

# Sanctity in Buddhism

## Introduction

To outsiders, Buddhism may initially appear to be filled with contradictions : doctrinally it seems to deny the existence of God and yet existentially it speaks of the human capacity to meet and imitate superhuman saints and saviours. While Buddhist teaching denies the existence of an immortal soul it nevertheless emphasizes personal continuity within a multitude of rebirths until liberation or enlightenment is attained. To Buddhists, however, these contradictions are only apparent and marginal.

Amidst a variety of sects and doctrines, Buddhists hold that it is the historical Gautama, the Buddha, who proclaimed the supreme and definitive goal of sanctity during the forty-five years of his earthly ministry which started in 530 B.C. with his celebrated first sermon near Benares. This sermon addresses itself to the individual and enjoins him to lead a life of perfection. Indeed, holiness is the very essence of Buddhism. It manifests itself at several levels. Doctrinally, the Buddha described it as the Four Holy Truths : Life is fraught with suffering ; the source of all suffering is the craving for sensual pleasures, for an afterlife, or for annihilation ; there is a way out of that suffering through the cessation of craving ; and there is a final state of bliss and perfection which is *nirvāṇa*. The modalities of a life of holiness are put into practice along the Holy Eightfold Path, a vigorous Middle Way between pleasure seeking and futile asceticism. This way of life which leads safely to enlightenment consists of the following : saintly views and intentions, which is a matter of a faith and rests on the charism of wisdom ; saintly speech, action and livelihood, which belong to the realm of morality ; saintly efforts, mindfulness and mental concentration, which are the domain of meditation and put the crown on the spiritual life.

The perception of the Four Holy Truths and the practice of the Holy Eightfold Path are not, as such, separate stages of spiritual

growth. Buddhist sanctity is holistic, synchronic, affective and intuitive. In theological terms one might say that it is both a grace and an effort, a task and a responsibility. One classic text in which the Buddha describes this new world of spiritual totality is this: 'Great is the advantage of meditations steeped in morality, and great is the advantage of wisdom steeped in meditation' (*Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, 1:12). Buddhists, then, are familiar with heroes of sanctity and they feel close to them as exemplars, guides, and saviours.

### 1. The Buddha, Paragon of Sanctity

The Buddha experienced total awakening, hence his name. He was endowed with tremendous personal charm and charity. The holiness which he preached is an inner call for happiness. He taught that there is no opposition between man and the rest of the sentient world because all join in the spiritualization of all that exists through consciousness of the Ultimate Reality. Buddhist perfection in Western terms, is at the same time theistic, atheistic and pantheistic, monistic and dualistic, personal and impersonal, esoteric and exoteric. Perfection is a matter of a man's total being seen as one of the many perfectible stages of life.

The historical Buddha never claimed to be the ultimate source of holiness, as God did for Christians. He is not the Way, even though he points to it. Hence, the Buddhist saint does not 'participate' in the Buddha's life but rather realizes himself through the practice of virtues. The Buddha's inner-worldly compassion is the saint's standard of perfection: detachment from the world for the sake of the salvation of the world. Sanctity is total liberation from the endless cycles of life-and-death, *karma*, from the shackles of self; it means that endless bliss which is *nirvāṇa*.

Of great importance are the Buddha's precept and exhortations which are still observed today. Buddhists, monks and laity alike, pledge themselves to observe five basic precepts: not taking life, not using what is not given, not engaging in illicit sex, not telling lies, and not drinking liquor. The code for monks and nuns is much more detailed and runs into hundreds of precepts the observance of which sets the pace of one's spiritual life. Progress calls for the use of spiritual techniques, mainly of meditation. This illustrates the unity of the spiritual life, and the need for interiority which leads to freedom from sensual desires, that is, from the causes of sin. He

who conquers these causes or, in other words, belief in a separate self which accounts for suffering and rebirth, is on the point of becoming a saint.

## 2. A Typology of Buddhist Sanctity

Buddhism sets forth a series of stages along the path to holiness. From low to high there are four categories of saints according to Theravada texts: 1. The stream-winner, *sotapanna*, who will no longer be reborn in hell, as an animal, or in any state of suffering because he has destroyed the first three of ten obstacles to sanctity, from reliance on good works to ignorance about the self. 2. The once-returner, *sakadāgamin*, who conquered also lust and hate, and shall be reborn only once. 3. The non-returner, *anāgamin*, who will be reborn in the higher heavens and thence reach *nirvāna*. 4. Finally, the *arhat* or 'worthy one', who completes the course of salvation at the end of this life. It has often been pointed out that the *arhat* is the ideal saint of Theravada, while the *bodhisattva* type belongs to Mahayana. In fact, both types of sanctity overlap. To Western eyes, the *arhat* is the stoic, outer-worldly saint, while the *bodhisattva* is the committed, inner-worldly saint, intent upon alleviating the suffering conditions of his fellowmen to such a degree that he vows to forego final bliss until all have been saved. There are countless mythical bodhisattvas. Perhaps the better known of them is Avalokitesvara who rescues people from evil passions, shipwrecks and demons; who grants children to the childless; who is the father-mother saint, glorified as Kannon, the Goddess of Mercy. Such are the celestial patron saints of earthly saints.

Saints are celebrated for their amity and compassion, their joy and humour, their agapeic love, spiritual powers, and indifference to worldly conditions, their chastity and for a host of other virtues.

## 3. Holiness, Secular and Monastic

As Buddhist sanctity is the final goal of all beings, no one need eternally be lost, even though this sanctity is not attained in the present life. Yet all beings are not equally close to that goal because they are unequally disposed by their *karma*. This fact is appropriately illustrated from a comparison between the holiness of the laity and that of the monk.

(a) *Laity : the holiness of householders*

The possibilities for holiness open to the laity are fairly grim. We are told, in a variety of texts, that the homelife is full of impediments to sanctity, and that the layman will never obtain the supreme wisdom by living the detested life of a family man, by enjoying the pleasures of the senses which make him hanker after wife and children. For all that, we are well documented on the elements of saintly life for the laity. Much like Confucianism, Buddhism stresses good inter-personal relations as essential to spiritual growth : between parents and children, pupils and teachers, husband and wife, friend and friend, master and servant, laity and monk.

The Buddhist laity, often in a kind of initiation, express faith in the Three Jewels, that is, *the Buddha*, his *Law*, and his *Community*. They also promise fidelity to the Five precepts, already mentioned, the observance of which varies considerably according to time and place. There are special counsels for girls and wives. The ideal wife, the Buddha said, 'respects her husband, has no wishes of her own, no ill-feelings, no resentment, and always tries to make him happy'. (*Anguttaranikaya*, 4 : 197).

Buddism has always known a large number of saintly mavericks, such as the *arhats* of India and *hijiris* of Japan. In Mahayana there is another type of popular saint, often a lay person, which has recently come in for renewed attention even at universities. I refer to the *Myokonin*, those 'wonderful good People' (as D. T. Suzuki calls them) whose *joie de vivre* is the measure of their inner freedom and ecstatic trust in Amida, their Saviour. *Myokonin* are marvellously integrated people whose character traits remind us of the Christian fruits of the Spirit. They are tolerant, compassionate, humble, poor and detached, pure and modest, generous and gentle, full of wonderment, joy and awe at the marvellous goodness of Amida. Their recent popularity, I submit, is due in part to the quest for models of an uninhibited and upretentious spirituality, for a Buddhism with a human face. Their spirituality goes back to the earliest Buddhism which holds that all beings can be bodhisattvas provided, in the pungent words of Suzuki, 'they do not philosophize about the word's tribulations from a celestial abode.'

(b) *Monks and Nuns : the holiness of homeless brothers and sisters.*

The Buddha exhibited a stroke of genius when he incarnated his ideal of holiness in the fourfold community of mendicant monks and nuns, lay brothers and lay sisters, all of them dedicated professionally to the pursuit of salvation. Not long after his death, however, the ideal of perfection was often confined to the Orders of monks and nuns. Their life is still regulated by minute rules. From the earliest times they were enjoined to sanctify every act no matter how trivial it might be. "In looking forward, or in looking round; in stretching forth or drawing in his arm; in eating, drinking, masticating or swallowing, sleeping or walking in obeying the calls of nature, in going, standing, sitting, speaking or keeping still, the monk remains aware of all that this means, and he becomes mindful and self-possessed" (*Digha-nikaya*, 2 : 65). The Rules of Discipline are recited in chapter. Offences are confessed and appropriate penances are given. Four offences warrant expulsion from the Order : fornication, theft, murder and false spiritual claims.

#### 4. Profiles of Buddhist Saints

Saints participate in the awe and fascination of the divine. The historical holy man or woman, even during his lifetime may be recognized as such, and also worshipped. Buddhists, much like Christians, have their *sensus fidei*, that uncanny, intuitive perception of outstanding qualities which are the hallmark of a saintly life. For all that, each saint remains an individual who must be seen standing before the motley canvas of his time. Here below, follow half a dozen thumbnail sketches which may help the reader paint for himself the composite portrait of the Buddhist saint.

1. *Tu-shun* (557-640) as many authors hold, is the nominal founder of the influential hua-yen sect in China, still flourishing in Korea and Japan. At sixteen he became a monk. At an early age, he led in prayer and meditation, feeding a thousand people when there was only enough food for half of them. He cleared a mountain from infesting insects which promptly left at his command. He cured the deaf and the dumb, as well as a man possessed by an evil dragon who said through the man's mouth : "The great Ch'an master has come ; I can no longer stay !" He wielded the miraculous powers of *shamans*, both male and female. His was a compassionate nature

extending love to all without distinction. Hence he gained the respect of all, monks and laity, noble and mean. In imitation of the Buddha, he remained unperturbed in the face of praise and censure. Once when he crossed a river and had to pull up the hem of his garment, he fell back into the water. Suddenly the water stopped flowing and allowed him to reach the other shore without wetting his feet, only to start flowing again when he was safely on land. At the age of eighty-four he sat upright in meditation and passed away without having been sick. He was buried in a sitting position and placed in a hole. The place was filled with fragrant odours. People built a shrine above the grave (Taisho Edition of the *Buddhist Tripitaka*, Vol. 50, pp. 653-4).

2. *Gyogi* (670-749), had a charismatic personality attracting thousands of people who recognized his divine powers and called him *bodhisattva*, a title posthumously conferred by the Emperor for the first time in Japan. Gyogi was a wonder-worker, the ideal *hijiri*, a holy man, a true *shaman* possessing mediatory powers at the service of common people. He founded charity hospitals, orphanages, old people's homes; he dug canals and built bridges. His many projects were managed by disciples, monks and nuns as well as laity who lived in small communities nearby. The Emperor, who needed his help, elevated Gyogi who had no ecclesiastical training, to the rank of Archbishop. He died at the age of eighty, leaving behind more than 3,000 disciples.

3. *Kukai* (774-835) or *Kobo Daishi* was born in an aristocratic family. A legend says that his mother conceived after dreaming that an Indian monk entered her bosom, and that her pregnancy lasted twelve months. Kukai went to China. Hui-Kuo, the master who received him exclaimed: "I knew in advance that you were coming; we have awaited each other for a long time!" In 824 there was a severe drought. The Emperor ordered Kukai to come to court and pray for rain. He performed the appropriate rites, set the rain dragon free which his competitor had put in a bottle, and brought forth abundant rain. He prophesied the moment of his death, refused the nectar brought to him by a celestial cook, and breathed his last. For ninety-nine days during which funeral rites were performed, his hair continued to grow and his body remained warm. Legend says that he did not die. His tomb is a popular place of pilgrimage on Mount Koya

whence, it is believed, he shall come forth again to save all suffering people.

4. *Genshin* (942–1017) is a venerated founder of Japan's Pure Land tradition. Like *Kukai*, *Genshin* was a great artist and writer. He had a deep awareness of his bodhisattva vocation and said to himself: "I formerly was a Buddha and I appeared in this world. Now that the conditions for salvation of others have been fulfilled, I shall return to my paradise." *Genshin* became the father of many aspirants to holiness and of hundreds of *communautés de base* whose influence upon Japanese religiosity remains even today his signal gift to the nation.

5. *Honen* (1133–1212), a disciple of *Genshin*, is affectionately known in the Western world as "the Buddhist saint." He was an articulate reformer, proclaiming "the easy way to salvation." He had to face jealousy and persecution at the hands of the traditional sects. He was stripped of his monastic rank and banished from Kyoto. His "easy way" brought salvation within immediate reach of the people and become a new source for social cohesion in the face of ecclesiastical oppression. Around his deathbed there appeared purple clouds, while sweet music and various perfumes filled the room.

6. *Shinran* (1173–1262) is one of the most remarkable reformers Japan has ever known. His mother, one tradition says, requested that he become a monk on her deathbed. At Mount Hiei, *Shinran* became so profoundly attached to *Honen* so much so that he wrote: "There is nothing for me to do than to believe *Honen*. Even though I should go to hell because I was deceived by him, I should not regret it!" *Shinran* completed the process of declergification begun by *Honen* stressing that praise of Amida or the *nembutsu* was sufficient for salvation. At the age of twenty-one *Shinran* became obsessed with the thought of his sins and passions. During a retreat he had a vision of the saintly Prince Regent, *Shotoku Taishi*, who appeared to him as *Kannon Bosatsu* promising to transform himself into a woman whom *Shinran* would embrace. *Eshinni*, who became *Shinran's* wife, confirms this tradition which suggests the difficulties of the celibate life.

At the time of his exile as a layman, *Shinran* found himself in a new society ready to receive his doctrine of pure grace for all, clergy and laity, men and women, on an equal basis of Amida's

mercy. His spirituality was not a concession to the flesh but the cry of his faith. Totally evil humankind is totally dependent on the saving powers of Another. This called for a revolutionary way of life, different from that of the traditional monk. Shinran described his new life in these poignant words: "I am an ordinary mortal, full of passions and desires, living in this transient world like the dweller in a house on fire."

The pendant of total sinfulness implies total redemption. According to Shinran, the Buddha nature and human nature are one and the same; saviour and saved are one; there is neither saint nor sinner. This is the famous doctrine of *Kiho-ittai*, which teaches that Amida's saving vow transports the trustful sinner into an irreversible state of holiness. Thus the transcendent becomes the immanent as worldly bonds are divinized: "All sentient beings in some birth or life have been my parents or my brothers. We can save them all when we become Buddhas in the life to come." Shinran's death at eighty-nine was uneventful and yet classic. He lay on his right side with his head toward the north and his face toward the west. When he could no longer be heard reciting the name of Amida, he had passed away, thereby to be born unto Reality.

### **5. Who is a Saint? Why Buddhist Saints?**

Holiness exhibits to the world the numinous dimensions of religion, as Scripture states: "Do not call the Tathagata by his name, nor address him as 'friend', for he is the Buddha the Holy One" (*Mahavagga, 1:6*). Buddhist saints are not the creation of a God, even though the Buddha is their creative ideal of perfection. In Buddhism and Hinduism the line between gods and saints is blurred. Historical saints are mythologized; mythological saints are historicized—a common religious phenomenon. Popular devotion, however, claims the privilege of humanizing all saints before it divinizes them. This reflects the anthropomorphic character of all sanctity and expresses the age-old belief that some mysteriously redeeming power penetrates the depths of this transient world. When this penetration becomes compenetration, as is the case in Mahayana, then, as H. von Glasenapp writes, "it may be said that Buddhism in spite of all doctrinal differences is nevertheless based on the same assumptions, feelings and hopes as the theistic religions" (*Buddhism, A Non-Theistic Religion*, London: 1970 p.125).



I have described the polyvalence of Buddhist sanctity: our saints are priests and prophets, healers and magicians. They are identifiable not so much by similarity of their common goal but by the diversity of their ministries to a suffering world. Saints are archetypes which impress, influence and fascinate. They fill a deep socio-psychological and religious need, and "they are responsible for the anthropomorphism of all God-images" (C. G. Jung, *Collected Works*, London, : 1964, X, p. 449).

The Buddhist appointment with sanctity shows remarkable similarities to that of other religions. The last word on sanctity is not spoken in the normal course of life, but after death when the phenomenon can be completely grasped. Saints, somehow, are such by popular acclaim, which is an intuitive reaction of a community of believers, and therefore takes time. Officialdom, as we have seen, can be a help or a hindrance in fostering that reaction. But the final word belongs to the people who project their own spiritual aspirations upon their choice. One phenomenological aspect of Buddhist sanctity, therefore, is recognition.

Are Buddhist saints necessary at all? They are not needed for creation, perhaps not even for salvation, at least in primitive Buddhism. But they do inspire people to yearn for perfection. Through vicarious experience Buddhist saints enrich our understanding of ourselves and of our world. Many of them, like Shinran, dramatize the tragic aspects of human life, as well as its nobility. Through them a tangible religious axiology becomes a living reality in our midst. Buddhism is inconceivable without the Buddha and its saints, and the seriousness of their quest for sanctity as the interpenetration of transcendent reality becomes the measure of its success as a full-scale realigion.

Let Buddhist saints be wreathed in legends and mythology. When all embellishments are stripped away, they still remain the eloquent and often effective symbols of higher human potentialities. With Pascal they know that, in man, there is more than man. The word "saint" is adjectival, not nounal. The saint is not a god, but god-like, divine and deifield. Yet he must stand before the judgment of human good because Buddhism concentrates on disciplining man's passions and channelling his emotions into the path of perfection. The Buddhist saint shares with us an internal humanism that puts the

ultimate value of humanity in man himself. Thereby he serves as a corrector to the external humanisms of the West which are primarily concerned with man's outside world. Buddhist saints invite us to make our inner life more perfect, more compassionate, and more universal.

Buddhist saints then are not strangers. Buddhist saints possess awesome and beatifying powers. They are never mere theoreticians or aestheticists. Even though they deny the existence of the True Self most seriously, Buddhist saints would subscribe to this statement: "Where serious concern for self and open-hearted detachment from self coincide, access is thrown open to the holy. This, however, does not force the holy to appear. It gives itself only as a free gift" of Amida (Karl Rahner, ed. *Sacramentum Mundi*, New York: 1969, Vol. 3, p. 52).