Chapter 3

Buddhism

The Perfect Religion for Disasters?

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Introduction

In seeking to answer the question posed by the title of this chapter, the first thing that comes to mind is exactly what would constitute a ‘perfect religion’ for disasters? What would its tenets be? What would the standards be for it to be judged either ‘perfect’ or ‘imperfect’? Further, perfect or imperfect for whom, i.e. for those who were the victims of a disaster, or those who merely observed a disaster, or both?

Needless to say, there are no easy answers to these questions. Yet, most observers would agree that, at the very least, any religion claiming to be ‘perfect’ for disasters of whatever type must address, in one way or another, the most salient characteristic of disasters, i.e. the immense suffering they cause their victims. It is in its ability to address this key component of disasters that Buddhism may be said to be the perfect religion for disasters. Why?

Unlike other major world religions, Buddhism begins with the fundamental assertion that far from being an anomaly or aberration, ‘suffering’ in its many forms lies at the very heart of the human condition. This assertion is expressed in Buddhism’s basic teachings, i.e. the Four Noble Truths, as follows:

1. Life means suffering.
2. The origin of suffering is attachment.
3. The cessation of suffering is attainable.
4. The path to the cessation of suffering.

In Buddhism the cause of suffering is seen as stemming from attachment, i.e. attachment to transient things and the ignorance thereof. Transient things include not only the physical objects that surround us, but also ideas, and in a greater sense all objects of our perception. Ignorance is understood as the lack of understanding of how our mind is attached to impermanent things. The reasons for suffering are desire, passion, ardour, pursuit of wealth and prestige, striving for fame and popularity, or in short: craving and clinging. Because the
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objects of our attachment are transient, their loss is inevitable, thus suffering will necessarily follow. Objects of attachment also include what might be called the most delusional idea of all, i.e. that each one of us possesses something that can be called an enduring if not eternal ‘self’. Buddhism, on the contrary, claims there is no abiding self, for what we call ‘self’ is just an imagined entity. In reality, we are merely a very small part of the ceaseless becoming of the universe.

Although these claims make Buddhism appear to be a very pessimistic, if not nihilistic, religion, such is not the case, for at the same time it offers a way, or path, to end suffering. Nevertheless Buddhism stresses that suffering, leading sooner or later to death, is an inevitable part of the human condition. Thus when disasters occur, they are not seen as something new, or even avoidable, but rather as further proof of the inevitability of suffering based on the fundamental Buddhist insight that all things, including the self, are destined to perish, i.e. they are impermanent.

Yet, Buddhism has an additional mechanism to explain the suffering that typically accompanies disasters and misfortunes of all kinds. This mechanism is of great antiquity and claims, at least at the popular level, that it is due to the workings of karma (Pali, kamma) that we become victims of both natural and human-made disasters. That is to say, it is the victims’ own past misdeeds, not only during this life but also from previous lives, that bring misfortune on themselves.

As ancient as this popular understanding may be, it is also readily invoked in the modern world. For example, at a press conference held in the immediate aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami of 11 March 2011, a reporter asked Tokyo Governor Ishihara Shintarō how the Japanese people should view the quake?

Ishihara replied:

The identity of the Japanese people is greed. This tsunami represents a good opportunity to cleanse this greed (J. gayoku), and one we must avail ourselves of. Indeed, I think this is divine punishment (J. tenbatsu).... It may be harsh for the victims to hear, but I want you to take it down and report it.1

The underlying viewpoint expressed by Ishihara is similar to that expressed by Tomomatsu Entai (1895–1973), a noted Pure Land sect scholar-priest. Entai’s comments were contained in an eighty-two-page booklet published on

1 Asahi Shimbun, 14 March 2011.