

Chapter 30

Nakamura Hajime



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Nakamura Hajime was perhaps one of the most gifted scholars in the twentieth century, able to move from one area of specialty to another with equal ease and authority. He is widely acknowledged as a scholar of great accomplishment, even to the extent that the output of his work is said to easily equal that of a hundred scholars. Ronald Burr, in his editorial preface, remarks: “He stands in a tradition of scholars who have held the chair of philosophy at Tokyo University, and who are of astonishingly high caliber in the amount and quality of the scholarship they have produced” (Burr 1992: ix). It was his early works such as *A History of the Early Vedānta Philosophy* (1950–1956) and *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples* (1948–1949) that brought about a breakthrough in his early career and made him an internationally acclaimed thinker. He expanded the horizon of his research into Indian, Chinese, Tibetan, Japanese, and European thought, cutting across the Eurasian continent. His interest in human thought culminated in the comparative analysis of human thought, both East and West. He summarizes his approach to his studies thus:

In recent scholarship there has been a tendency to avoid comparative studies. ... Gradually, however, I have come to believe that this tendency to avoid comparative study has gone too far. Each study by a specialist should, at some point, be placed in a comprehensive framework to make clear the significance of the total subject matter. I think that there is a need now to reconsider some of the problems of the history of thought from a comparative perspective, and although no one has the massive competence to treat all cultural traditions in a comparative depth, perhaps something of importance can emerge from modest efforts in a comparative direction. (Burr 1992: 4–5)

How many scholars and thinkers are adequately equipped with the tools and the necessary philosophical vision to delve into the area of the comparative history of ideas from ancient times to modern days? An ordinary scholar would never think of

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venturing into the deep recess of unknown territory. This final stage of his scholarship was foreseen even from the earliest period of his academic career, and everything he did was steadily geared towards the blossoming of what he calls human “thought,” which he defines as “guiding principles for man to live” (Nakamura 1986: 11). He recalls that the first step towards this was made when his predecessor teacher UI Hakuju 宇井 伯寿 (1882–1963) at Tokyo University told him one day that scholars when young should explore Indian philosophy to gain a wide and objective viewpoint so that Buddhism could be objectively studied. This is how, Nakamura says, he began to work on the studies of Vedānta philosophy (Nakamura 1986: 13).

Hajime Nakamura was born on November 28, 1912, in a city named Matsue in Shimane Prefecture and moved to Tokyo at an early age. Graduating from the Department of Indian Philosophy and Sanskrit Literature, University of Tokyo, he became an associate professor of the same department in 1943. His area of discipline is usually categorized as “Indian Philosophy.” He was known as one of the frontrunners in this area of specialty. However, he preferred to call himself a student of academic truth. In academic circles in Japan before and during his time, sectionalism prevailed in every field of studies. This prompted him later on to set up an academic institute where the barrier of sectionalism would be completely removed and true academic pursuit could be realized. After his retirement from Tokyo University, he established the institute Tōhō Gakuin 東方学院 (The Eastern Institute, Inc.) and became its first founder-director in 1973. The Institute’s doors were open to anyone with a sincere zeal for study, irrespective of age, academic qualifications, occupation, nationality, or gender. He called this a “Terakoya” 寺子屋 (“temple-hut”) (1986: 177).

He pursued his studies tirelessly and uncompromisingly until his death. The strength of his scholarship stems from his firm belief that scholarship must be understood by all, for which purpose logical sequences and arguments in writings must be clear to the reader (Nakamura 1986: 58). As his areas of research cover a wide range and as in each discipline he has distinctly contributed to human knowledge, the following categories of his areas of research on a broad basis may be adopted for clarity and convenience.

1 Indian Studies

At Tokyo University Nakamura lectured on the history of Indian thought until his retirement. He authored many books and articles covering ancient Indian thought up to modern philosophers who had left lasting influences on the history of modern India. As he reports, he began his research into Indian philosophy as a prelude to the study of Buddhism (Nakamura 1986: 13). Working for several years on the study of Vedānta philosophy, he contended that Indian philosophy should be investigated from the methodological perspectives of thought and philology. He examined every available text in Sanskrit, Pali, Tibetan, Chinese, Greek, or any language relevant to the subject. Such thorough textual examination, as anyone who has read his works

would notice, makes Nakamura's scholarship solid and difficult to dispute. This attitude persists in every field of study he undertook.

Nakamura's interest in Indian philosophy encompassed many fields, including Buddhist studies. He moved freely from one discipline to another, covering texts such as the Vedas, Upaniṣad, and Mahābhārata, the philosophies of Śaṅkara, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṃkhya, and Yoga, the logic of Dharmakīrti, translations of the Nyāya-sūtra, and Jaina and Hindu studies. He covered even the modern era of Indian philosophy, including philosophers such as Sri Ramakrishna (1836–1886), Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902), Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945), Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888–1975), who left indelible marks on the history of modern India. Commenting on the underlying principal axis of Nakamura's scholarship, MAYEDA Sengaku, one of his beloved pupils, says:

The scholastic production of Dr. Nakamura sprouted with vigor and continued to expand like a banyan tree, granting people respite and tranquility. The banyan tree possesses numerous enormous trunks that have their roots firmly embedded in the soil. At a casual glance one gets the impression that each trunk is an individual tree. However, upon closer observation one notices that the trees all constitute one immense cosmos-like formation, with a single tree in the center as the axis with all the others securely attached to it. In the case of Dr. Nakamura, I personally am of the opinion that the tree that constituted the central axis, was none other than Indian philosophy. (Mayeda 2000: vi)

How important Indian philosophy was to Nakamura can be measured in terms of his publication of his *Selected Works* (Definitive Edition) (1988–1999), which contains 32 volumes on Indian philosophy, though the volumes 2–4 have no direct bearing on India. When glancing at the vast expanse of his scholarship, all the branches merge toward the trunk that is deeply rooted in the soil, and the trunk is nourished and sustained by the question of self-introspection and rethinking of how man should live (Nakamura 1986: 192). This is the question Nakamura began to ponder, and in search of its answers, he set out on his long journey wandering into different directions.

The cultural history of India was another area in which he took special interest. He believed that there was no “thought” that was in isolation from the realities of the society. His intention in venturing into the study of the historical development of Indian society was to examine the basis for the rise and establishment of ideas. He wrote an extensive work on the ancient history of India called *Ancient History of India* in two volumes in 1963 and 1966. KARASHIMA Noboru 辛島昇 (1933–2015), an expert in the history of south India, observes that at a time when there was no comprehensive history of ancient India written in Japanese, books such as Nakamura's, with citations and references freely made from Sanskrit originals and Chinese Buddhist texts, could have been written only by a man of genius (Karashima 2005: 27). Nakamura was not a historian but was only interested in the socio-cultural background in which he believed the Indian ways of thinking were embedded.

In the field of Indian Studies, the definition that has been associated with the discipline is gradually being broadened, and now it is very much part of the “area studies” that became prominent since the end of the Second World War, particularly in the United States and Germany. MAYEDA Sengaku, well known for his study of

the philosophy of Śaṅkara, tracing the history of “Indian Studies” in Japan, comments that it covers Indian culture, religions, history, and other areas as topics of research through literature and material things (Aruga 2005: 124). Although Nakamura’s works on Indian philosophy may be included in the older definition of the discipline that was substantially based on the various types of literature, his approach can be said to have differed from the Western methodology that was the order of the day in Europe and America at that time. Even when the new movement of “area studies” was gradually gaining currency, it was he who became one of the frontrunners to introduce and raise the standard of the relevant research approaches adopted among scholars of Japan at a time when scholarly works were at a standstill due to the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in the Second World War. His last lecture entitled “Is Indology ‘Egyptian Studies’?” at the University of Tokyo reflects his thought, the thought he cherished throughout his career as an important methodology for his research.

Perhaps Hajime Nakamura is remembered most in the western world as the author of the *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*. Though written early in his academic career, this work became a focal point of discussion among Western readers. It also became a textbook at several universities in the United States. He got involved in this work, he writes, in 1943 at the request of ITÔ Kichinosuke 伊藤吉之助 (1885–1961) of the Department of Philosophy, University of Tokyo, who was one of the leading members of a committee commissioned by the Ministry of Education of Japan to promote a comparative study of the ways of thinking of different peoples. The themes given to him were “ways of thinking of Indian people as reflected especially in linguistic style and logic” and “ways of thinking of the Chinese and Japanese peoples as found in the process of accepting Buddhism” (Nakamura 1981: xiii; 1986: 147). He recalls that in order to make the work academically accurate, he had to have a clear methodology: “I realized that if I was not clear on methodology, I would not achieve the scientific accuracy desired” (Nakamura 1981: xiii). It would have been a daunting task for any scholar to single-handedly undertake such a work at the highest level of research. It requires not only the necessary skill and highly demanding academic apparatus but also a firm conviction and vision that such a work would bring about a fruitful result – perhaps making use of its outcome as a launching-pad for a self-criticism and introspection based on objective evidence which was needed in Japan at the time. Arthur Frederick Wright writes:

The Catastrophe which befell Japan in 1945 ushered in a period of great intellectual and spiritual ferment. Japanese intellectuals asked themselves fundamental questions about their nation and their culture, about the potential of a new Japan in a new world order. One facet of this great effort of reappraisal and projection was comparative study which, it was hoped, would give the Japanese a fresh view of their culture and society, their myths and their values. Mr. Nakamura, as the preface to the Japanese edition indicates, was drawn to this new effort at national self-knowledge through intercultural comparisons. (Wright 1981: vii)

This intention and motivation of Nakamura in undertaking the work is well reflected in the prefaces to the first Japanese edition of the *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*, volumes 1 (1947) and 3 (1949). This work grew with the author over the years, as is evident from the fact that a new chapter dealing with the ways of

thinking of the Korean people was subsequently added to the work under the title of “Ways of Thinking of the Tibetan and Korean Peoples” published in 1989.

Less known in his scholarship is the attitude underlying the society as a whole, though his studies centered mainly on thought and religion. Nakamura’s scholarship, writes HOSAKA Shunji, was a comprehensive approach to society as a whole (Hosaka 2005: 80). In this process there are no boundaries that separate culture and thought from economy, politics, and community. Such an attitude to scholarship is well reflected in his idea that man is always a social being. He always sounded a warning to those who blindly followed the supremacy of Western scholarship and ideas and advocated that “Asian studies” should evolve from within Asia, with Buddhism as a yardstick to measure the extent of cultural evolution in Asia, in general, and in Japan, in particular. His attitude to Asian studies (this also applies to all his works) manifests itself in the spirit of absolute freedom of scholarship, based on the strict examination and critique of the source material and fair viewpoints, through which the object of investigation is carried out with empathy and compassion.

2 Buddhist Studies

Hajime Nakamura is often considered to be a Buddhist scholar based on the fact that he authored many works on the various forms of Buddhism, beginning with early Indian Buddhism to Mahāyāna Buddhism in Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Of particular interest among his vast collection of works is his passion for early Buddhism. His greatest contribution to Buddhism, as is widely acknowledged, is that his writings are clear and easy to understand even by those who are not specialists in the subject. The prevailing academic criticisms at that time were that writings on Buddhism were pedantic and beyond the comprehension of ordinary readers. It was his conviction that Buddhism, deeply rooted in Japanese spirituality, should be made available to the public through writings that were comprehensible and meaningful to them. He made this conviction a reality by writing numerous books and translations in a language intelligible to the ordinary public. He began with *Gotama Buddha- A Life of Śākyamuni*, *Words of Śākyamuni*, and *Words of the Buddha – Suttanipāta* – all published in 1958. The last one, in particular, was acclaimed a masterpiece in translation and accepted among intellectuals as a departure from the restrictions of traditional writings. In this translation, some of the new words or terms used by him, which had never been considered by his predecessors as appropriate, are today widely accepted. In his translation of the *Suttanipāta* he makes it clear that the work’s content is very closely related to the Indian socio-religious norms at the time, and nothing could be said particularly of its Buddhist character. Nakamura believed that if Gotama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was grasped as a historical figure, then the *Suttanipāta* was the work, or at least one of such works, that would depict the Buddha’s life vividly (Nakamura 1985: 433). He, thus, tried his best to do away with anything that could be considered later additions when

translating it. If later Buddhist interpretations and ideas were to be employed, then the spirit of what the Buddha wished to convey in the early days of his Dispensation would be completely lost. Nakamura once said that he tried to make it as simple and as easy to understand as possible (1985: 441). His interest in translating early sources in Pali into modern Japanese saw the publication of more works subsequently. The *Dhammapada*, *Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, and *Theragāthā* are just a few of them.

The life of the Buddha, one of his main subject-areas for the study of early Buddhism, was improved and revised several times as he advanced in his studies of early Buddhism. He tried to be impartial, and his usual thoroughness in not only quoting and citing literary works but also incorporating archeological and epigraphic evidence is seen in this work too. His *Selected Works* (Definitive Edition) in 40 volumes (32 volumes plus 8 additional volumes) contains eight volumes on early Buddhism. Of particular interest among them are volumes 17 and 18 that discuss Buddhist ethics and socio-economic problems as found in early sources. Such topics as equality among men, economic ethics, problems related to the environment, sense of nationalism, and peace eloquently speak to Nakamura's interest in contemporary issues. He had a clear understanding that the core of Japan's spiritual culture is Buddhism. He writes that the study of Buddhism was important even to his own search for a spiritual foundation. Early Buddhism centering on the Buddha was his main concern, and he poured his energy and attention into it (Nakamura 1986: 222).

The studies on Mahāyāna Buddhism were also on Nakamura's agenda. He translated many Mahāyāna texts into simple and lucid Japanese. In his *Selected Works*, there are at least four works under the title of *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (volumes 20–23). One example of his interest in the various aspects of human activities is a work entitled “Ideal existing in Buddhist Fine Arts” (*Mahāyāna Buddhism*, volume 4). Another contribution in this field is a series called “Reading the Mind” (*J. Kokoro o miru* 心を見る) (NHK 1986) in which many translations into Japanese were made from the Sanskrit originals. Thus, he has covered a vast extent of Asia, cutting across the Indian subcontinent, along the Silk Road, to China, and then to Korea, and finally to Japan in the northern Buddhist tradition, together with the southern Buddhist tradition traversing Sri Lanka, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, and other countries in the region. In short, his academic interests have yielded what can be termed as “Nakamura-ology” (the totality of Nakamura's scholarship). He followed his principle that results of his research should be published as soon as they were ready. He would say, the present writer recalls, that one should not become afraid of mistakes because they could be rectified when one's research advanced; the advancement of scholarship was possible only when constructive criticism was made and adequately taken into account for further improvement of one's research. Such an observation could have been possible only by a scholar of the caliber of Hajime Nakamura who was thorough and eager to learn in any field of his choice.

Nakamura believed that there could be four ways of doing research on Japanese Buddhism: (1) A sectarian approach dealing with the establishment, development, division, and philosophical stance of each sect existing today; (2) Understanding the history of Japanese Buddhism along the line of the historical and social development of Japanese ethnicity; (3) Examining how Buddhism, a universal religious

system of the Orient, transformed itself after its introduction to Japan; and (4) Understanding how Japanese culture faces the various systems of world culture, especially in the modern period. TAMURA Tamura, Kōyū 田村晃祐 remarks that Nakamura adopted the fourth one as his own methodology for the study of Japanese Buddhism (2005: 165). In other words Nakamura always compared and contrasted both Eastern and Western thought. For example, he found a universal message in the works of Prince Shotoku 聖徳太子 (574–622) when he compared the prince's ideal with other kings and monarchs of different regions and periods, including King Aśoka of India.

An interesting approach adopted by Nakamura in dealing with self-introspection and contributions made towards building modern Japan is to focus on two historically important figures: one is SUZUKI Shōsan 鈴木正三 (1579–1655), a Zen master, and the other is TOMINAGA Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746). Suzuki is known for his contribution to the idea that Buddhism could be practiced by anyone irrespective of his/her occupation; to fulfill the utmost in any chosen occupation was the best form of the practice of Buddhism. He also rejected occupational discrimination of people. Tominaga, on the other hand, is remembered for his persistent idea that Mahāyāna Buddhism does not represent the words and teaching of the Buddha. Although in recent years, Suzuki's philosophy has come to be evaluated by some Japanese thinkers as contributing to modern economic ethics, Nakamura was one of the first to recognize Suzuki's philosophical contribution towards work ethics in Japan nearly 60 years ago.

Nakamura's contribution in the field of Japanese Buddhist studies is in no way negligible. He placed Japanese Buddhism in a much wider spectrum, even within the context of world religions. He emphasized a need to study links and connections between Buddhist thought and the thought of the world and has shown to us that some of the Japanese Buddhist monks' efforts preceded the thinkers of the West at times. He also showed some shortcomings in Japanese Buddhist thought. Such an attempt by him made the study of Japanese Buddhism more globalized.

3 Jaina Studies

Less known in Nakamura's scholarship may be the study of Jainism. However, his vision of scholarship, focused on human history and ideology, has to be taken into consideration. For him Jaina studies were very much part of his whole process of investigation into Indian philosophy, thought, and history that to him formed what India is today. According to OKUDA Kiyooki 奥田清明, a Jaina scholar in Japan, KANAKURA Enshō 金倉圓照, who pioneered Jaina studies in Japan in the 1930s and 1940s, was responsible for elevating Jaina studies to the level of *Der Jainismus: Eine indische Erlösungsreligion* of Helmuth von Glasenapp (1891–1963) published in 1925 (Okuda 2005: 175). Okuda believes that after Kanakura, the standard of Jaina studies in Japan was further raised to where they stand today by Nakamura. Equipped with all the necessary tools such as the ancient as well as modern

languages, including Hindi, and familiarity with the history of ancient India, Nakamura had easy access to the ancient texts of Jainism and the language skill to read modern works, particularly of German scholars.

4 Hindu Studies

For one who had authored *A History of Ancient India, A History of the Early Vedānta Philosophy*, and works on the other religions of India, it was a natural course of investigation and interest to write on Hinduism. He was aware at the time that the subject had been dealt with by many specialist scholars of Hinduism. Nakamura's contribution in this field, as told by YAMASHITA Hiroshi 山下博司, is an attempt to write "a continuous history" of Hinduism, spanning almost from its inception up until today (Yamashita 2005: 110). This kind of methodology was once again possible by a scholar of vast knowledge of Indian history and philosophy, and Nakamura met all these requisites.

5 Buddhist Dictionaries

In the field of Buddhist studies, as in other fields, various dictionaries, indices, and glossaries have been compiled by Japanese scholars. This has been a great contribution to the advancement of Buddhist studies in Japan. Each dictionary, glossary, or index has many stories to tell behind its compilation. The amount of work put in and hardship undergone by the compilers is often difficult for an ordinary man to grasp. The time spent and sacrifices made are sometimes beyond our imagination. Dedication and love for scholarship seem to be the key for the success of such works.

Nakamura was a scholar whose vision of compiling a dictionary was somewhat different from the traditional approach. In the past, Buddhist dictionaries were brought out using traditional Buddhist terms and concepts that were intelligible mainly to the specialists. It was often the case that a layman having no training in Buddhist studies found it difficult to comprehend. If Buddhism was to be propagated among people in society and was to be also made a guide for people at large, the writings needed to be understood by ordinary people. This was the underlying principle Nakamura kept throughout his career as a scholar and was applicable as well to the compilation of a Buddhist dictionary he started when young. There is an episode related to this dictionary. The manuscripts were given to the printer, but due to some reasons they were never found, in spite of the fact that the company and mass media desperately searched for them and even made an appeal to the public for help. When this was told to Nakamura, he is reported to have calmly said that it was not morally right to disappoint those who had helped him in collecting data for the dictionary. He restarted the project with great courage and determination to make it better. The dictionary called *Great Dictionary of Buddhist Terms* 佛教語大辞典

was finally published 8 years after he returned to this project in 1981. Nakamura was a scholar who never stopped his scholarship even for a moment. Since its publication, he added new materials to the dictionary and made it more readable. He edited several dictionaries and glossaries till his death. All this was the result of his wish that the Buddhist terms should be made available to the people in their own words.

6 Comparative History of Ideas

As early as 1958 Nakamura expressed his thought: “In order to achieve peace and happiness of humanity, it is imperative to promote the mutual understanding among the various peoples in the world. To make it a reality it is necessary that the studies of comparative ideas must be advanced a step further” (Kawasaki 2005: 91). Nakamura’s scholarship began based on a vast vision he had towards achieving understanding of humanity. His focus, though wandering into diverse directions at times, always returned to Japan. He examined all possible materials to have a better understanding of Japanese people and their culture. At the same time, the idea of a comparative study of philosophy spread into different directions at different points of time in his career. His works on the Vedānta philosophy, or ways of thinking of eastern peoples, were all started as a prelude to the vast amount of scholarship that developed later and which, as it became distinctly clear to all as time passed, began to move in one direction. Leaving India, Tibet, China, and Japan in Asia, he stepped into the area of the history of ideas of the world, while still having in mind a lasting question on Japanese ideas. The extent and importance Nakamura attached to this venture can be measured by the number of works included in his *Selected Works* (Definitive Edition). Of the eight additional volumes, Nakamura dedicates four volumes to the “History of World Thought” and the other four to the “Thought of Japan.” This indicates clearly that a comparative approach to the study of thought was his methodology for the task.

In the field of comparative philosophy, Nakamura talks about its methodology by giving an example of the central philosophy of Buddhism. In Buddhism there is the theory of “12 links of causality.” This has 12 items beginning with “ignorance,” “karmic formation,” “consciousness,” etc. Although this theory is specific to Buddhism alone, items such as “decay and death,” “birth,” “ignorance,” or “delusion” are the problems of any culture. In other words, they are the universal problems of mankind. Comparative philosophy or thought has, as its target, such universal problems, or the problems that became common to both East and West. Nakamura had a clear vision as to why such a process of comparison in philosophy or thought was needed. He was firmly convinced that if the studies concerning philosophy were to become meaningful as something that would truly come alive, one should abandon the attitude that one’s theory was true and others’ were false; and it is imperative that people must have self-introspection and speak out mutually. Such an attitude of Nakamura, one could infer, would have been influenced by Buddhism,

especially early Buddhist teachings of Gotama Buddha. He contributed greatly in the field of comparative philosophy and was instrumental in establishing an academic association called the Japanese Association of Comparative Philosophy 日本比較思想学会 in 1974. He acknowledges that the methodology for the study of comparative philosophy in Japan is still in a state of confusion and suggests two methods: one is the direction into historical particulars; and the other is the direction into “universalization.”

Nakamura never stopped walking on the path that he believed would lead to the advancement of human knowledge. He had the academic tools and a clear vision to steer his career through. All these made him a scholar and at the same time a human with compassion, the quality he cultivated because of the strong influence of Buddhism.

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