

Saeng Chandra-Ngarm's response to Daigan Lee Matsunaga's paper on
"Issues of Life and Death in Buddhism"
Committee II. The Value of Human Life
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Dr. Matsunaga's paper is commendable for its format, its systematic presentation of contents and its clarity of expression. Regarding the format: Dr. Matsunaga has divided his paper into five sections and each section is headed with an appropriate subtitle. This format not only looks neat, but also helps in reading, recalling and reference.

The presentation of the contents is systematic and sequential. It begins with an overall picture of Buddhism as a pragmatic religion interested in solving the problem of suffering here and now. Then the nature of suffering is given in detail. Emphasis is placed on mental or psychological suffering as the result of clinging to the self-created "dream world" based on ignorance of and alienating oneself from True Reality. The process of suffering is given in detail in the form of the interdependent origination. The section on Karma describes how life is manipulated by a driving coherent force called Karma.

Some more light has been shed on the nature of suffering and how to overcome it with Nagarajuna's doctrine of Emptiness or Sunyata. The paper ends with the inadequacy of intellectual comprehension of the truth alone; it is necessary to surrender one's 'false self' to find True inner self in True Reality. Dr. Matsunaga's language is straightforward and clear.

Points to Ponder

There are, however, a number of points in the paper which need elaboration as well as clarification. This paper is a serious one dealing with the very heart of Buddhism. It should be comprehensive enough to give the reader a complete and clear picture of Buddhism. Some of the points are as follows:

1. The author freely mentions 'True Reality' or 'Ultimate Reality' without giving it a clear-cut definition. From the contexts where the words appear, the

reader cannot help but come to the conclusion that True Reality is identical with the empirical world or nature. The phrase "the tranquil flow of True Reality" renders support to this conclusion. But towards the end of the paper, an innate essence or innate self, the very core of human nature, the Buddha-nature, is mentioned as the other power of True Reality, an integral part of it. True Reality here seems to have a different sense. This should be clarified.

2. Dr. Matsunaga's interpretation of Interdependent origination is very interesting. He has tried to interpret Independent origination as a description of psychological birth and death that occurs several times a day in one's daily life. This is quite a departure from the traditional interpretation which looks at it as a process of conventional rebirth. It is a pity, however, that the author has presented this difficult doctrine in such a way that it is impossible for a newcomer to Buddhism to understand the meaning of each link or condition and the interrelationship between them. The nature of Sankhara (2nd link) and their interdependence (on p. 6) are not clear. Elaboration is necessary here.

3. The Middle Way, the last truth of the Four Noble Truths, is mentioned only briefly on p. 10. It is a way "to overcome the false notion of self and it means the avoidance of hedonism and asceticism. Only this much and without the explanation of the Noble Eightfold Path can by no means help the reader to envisage how the false notion of self is overcome.

Among the three characteristics of life: suffering, impermanence and no-selfness, the last is the most difficult to realize. Ordinary people only know it at the level of view (ditthi). Enlightened people from the level of the stream-winner (Sotapanna) and higher realize the truth of no-selfness at the epistemological level of intuitive Insight (nyana). And samadhi or meditation, the last step of the Noble Eightfold path can help average people achieve intuitive Insight. Only intellectual contemplation is not enough.

4, About a half of the paper has been devoted to the discussion of Nagarajuna's doctrine of Emptiness. It is stated on page 11 that the subjective individual is devoid of any lasting, permanent nature and the objective phenomenal world was equally devoid of any unchangable core of essence. But at the end of the paper, 'our innate essence, the very core of human nature, Buddha-nature, a part of True Reality hidden beneath is mentioned and affirmed. It sounds paradoxical to the layman. It is quite suggestive that the author is trying to synchronize Sunyata-vada, Astivada, Vedanta and a form of Monotheism. This, however, is quite plausible for the sake of religious unity.

5. At the end of the paper, the author advises us to seek guidance from the "Other Power" or core of "True Reality". This may sound too "theistic" for a conservative Theravadin to accept. But the liberal ones will understand. The significance of faith is emphasized here and there in the Buddhist texts. The statement "By faith one crosses the ocean (of samsara) (Saddhaya tarati Ogham) is well known and there are even those who have attained final liberation through faith. They belong to the category of 'The faith-oriented ones' (Saddhadhika) in contrast to 'the Insight-oriented ones' (Pannadhika).

6. In general, the paper is a modern interpretation of Buddhism. Emphasis is placed on the psychological, experiential aspect of Buddhism. It is only a type of interpretation and not the only authentic interpretation of Buddhism. Buddhism has metaphysical aspects too. The Buddha talks freely about nature of the mind, life after death, different planes of existence and the nature of Nirvana. The fact that the Buddha keeps silent when asked about some metaphysical questions in the Malunkayasutta doesn't mean that he reacts in that way all the time. His attitude varies according to the mental attitudes of the questioners. If the questioner has a firm belief in things metaphysical, the Buddha talks freely about them as if they were real. If the questioner is in doubt, he will put aside those things as

unimportant and irrelevant. If the questioner is intent on philosophical argument and demanding proof, he keeps silent.

With necessary revision and improvement, Dr. Matsunaga's paper will be perfect and a valuable source of Buddhist knowledge in its own place.