The Buddhist Doctrine Sin in India and Japan

— Genjun H. Sasaki

Here an attempt to analyse some important aspect of Buddhist sin in India and Japan. In Buddhism, there are has been made many a term analogous to ‘sin’. These are, however, conceived slightly differently than sin for the following reasons: first, Buddhism does not postulate a Divine Being but rather a timeless, undifferentiated Unity, however in Christianity, man feels guilty when he violates Divine Law, but when Divine Law is not recognised, there can be no guilt-feeling; second, Buddhism, being non-dogmatic, admits differing concepts and interpretations of its terminology. Being an empirical and affirmative religion, it has combined with the indigenous cultures of such different countries as India, Tibet, China and Japan. Buddhism has entreated to produce in each case a unique form; which forms often differ in philosophy. The Buddhist conscience, thus, is not aware of the glut feeling of Western man, although it acknowledges human misconduct. The Oriental people do not confess before the Sacred. The Buddhist conception of sin and guilt is outlined in the following historical and terminological analysis.

In India, an idea similar to sin seems to have occurred to the Vedic sages, as there are frequent references in the Vedas to the term pápa and its purification. A criteria for pápa does not, however, depend upon a Controller of Human Destiny, a God, but rather on Dharma (truth). A Pali or Sanskrit term pápa stands for sin. With the development of Buddhism a term pápa came to denote demerit. Further, with the development of Buddhist psychology a set of terms—pápa (demerit), vipatti (failure), karma (deed), klesha (detilement), aparadha (offence), dosha (fault), pátaka (crime), duskrî (misconduct), agha (misdeed), enas (misdeed), avidyā (ignorance), samsāra (cycle of life)—came to be used. These terms can be classified into two types:

1. One type is a reaction to external standards. That is, if one violates the Buddhist precepts, one is said to commit vipatti (moral failure), which can be removed simply by changing one’s behaviour. The Vinaya Pitaka enumerates three vipatti: “cattari ca parajikani terasa samghadisesa ayam silavipatti, thullaccayam pacitiyam patidesani ayam silavipatti dukkatam dubbhaasitam ayam acaravipatti, micchadthi antaggahika ditthi, ayam ditthivipattiti”. (The four offences involving defeat, the thirteen offences entailing a formal meeting of samgha—this is a moral failure; an offence of expiation, an offence which ought to be confessed, an offence of wrong-doing, an offence of wrong speech—this is a failure of right conduct; a wrong view taking up a false view—this is a failure of right view). These failures (silavipatti, acaravipatti, ditthivipatti) can be removed by changing one’s mind and behaviour.
2. The other type is a reaction to an internal awareness of human nature. For instance, avidyā (ignorance) as opposed to vidyā (knowledge) is subject to this type of term. Vidyā does not mean to let things stand as they are. But, it really means to see things as they are. It rather describes an ellipse in which man stands at one focus in dynamic balance with complimentary points of focus and against which his destiny must be enacted. Avidyā is to be unaware of this structure. It is the fundamental basis of defilements. Defilements are to be purified by one’s self. Indian Buddhist thinkers did not say much about the conflict between the forces of good and evil. Instead, they were concerned with avidyā (ignorance). In Buddhism there is neither absolute good nor absolute evil. The two are relative. Humans exist in a world of good and evil action, but not good ‘or’ evil actions. Avidyā is a negation of this recognition.

Sin in Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism emphasised the second type and extended it to its limits. Within Mahayana, two fundamental trends of thought (both of the second type) can be distinguished as follows: “The first trend of thought equates human defilement with its purification. At the early stage of Buddhism, the anatta doctrine (egolessness) was frequently expressed by the Theravadins. All determinate things are considered transitory, suffering and egoless. Whether it be a rule of religion or a rule of human ethics, there is nothing that can hold at the times for all men under all circumstances. At the later stage of Buddhism they expound the significance of anatta in a wider perspective, providing it with the other expressions: sunyata (emptiness), avitathata (not untruth), dharmadhātu (totality of things), dharmasthiti (substratum of things), (the essence), ananyatathata (uniqueness) aviparya-satathata (irreversible), paramartha (the absolute), aviparya satathatā (irreversible), paramārtha (the absolute), (acintyadhistu) (incomprehensible substance), suprasanta, (perfectly calm), advaya or advaidhikara (non-separable of non-divisible), nirvikalpa (non-discrimination), nirvṛtti (disappearance), nirodha (cessation), nirvana, (enlightenment), tathata (suchness), tatta (truth) svasidhanta (self-realisation) anutpatti or anutpanna (unborn), anirodha (non-destruction) and others”.

Various expressions of anatta (experience), as mentioned above indicate that anatta in its implication does not merely mean a negative side without being conscious of the ground upon which it can rest, as really it is. This anatta is to be founded upon a positive experience as expressed by such terms as paramartha, such tathata and tattva. The positive counter-part of anatta is tathata, through which anatta reveals itself and on which there is avatta (non-self). The non-self (anatta ) implies the absolute ultimate essence, i.e., sunyata (emptiness or non-substantiality) of Mahayana philosophy.

With the basis of early Buddhism, as stated above, the Mahayanic conception of nirvana has been developed into a mystic truth. According to their mystic advancement sunyata (emptiness) represents the negative and tathata (suchness) the positive aspects of the Truth. The Lankavatara sutra runs: “When erroneous views based on the dualistic notion of assertion and negation are gotten rid of, and when the vijñanas cease to rise as regards the objective world of names and appearances, this I call ‘suchness’ (tathata). Mahamati, a Bodhisattva-Mahasattva who is established on suchness attains the state of imagelessness (nirabhasagocara) and thereby attains the Bodhisattva stage of Joy (pramudita).”2 The implication is that all things existing in this world are essentially of the same nature, avoiding their own entities.

Global Religious Vision, Vol. I/II
One of the important concepts of Mahayana is *sunyata* (emptiness) of which the positive meaning is easily shown by the facts of comparative philology. *Sunyata* (*sunya-ta*) is derived from the root *svi*, to swell. According to Dr. Conze “the root *svi*, Greek *ky*, seems to have expressed the idea that something which looks ‘swollen’ from the outside is ‘hollow’ inside”.3 Our personality (*atman*) in early Buddhism was understood at first as *swollen* in so far as constituted by the five aggregates (*skandha*). Because of non-self our personality is also hollow inside. The personality (*atman*) contains nothing permanent. Hollow means, however, a possibility of *swollen* with foreign content. Thus, any conceivable possibility is attributed to *sunyata* (emptiness). The Diamond Sutra skilfully illustrates a positive side of *sunyata*: “As far as any conceivable universe of beings is conceived, all these should be led by me into Nirvana, into that realm of Nirvana which leaves nothing behind”.

Mahayana, thus, teaches us to be aware of inconceivable possibilities, going beyond good and evil, guilt and purification. To use Western terminology, purification is not just passively mirrored within guilt, but in fact depends upon guilt. Indeed, there is no purification without guilt. Human defilements are equated with purification. There is no distinction between *samsara* and *nirvana*.5 Practically speaking, Mahayana suggests that human existence can be found only in a complex of good and evil, flesh and spirit, joy and sorrow, none of which should be demolished, but rather should be transformed into the wholeness of human existence.

The second trend of thought is one in which sin denotes the fact of paradoxical human nature. According to the Indian Buddhism, *karma* is a phenomenological description of human existence, which can properly be regarded as the five aggregates (*rupa, vedana, sanna, sankhara, vinnana*) bound together by *karma*.7 *Karma*-awareness in this sense is a means by which one can attain the cognisance of non-self (*anÊtman*). Thereby a means is speculative; self is an object to be analysed. Self has still the possibility of making good or evil *karma*. Human beings are the object of contemplation and theoretical analysis. This epistemological tendency of Indian Buddhism refers to one side of human existence, but neglect another side of human existence, namely emotions or passions. This historical development is similar to the philosophical development in Europe which first emphasised the theoretical aspect of human existence, leaving the emotional side to be later investigated by the existentialists.

**Sin in Japanese Buddhism (Shinshu)**

It is Japanese Buddhism (*Shinshu*)8 that takes up this aspect of human existence. In this Buddhist sect, human existence is no longer the object of contemplation. Human existence is unfixed, flexible and moveable. It has no basis, philosophical or ethical upon which man can determine his actions for himself. Human existence is conceived to be the paradoxical structure. The basic decision should be realised through insight into the paradox and contradiction of human existence. This trend of Buddhist thought points out the invalidity of human existence, which is emphasised in neither India nor China.

Shinran was an important Japanese philosopher and religious reformer who insisted on the salvation of all human beings, poor and rich low and high, and who, to achieve these aims, established the Jodo Shinshu (“True Pure Land School”) sect of Buddhism in A.D. 1224. Historically speaking, this school of Buddhism retained Indian devotionism and provided it with a Buddhistic foundation.

*October, 2000*
of compassion (maitri-karuna) in contrast to the self-disciplined Buddhism (Tendai, Zen) that concentrated on wisdom (prajna) and had few effective means of savingless well-endowed human beings. Shinran took seriously the salvation of the masses. His belief was that perfect intercommunion of Amida Buddha, the Buddha who ruled over the Western Paradise, and all sufferers, and thus, the salvation of all could be achieved through the mere calling of the name of Amida Buddha (Namu-Amida-Butsu).

With the existential orientation Shinshu Buddhism re-interpreted and re-newed a connotation of karma, which originally meant ‘deed’ derived from the root kr (to act). Karma in an Indian sense has three differences: good, evil and indeterminate. In Shin Buddhism, however, Karma is no longer the object of moral judgment. It is also no longer the object of contemplation. Instead, Karma is a mist of paradox, which lies at the root of all human existence or human formulation. Man lives in a stream of paradoxical elements, good and evil, but not good or evil. It does not mean a simple action. It is considered one rooted in human existence. Karma does not mean a man’s treason against the divine God or his action contrary to the divine Law. It denotes rather his inability to rid himself of the dualistic notions of good and evil, love and hate. Shinran, Founder of Shinshu Buddhism, said to his discipline Yuien: “I do not know whether it is good or evil, or which is good or evil. I know neither good nor evil.” Any discrimination built out of determinate meanings, whether good or evil, must be something that cannot hold at all times for all men under all circumstances. There cannot be determinate, eternal rules of ethical conduct; for all determinate things are transitory. Shinshu Buddhist ethics are admittedly human and relative, not divine and absolute.

Shinran takes karma as sin (tsumi in Japanese) in his works Shozomatsu-wasan and Mattosho. Thus, in the light of the depth of human existence, he equates sin with an Indian concept karma. The cognisance of karma is the experience which makes the limitation of all human abilities inevitable. Shinran states in his Kyogyoshinsho: “One is an ordinary person (prthagana) full of evil, living in the circle of births and rebirths. He is one who, since the beginning, persistently scuttles himself and wanders around having no means to liberate himself from the karmic world.”

The experience of karmic existence is not something that man can avoid. One can attain salvation only by and through the vital faith in the quasi-divine Amitabha (the Absolute). Amitabha is a symbol of the principles, wisdom (prajna) and compassion (karuna). The two are of the Indian tradition. The transformation of wisdom into compassion is called Amitabha’s Original Vow. It is by compassion that release occurs. This devotional attitude can be found in the Indian traditional faiths (as in the Gita and Bhaktimarga). This devotional attitude of Shinshu Buddhism sometimes comes even to replace the formal worship and meditation. In line with the Indian tradition, the notion of karma in Shinshu Buddhism is referred back to the underlying store-consciousness (alayavijnana) in the Vijananavada school in India. Over-coming his original sin (karma), thereby does the awareness of karmic life precede the leap of faith. The karma doctrine in Indian Buddhism is carried by Shinshu Buddhism in Japan into its farthest extent into existentialism.

The Sin in Shintoism

In order to clarify a Buddhist concept of sin, we shall refer briefly to Shintoist one. A Buddhist concept of sin has come to connote karma in its process of development. Karma in its connotation refers to the fact of human nature. Shintoist sin, however, denotes something like dirt accumulated
on surface of things. It includes all malformations, physical and mental. We have various sins such as sins of heaven (amatsutsumi), sins of land (kunistsu tsumi), and miscellaneous sins (kokutagu-no-tsumi). Wicked sins (magagoto) is also viewed as bad things or sins, which cause annoyance or pain. All of these sins show us the fact that no clear boundary can be drawn up between the natural accident and the internalised conviction of sin. These Shintoist sins are concerned merely with demerits. We can find many similarities to Hinduism. They are derived from a natural process and no matters to be made into cases for ethical judgment. All these undesirable sins are to be carried off to the ocean. According to Shintoism, except for ‘casting off’ (harai) there is no way of transforming them into purification.

In terms of similarity, it might be interesting to refer to Hinduistic sins. In the Veda, we can find various concepts equivalent to sin or evil. They are, for example, pāpa, pāpman, pāsa and amhas. Moreover, we have more specific terms, namely, enas (wrong-doing), agas, hedana, anrta, viloma, kilvisa and others. All of these, however, indicate the various kinds of sin referring to the physical actions or the ritual mistakes as they are with Shintoism. It is worth to be noted here that an offence against the highest god will be removed by the prayer for forgiveness. Regarding the prayer for forgiveness the Rigveda remarks: “If we as gamesters cheat at play, if we have done wrong unwittingly or of purpose, thou, O Varuna, cast all these sins away like loosed fetters and let us to thine own beloved” (Rigveda, V, 85). In the Brahmanas, sin refers to the sacrifice (yajna) and its magical efficiency. Hence, sin indicates the ritual misbehaviours. Consequently, sins are removed by a ceremonial confession or by a public declaration (nirukta).

We can find here that sin both in the Brahmanas and the Vedas refer to something physical and external rather than moral and internal. Sin in this context indicates simply a stain which can be removed by prayer or even by water (Rig., 1, 23.22) or fire (Ibid., X, 164.3). The transgressions of divine law or sacrifices are more important than the internal awareness of human nature.

In terms of the process of development we have also similarities between Hinduism and Shintoism. With the increase of Buddhist influence, a concept of sin developed and became modified in Japan. According to Buddhism, there is nothing which happens without reason. Every natural calamity, which is considered as sin in Shintoism, follows simply the order of nature. All natural phenomena take place with a basis of conditions and orders. As many Indian thinker admitted, there is nothing disordered and irrational in the Universe. There is no accident in the Universe. Many Japanese terms stand for the ancient concepts of sin. They include tsumi (piling up), imi (unlucky) and magagoto (crooked things). A wide variety of sins are catalogued in the Book of Engi which was written in 927 A.D. According to this book, the concept of tsumi denotes something like dirt accumulated on the surface of things. It refers to a natural phenomenon such as moss on stones. For this reason Shintoist sins are not sins in the Buddhist sense.

The process of the historical development from the Veda Brahmana to the Upanishadic idea is analogous to the development from Shintoism to Buddhism in Japan. With the growth of the Upanishadic idea, the interpretation of sin in India has been turned into the philosophical one. Sacrifice has become secondary, losing its primary significance. The ultimate purpose of the Upanishads is the realisation of the unity of Brahman and Atman. Evil means any obstacle to the realisation of this unity. Sin or evil is avidyā (ignorance) kāma (desire) and karma (action). Neither offences against Varuna nor mistakes for the sacrifice are considered as moral transgression.
What is important is to attain the perfect knowledge or the unity of Brahman and Atman. Therefore, where perfect knowledge is there is no notion of sin. Man who has attained perfect knowledge, has been freed from sin, from impurity and doubt. He becomes Brahman. The difference between good and evil seems to have been destroyed. The emphasis on this transcendence is accurately expressed in the following passage: “He is not followed by good, he is not followed by evil, for then he has passed beyond all sorrows of the heart”. (Brhad-Aranyaka Up. 4.3.22). This passage points out that sin can be reduced to a consequence of ignorance. Knowledge is valued, while every action whether good or evil becomes deprived of the absolute value.

The Buddhist concept of sin is founded on a complex of the two different types of sin-awareness: at first it is external. It means pāpa (demerit) and vipatti (crime) originated in India. Veda and Brahmana in India and Shintoism in Japan belong to this trend of thought. It is internal, philosophical and existential. Sin means avidyā (ignorance) in the Upanishad and karma (fact of paradoxical human nature) in Shinshu Buddhism in Japan. Referring to the sin-awareness of the modern Japanese we have to draw attention to the fact it is founded on a complex of the three different types of sin-awareness: (1) papa (demerit) originated in India. (2) Physical and mental malformations retained since the ancient period. (3) Karma (a fact of paradoxical human nature) developed in Japan. The two trends of thought, external and internal, have not been left in a state of abstract inaction but fit together making up a great ethics.

REFERENCES
4. Ibid.
5. Sunyata (emptiness) is the synonym of that which has no cause, that which is beyond thought or conception, that which is not produced, that which is not born, that which is without measure. It denotes the dependent origination (pratīyasamutpada) or the Middle Path (madhyānapātīpāda). The Prasannapada reads: “yāh pratīyasamutpadaḥ tam prajñāpārame/sa prajñānaparupadaya pratīpatsaiва sunyata madhyāma,” (p. 503). Sunyata identified with nirvāṇa is equalised with samsara (human life): ‘na samsaratkim cidasti visheshanam’ (ibid., p. 535).
10. Shinran, Shozomatsu-wasan (hymns on the Periods of the Authentic Dharma, the Unrealised Dharma, the Decadent Dharma)... Shinshuseiten, (ed. by Kashiwabara), Kyoto, Hozokan, pp. 248-259, 1939.