

# A Brief Talk at the Interfaith Meeting between Buddhists and Muslims<sup>\*</sup>

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Thank you very much for inviting me to give a short talk at this interfaith meeting on the common ground between Islam and Buddhism.

Unfortunately, I do not know very much about Islam, I'm afraid, so all I can really offer you on this occasion is a brief overview of some of the essential aspects of our own particular Buddhist tradition, not a comparison between Islam and Buddhism in general.



Shin Buddhism, which is our particular tradition, is one of the Japanese Pure Land schools that speak of salvation through birth in the Pure Land, the land of Amida Buddha. Our school is usually known as *Jodo Shinshu*, literally 'The True Teaching of the Pure Land.' The world-renowned Zen philosopher, D. T. Suzuki, loved *Jodo Shinshu* as well as *Zen Shu*, referring to the one as Shin Buddhism and to the other as Zen Buddhism.

A) Salvation through faith alone.

Shin Buddhism is a religion that teaches 'salvation through faith alone'. This may remind you of the Lutheran dogma of 'Justification by faith' that we find in Christianity. Although I do not know whether Islam possesses a similar tradition, I will talk about this teaching briefly.

Faith is faith in unconditional love, the unconditional love of Amida Buddha, who promised he would save all beings without any form of discrimination. According to *The Larger Sutra of Eternal Life*, Amida Buddha vowed, whilst still a *bodhisattva*, that he would not attain Buddhahood unless all beings, by pronouncing his Name, were able to be born in the Pure Land he was creating. Thus Shin Buddhist faith involves entrusting oneself absolutely to Amida's universal, unconditional love that never discriminates between young and old, men and women, rich and poor, ignorant

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and wise, good and bad. On awakening to the unconditional love being poured over us, we entrust ourselves absolutely to that love. When we talk about ‘salvation through faith alone’, the faith with which we entrust ourselves to the absolute love shown by Amida is pure and untainted.

In Shin Buddhism, pure faith is known as Other Power faith: we entrust ourselves absolutely to Other Power, the great working of unconditional love. Self-power faith is not pure: it involves relying still on our own power, being incapable of entrusting ourselves absolutely to Other Power. Having self-power faith signifies being proud of our own deeds as individuals and remaining tenaciously attached to them. Pure faith known as Other Power faith, on the other hand, involves forsaking all attachment to self-power and entrusting ourselves single-mindedly to the unconditional love of the Buddha. ‘Salvation through faith alone’ thus means that it is not by our own deeds, or self-power, that we attain salvation—or ‘justification’ in Christian terminology—but by Other Power. With regard to religious faith there can be no ‘self-justification.’ Pure faith is free of any kind of self-justification and shows no attachment to our actions.

The reason why the Shin Buddhist faith is called Other Power faith is not only because of this entrusting of the self to Other Power but also because the origin of this faith is itself Other Power. Once we awaken to pure faith, we immediately realise that it is Other Power, or Amida’s unconditional love, working upon us that has awakened us to the faith of entrusting ourselves absolutely to that Other Power. In other words, it is through Amida’s unconditional love that faith is awakened within us. In this respect the original source of Shin Buddhist faith in Other Power is Other Power itself. This is the original reason for the Shin Buddhist faith being known as ‘Other Power faith.’ In this sense the awakening of faith is entirely a gift from Other Power. Shinran Shonin (1173–1262), the founder of Shin Buddhism, says, ‘It is all due to the karmic condition of things that some follow one master while others leave him. This being so, it would be absurd to say that one who turns from one master to another will not attain birth in the Pure Land. Do people mean to take back the faith given to each person by Amida as if it were something of theirs? Such views are most decidedly unreasonable. (*The Tannisho*, chapter 6)

B) The three forms of love, including Unconditional Love.

What then is this unconditional love, shown by the Buddha, or ‘Other Power?’

In his analysis of love, Dharma Master Tan-Luan (476–542), a Chinese monk of the Pure Land tradition, separated the concept of love into three different categories:

“There are three forms of love: The first is conditioned by one’s worldly relationships (衆生緣) and is called ‘small love’ (小悲), the second is conditioned by one’s relationship to the Dharma or Truth (法緣) and is called ‘medium love’ (中悲) and the third is not conditioned by any relationship (無緣) and is called ‘great love’ (大悲).”

The first form of love, known as ‘small love’, is the kind where people love others because they share some worldly relationship, a parent-child relationship, for instance,

or a friendship, or a regional or company work relationship, or because they belong to the same social organisation or are of the same nationality etc. It is 'small' due to its self-centredness. The second form of love is the one where people love others because they share the same Dharma, or religious truth, free of the self-centredness found in worldly relationships. Even this type of love cannot be called 'great love', however. It is seen only as 'medium love,' because it is not yet completely free of self-centredness, being conditioned by the Dharma or the religious truth that people share. According to Buddhist teaching, true love is not conditioned by anything, not even by the Dharma or religious truth. If, in their encounter with other religions, people are too attached to their own teaching, it can lead to terrible conflicts. Such dogmatic attachment is called "Dharma-ego" in Buddhism and is to be avoided at all costs.

Unconditional love is the third type. As it is not conditioned by anything, not even by the Dharma, it is given in equal measure to all beings. Transcending all forms of discrimination, it can truly be called 'great love'. However, the pure act of loving others in a manner unsullied by any vestige of selfishness would appear very difficult, if not downright impossible, for ordinary beings such as ourselves to accomplish. In this sense, unconditional love is considered as the working of the Wisdom of the Buddha, one who is awakened to the truth of life.

This does not mean to say, however, that there is absolutely no way for us to practise the pure act of loving others just as they are. In Mahayana Buddhism the bodhisattva's ideal is 'benefiting oneself and at the same time benefiting others.' In this context 'benefiting' means 'awakening to the truth of life'. In other words, to love others as much as you love yourself is an imperative for any seeker after truth, whatever tradition they belong to. There is an important saying, 'People are all equal beyond friend and foe.'

As all beings possess Buddha-nature, by which is meant the potentiality to become a Buddha, all beings also have the possibility of loving others as a pure act devoid of any self-centredness. According to the *Treatise on the Treasure-nature* by Sāramati (350–400), on which the theory of the Buddha-nature (*buddhadhātu*) is believed to be based, the reason for all sentient beings having Buddha-nature is that 'sentient beings are within the Wisdom of the Buddha.' Likewise all sentient beings are within the embrace of the Buddha's unconditional love, itself the working of his wisdom. Thus there remains for us the possibility of accomplishing the pure act of loving unconditionally. Sadly, however, this potential is usually blocked or concealed by our own blind passions and selfish attachment to thoughts and feelings. The obstacle lies not without but within our own karmic existence.

Although we ourselves are so self-centred and unable to love others as we should, it is still possible for us, if we take the time to reflect humbly on our existential situation, to see how we ourselves have been forgiven, accepted and supported by the love and compassion of others. Then, awakened to the unconditional nature of that love, we can also entrust ourselves to that love. As, with the awakening of true faith, we entrust ourselves to the unconditional love of God or Buddha appearing through those around

us, so we also come to recognise the important meaning of unconditional love and try ourselves to love others just as they are. Although we experience the bitterness of frequent failure, nevertheless, by coming to know the forgiveness and love of others, we can still go forward gratefully with faith in unconditional, universal love.

C) Two Aspects of true faith.

There is another important element to the Shin Buddhist faith. It is said in our tradition that true faith possesses two essential aspects: 1) Awakening to Amida Buddha or his unconditional love and 2) Awakening to oneself or to the sad reality of one's karmic existence. These are two aspects of the same pure faith. Awakening to Amida Buddha is not separate from awakening to oneself. Although the English word 'faith' bears similar connotations to the Japanese word *shinjin* 信心, the former cannot entirely encompass the latter. Whenever I, as a Japanese Shin Buddhist, employ the word 'faith' in the sense of *shinjin*, it invariably includes this element of awakening. In Buddhism the essence of faith lies in awakening. When we awaken to the unconditional love working upon us, we ignorant wretches are impelled to entrust ourselves absolutely to that love.

This means that for us 'unconditional love' is not merely a philosophical concept but the absolute reality in which we find ourselves as individuals. There are many religions that talk of the extreme importance of unconditional love but, if it is not related to an existential awareness of one's own existence, it remains merely a concept. What is important for us as Shin Buddhists is to become fully aware of the sad reality of our existence—negative aspects such as selfishness, ignorance, greed, anger, pride, attachment and so forth. Unless we become aware, in the light of the true teaching, of these negative aspects, it will be very difficult for us to overcome them and live our lives positively. The starting point, whether we find ourselves in a secular or a religious environment, has to be this awareness of our karmic condition and a simultaneous entrusting of ourselves to the Buddha's unconditional love as it manifests itself through those around us. In Shin Buddhism, true faith is said always to include both these two kinds of awakening.

Once awakened to true faith, we discover in the deepest spiritual dimension a peaceful awareness of the sad reality of our own existence and at the same time of Amida Buddha's unconditional love, and we can go forward positively and tranquilly on the way to the Pure Land with deep humility and gratitude.

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