

Buddha Dharma embedded in the Ambience

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1. From me to us

Capitalism and mindfulness

When we question the origin of mindfulness, we seem to arrive at the Pali word *sati* which means awareness, what is called physical and mental detachment in Buddhism, a release from the self-awareness that binds us to the acquisition of a state of selflessness. Thich Nhat Hanh who was at the origin of the modern translation of Buddhism, taught *human beings* manifest from *interbeing*, that stands on interconnection. In Mahayana Buddhism, the *self* is acknowledged as *the sky*, a symbol of emptiness. Everything is a series of ever-changing edges, in other words, it is a phenomenon that emerge on *our* horizon.

In the late 1990s, as we looked for more “enrichment” but felt harried to live their lives in a rush and began sensing the limitations of capitalism, those who wanted to distance themselves from the frameworks of society to a certain degree began developing an interest in spirituality. And as mental health became a social issue, not only medical and psychological symptomatic treatment, but also yoga, meditation and spiritual narratives that involve somatic sensation spread in answer to that as ways to care for the mind and body. People at home and abroad are increasingly turning to Buddhism which shows the origins of the world, for clues and references as they seek to learn *how to live* through world.

With such trends can be seen in many parts of the world, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a Professor of Medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and others, eliminated the *religious aspects* of Buddhist Zen thoughts and practices and suggested the concept of mindfulness in a merging with Western science. The teachings thus created of Buddhist worldviews and teachings translated and arranged for people unfamiliar with Buddhism to understand easily have been actively incorporated by Western businesses facing issues in human resources development and management and spread at once as a tool for *competence development* and *mental care*.

However, when a capitalist system becomes its main user, if spirituality can also be swallowed up as a consumable, it can go in the opposite direction of the physical and mental detachment. A precondition for a capitalist system is the idea that capital increases as time goes by, and value may be discounted. Thus, people are human resources that are taken in and consumed. We are inside a system that is constantly urging us to increase our value and secure our place

in the world so that we can meet its demands. This expansion of self and sense of competition has supported the homogenized worldview of capitalism.

From me to us

But today, that very capitalism has reached a crossroads. We are confronted by the bloated results of the impact on the global environment made by human activity pursuing profit for *our selves*. Gone is the era where one only needed to think about profit for *oneself*. The period for an infinitely scalable scrap and build economy is over, and society is transitioning to a sustainable and circular economy where everyone can wisely maintain their limited resources.

Based on the precondition of excessive production and consumption, our consumer society that has driven modern capitalism forward has overlooked the existence of decomposers. Kyoto University Associate Professor Tatsushi Fujiwara says in his work, *The Philosophy of Decomposition*:

“To knock down or smash devices, we imitate those devices and end up being swallowed up. That has been repeated time and again in history. Instead, accelerate the decomposition process where the device isn’t being used to its full potential. That way, its massive production of injustice will give way to the devices for destiny and fate.”

Systemic reforms and the abolition of customs where only conclusions are brought in merely change the exterior, leaving the same phenomena to be repeated in different ways. Actions of decomposition are what are needed to indicate new developments to come.

Starting with our metabolism, where the skin on our bodies peels off daily, some of the trash produced in our daily living will return to the air and the earth, while others will accumulate without decomposing. Things go around by decomposing, then rot or ferment to become other entities. The human acts of *cleaning* and *cultivating* are indispensable for various cycles. There are those who clear rough terrain to restore destroyed land. Some plow the hardened earth so seeds may be planted. Decomposers who connect the imagination with destruction and production with consumption are the ones we should note. Thanks to them, the world continues, but they generally function in areas that have nothing to do with heroism. We should be aware that everyone continues to repeat production, consumption, destruction, and regeneration while fulfilling their roles as decomposers.

Nurturing together with open-minded peers

The axis will not stabilize when the root sways and the harvest may be poor. Buddha Shakyamuni suggests practicing admonitions (practices) with peers to spread our roots. Many customs we practice with peers, previously a part of units such as families, villages, and communities, have been lost in modern society, particularly in urban areas where individuality is respected. However, as the world experiences various crises together, we are reconsidering associations between public and personal spaces on what to share with whom. These days, we see broad movements on a global level attempting to spread mindfulness that focuses on us rather than me. Such a perspective is what will create the commons of the future.

Regarding the units I mention here, the way around belonging can be left for individuals. For example, some people, such as nomads, may be on the move and use technology to share as us, while others will take root in their regions. The important thing is not to settle within certain frameworks provided by others but to use individual thoughts, values, and embodiment to create just the right connections for each individual.

To live is a series of such creations, and connections unfold beyond one's actions. We are always linked with others and are together with the past and the present. Yet at the same time, we also live in absolute solitude as the embodiment of *We're born alone, we die alone; we come alone, and go alone*. And that solitude has served as the horizon to unite like-minded individuals who understand that sadness. While being a part of a community, we are forever alone. Buddhism has accepted that contradiction of refraining from invading one another in multi-layered ways. The Japanese Buddhist world has indeed nurtured a rich sense of us.

2. Japanese Buddhism and *Good Ancestors*

Japanese temples are *two stories high*

Japanese Buddhism opens the way for *us*. Meanwhile, as a monk who has been active with Japanese temples, I chiefly engage in matters to do with services conducted for the deceased, such as funerals, memorial services, and paying respects for the departed at their gravesites

and have felt that we may be apt to leave behind the [us] that exist in the here and now. How should we perceive this aspect of Japanese Buddhism that focuses on the deceased who lived in the past, which it might be called *ancestor religion*?

Japan's Buddhism is easier to understand if we see it as a *two-floor structure*. The ground floor is a venue for *ancestor worship* for mourning the departed, and the second floor is for *Buddhist teachings*, where the living question how to live and the ways of the world through mindfulness and Zen. For Japanese people today, Buddhism as a religion focuses on comings and goings to and from the first floor, where memorial rites are performed for their ancestors. Having maintained family registries in the past, temples exist with support from a parishioner system that considers *family lineages* as units. So, it was natural to embrace words of gratitude and compassion with thoughts of *cherishing one's ancestors* and *passing on sentiments of heart to their children and grandchildren*. However, religious perspectives and family values are beginning to crumble, and change is happening to the social structure that has supported that first floor. Moral values based on unified beliefs on how the structure should exist, with the family system as a backdrop, may now risk becoming exclusionary.

Meanwhile, more people are feeling discomfort with today's social systems and individual limitations in answering them, starting to appreciate Buddhist worldviews, and proceeding to the second floor through mindfulness, re-imported from the West, as a gateway. Buddhism is being liberated from *religion* and shared broadly through diverse methods and expressions as a universal worldview that is *spiritual but not religious*, going beyond philosophy, thoughts, and attachments. This is a trend of the times that I have called *Post Religion*.

As long as Mahayana Buddhist temples comprise the first-floor space for ancestor worship and that for Buddhism on the second floor, the essential worldview of *auspiciousness and the sky* that goes beyond time and space will maintain its collectiveness. However, the first and second floors cannot help being separated if they are constrained within frameworks such as *family lineage, self, the past, and the present*. Then how can the first and second floors of Japanese Buddhism coexist?

Encountering *Good Ancestors*

We live in an age where we can expect to live to be a hundred. Now that we have more time in this world, are we living in a more leisurely way? On the contrary, I feel that as time passes,

more is pressing in smaller increments. Is it possible to see the world from a broad perspective living like that?

Debate is going on today in all areas of society about the future while questioning *diversity*, *coexistence*, and *sustainability*. But to what extent are we genuinely turning our attention to others and respecting worlds that exceed the scope of our own experiences? Businesses are chased with quarterly results, while politicians are hounded by steps to achieve results in the next election. From children to adults, everyone is desperately trying to meet their obligations, responsibilities and values that are being asked of them. At the same time, digital terminals indicate to-do tasks in the tiniest increments, stimulate desires, and issue alerts on dangers. Tasks, desires, and risks may seem to be created endlessly within us while notices continue to tell us what to do next.

In his book, *The Good Ancestor*, Australian-born public philosopher Roman Krznaric sounds an alarm on the overwhelmingly short-term thinking in modern society. As we live amid frenetic short-termism, Krznaric speaks to us about the need for long-term thinking to live in the now with a perspective that spans beyond generations. I had an opportunity to translate the work into Japanese, and it was published as “*The Good Ancestor: Watashitachi wa Yoki Sosen ni Nareruka?*” in autumn 2021 (Asunaro Shobo). Through this experience, I could recapture the relationships between Japanese Buddhism and ancestor worship, using the keywords “*Good Ancestor*.” It was a discovery of how the first floor of a temple (ancestor worship) and the second floor (Buddhist teachings), which seem separated, are connected.

From *ancestors as family lineage* to *forebearers*

Honoring one’s ancestors and thinking about the past is an act to open *the self*, which tends to be closed in *the present*. The same may be said of thinking of one’s descendants and *the future*. We will eventually become *ancestors* of the past for future generations. Through the ceremonial rite of holding memorial services for the deceased, Japanese Buddhism has continued to reflect on the past, and folding one’s hands in prayer to the past equated to looking toward the future. That was the biggest awareness I achieved by translating *The Good Ancestor*. I wonder if praying at a Buddhist altar each morning, which reminds us that we *will eventually go to the other side*, might be a daily practice of *a meditation of death* type of mindfulness with the deceased as a medium.

For example, in Buddhism, directing our wishes to all beings is called a *transfer of merit*, and its closing recital text is indispensable for chanting a Buddhist sutra. The objects of our wishes include human beings who live in the present and expand to all living things, past, present, and future. Such a custom should bring long-term thought for seeing the world with an eternal time axis to everyday life, which Roman calls *Deep time*, to our daily lives. The Japanese climate is such that the Buddhist belief goes around seeking to find spirituality in all things, not only humankind but also the mountains, rivers, trees, and plants. Perhaps that has invited us into a realm of *Deep time* beyond time and space without our realizing it.

In working on Roman's book, I translated the word ancestor as *Sosen that means forebearer* rather than *Senzo*, the literal Japanese term for *ancestor* which is limited to the family lineage. The word *Senzo* is limited to people related by blood, although the ancestors the author discusses are not limited to those with blood ties. *We* are the open entities that create the future. Without limiting ourselves to the diversity of beings who live in the now, we should bring in stakeholders transcending time and space, from our ancestors to future generations. From *ancestor worship limited to the family lineage* to *worship for forebearer*. I believe such a shift will smooth the path for preventing Japanese Buddhism as *ancestor worship* from becoming *faith in one's bloodlines* and open the way for ties that exceed blood ties.

How can we become good ancestors?

How can we become good ancestors? To answer that question, I think the starting point to consider is not to ponder the ways of our ancestors but *to be aware of the blessings we are endowed with*. We can see traces of countless individuals walking the paths we now walk and become aware of the history made through repeated trial and error.

It is by receiving blessings from countless entities whose ties make up the now that we exist. Being aware of that means we are one of those nameless ancestors, a dot within the things that happen, pass on, and leave blessings for others.

Despite the roles and responsibilities that seem to chase us daily, *our* days will not deviate from the fact that we co-exist with countless others, regardless of the when or where. The *here and now* do not belong only to *us in the now*. Is it not a simple human sense to learn that *we* are part of a series of related occurrences and live feeling companionship with that connection? I would like to suggest a stance that responds to Roman's call to question how to

be *good ancestors* in the Buddhist worldview of interdependent co-arising.

3. Ambient Buddhism

A custom of ancestor worship extending our selves

Today's times are called the *Anthropocene*, a geological term for the era based on significant human impact on the earth's geology. It is a concept that seeks restraint among humanity, which substantially impacts the global environment. While it's true that humanity greatly impacts the natural environment, we can also see traces of self-recognition that humanity controls the earth. Even a single life is full of unsolved mysteries, and we can hardly control our own bodies. The initial Buddhist spirit had been to open up the idea of *me* to a horizon of *us* from a neutral perspective where the earth is considered a common asset, and nature, humans, and everything is a part of it.

Success, as lauded by capitalist society, is a bloating of the *self* that forever seeks unceasing material proliferation and prosperity. And capital that is thus multiplied may be considered private property that will be enjoyed and inherited by blood relatives who are an extension of *self* that is closed only to family and does not circulate. However, I wonder if the *self* may have been more open and relaxed, based on interdependent co-arising, before the idea of *individualism* was introduced to Japan for modernization in Meiji Era. I imagine it had been supported by daily habits such as folding our hands in prayer for ties transcending time and space—our ancestors, forebearers, Gods, Buddha, and deities. Mindful customs connecting countless interdependent co-arisings that create the self with higher beings have been a natural part of Japanese life and culture, reminding people of the open connections available as a regular part of their lives.

We should now bring back and rebuild such interdependent co-arisings that we have shunned. These are connections with our ancestors, the past, ties with the future yet to come, our neighbors, other individuals, different species, and the planet Earth. No matter which part of time and space we slice in whatever way, there is no denying that the *self* is a part of that.

Precepts refer to good habits

Habits are ingrained in our daily physical behavior. There is nothing complicated about it; cleaning, cooking, having tea with someone, and consuming seasonal items are examples of life practices many can share. These lifestyle habits, which have essentially remained unchanged since ancient times, are the things that have fostered mutual trust between individuals and served as a foundation for maintaining genuine peace beyond confrontation.

In Buddhism, such life practices (habits) are called *Precepts*, and such practices conducted with peers have been at the root of all types of Buddhist teachings, which are based on three core teachings: *Precepts*, *Meditation*, and *Wisdom*. Precepts are commandments for acquiring good habits. *Meditation* stands for maintaining a calm mind, which we may call mindfulness. *Wisdom* is for achieving enlightenment to see the *self* and the world accurately. One spreads one's roots through *Precepts*, nurtures the stems with *Meditation*, and bears fruit with *Wisdom*. While strict precepts in a Monastic Buddhist way are said not to have fully taken root in Japanese Buddhism, characterized by its breadth and tolerance, their habits have continued to be embraced.

Precepts are not for judging oneself or others and are not obligatory to protect in fear of judgment. Phra Yuki Naradevo, who became a monk in Thailand, said, "We do not protect Precepts. They protect us." So, if we were to see *Precepts* as habits, it is easy to reflect on ourselves and know that *they protect us*. Habits make human beings. Our behavior, the way we combine words, our way of thinking—many of things we do regularly, we have acquired through repetitions since childhood, as well as for protecting the mind and body.

Modern living environments have diversified from person to person. It is fine to handle life practices on one's own, and it is also fine to share experiences with others through exchange. Is it not fair to say that everything begins by practicing good habits in various ways for various situations so that each of us may maintain those good habits and live with peace of mind? It is so obvious that the idea has been given little attention, but I feel that going through *the ordinary* daily is the only way to become *good ancestors*.

A taste for *Ambient Buddhism* through pilgrimages

We have embraced habits with various rhythms. Daily routines, such as praying at a Buddhist altar, monthly practices of speaking at village gatherings, seasonal traditions of visiting our

ancestors' graves at the end of the year, during the spring and autumn equinox, and the August homecoming period are all a part of our lives. Rhythms with different wavelengths converge as our lives change dramatically while maintaining harmony. There will be times, however, when our rhythm becomes irregular, weakens, or loses balance, and we lose sight of the whole picture. That is when we have taken trips to escape from our daily lives and cherished experiences to immerse ourselves in the extraordinary—which, from a religious standpoint, we call pilgrimages.

If we were to see the temples in towns and villages alongside our everyday living as training venues for acquiring better habits, I think avenues for extraordinary experiences that occasionally shake them up and bring change to the overall rhythm of *our* lives are the pilgrimage paths and culture of pilgrimages the Japanese climate has subsumed.

Many pilgrimage routes have been developed in Japan since ancient times. Not limited to expeditions from Mount Koya to Kumano, Ise Grand Shrine, or Shikoku, one can climb any mountain, walk the paths our ancestors have walked, and stop to find traces of the prayers they have offered. While many pilgrimage routes exist in the world, a particular appeal of Japan is its safety for any individual who wishes to walk such a path. One can settle down, listen carefully, and begin to hear the voices of the nameless.

Even in a metropolis such as Tokyo, one can climb Tokyo Tower, look down at the cityscape below, and be surprised by the many shrines, temples, and cemeteries scattered throughout the city. It reminds us that we are always alongside entities that transcend time and space. The custom of remembering and feeling ties with things invisible to us had once been a fundamental part of Japanese living. Buddhist worldviews had been ingrained in our lives, and people had lived with that without realizing it.

If ambient music, pioneered by the British composer Brian Eno, blends into its environment, I wonder if we can't call Japanese Buddhism *Ambient Buddhism*, or *Buddhism that blends into its surroundings*. Ambient music is often translated into Japanese as *environmental music*. However, as one who feels it should be translated as *cultural music* for its richer texture, I think Japanese Buddhism might also be called *Cultural Buddhism*.

How can we become good ancestors for future generations born a hundred years from now? The time that we dedicate ourselves to Ambient Buddhism and together deepen our questions is when the winds of Buddha Dharma will surely blow.