explicated his analysis much more. However, in 1912, we are already in a time of structurally increased secularism. Auguste Comte (positivism) and Karl Marx (his theory of religion as the opium of the people and the idea of class struggle) have left their traces. Durkheim is aware of these determining forces in French society. He envisages a religion functional in society, and the basic function would be the binding factor. So, in order to overcome the secular drive, religion should reinvent itself. Religion should not disappear but change. We need the good aspects of religion and foster their function in society. We need a religion which is aware of the secular forces and the destructive elements in industrial societies. The most destructive one is the breaking up of social bonds.

Now, we should take a look into the different Buddhist societies in South Asia, Southeast Asia and China today, then in Japan, and I need to limit our focus here to Japan. I refer to a paper which I had written earlier: Classical Buddhist institutions have diminished in esteem among the populace ever since the persecutions of Buddhism in the Meiji period, while at the same time continuing to serve the ritual needs of the people. On the other hand, modern lay Buddhist movements, such as the Soka Gakkai, Reiyukai, and Rissho Kosei-kai, are gaining ground both in Japan and abroad. For example, the Soka Gakkai is now represented in more than 190 countries. With the erosion of the religious authority of the priests and monks, the lay organizations have redefined the spiritual role of the individual in a collective effort. The individual is considered fully capable of performing all religious functions, including merit transfer to deceased ancestors, funerals and ancestral rites. Differently from traditional institutions, lay organizations also take care of every aspect of an individual's life, including psychological, spiritual, marital and financial counseling. All members are asked to actively recruit other members. Leadership positions are often assumed by women. A point of appeal of the groups is their way of building community through interpersonal communication and reports in so-called Dharma circles; I am speaking about the *Hoza*, of people coming together on a regular basis. In these groups' counseling sessions, people share the experiences and difficulties encountered in their daily life and exchange their insights on how the teaching of the Lotus Sutra illuminates such situations. These personal acts of witnessing help foster the cohesiveness of the group and the allegiance of its members. Since these lay movements are based on the teachings of Nichiren, one of the reformers of the 13th century, their study of Buddhist doctrine is mainly focused on the Lotus Sutra, their practice of chanting the

title of the text. Even though more traditional institutions, like Zen temples, have opened themselves, very often reluctantly, it is the laity in these new religious movements, which is really stimulating the Buddhist presence and practice in the country and worldwide. These developments are inspired by Makiguchi, Toda and Ikeda Daisaku. But as we can directly recognize, they are exactly fulfilling the needs of a reformed religion as was envisaged already by Durkheim in his sociological studies after 1900. This is very interesting.

I am coming to the third point: *education*. We need to be aware that religious education is an education in values, as Makiguchi, Toda and others have always stressed. And this is absolutely important for the functioning of our societies, but also for the maturation and growth of the individual. It is not just the education about historical facts of religion and some kind of transcendental beliefs or whatever, but education is educating the mind in the double sense, as I said: the clarity of mind and the power of compassion, which the mind can produce on the basis of the insight of interconnectedness of all events. There is sufficient evidence that this is possible; it is not just a utopian dream. As already mentioned, everything is impermanent. The mind is flexible. Neuroscience today calls this the plasticity of the brain. Training the mind is one of the very important keys not only for a better life, but also I think a key – maybe it sounds a bit pathetic, but I express it this way – for the survival of humankind. Not just because we are living in the nuclear age, though this is one aspect of high relevance and recent developments demonstrate this in a frightening urgency, but also because of the ecological situation. What ecology is concerned about is that we need to be aware of the urgency. Maybe the needed turn or transformation is not a matter of decades, but perhaps in the next 10 or 15 years. Here, we all sit in one boat, be it Russians or Ukrainians, Chinese or Taiwanese, North Koreans or South Koreans, or whatever. The natural as well as political disasters in Africa and Latin America are also connected to it. They all have their political and economic conflicts, but ecology unites us, whether we want it or not. We know that new technological developments and breakthroughs in engineering are vital and important. Much can be done and is already being done – what the Hydrogen Society Japan is talking about is an excellent example for the world. We have become aware that our technologies, which we had so far, especially energy production and so forth, have been rather primitive because they were using and producing waste with a little bit of energy and a little bit of beautiful products in between. But an intelligent economy would produce intelligent technologies and goods on the basis of a wholesome economy with products that can be recycled, because the processes of nature are in cycles. So, the processes of culture and economy, as part of our culture, should also be recycled. This is what we are teaching, hopefully, in our technological departments, and we will be able to increase performance and make it ecologically suitable, when we do so.

But this is not enough, for it is only one side of the story. The other side is the motivation and mood of human beings. There is too much inertia, self-centeredness, greed and ignorance. We have so much technological innovation, but still, we do not apply it, at least not fast enough. Why? Not only because of ignorance and not only because of, shall I say, the laziness of the systems, but because of greed, because of hatred, because of a consciousness, which is not up to the mark. Our mental system is not yet sufficiently developed, and our emotions are not yet sufficiently integrated in a situation, where technologically, we are so advanced that we can destroy all life on earth. Just to give one example: Even today, in view of all the problems just mentioned, what do most of the people do all the time? What do you see them doing on the trains, for hours and hours? What do they spend most of their precious time with? Playing games, which are in most cases rather dull and even foster aggressive skills. It is perpetual pachinko. This is a real danger. Next to all the gossip and fake news and fabricated false reality on the internet, we have to realize that our brains can degenerate. We can see already in the scanner of neuroscientists how the brain degenerates by this misuse, by this one-sided training. Especially, emotional qualities may degenerate. Here, education is the key to the solution. It needs to be a comprehensive education that reactivates the resources of our cultural and religious traditions, but in modern form and in languages and images that are adapted to the present age. Pointing to it sharply we can say: To get enlightened and to get compassionate is not just a task for some saints or for some special people, it is a task for everybody. And it is the duty of our educational systems to provide structures, to provide the space and time for developing the human mind to its full potential. Only then, we can really implement the technologies which are coming to the benefit of all sentient beings. Only then, we will make the earth a better place to live in – or perhaps we should say – Only then we will be able to live. Education is at the center of everything.

Thank you for your attention.

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#### **Questions and Answers:**

**Q:** Thank you very much. Your lecture is so interesting and so encouraging. My question is about the attitude to transform our minds. You said it is very important to transform the mind, and you introduced Soka Gakkai's activities, where we share experiences, and this is a good opportunity to change your mind. But what do you think is the real benefit from this kind of sharing? In the Soka Gakkai, you can hear them say that, if you believe in this religion, you

can become rich, and you can also discover that you are sick and may need help. Yes, it is a worthy benefit. Sharing your real experience is important and a good opportunity to change and transform the mind, to develop potential. But many Japanese scholars criticize the Soka Gakkai for its activities because they emphasize worldly benefit only, and this has nothing to do with religion. According to these intellectuals, religion should not be preoccupied with worldly benefits but with ethical life. What do you think about this?

**von Brück:** I quoted the Soka Gakkai as an example of changing classical religious traditions to adapt it to a secular and post-secular environment. So, I think the structures, which we have built, or which you have built here, and especially the *Hoza*, is one level. We need to distinguish different levels in our life, in our development, and also in our educational systems: One level is personal, the second is interpersonal, and the third one is society or the social/political reality. Personal is the inner development of the mind, concentration, balancing emotions, generating joy and hope, etc. Interpersonal is the relation to others, which, of course, directly influences the personal level as well. This is where the practice of communal chanting, performance of rituals and also *Hoza* is located. I suppose this is important in Japan, because you did not have these structures before. It is a kind of counseling, meeting, family relations, and so on. The social level is where you gather larger groups and get to activate them in useful work for society.

Meditation means to create concentration and mindfulness, and this is extremely important for all levels. The cultivation of the individual is influencing society. During the last few years virtually thousands of studies have been made about the power of meditation. According to all findings, meditation has a significant influence on the cognitive, emotional and social competencies of the person; it can really make a change. There are studies conducted by one of the Max Planck Institutes for Neurosciences in Leipzig (called "The Human Resource Project"). They found out that you actually can learn to develop a compassionate heart, depending on which kind of meditation you practice. There are many: *zen*, *mantra*, *nembutsu nam myoho rengo kyo*, etc. In all these practices you focus your mind, you concentrate, you generate awareness and attentiveness, and so on. This changes "the hardware" of the brain. If you combine it with cognitive content such as *metta* and/or *karuna* meditation (visualizing love and compassion), the mind is really tuned toward a lasting compassionate attitude.

Now, having said this, I come closer to answering your question. I do not think that we should make a dichotomy, or a contradiction between the material and spiritual, or material goods and

spiritual goods. Reality is one. The transcendent and the immanent are not two realities, but two ways of looking at one reality. The two are *soku*, as it is expressed in Japanese logic. In the Buddhist tradition, this is expressed philosophically in many different ways. Most famous is the quote from the Heart Sutra: *rupa* (Form) is *shunyata* (Emptiness) and *shunyata* is *rupa*. Or, Zen declares in the famous ox-herding pictures: after enlightenment, return to the marketplace. It is the marketplace where you engage and practice your wise and compassionate mind. So, in classical Japanese Buddhist thought, the contradiction your critics are applying is not valid. Similarly, in Christianity, you may have faith (trust) in God. But this expresses or embodies itself in your attitude in daily life. In one simile (Matthew 25, 14-30), this is expressed even in financial/economic terms: people have been given talents by God to work with it, to augment it. Talent in antiquity was a measure for money, after all.

However, we should make a distinction between quantity and quality. So, just to give you an example: Enjoy a Japanese meal. It is aesthetically so beautifully ordered, but you do not have much on the plate in terms of quantity. You have beauty, and you have enjoyment, and it may be expensive. It may have taken a lot of work, and a lot of energy is in there, but to enjoy this with full attentiveness is a spiritual practice, whereas when you have heaps of American burgers, then you just have a lot of quantity, but perhaps not necessarily quality. If you just fill up your belly without this sense of beauty and contentment, it is not a spiritual practice. So, I think the divide is not between material and spiritual, or material and mental, but between quantity and quality. And for me, this is my basic distinction also with regard to the ecological transformation. To consume less might make us more aware of quality, so we gain something. Our society still is too much oriented on quantitative terms, so the Gross National Product (the performance of the economy) is measured in quantitative terms only. I think this is wrong. We have to switch over to quality, and I think here we can learn a lot from classical Japanese aesthetics. Aesthetics is not just for the holidays and something which we would enjoy when we have done our ordinary work, but aesthetics is how we do our ordinary work. In this field, the Soka Gakkai has made a contribution. Everybody has to make a contribution, and we have to see how we can improve our self-education on all three levels: the individual level, the interpersonal level, and the social level. Our brain is built to act according to rewards. Joy is the reward of good action. This is our human condition, biologically as well as socially. We want rewards, but the rewards should be the proper ones. This is what I would answer to the critics you are referring to.

**Q:** I would like to follow up on something since we are on the topic of the Soka Gakkai, and this

was something I actually wrote for an encyclopedia article I was working on concerning the Soka Gakkai and modernity. On the one hand, there is this sort of group pastoral environment of mutual support, but on the other hand, this is combined with a very strict individuality, which in the Soka Gakkai takes the form: only you can change your own Karma. So, there is a supporting environment, and then at the same time, there is a very rigorous individual responsibility. My feeling is that this creates a good potential to tackle some of the issues of modernity, and I just wonder if you have any thoughts on that.

**von Brück:** Sure, but this is not new. The concept of Karma is the very basis of Buddhism. Karma is a special understanding of causality; it is what I translate as reciprocal causality. This means that any action has a double result – it causes a modification of the object, but it also changes the subject. It contributes to building the character (lit.: imprint) of the subject. Most Buddhist schools hold that there is no collective Karma, there is individual Karma. So, when I talk about causal relations...

**C:** *sokuteki ingasei.*

**von Brück:** ...this is the cause, this is the effect, and we say the cause is creating the effect in a one-way direction, but this is not so, for the relationship is mutual. There is also a rebounding. Let me give an example: When a person smokes, he/she does it one time to try, again for companionship, again because it is just what you do when you sit together, etc. You do it once, you do it twice, you do it three times and it becomes your habit – you have changed. You do not only pollute the environment but yourself. So, every cause has an effect, but the effect influences the cause. This is Karma. Therefore, you have great responsibility, and you are responsible also to your own life and to develop your own potentials. Now, to many Christians this may sound like a heresy and I would answer: No, you mistook the whole point of the basis for Christian ethics. Because if God is within you and you have become a new being in Christ (many passages, for instance Paul in 2 Kor 5,17), you have been reshaped by your mental attitude (faith). This faith may be regarded as a gift of God, sure, but you have to open yourself up to it. This is your self-transformation. In another expression, this is the point of incarnation. The early church expressed it in the astonishing formula: God became man, that man can become God. You see, if God is within you, you have to take care of that, and since the early Christians say (Paul in 1 Kor 6,19), that you should mind your body, because it is the temple of God, he talks about responsibility for your own life. In fact, Paul takes this from the Roman architecture (Vitruvius, 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D.), because there, any temple building is considered a temple of God insofar as it imitates the human body. Paul admonishes his friends in Korinth:

You better clean that place. So, in this way, I would say, all the religious traditions who are focusing on changing the mind and developing the mind would have this potential, which Indian religions have expressed in the idea of Karma.

**Q:** Thank you.

**von Brück:** But as you know, in Japan the classical traditional Buddhism has become very much ritualistic, and this is it. I think we need rituals, and that is another thing. But again, the ritual is not enough. It is useful only when it helps to develop the mind because all depends on the mind. I think, this is what the founders of the Soka Gakkai took up. That is what Nichiren took up in his time. The other day, we talked on Nichiren and Luther, the two reformers who got impatient with the ritualistic religion of their time. They considered it as corrupt. This is certainly one reason why today people of the Soka Gakkai were not so much liked by traditional Buddhists. The critics argue: You are not really a Buddhist, because you get impatient. Nichiren was very impatient, indeed. He did not behave calmly because he felt the need to transform society in order to implement Buddhist values. And this is what is very Buddhist. It is similar to the reformers in Europe in the 16th century. Luther was very impatient. He got criticized for similar reasons, but sometimes, it is necessary to act with impatience. However, your mind should not get disturbed, but your actions should be forceful.

May I ask you a question in return? How do you see the situation of the youth in Japan? Is there a search for mental development and real joy, or is there just this running for meaningless entertainment? Is it integrated or is it going into such a materialistic and distracted way as we see everywhere in the West and also in China?

**Answer:** They do not think about it. They do not want to think about it. They do not want to face reality. They want to run away. That is why they want to spend time playing games because they want to focus on nothing.

**von Brück:** Is there a kind of awareness of the ecological challenge? For ecological transformation of the society? Are they getting engaged and trying to push the industries and so on?

**Answer:** They do not.

However, some Japanese are interested in ecological programs and they are active. But not so many. Usually, we do not want to discuss politics, religion, or economic disasters. We want to prevent those things from our lives.

Unfortunately, many Japanese students are not so interested in ecological programs, but fortunately, our university has a great goal which the founder, Ikeda, showed us. So, I think many students at Soka University want to create a better world. And their attitude is, I think, much better than older Japanese students. So, I hope our students will contribute a lot.

**Q:** My question to you is: What is the most important factor of higher education? You used the word transformation and change of mind. However, in the university system of higher education the most important goal is cognitive or academic skills. But you said education should be not only cognitive but also more harmonized between cognitive aspects and emotion. What is the important premise today for such transformative education?

**von Brück:** In Munich, we have a group of scholars representing different disciplines (natural sciences, medicine, humanities, law) who form what we call the Human Sciences Centre. Since more than 20 years, we have met regularly to raise questions and discuss most basic research without producing papers all the time; there is no pressure to produce, but time to ask. We usually have a topic, one of us introduces it, and then we discuss it. Biologists, medical doctors, and colleagues from the fields of genetics, brain sciences, sociology, religious studies, philosophy, theory of sciences, etc. And what do we do there? Our motto is: Ask the unasked questions and explore the anthropological universalia and the cultural specifica. What we take for granted needs to be challenged. What is mathematics? What is knowing? What is evolution, biologically and culturally? Does humankind have a future? Of course, a big question is artificial intelligence, what is it? We ask from different perspectives.

So, the *first point* in education is: Ask the unasked questions and prepare students to ask unasked questions. How do we do that? You need to learn, and this is the *second point*, to distance yourself from yourself. The best way to do it is by meditation. You breathe and observe it. Who is it who is breathing? Me? What is this? Who am I? And so on. We learn the distance from ourselves. Usually, we identify with our thoughts, our sex, our religion, our position in society, with what we experience as our Ego. Who is this? And who is it who asks this question? Learning to distance yourself from yourself allows you to develop a critical mind. Further, a *third point*: A couple of years ago, one orchestra in the city of Hof (Bavaria) asked

my university to conduct a study on the benefit of music education, because they have a special cooperation with two high schools where the students learn to play instruments, especially violin. If they are good enough, they can already play in the orchestra, so they are already integrated into the performing arts. This is different from an ordinary music school. We made a sample, of course, put them in the brain scanner, used interviews and studied performance rates. The result was significant. These kids who were in musical training did better cognitively. They were much better in mathematics. They were also much more balanced emotionally, and they were much better at socializing. Why? Because they learned to control the mind, the emotions, and the physical body, and they needed to relate all their activities to the other performers in the team. This demonstrates what the famous conductor, Daniel Barenboim, of the Berlin opera told us at another occasion at a conference in connection with the Salzburg Festival: Cross-cultural and interdisciplinary dialogue is like playing in a string quartet. You need to play your own sound while *simultaneously* listening to the other; otherwise, the quartet cannot come together. More abstract: Your own is to be totally in tune with what the other is, and vice versa. Reality is mutuality. This is what comprehensive education is all about.