

# Bringing Joy to Others

by Nichiko Niwano

Imagine that your stomach is empty and there is a single rice ball. However, everyone around you is just as hungry as you are. Well, everyone, what would you do with it? Some will put other people first. Others will share it. And yet others might, from extreme hunger, begin snatching it away from each other.

Saicho (767–822), the founder of the Tendai denomination of Japanese Buddhism, said that the highest form of practicing compassion is to “forget the self and benefit others.” As Buddhists, we should let others eat the rice ball first, but there is a side to us that cannot readily let go of our desires.

That may be true, but we innately have the potential to experience joy and happiness that go far beyond the fulfillment of our wishes. The face and appearance of a happy person is the switch that turns on such sensitivity in us.

A woman who took presents to a Seniors’ Day event at a nearby facility was told by one senior, “I can’t accept a gift from someone I don’t know.” The woman replied with a request: “I want to share in your good luck of living a long life, so would you rub my head?” The senior then rubbed her head until her hair was completely disheveled. When then asked to accept the gift as a thank-you, the senior did so with a beaming smile and told the woman, “Thanks.”

This episode proves that the joy we receive from doing something for others is greater than the joy received when someone does something for us. At the same time, this story shows us that when our action leads to someone

else’s happiness and joy, it can make life more meaningful.

An ancient Indian text says, “From doing good deeds for others, you should expect no repayment, no praise, and no reward. Why is this? Because doing so is nothing more than for one’s own pleasure.” When we give benefits to others, we experience a happiness and joy that cannot possibly be had otherwise, transcending any form of praise or calculation of profit and loss.

## The Joy of Being Considerate of Others

No matter how much we may be thinking about the other person, however, if we ignore his or her feelings and circumstances, we may come off as smug. In some cases, our efforts to help will end up being unwanted and irritating.

Today Cofounder Myoko Naganuma is still called “the compassionate mother” of Rissho Kosei-kai because she was so fervent in showing consideration to others that when she saw someone in need, she could not stop herself from reaching out to that person. Founder Nikkyo Niwano said of her, “In every situation, she would appropriately and promptly grasp the feelings of the other person. When someone seemed to need something, she would generously give it to him or her. . . . She possessed a manner of guiding others that was always adapting to the circumstances while meticulously taking care of the details.” Because Cofounder Naganuma had herself experienced more of the sufferings of illness and poverty than most people,

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she could truly understand how suffering people felt. Her sense of oneness with them gave rise to her consideration for them and enabled her to quickly grasp with just the right timing what lay deep in their hearts. Although it is not easy to do, we also want to cultivate our own consideration for others.

Even if we are not capable of the same degree of consideration of others as she was, or even if the other person does not accept our thoughtfulness, we still can get great joy in discovering that we ourselves have hearts that enjoy giving to others. Besides, we should feel relieved knowing that, by being able to put others first, we are also ridding ourselves of greedy desires. For example, even if the offer to help is not heartfelt or the show of compassion is insincere, when these actions are repeated again and again, we will feel joy, and our hearts and minds will be inspired and grow.

The feeling of being refreshed and the joy that we receive from making others happy through donations made with our bodies, hearts, and minds, giving freely of ourselves, as well as donations of material things, make us feel like continuing to do more practices of consideration. Then, whenever we are practicing consideration, we can more fully experience the joy of being alive. □

# DHARMA WORLD

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## FEATURES: Dual Religious Identity: Can One Practice Two Religions?

*Dharma World* presents Buddhism as a practical living religion and promotes interreligious dialogue for world peace. It espouses views that emphasize the dignity of life, seeks to rediscover our inner nature and bring our lives more in accord with it, and investigates causes of human suffering. It tries to show how religious principles help solve problems in daily life and how the least application of such principles has wholesome effects on the world around us. It seeks to demonstrate truths that are fundamental to all religions, truths on which all people can act.

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# Multiple Belonging

by Gene Reeves

***I believe we are called today . . . to move beyond our own tribalisms, our racial and ethnic and national and class smallness, and let our vision of human wholeness become a basis for a more genuine community, a model of what can be. One way [to do this] is by participating in multiple religious traditions.***

Personal identity is a tricky thing. I have not always known who I am. Sometimes, perhaps, I tried to find myself. And even now, having entered the ranks of “the elderly,” I’m not sure I know who I am.

Many years ago, when I was invited to preach at the Unitarian Church in Cape Town, South Africa, I wanted to encourage the struggling congregation to broaden their outlook, and for this purpose I chose a passage from the Jewish bible, from the book of Isaiah: “Make your tent larger, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes” (54:2).

I explained to the congregation that I was raised Christian. At twenty I became a Unitarian. At thirty I became a Unitarian Universalist. And at fifty I became a Buddhist. But not once did I think of those becomings as a conversion from one faith to another. And so I remain, in my own self-understanding, Christian, Unitarian, Universalist, and Buddhist. The sermon, I claimed in Cape Town, could be understood as Jewish, Christian, Unitarian, Universalist, and Buddhist.

When I was young, even among Christian sects and denominations, being religiously more than one thing was not allowed. My family’s local church

was Saint Jude’s, a small, working-class, Episcopal church. Among other responsibilities there, I was the janitor. As janitor, I had keys to the small, three-room building built in the shape of a cross. Late one night, under cover of darkness, I sneaked into the building with one of my best friends, a Roman Catholic, just to show him what the inside of a Protestant church looked like. We had to sneak in because at that time Roman Catholics were not allowed even to enter a Protestant church for any reason.

The Second Vatican Council, often called Vatican II, convened by Pope John XXIII in 1962, pretty much brought an end to that attitude, with Catholics not only allowed to enter non-Catholic facilities and holy places but often encouraged to engage with members of other religious traditions both for improving personal understanding and for benefiting the world. In reference to various discussions before the Second Vatican Council actually convened, Pope John XXIII is often quoted as saying that it was time to open the windows of the Church to let in some fresh air. And he invited organizations outside the Catholic Church to send observers to the Council.

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## Multiple Belonging

In Cape Town I was suggesting that I am in some ways Jewish, Christian, Unitarian, and Buddhist. Even today, if someone were to ask me whether I am Christian or Unitarian, under most circumstances I would reply in the affirmative. That is basically for two reasons: First, I find that both Christian and Unitarian sensibilities, even biases and prejudices, are deeply imbedded in me, in my values, in my ways of thinking and being. Moreover, there is much in Christian and Unitarian teachings and symbolism that I affirm. I am not a fatalist but believe strongly in the reality and ever-present possibility of personal transformation. I learned that, even took it into my being, from Christianity. I also believe firmly in the importance of respecting other religious traditions. I learned that at a young age from Unitarianism. But there are also other traditions and occupations that are part of my self-identity, some by choice, others by circumstance.

It is common to divide personal identities into two kinds—those that are chosen, often through voluntary association with some group or organization, and those that one inherits or adheres to because of the circumstances one happens to be in. But while this distinction between chosen identities and circumstantial ones can be useful, it is not very clear or strictly applicable.

Take, for example, nationality. I was born and raised as an American. I did not choose to be an American. But I can choose to no longer be an American by resigning my citizenship and becoming, for example, a Japanese citizen. But were I to do that, would I also become Japanese? Hardly! To my way of thinking, being Japanese is at least as much a matter of ethnic identity as it is of nationality. One can become a citizen of Japan, but that is very different, it seems to me, from being “Japanese.” But not everyone thinks the way I do on this matter. So there are, in fact, people who have become citizens of Japan, though they are not ethnically Japanese, who think of themselves, and would like others to think of them, as Japanese, which in at least one sense they actually are. But I would not understand myself to be Japanese even if I became a citizen of Japan.

I am also a professional philosopher and think of myself, to some degree, as a philosopher. Being a philosopher is part of my identity. And it seems to me, it is part of my identity whether I choose it or not. It’s true, of course, that I originally made a choice to study philosophy and, in that sense, to become a philosopher. But since then, it has been part of my identity, part of my being—whether I like it or not. In one sense it is a chosen identity; in another it is not.

Until fairly recently, all of my adult life I have been a university professor. That’s obviously a profession that I chose. But now, in retirement, some still address me as “Professor,” some as “Professor Reeves,” others as “Professor

Gene.” Am I, like the colonels, generals, governors, and presidents, to have that title forever? To me it does not seem appropriate, but obviously others have other views. For them, being a professor is part of my identity.

The point I would like to make is that personal identity is not as clear-cut as we sometimes think. Individuals have many identities, some very important to themselves, others not; some chosen, others not; some clearly applicable, others not; some quite permanent, others not.

## On Being Buddhist

I have several other identities that might be worth discussing, but the one that I would most like to mention here is that of being Buddhist.

Partly I think because of my history as a Unitarian Universalist minister and the head of a Unitarian Universalist Theological School, I have often been asked whether I am now Buddhist. My usual response is, “Yes, I think so.” That response suggests a kind of ambivalence, an ambivalence not in my own sense of

what I am but an ambivalence rooted in a strong sense that many Buddhists would not regard me as Buddhist.

There are several reasons for this. For many Buddhists, the only way to be a “real” Buddhist is to be a monastic, a monk or a nun, and to follow some form of a code of behavior for monastics, the Vinaya. Accordingly, for some Buddhists there are practically no Buddhists in Japan, since even Japanese Buddhist clergy typically marry, eat meat, and drink alcoholic beverages. With such a sense or definition of what it means to be Buddhist, I am clearly not a Buddhist.

## East Asia

For more than twenty-five years I have been living in East Asia, primarily in Japan, but also in China, and with occasional extended visits to Taiwan, Korea, and Singapore. In all of these countries, and in other smaller areas with Chinese populations or influence, though they may disagree with each other on many issues, one finds that Confucian values and Confucian sensibilities are still very strong. At the same time, in much of East Asia, Buddhist institutions are also strong and growing stronger, both in numbers and in vitality and cultural influence. Other indigenous traditions, especially Taoism in China and Taiwan and Shinto in Japan, are doing well in various ways, though their institutional embodiments may not be quite as strong as the Buddhist temples and associations. And sometimes these old traditions are embodied in “new” religions, where they attract many adherents. Very often the strong connection between the traditional religious tradition and the new religion is not explicit, and may even be denied, but is there nonetheless. In addition, in many places in East Asia, “foreign” religions, especially Christianity and Islam, are growing and increasing their public prominence.

These countries and cultures are not all the same, not even with respect



to religious institutions. For example, Christianity is very strong in Korea and growing rapidly in China, despite government opposition, or perhaps because of it, while in Japan Christians remain a tiny, though influential, presence. But one thing I think all of these countries and cultures have in common is widespread tolerance of multiple religious customs and traditions.

Not only is mutual tolerance widespread in East Asia, so is multiple belonging. Since no one is counting, it is difficult to be precise about this, but it seems as though the majority of people in Japan who support a Buddhist temple or belong to relatively new Buddhist organizations such as Rissho Kosei-kai also occasionally visit and pay their respects at Shinto shrines. In fact, in most of the new lay Buddhist organizations, both Buddhist bodhisattvas and Shinto *kami* are recognized and incorporated into religious life in various ways. In Rissho Kosei-kai, for example, a Buddhist altar often incorporates a Shinto shrine. In China, too—though in most parts of the country Taoist traditions are not as well institutionalized as Shinto shrines are in Japan—where Taoist temples exist, there does not appear to be much conflict or even tension between Buddhism and Taoism or between being Buddhist and Taoist at the same time. There is even one famous case in Singapore where a large Taoist temple is owned by a nearby Buddhist temple and run by its Buddhist monks.

The big exception to this mutual respect and multiple belonging is the Abrahamic religions of Christianity and Islam, where, for the most part, being a Christian or being a Muslim pretty much precludes being Shinto, Taoist, or Buddhist. This does not mean that there are not exceptions, where, for example, some Japanese Christians are free to participate in Buddhist rituals and may even regard themselves as being Buddhist in some ways. I'm less familiar with Muslims in East Asia, but it seems to me that in both Japan and

China there is a strong sense among them of belonging exclusively to Islam.

The point I want to make here, without putting it too strongly, is that in East Asia, more than in the West, there is, and has long been, a kind of openness to participating in and belonging to more than one religious tradition. I have thought that this would be less so among religious professionals, but I will never forget being guided around a Taoist temple in Taiwan

by a Buddhist nun, who insisted strongly that even in their most bizarre portrayals the traditional Taoist or popular Chinese gods should be suitably respected and honored. For her, I suppose respect for and even veneration of Taoist and popular deities is not felt to be multiple belonging. It's just being Chinese. But clearly something like multiple belonging is involved.

In East Asia generally, it seems to me, multiple belonging comes easily. This has not always been true, certainly not everywhere. One does not have to look far to find examples, even today, of extreme intolerance toward other religious traditions. Though not always, very often such intolerance involves, on one side or the other, an Abrahamic tradition, Muslim or Christian. Today in western Myanmar, for example, which is generally a Buddhist country, it is not safe to be Muslim. In parts of Bangladesh, a Muslim country, it is not safe to be Christian or Buddhist. Generally, when such intolerance and hatred of other religious traditions exist, multiple belonging is impossible or at least extremely difficult.

But even with important exceptions, though not often recognized,

participation in multiple religious traditions has been going on for centuries. This does not always, perhaps not even often, involve any sense of multiple religious identity. A Japanese Buddhist who goes to a Shinto shrine at New Year's does not necessarily think of himself or herself as Shinto, just as a young Shinto couple, closely related to a Shinto shrine, who have a Christian-style wedding service do not thereby think of themselves as Christian.

Mutual tolerance and even participation in practices and rituals of other religious traditions do not constitute multiple belonging and do not mean the people involved have a religious identity that is consciously rooted in more than one tradition. But such tolerance and participation do get one close to multiple belonging and open a way, so to speak, at least on reflection, for one to come to see oneself as belonging to more than one tradition.

If we think of multiple belonging as only a matter of chosen, conscious, identity, then perhaps it is no more common in East Asia than it is in America or Europe. But if we can allow that there is such a thing as circumstantial multiple belonging, a multiple belonging that

is not so much a matter of consciously chosen personal identity as it is a matter of participating in more than one religious tradition and drawing significant spiritual sustenance from them, perhaps multiple religious belonging is actually quite common in East Asia.

## Second Isaiah

Scholarly views of the Old Testament book of Isaiah have changed rather dramatically in recent decades. But I think we need not trouble ourselves with that here. Regardless of what actually happened in history, we have a story, a story that can contribute to our understanding of religious tolerance and multiple belonging.

Around the middle of the sixth century BCE, with the Jews in captivity in Babylon, a prophet arose in their midst. We now know him as Second or Deutero Isaiah, because his story is found in the second section, or second half, of the book of Isaiah.

This was an extremely difficult time for the seminomadic Jews. Pinched between Egypt and Babylon, they had been thrown out of their homeland and made captives of the Babylonians. There had been nothing like a functioning

Jewish state for several decades, and now Cyrus, the Persian king, was winning battles everywhere and was about to take Babylon itself. To many Jews, there seemed to be no ground for hope. Some even began to doubt the existence of their god, Yahweh.

But this prophet, Isaiah, spoke with a vision, a vision that transcended the present moment and difficulties. Basically he told the exiled Jews two things. First, he assured them that their lives were very important, that they had a purpose in the world and therefore the strength to move forward. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her, that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned” (40:1–2).

“Haven’t you known? Haven’t you heard?” he said. “Your God is everlasting, the creator of the world. He never gets tired or weary, and he strengthens those who are tired and weak” (40:28–29). “The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (40:8). “Even young people become weak and get weary . . . but those who trust God shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (40:30–31). And then the prophet promised the people that despite all that had happened, despite their sins and captivity, they would return to Israel and rebuild the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem. So the first part of what the prophet said was a word of comfort, promise, and encouragement.

But the second thing this prophet said was that this was not to be simply another restoration project. “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare” (42:9). “Sing to the Lord a new song” (42:10). “For I create new heavens and a new earth” (65:17). Something new was about to happen, and this new thing was to be a kind of universalism. No more narrowness, no more petty nationalism, no more small-time tribalism.

It is not enough, this prophet said, for Israel alone to be restored. “Behold my servant [Israel], whom I support; my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon you; you will bring forth justice to the whole world. You will not fail or be discouraged until you have established justice over *all* the earth” (42:1, 4; emphasis mine). “I have given you as a covenant to *all* people, a light to all nations, to open the eyes of the blind and to bring from prisons those who sit in darkness” (42:7). “It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore . . . Israel. I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation shall reach the ends of the earth” (49:6). “For my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* peoples” (56:7).

In other words, no more business as usual. You have a new task as a people—to bring justice to all the earth, that the blind may see and the oppressed be liberated and a covenant made with all peoples.

How was this to be accomplished? Toward the end of the prophecy, the prophet says, “Make your tent larger, lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes” (54:2).

Make your tent larger. Like those Jews in their Babylonian captivity, I believe we are called today, each one of us is called, to make our tents larger, to move beyond our own tribalisms, our racial and ethnic and national and class smallness, and let our vision of human wholeness become a basis for a more genuine community, a model of what can be.

One way—to be sure, not the only way—to make our tents larger is by participating in multiple religious traditions. By doing so, we can perhaps glimpse, or even come to know deeply, perspectives not our own. We can learn to see the world through the eyes of a Muslim, and thereby even be a Muslim, without casting off the identity with which we entered our too small, but growing, tent. ≥

# Many Religions, One Reality

by Joseph S. O'Leary

***Here [when nonsectarian dialogue occurs] “religious identity” takes on a new meaning, pre-Buddhist and pre-Christian, and our belonging to either or both of the constituted traditions should be opened up to a deeper belonging that we share with all human beings.***

“How can one believe or practice two different faiths, especially if some of their doctrines are contradictory? . . . Studying and practicing a second religion often gives us fresh insights into our first religion. Can dual religious identity also be a path to salvation or spiritual liberation?” (*Dharma World* editors)

I suggest that the conundrums introduced above could be defused if one placed the accent on the fact that both Buddhism and Christianity are concerned with reality as such and with the whole of reality. This is obvious in the case of Buddhism, with its account of the marks of existence (impermanence, painfulness, nonself, and emptiness), of dependent origination, and of

“thusness,” or *tathatā*. Christianity, too, teaches an outlook on reality as such, best expressed in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, Luke): “Consider the lilies of the field” (Matt. 6:28). Both religions cover the same field but in different ways. To adopt both religions is to practice seeing reality as such from different perspectives, attaining a more all-around perception of reality as a whole. On the practical level, both religions urge a contemplative mindfulness that is attuned to the splendor of reality, or the goodness of being, and a compassionate responsiveness that engages with the suffering neighbor here and now.

“Reality itself” is of course a rather indeterminate notion, and it is difficult to set it up firmly as a criterion of what is dead and what is living in religious traditions. But if we accept that reality is the judge of religion, not religion the judge of reality, just as “the Sabbath was made for humanity, not humanity for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27), then each religion is faced with the task of determining what reality itself is and of aspiring to be adequate to it. Buddhism and Christianity can collaborate on this task, which takes place at a more basic level than that of doctrinal formulations. In his book *Facing Up to Real Doctrinal*

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*Difference: How Some Thought-Motifs from Derrida Can Nourish the Catholic-Buddhist Encounter*, Robert Magliola urges us to “face up to doctrinal differences” and sees the resultant tensions as giving a new vitality to interreligious encounter (Angelico Press, 2014; see my review in *The Japan Mission Journal* 69 [2015]:185–89). But it seems to me that doctrinal differences can look after themselves and that doctrine itself is not immune to processes of change, development, and reinterpretation that can undercut efforts to state stark differences. Reality is the judge of doctrine, not doctrine the judge of reality. Applying this to Christian piety, one could say that someone who recited the rosary every day, a meditation on fifteen New Testament events, is ultimately attuning to reality itself under fifteen different colors. To draw on Buddhism in one's practice is to multiply the colors, so that one might meditate on reality itself under the rubric of the Buddha's enlightenment along

with meditating on it under that of Christ's resurrection.

Christians and Buddhists are moving together in the same direction, using their respective complex traditional equipment—which can sometimes look like “shabby equipment always deteriorating” (T. S. Eliot, “East Coker”)—as a skillful means in their shared creative task of thinking anew about matters of ultimate concern. Doctrinal differences can be a theme for interesting discussion, but they should not become a blockage to spiritual wisdom or engaged compassion. Rather, the debate should itself be guided by the overarching question of how these ancient traditions serve the human quest for truth and salvation today.

The secularist will say, “Well, we all know what reality is, so why do we need religion to tell us?” And most people seem satisfied with the corners of reality that they know best and that familiarity has made comfortable to them. Religion stands or falls by its claim that true reality is elusive. Buddhism and Christianity are two traditions of proven efficacy in waking us up to that true reality, and the breakthroughs to the real in both traditions remain a criterion of religious authenticity today. Study of Buddhism does give “fresh insights” into Christianity by helping us see it as a religion of awakening to reality. It focuses the attention of Christians on what is most essential in their faith and yields a new way of “affirming Christian identity,” such that this no longer means obsessing over church claims or lifestyles but, rather, means a return to the basics of the outlook on reality taught and lived by Jesus Christ.

Some have argued that Christian truth today can be more luminously presented in a discourse influenced by Buddhist analytical methods and ontological insights than in the old frameworks formed in dialogue with Greek ontology. But the dialogue between the two religions seems to have stalled, largely because it has been conducted

in the key of stale speculation about such topics as kenosis or the Trinity, drawing on philosophies such as process thought that have only further encumbered it. The exchange between Buddhism and Western philosophy is currently far more vibrant, at least intellectually, than the Buddhist-Christian dialogue because it focuses not on esoteric theological claims but on the question of the nature of reality, a question that haunts every human being in one way or another. To restart the interreligious dialogue, Christians need to foreground an understanding of faith that sees it as the embrace of reality itself.

Buddhism begins by dismantling the Brahmanist idea of a securely substantial God, whereas Christianity is firmly rooted in Jewish monotheism and even reinforces it by Platonic structures of transcendence wherein God is located as supreme eternal being. Here we seem confronted with an irresolvable contradiction that makes “double belonging” impossible. But even within Platonizing Christianity the notion of God has many traits of Buddhist emptiness: God as an infinite act of being is stripped of all limiting finite and substantial attributes—everything about this God is infinite, absolutely simple (no differentiations in the divine being), incomprehensible, or ungraspable. Going beyond this metaphysics, we encounter the dynamic Johannine and Pauline conception of God as an event of Spirit, light, love. Here again is a reality that it is quite difficult to set up in opposition to Buddhist teaching. The thorny doctrine of the divinity of Christ can be translated back into these phenomenological terms so that it, too, becomes an opening up to reality itself.

To be sure, the Buddhist sense of reality and the Christian sense of reality differ in style, and Christians would say that they “live by faith” (Rom. 1:17) or “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7) in a sense that has no Buddhist equivalent. But this nuance should not be

hardened into a black-and-white opposition. All religions have faith in the sense of generosity of vision and existential trust that goes beyond the warrant of narrow empiricism and implies a relation to gracious ultimacy. Positive claims about the election of Israel and the saving role of Jesus Christ are put in perspective when interpreted as notes within the opening up to reality itself that is the essential action of faith. Subscription to creedal articles of faith is secondary to this. Faith is something like the *adhimukti* (aspiration) of which the Lotus Sutra speaks, an opening up to a divine life and light and grace pervading the whole of reality.

Credibility is strained by the startling particularity of the Christian claim that the salvation of the entire world, including all of humanity stretching back to its ancient evolutionary origins, has been decided by an event that happened on an afternoon in Jerusalem in 30 CE. The scandal of the claim is lessened when we remind ourselves that the event of grace encountered here reveals the ultimate nature of reality itself. The particular event has a universal meaning and



ceases to be that event unless experienced in its universal horizon. The sinner who is “ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven” by the power of Christ’s death and resurrection encounters not a past event but ultimate reality as active here and now.

The categories of classical dogma have a role in orienting Christians toward reality if they are skillfully deployed. But they are less central than the orientation given by the gospel message itself: the primacy of love, the superiority of the life-giving Spirit to the letter that kills (2 Cor 3:6), the abundance of grace and of divine mercy, justification by faith in Christ, the assured triumph of the eschatological Kingdom. These are mysterious indications, and to make full sense of them they should all be interpreted as coterminous with reality itself. That is, love lights up the essential nature of reality. The Spirit is the transcendence of limiting conceptual regimes to an experience of freedom that demands ongoing contemplative perception and that cannot be reduced to categories. Grace and justification offer release from the stress generated by a delusive ego anxious to shore up its identity and fearful of letting go. As to the Kingdom of God, it cannot be anything less than reality itself: the world in which we breathe here and now must be affirmed as the place of the Kingdom.

Vatican II urged Christians to read “the signs of the times,” that is, to tune in to here-and-now realities and to rearticulate the gospel in response to them. Buddhism, in its exercise of discernment and compassionate action, reads the very same signs. For instance, both religions are cultivating awareness of the ecological crisis and emphasizing “care for the earth.” This has a retroactive effect on their understanding of their respective traditions, leading to a new emphasis on the earth-friendly dimensions to be found in tradition and a critique of rhetoric or philosophical outlooks that denigrated or undercut the value of earthly realities. Buddhist-Christian collaboration on ecological projects thus brings the two religions together not only on the plane of praxis but also in critical querying of their doctrinal foundations. The two religions cannot pursue their self-critiques or self-reinterpretations separately, for the entire method and process of rethinking an ancient tradition in light of contemporary problems and insights is common to all religions that undertake it. Modern Buddhist thinking from D. T. Suzuki to Critical Buddhism is clearly influenced by Christian hermeneutics, and Christian theology is being influenced by a Buddhist sensibility to the conventional fabric of religious discourse as skillful means.

Some argue that one can give total adhesion to only one religion, usually the religion of one’s childhood, so that when people speak of double belonging, all they mean is that they have a supplementary sympathy with or interest in the second religion. A Japanese person, accustomed to thinking of religions as a pluralistic menu, a smorgasbord, might engage in Buddhist and Christian activities on appropriate occasions without any sense of conflicting loyalties. Is this double belonging? Or is it a refusal to think of religion as requiring a total belonging? Would it be comparable to committing bigamy or to shallow promiscuity? Such questions go beyond the merely psychological or sociological level and raise the deeper question of what a religion is. Perhaps Buddhism does not demand the unconditional surrender of faith demanded by the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, so that Christians can embrace the essence of Buddhist wisdom without diluting their faith, just as they embraced the essence of Greek philosophy in earlier times. A Buddhist, conversely, could embrace the Christian message while preserving the essence of Buddhist wisdom. It is rather regrettable that Buddhist scholars such as Paul Williams and Paul Griffiths have presented their conversion to Catholicism in terms

of renouncing Buddhism and polemicalizing against Buddhist errors.

In any case, worrying about the possibilities and problems of dual identity is ultimately a rather sterile occupation. It is a quarrel about recipes that gets in the way of actually eating. Here we might apply the Zen wisdom of non-thinking and nonduality to free ourselves from the tyranny of cut-and-dried dichotomous categories. What both Buddhists and Christians must do is reach out to the riches of the other tradition, which may often serve to complement or correct perceived deficiencies in their own and may at least provide a stereophonic religious awareness that is healed of sectarian identity fixation. Such an awareness is spiritually liberating, and so must be conducive to or aligned with salvation, the ultimate liberation. The question “Can dual religious identity be a path to salvation or spiritual liberation?” asks if adding Buddhism to Christianity increases rather than diminishes the salvific power or promise of one’s Christian faith (or if adding Christianity to Buddhism increases the promise of Buddhist spiritual liberation). I would suggest that for many Christians, Buddhist meditation has the effect of bringing the gospel message of salvation into clearer perspective by training the mind to focus on the

essential or vital aspect of this message rather than on theoretical or doctrinal dimensions. Salvation is of course an unconditional gift that lies beyond the machinery of religion (Rom. 5:1–17); it “is coming into the world” (John 11:27), reaching us right where we are, and is not something we reach up to; but insofar as that “machinery” can impede or aid perception of this gift, then Buddhism may play a key role in improving the functioning of the Christian machinery, clarifying how it can be a skillful means. A Christian can thus embrace Buddhism wholeheartedly, albeit as a complement to Christian faith.

Or perhaps there is a faith that lies deeper than any constituted religious faith, a faith that consists in openness to reality as such. Would this predenominational faith be a saving faith? For Paul the faith of Abraham is saving faith, even though it comes before Moses, Judaism, or Christianity. Today we should perhaps aim to get back down to this primordial level, and the shock of encounter between Christianity and Buddhism may be the catalyst for this.

If interreligious dialogue is only between the religions, it remains rather exclusive, especially at a time when so many no longer subscribe to any formal religion. Dialogue should not be a matter of negotiation between specific

religions but should rather aim at creating something, a new configuration, through the conversation itself. Extended to those who have no religion or who reject religion, dialogue can reach down to a level of faith that subsists when one peels away all the religions, a primordial embrace of the goodness of reality, which is not achieved by academic, theoretical discussion but in a nonverbalized encounter.

Here “religious identity” takes on a new meaning, pre-Buddhist and pre-Christian, and our belonging to either or both of the constituted traditions should be opened up to a deeper belonging that we share with all human beings. Our belonging to “reality itself” sets the basic context of all dialogue, in which one talks to the other not as Christian to Buddhist, or vice versa, but as one person to another sharing basic human questions. Could we imagine someone born into the uncharted condition of this basic predenominational faith who would discover at one and the same time the Buddhist and the Christian traditions, cultivating them both and growing in them? This would be an exemplary achievement of double belonging, but it would be grounded on the prior belonging to the gracious reality accessed in a more basic openness of faith. □

# Buddhist-Christian Double Belongings

by Kunihiro Terasawa

***Double belongings might be necessary for us to deepen our understanding of reality, including the self and the world, through our ultimate and various religious experiences.***

Religious pluralism has had a large impact on the spirituality of double or multiple religious affiliations (double belongings). Many people claim that they are Buddhist-Christians, Sufi-Christians (Sufism is a mystical dimension of Islam), or Buddhist-Confucianists. In the United States, for example, Buddhist meditation has been practiced at some mainline Christian churches. Also, Paul F. Knitter, a Jesuit and a retired theology professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York, has recently written about these double belongings in his *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian* (Oneworld Publications, 2009).

I believe that the spirituality of double belongings or multi-belongings will increase. Moreover, double belongings might be necessary for us to deepen our understanding of reality, including the self and the world, through our ultimate and various religious experiences. Here, I would like to focus on double belongings in Buddhism and Christianity.

Before discussing double belongings in Buddhism and Christianity, one needs to discuss what religion is: its purpose and relationship with human experience, the so-called religious experiences. Depending on how you define religion, our understanding of Buddhism, Christianity, and double

belongings may differ. Why do we seek religion? We know certainly that without human beings, there is no religion. We ask why and how human beings came to exist and where they will go. More concretely, we inquire what “I” is. Why, how, and where do I exist? All religions ask about the meaning of the self, then about relationships between ourselves and others, such as family, friends, society, our nation, and the world. Furthermore, we question our relationship not only with other people but with nature, the environment, the universe, and eventually the ultimate (God, or *dhamma*). One seeks the ultimate experience in which the self, the world, the universe, and God or *dhamma* are profoundly interconnected. One calls this ultimate religious experience.

Kitarō Nishida (1870–1945), a Japanese philosopher of the Kyoto school, described the ultimate experience as a “spiritual fact” or “spiritual event” (“Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekai-kan” [The logic of place and the religious worldview], in *Nishida Kitarō tetsugaku ronshū* [Kitarō Nishida collected philosophical papers], ed. Shizuteru Ueda [Iwanami Shoten, Publishers, 1989], vol. 3, 299). Gautama Siddhartha experienced it as an enlightenment experience at the age of thirty-five after his rigorous spiritual journey. Jesus experienced

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it as a seeing-God experience: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (Matt. 5:8 [New Revised Standard Version]).

Both experiences have something in common that goes beyond words or languages. Gautama Siddhartha, therefore, remained profoundly silent for a time after attaining enlightenment. Jesus often went to quiet places to pray alone. Even though religions have several aspects, such as doctrines, scriptures, and liturgy, which are often expressed through languages, those aspects would not have existed without the founders’ ultimate experiences.

Double belongings are typically considered a synthesis of liturgy, scriptures, and doctrines, which are parts of the object of faith. This type of synthesis may occur often in the case of double belongings. For example, Japan has been historically accustomed to synthesizing different religious traditions, such as Shinto and Buddhism

(*shinbutsu-shūgō*). It has also been common in China for an individual to be affiliated with Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism, according to the stages of life. In the East, religious double belongings or multi-belongings have not been a large problem. People in the East intuitively understand that experience of religious practices has a much more significant depth than theories and doctrines cutting across different religious traditions.

On the other hand, Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have historically emphasized exclusive faith in one God, creed, and doctrine. However, those religions cannot ignore religious pluralism under the pressure of globalization and multiculturalism, which the West has ironically promoted through industrialization and a free global market.

Skepticism about double belongings has often been aroused by people who believe in an ultimate Transcendental Other as an object of faith outside themselves, requiring exclusive faith. They believe that affiliation with another faith community would compromise their faith in a Transcendental Other. On the other hand, if one seeks the sacred or the ultimate immanently within oneself beyond objectification of faith, double belonging may not matter much. People who do this need several religious experiences in the process of their inner journey in order to find their true selves in the image of God within them without objectifying God or the Buddha or a creed. The names of God, the Buddha, a creed, and scriptures are analogous to fingers pointing toward the moon without being the moon themselves. One can learn this from Zen Buddhism's Ten Pictures for Finding the Bull; objectification of faith makes the bull—symbolizing the Buddha, enlightenment, or God—disappear.

If one focuses on the kind of ultimate or pure experiences that Nishida

describes, it is necessary to attain enlightenment as the Buddha did or experience God as Jesus did, along with seeking other Buddhist and Christian religious experiences, to enlarge one's holistic experience of the ultimate.

Even the words of the Buddha and God from those founders came out of a profound experience of the ultimate. Founders' experiences, such as those of Jesus and Gautama Buddha, help enlarge one's interconnection with the self, the world, and the universe to find a much deeper ground of the self. This is done not only cognitively (dialogue of the head) but also aesthetically (dialogue of the heart) and practically (dialogue of the hands), as described by Leonard Swidler in his *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding* ([Palgrave Macmillan, 2014], 17).

A very common theme is that of the similarity of the love of God in the New Testament and the Buddhist's compassion (*karuna*) through *sunyata* (emptiness). Jesus emphasizes God's unconditional love of humanity and nature: "For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45), describing the primary unconditional contact with people and nature. On the other hand, Buddhism emphasizes that buddha-nature penetrates all people and other sentient beings, especially bodhisattvas, who give up the search for their own enlightenment in order to help others attain enlightenment first, out of unlimited compassion for all sentient beings.

Why is that possible for Buddhists? It is because of their experiences in interdependent co-arising (co-origination) and *sunyata* (emptiness). Nothing has a separate identity but exists in emptiness and interdependent co-arising. In other words, there is no self and no "other." There is no separate identity as an independent substance. Thus the wisdom of *sunyata* as *prajna* "A is

a not an A, therefore it is an A." They are neither one nor two but a relationship. Relationship precedes substance. Thus the world's sufferings are one's own sufferings, so that helping others is unconditional and unself-conscious. Just as my finger hurts after I cut it while cooking, the pain is sensed by my whole body, which works unconditionally and unconsciously to heal the finger.

Furthermore, God in the New Testament tells us in Philippians 2:5–7, "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness." It is the so-called *kenosis*, self-emptying God. In other words, God must negate himself to be a creator (Nishida, "Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan," 328–30). To be God, God must negate himself. This is close to *prajna*, "A is a not an A, therefore it is an A" (Masao Abe, "Emptiness," in *Zen and Comparative Studies*, ed. Steven Heine [University of Hawaii Press, 1997], 42–47). Thus, God is *not* God, therefore it is God. It is God who constantly empties God in God's self in order to relate with creatures for creation and re-creation at every moment.

This view of God is quite different from traditional Christian theology, in which God is seen as Transcendent Other, uninfluenced by his creations or human emotions. In the Hebrew Bible, however, there are many occasions on which God manifests his compassion, regrets, and even anger over people's responses to his callings or covenant. Before passing judgment on humanity and flooding the earth, God regretted having created humanity. His response to Abraham when passing judgment on Sodom was that if there were ten righteous people there, he would not destroy the city (Gen. 18:32). During the Exodus, God changed his mind



about who would enter the Promised Land, and most of the first generation of Israelites who left Egypt and were faithless died in the wilderness, and only the second generation entered the Promised Land. However, under the influence of Greek philosophy, Christian theology shifted its concept of God as a relational God to the Unmoved Mover, the totally Transcendent Other.

Therefore, it would be beneficial for Christians to engage in interreligious dialogue with Buddhists to rediscover various aspects of God that have been missed in the conventional or traditional paradigm throughout history. That is also the case for Buddhists when engaging in interreligious dialogue with Christianity. Buddhists could rediscover much rich heritage that has often been missed by fixed doctrines and teachings throughout history.

Of course, Buddhism does not talk about God in either a theistic or an atheistic way, whereas Christianity always talks about what is God or God's will. In terms of experiencing God, however, there is a common feature of the ultimate experience. In other words, for Buddhists, in order to experience *dhamma*, or enlightenment, one has to experience *sunyata* (emptiness), absolute negation or absolute nothingness. Christianity also encourages one to experience *kenosis*, total emptiness beyond the self. Paul says in his letter to Galatians, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:19–20). Jesus says, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 16:25). Jesus also says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt. 5:8). Jesus does not say that people should believe in God or have faith in God but *see* God, an experience of the ultimate.

This concept of absolute negation or emptiness does not end with a merely

empty mind or void but is the relationship of absolute affirmation and fullness of love and compassion. These dialectical processes of ultimate experiences are included in both Buddhism and Christianity. One can call these dialectical processes of experience Immanent Transcendental (Nishida, "Bashoteki ronri to shūkyōteki sekaikan," 396). If one sticks to objective logic, one could see either the transcendental or the immanent, but if one sees a dynamic religious experience itself, one can understand immanent transcendence.

In terms of dialogue of the hands, dealing with practical issues, this double belonging is important. Religious wisdom often manifests itself not only in the discussion of doctrines or philosophy but also in responding to the practical, critical issues of reality, such as climate change, violence, war, human trafficking, the environment, racial discrimination, education, and so on. Christianity especially has quite excellent examples of resisting the social injustices of ultranationalism, racial discrimination, and the like.

The Confessing Church in Germany led by Martin Niemöller, Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer denounced the Nazi policy of asserting Aryan racial superiority and anti-Semitism and the New National Church's cultural interfusion with German-ness by insisting on transcendental God's sovereignty. In Japan, although mainline Buddhist institutions followed national war policy in the 1930s and 1940s, a few Buddhists, such as Girō Seno'o and Shōgen Takenaka, and Christians, such as Tadao Yanaihara, denounced the government-ordered invasions. However, none succeeded in preventing war. One reason for that was the lack of grassroots interreligious dialogue and cooperation between Christianity and Judaism in Germany, and among Buddhism, Christianity, and the New Religions in Japan. Eventually, ultranationalistic state propaganda demonizing other

racess and nations prevailed over universally religious human solidarity and compassion.

That is why it is critical for world religions, such as Buddhism and Christianity, to work together (dialogue of the hands), despite doctrinal disagreements, in order to resist ultranationalistic ethos at the grassroots level. Ultrnationalism is a nostalgic, romantic reinvention of the origins of a people's nation and race when a nation and a race feel threatened and lose confidence. It is an emotional ethos. That was why in Germany during the Weimar Republic (1919–33) and in Japan during the Taishō period (1912–26) liberal intellectuals were helpless to stop grassroots, ultranationalistic, and romantic populism. Thus, unless there is some appeal to a higher emotional level, transcending a narrow ultrnationalist ethos, patriotic populism will prevail.

Hence, the world religions Christianity and Buddhism must work together, since they teach universally transnational love and compassion, and at the same time they are rooted at the local level, pastoring people at the grass roots. This is the emotional battle between religious transnationalism and ultrnationalism at the grass roots (Kunihiko Terasawa, "Modern Japanese Buddhism in the Context of Interreligious Dialogue, Nationalism, and World War II" [doctoral dissertation, Temple University, 2012], 250–51). Buddhism and Christianity can work together as a dialogue of the hands for resistance not only to ultrnationalism and totalitarianism but also to climate change and environmental pollution owing to the greed of capitalism and consumerism, as well as to terrorism and family and school violence. For these reasons, people who have double belongings to Buddhism and Christianity can definitely help enhance not only dialogue of the hands but also dialogue of the head and heart between Buddhism and Christianity. □

# Religions in Japan: Many or None?

by Gaynor Sekimori

***The dual religiosity of the Japanese is often illustrated by the existence in the family home of both a Buddhist altar (butsudan), where the family's memorial tablets are placed, and a Shinto shrine (kamidana).***

Overall, Japanese people seem perplexed when asked the question “What is your religion?” Surveys by the Agency of Cultural Affairs have for decades reported something close to twice the population of Japan belonging to a religious group. In 2009, for example, when the official population of Japan was around 126 million, more than 106 million were recorded as adherents of Shinto, around 90 million as adherents of Buddhism, and 2 million as adherents of Christianity, with 9 million listed as “other.” This seems to indicate that the

majority of Japanese subscribe to two religions simultaneously, Buddhism and Shinto. But do these figures represent the actual religious beliefs of individuals or the numbers reported by religious organizations? It is not uncommon for a person to be a “parishioner” of a local shrine while simultaneously belonging to the Buddhist temple that contains the family grave. We may have to redefine what *religion* means to the Japanese: as a member of a family, a person may have two affiliations that nevertheless have no significance at all when it comes to his or her personal belief (or lack of it).

This may explain the findings of a Gallup poll of 2012 concerning religiosity and atheism, which revealed that only 16 percent of the twelve hundred Japanese respondents thought of themselves as religious, while a very telling 23 percent, the highest percentage by far of all the countries polled, answered they did not know if they were religious or not. These figures closely reflect the results of social surveys

about religious affiliation of the Japanese conducted between 2000 and 2005, where only about 11 percent admitted to a personal belief, while some 23 percent claimed affiliation as a family member. The rest did not admit to any affiliation or belief at all.

Some of this “confusion” arises out of the word *shūkyō* that was coined in the mid-nineteenth century to translate *religion*. This “religion” was very much a Western concept, newly brought to Japan in the wake of the great changes that occurred after 1868. It was based largely on a Protestant Christian idea of what religion was, focusing on personal belief, a specific faith, a founder, an organization, and a set ritual. It was hard to classify the actuality of the sacred realm as experienced in Japan through this definition and its rigid categories, which classed anything beyond them as superstition or folk religion, with the implication they were somehow not “true” religion. As a result Buddhism and Shinto gained a stricter, separate identity than had ever been the case before.

This emphasis on belief should not, however, be overemphasized as a defining point between Japanese religions and monotheistic religions. As Jonathan Freedland wrote recently in the *Guardian*, “Over the years, conversations with Jews, Catholics and Muslims have taught me that when it comes to religion, belief is often optional. For many, it’s about belonging and community, a matter of ethnic or familial solidarity rather than theological creed. For increasing numbers of Anglicans, it



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works that way too. Singing hymns in church is a comfort, reminding them of their childhood or their parents, and leaving them with a glow of warmth towards neighbors they might otherwise never meet” (September 26, 2015).

The dual religiosity of the Japanese is often illustrated by the existence in the family home of both a Buddhist altar (*butsudan*), where the family’s memorial tablets are placed, and a Shinto shrine (*kamidana*), traditionally containing perhaps images or pictures of popular deities like Daikoku or Ebisu, other kinds of *engimono* (good luck objects), a model shrine building, and talismans and paper slips from both shrines and temples (fig. 1). However, urban living, smaller houses and apartments, and the decrease in multigenerational households have led to a marked falling off of both *butsudan* and *kamidana* in homes. Unless a household has a strong religious conviction, as in Rissho Kosei-kai, neither altar may be considered necessary for a newly established home. This has created a challenge for dealers in *butsudan*. A major business in the Asakusa area of Tokyo promotes itself as a *butsudan* department store and offers both an enormous range in choice—from *butsudan* “in the Japanese taste” to “stylish” ones suiting a Western décor—and “professional advisors” who can guide the neophyte through the variety on offer with the minimum of stress and provide after-sales service, setting the *butsudan* up and furnishing it.

Stores selling *butsudan* often sell *kamidana* as well. Customers are urged

to make the purchase “at those special times when people feel the need to venerate the *kami*, such as building a new house, getting married, or during the periodic ‘unlucky years’ (*yakudoshi*).” The *kamidana*, they say, provides a focus to “revere the *kami* and ancestors to ensure their protection and pray for the family’s peace and prosperity.” Once again, it is the family rather than the individual faith that is the issue. In actual fact, so few private houses now have *kamidana* that the National Association of Shrines distributes free altar kits to encourage people to buy Ise amulets, which they would not do if they had no *kamidana*. Whereas most households in Japan enshrined them in the mid-1940s, now probably no more than 10 percent do so, and the lack of interest is most noticeable in urban areas. Today *kamidana* are more likely to be found in business premises, particularly restaurants and traditional inns, because they are believed to bring prosperity, rather than because of any particular devotion to Shinto as a religion. The line between Shinto as a religion and Shinto as a mass of traditional communal practices is in

fact quite vague, so even though there is strict separation of state and religion in Japan, Shinto groundbreaking ceremonies for official buildings can be paid for out of public funds, on the grounds that their purpose is secular and the rite follows general social custom. Similarly, the majority of Japanese would not ascribe any religious significance to the large ornamental rake (*kumade*) (fig. 2) prominently displayed in Ueno Station in Tokyo every November, although it is provided by Ōtori Shrine near Asakusa, a religious site.

Though people do not admit in large numbers to personal faith, this does not mean they do not engage in practices that seem to an outside observer to be religious. Enormous numbers visit popular shrines and temples over the New Year period when two or three million people crowd places like Meiji Shrine in Tokyo and the Buddhist temple of Naritasan Shinshōji in Chiba Prefecture. Rarely does anyone think whether the place is Shinto or Buddhist; more important than sectarian affiliation is its cachet. Also, as anyone who has tried to take long-distance transport during the *o-bon* season in July and August has experienced, millions of people try to return to their ancestral homes at that time to visit their family graves and attend ritual services for the dead.

The three most important rites of passage are also celebrated in the name of religion, as exemplified by the well-known phrase “born Shinto, marry Christian, and die Buddhist.” Babies are generally taken to their local shrine,

their *ujigami*, at the age of around one month to be introduced to the local protector deity. No belief commitment is assumed, and therefore this does not have the force of baptism in Christianity, where the parents and godparents are enjoined to bring the baby up in the Christian faith. Marriage was a secular, household rite until the beginning of the twentieth century, when Shinto-style weddings became popular in the wake of an imperial marriage in that style. Today their popularity has been overtaken by Western-style, “white” weddings (that is, Christian), with perhaps 80 percent of couples being married in an unconsecrated wedding chapel by a “minister,” more often than not simply a Caucasian male dressed in clerical robes who conducts weddings for money. In an interview, one admitted he was not ordained, not religious, and did not understand what he was reading in the service. Though the service incorporates a hymn, prayer, and Bible reading, no knowledge of Christianity is assumed or taught, and an actual missionary pastor taking the opportunity to proselytize would probably be unwelcome in a commercial wedding hall or hotel. The experience takes precedence over belief; couples enjoy it because it is fashionable, cool, and exotic.

The role of Buddhism in funerals and memorial services is by comparison much more fundamental and serious. Like Christian culture in the secular West, Buddhist ideas are ingrained in Japanese life and traditions. It is no coincidence that a deceased person is called *hotoke*, which means “buddha.” Through the funeral service and subsequent memorial services at set periods, Buddhist priests ease the deceased toward rebirth in an enlightened state, or buddhahood. Ideas about the spiritual progression of the dead meld in some places with native ideas about ancestral spirits gradually ascending local mountains and becoming *kami*, guardians of the locality. People living in the



Shōnai Plain in Yamagata Prefecture, for example, believe that over a period of thirty-three years, the deceased gradually ascends a mountain called Gassan. Today the major religious presence in the area is a Shinto shrine called Dewa Sanzan Jinja, which was until 1870 a Buddhist temple called Jakkōji. Shrines generally have nothing to do with the cult of the dead, this being the preserve of Buddhist temples, yet here popular expectation centuries old has forced the shrine to erect a hall called the Reisaiden (Spirit Veneration Hall) to memorialize the dead. Outside there is a large pot for incense (fig. 3), and inside can be seen memorial tablets and even a Buddhist statue on the altar (fig. 4). On Gassan itself there are many Buddhist-style monuments, both old and contemporary, to the dead that are supposed to reside at the summit of this sacred mountain (fig. 5).

Throughout most of Japanese history, Buddhism and native beliefs, and to a lesser extent Chinese cosmological ideas, have existed in combination one with another. Modern scholars call this coexistence *shinbutsu shūgō*, which has been translated by words such as *syncretism*, *contamination*, *blending*, *assimilation*, or *amalgamation* of buddhas and native deities. Perhaps the best nonjudgmental way of describing how Japanese religion has worked for most of its history is “combinatory.” Wherever Buddhism went in its journey across Asia, it absorbed local deities and cults in the name of skillful means—local gods became protector deities and local concerns continued to be acknowledged within a new framework. In Japan, for example, the deity Hachiman was made the protector of the great temple of Tōdaiji in Nara and was commonly depicted wearing the robes of a Buddhist priest. Most temples had the shrines in their grounds, and most large shrines were in fact shrine-temple complexes, where the *kami* were venerated as avatars (*gongen*) of Buddhist

deities. Thus at Togakushisan in Nagano Prefecture, now a shrine, the local nine-headed dragon deity was venerated as an avatar of Benzaiten, the Buddhist deity principally associated with water (fig. 6). This is why we can still occasionally see buildings like pagodas and *goma* halls standing within shrine precincts.

Perhaps nothing in Japan today better represents the actuality of traditional combinatory religion than Shugendo, where beliefs and practices associated with mountains have been given expression through esoteric Buddhism. The core of Shugendo practice is mountain-entry (*nyūbu*) rituals. One of the most famous is the seven-day *okugake* practice in the Ōmine Mountains in Nara Prefecture, where practitioners traverse a series of peaks between the Yoshino and Kumano, reciting sutras at numinous sites, performing physical exercises like climbing around dangerous outcrops and hanging over cliffs, and venerating the *kami* and buddhas through fire rituals called *saitō goma*. The latter often incorporate fire-walking, especially in large public ceremonies like those at Mount Takao near Tokyo every March (fig. 7). At the center of Shugendo practice is the mountain itself, regarded as an avatar of a Buddhist deity, and also as a *kami*. Thus in Haguro Shugendo in Yamagata Prefecture, the highest of the three sacred mountains, Gassan, is considered as an avatar, Gassan Daigongen, of a Buddhist divinity, the Buddha Amida (Amitābha), and as the *kami* Tsukiyomi no mikoto.

Contributing to the confusion about sectarian identity in modern Japan is the movement initiated by the new Meiji government in 1868 to “clarify” what was Shinto and to remove any “foreign” (that is, Buddhist) elements from it. Since, with the exception of the immediate surroundings of the Ise Shrines in Mie Prefecture, every major shrine in the land was actually a part of a shrine-temple complex, this caused major changes in the religious landscape,

institutionally, ritually, topographically, and materially. A pagoda has remained in the precincts of the present shrine on Mount Haguro only because a buyer could not be found to take it away as fuel wood. Buddhist statues and implements were removed from shrine buildings, often destroyed, but also often preserved secretly by local sympathizers with the traditional religion. Even today it is easy to find beheaded stone statues of Kannon, Jizō, and other Buddhist figures, victims of an anti-Buddhist movement that was forceful in the late 1860s and early 1870s (fig. 8). Many of the images found today in Western museums were acquired from antique dealers into whose hands fell many of the rejected pieces of Buddhist artwork.

The idea of combinatory religion is not a thing of the past in Japan. Moreover, new forms have appeared. An interesting example is the Zen-Catholic combination that two Jesuits resident in Japan, Father Hugo Enomiya-Lassalle (1898–1990) and Father William Johnston (1925–2010), promoted. Father Lassalle set up a Christian-Zen training hall called Shinmeikutsu near Ōme, west of Tokyo, in 1969. In form it was exactly like a Soto Zen training temple.

However, whereas in a *zendō* a statue of Monju is placed directly in front of the entrance, here there was a cloth-covered boulder for the daily celebration of the Eucharist. Father Johnston used to conduct *zazen* sessions in his home in Hongō, near the University of Tokyo, followed by a Mass where all shared the Eucharist cup, whether or not they were confirmed Catholics. Reportedly Pope John Paul II questioned this Catholic-Zen combination during his visit to Japan in 1981, but while the Vatican remains cautious about mixing aspects of Christian and Buddhist practices, in 1989 it did state that Catholics could take methods from non-Christian religions “so long as the Christian concept of prayer, its logic and requirements are never obscured.”

In Japan, too, there is a growing awareness of the centrality of combinatory ideas to Japanese spirituality. Shōkai Koshikidake, who recently reconstituted the Shugendo temple in Yamagata that his ancestors had maintained down to the 1870s, has stated his express aim in reviving Shugendo there to be “restoring and continuing pre-Meiji [pre-1868] combinatory rituals”

and “reinvigorating *shinbutsu shūgō* as the core of Japanese religious life.” At Mount Haguro, the host of Daishōbō pilgrims’ lodge, Fumihiro Hoshino, though his family has been affiliated with the shrine since 1874, is actively teaching Shugendo with *shinbutsu shūgō* as its spiritual core.

In March 2008, an organization called Shinbutsu Reijōkai (Kami-Buddha Sacred Sites Association) was formed in response to an appeal made by the scholar Tetsuo Yamaori and others to “bring back to the present age the spiritual climate of the past in which Japanese people respected both *kami* and *hotoke* in the belief that the gods and the buddhas (*shinbutsu*) coexisted, and to contribute to the peace of mind of modern people and the stability of society.” To this end later that year more than two hundred Shinto and Buddhist priests visited the Ise Shrine to mark the start of a pilgrimage route of 150 shrines and temples around Kyoto and Nara. It was the first time that prominent Buddhist figures had formally visited the shrine. The organization continues to hold seminars and events to publicize its aims.

Combinatory religion is not unique to Japan but, rather, can be seen to a larger or smaller extent in most cultures. However, because of historical circumstances, its existence has been obscured in Japan, and this has caused misunderstanding about the nature of Japanese religion. An appreciation of the nature of the *shinbutsu* can only deepen spiritual awareness among all of those belonging to a Japanese religious tradition.

# Religious Syncretism in the African Diaspora

by Terry Rey

***Catholicism and African religious traditions tunelessly blend in the Americas and are practiced as such by millions of people. Not only are these believers bireligious, but so are the divinities who inhabit their world and walk with them on life's way.***

## When the Saints— and the Spirits— Go Marching In

In Haitian Vodou, most spirits (*lwa*) are of West African origin yet consider themselves to be Catholic, sometimes asking their devotees to take them to Sunday

Mass. Among Cubans, the phrase “soy católico a mi manera” (I’m Catholic in my own way) is often heard and generally taken to mean that its speaker is a devotee of the *orisha*, spirits of the Afro-Caribbean religion of Santería. Brazil’s patron saint, Our Lady of Aparecida (Nossa Senhora Aparecida), meanwhile,

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is for many practitioners of Candomblé a manifestation of the West African feminine *orisha* Oxum (or Oya, and/or Yemaya). These are just a few examples of the many colorful and creative ways in which Catholicism and African religious traditions tunelessly blend in the Americas and are practiced as such by millions of people. Not only are these believers bireligious, but so are the divinities who inhabit their world and walk with them on life’s way.

The survival and spread of African-derived religions in the Americas is one of the most inspirational stories in human history. (The term *African-derived* is not without its critics. See, for instance, Todd Ramón Ochoa, *Society of the Dead: Quita Maniquita and Palo Praise in Cuba* [University of California Press, 2010].) It is a story of the resilience of the human spirit’s thriving in the face of arguably the fiercest injustice ever orchestrated by our species, namely

as spirits and customs originally associated with one kingdom or ethnic group were often adopted or adapted by another, as was Catholicism in the Kongo Kingdom toward the end of the fifteenth century. Change and adaptation notwithstanding, divination, drumming, dance, healing, and spirit possession have remained elemental to African religions on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

Being generally monotheistic as concerns creation, in traditional African religions our world was set into motion by God but was completed by a group of divinities that God left in charge, and soon human beings, who were very much like them, were placed on the earth. (Most African creation myths depict God as masculine, but there are exceptions in which God is androgynous or in which both a male and a female creator set all of this in motion.

For examples, see Ulli

Beier, ed., *The Origin of Life and Death: African Creation Myths* [Heinemann, 1966].) God retreated from this incomplete creation and is perceived as being so distant that most religious commerce for humans is with the spirits and the living dead rather than with God, even though God is affirmed as the source of all and the ultimate refuge when things go very, very wrong. The world that God

set in motion, and in which we reside with spirits, ancestors, and nature, is an altogether good place, furthermore—suffering be damned—and spirits and ancestors help us humans thrive here. Therefore, in return and gratitude we serve the spirits with ritual, sacrifice, and song, while we are also obliged to venerate the ancestors, which we ourselves will one day become.

## **Africanizing Christianity in the New World**

More than twelve million Africans were enslaved by Europeans between 1441 and 1888. Most slaves were forced to labor in unspeakably cruel conditions on plantations in places like Brazil, Cuba, Saint-Domingue (colonial Haiti), and the thirteen English colonies that would become the United States of America. Though syncretism between African religions and Christianity did occur in colonial societies ruled by Protestant Europeans, it was especially Catholicism that lent itself to merger with African religion in the New World. With all of its saint cults and ritual paraphernalia, Catholicism proved to be quite resonant with traditional African religions and provided fuel for the freewheeling syncretism behind Candomblé, Santería, Vodou, and related religions.

Granted, most Africans in colonial Brazil, Cuba, and Haiti actually received little, if any, religious education from Catholic friars. Nonetheless, the sacraments and lessons that they did receive were often of deep interest to them, leading one distinguished scholar to state that they “greedily adopted” Catholicism, though without abandoning the spirits of the mother continent (Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Hugo Charteris [Schocken, 1972 (1959)], 331). Stories of slaves returning to be baptized on multiple occasions or of “stealing” holy water from churches are found in missionary records, for instance, while the hagiographies of Catholic saints, whether

the transatlantic slave trade. The religions discussed in this article were born in and out of that horror. To be sure, religion had flourished in West and Central Africa prior to the incursion of Europeans there and the beginning of transatlantic slavery in the fifteenth century. Traditional African religion was in fact already characterized by a capacity for change and adaptation,



expressed in sermons or statues, seemed quite plausible to Africans and quite consistent with what they had always believed. Who, after all, could Catholic saints possibly be if not dead people who live on somewhere else and have powers to intervene in our lives? Africans had always believed such things about their ancestors.

Many of the attributes and symbols associated with Catholic saints thus found correlates among the *lwa* and the *orisha*. Take Saint James the Greater, for instance, who in one striking image as Santiago Matamoros sits atop a horse brandishing a sword, a knight in shining armor at his side. What else could this be but a white man's representation of Ogún, the *orisha* of warfare and metals who for centuries has been the object of a devotional cult of unsurpassed prestige in much of West Africa, especially among the Yoruba people? (On the precedence that Ogún takes in Yoruba religion, see Jacob K. Olupona, *City of 201 Gods: Ilé-Ifè in Time, Space, and the Imagination* [University of California Press, 2011]). For similar reasons, Saint George, often depicted in armor, is associated with Ogún (Ogum) in Candomblé. (On Ogún in Afro-Brazilian religions, see Renato Ortiz, "Ogum and the Umbandista Religion" in *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New*, ed. Sandra T. Barnes [Indiana University Press, 1997], 90–102.)

Besides saints and their hagiographies, other forms of Catholic ritual paraphernalia have also enjoyed a long history of African and Afro-Creole adaptation in the Atlantic world. Candomblé, Santería, and Vodou altars sometimes feature representations of the Eucharist and chalice from the Catholic Mass, for instance, while commonly crucifixes, rosaries, and votive candles are found in sanctuaries and on the bodies of the faithful. Furthermore, the scheduling of major ceremonies in these religions is tied to the Catholic liturgical calendar, as in the case of the Feast of Our Lady of Charity, patron saint of Cuba,

on September 8, when many Santeros/Santeras participate in elaborate rituals or quiet personal devotions for Ochún, the Yoruba female spirit of fresh waters, fine fragrances, sensuality, and femininity.

The Catholic liturgical calendar is also foundational to the cult of the African dead in Haitian Vodou and to the religion's most important holiday, Fèt Gede, the Feast of Gede, the chief divinity of all things related to death, the dead, and dying. This feast takes place on November 1 and 2, All Saints Day and All Souls Day, with communal rituals performed in cemeteries and streets throughout Haiti. While Gede is widely assimilated with Saint Gerard, it is All Souls Day, rather than that saint's feast day (April 23), that foregrounds Fèt Gede. For this there are deep and tragic African reasons, especially the spiritual trauma of the enslavement of the ancestors and their/our resultant spatial distance from the burial sites of the dead in Africa, where regular offerings would be performed. Enter All Souls Day in Haiti, which Africans appropriated to venerate the distant dead of Africa, as their Haitian descendants

do today. (For a general overview of funerary traditions and thanatology in African and African diasporic religions, see Terry Rey, "The Life of the Dead in African and African Diasporic Religions" in *Death and Dying in World Religions*, ed. Lucy Bregman [Kendall Hall, 2009], 153–67.)

## Scholarly Interpretations of Afro-Catholic Syncretism in the Americas

Until recently most practitioners of Afro-Catholic religions in the New World have not concerned themselves with the putatively hybrid nature of their religious lives. This has not kept scholars of these religions from being preoccupied with the issue, however. Since the first anthropologists and historians began researching Afro-American religions in Brazil, Cuba, Haiti, and the United States, the question of just how "African" these traditions actually are has received much attention. (The first serious comparative effort made to make sense of the "survival" of "Africanism"

and the concomitant “reinterpretation” of Christianity in light of African traditions is Melville J. Herskovits’s classic *The Myth of the Negro Past* [Beacon, 1990 (1941)].) Generally speaking, there are three basic arguments about the nature of African/European religious syncretism in the New World, which for the sake of brevity may be alliteratively called “mask,” “mix,” and “mosaic.”

Proponents of the mask theory of religious syncretism in the African diaspora argue that most enslaved Africans did not really take an interest in Catholicism but instead exploited the religion in order to conceal and sustain spiritual practices from the homeland. Scholars subscribing to the mix theory feel that African religions were so blended with Catholicism during the colonial era that distinctly hybrid or creolized traditions emerged, which should be considered discrete religions altogether. To put it artistically, religion blue meets religion red and religion purple emerges. The mosaic theory, for its part, prefers the term *symbiosis* to *syncretism* in the interpretation of Afro-Atlanto-Catholic religions. From afar they might indeed appear to be purple, but upon closer inspection one comes to realize that these religions are more like a stained-glass window made up of distinct blue and red pieces that themselves remain more or less intact and distinct. (Leslie Desmangles has quite effectively argued for the mosaic theory in *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* [University of North Carolina Press, 1992]. For an example of the mask theory, see Raul Canizares, *Cuban Santeria: Walking with the Night* [Destiny, 1999].)

Though understanding the perceptions and intentions of historical actors is challenging, especially those who were victimized by the brutal injustice of enslavement and in effect silenced in the archives that historians so covet, there is probably an element of truth to each of the three theories. White

colonists and missionaries believed that African traditions were diabolical, superstitious, and dangerous, after all, and they enacted legislation against them. The survival of African religion in the Americas thus required secrecy, to be sure, lending some measure of credence to the mask theory of religious syncretism. But the reality was much more complex, and the historical record in fact reflects genuine and widespread interest in things Catholic among enslaved Africans.

## Outlawed Faith and Rebounding Intolerance

Long before scholars ever thought critically about the difference between African customs and Christianity in the Americas, missionaries and other colonial officials pontificated about them and enacted laws to protect the “purity” of Catholic doctrine and practice against “pagan” additive, adoption, or appropriation. Taking justification from a series of papal bulls that legitimated the European enslavement of Africans, Catholic friars baptized and catechized to slaves, while colonial administrators enacted harsh legislations to stamp out African “superstition.” For instance, Pope Nicholas V promulgated *Romanus pontifex* in 1454, addressed to King Afonso V of Portugal, which would “bestow suitable favors and special graces on those Catholic kings and princes, who . . . not only restrain the savage excesses of the Saracens and of other infidels, enemies of

the Christian name, but also for the defense and increase of the faith vanquish them and their kingdoms and habitations, though situated in the remotest parts unknown to us.” (For the full text of this papal bull, see <http://www.nativeweb.org/pages/legal/indig-romanus-pontifex.html>; accessed July 17, 2015.)

In Saint-Domingue, the importation of enslaved Africans increased dramatically in the eighteenth century, turning the colony into the French empire’s economic crown jewel. The devoutly Catholic king Louis XIV sought to bolster the church there, and since the vast majority of the colony’s subjects were slaves, he implemented legal measures to ensure that they be brought into the Catholic fold. Thus in 1685 the king promulgated the Code Noir “to maintain the discipline of the Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman Church there and to regulate the status and condition of our slaves in our said islands.” (An English translation of *Le Code Noir* can be found at <https://directory.vancouver>

.wsu.edu/sites/directory.vancouver.wsu.edu/files/inserted\_files/webintern02/code%20noir.pdf; accessed July 25, 2015.) The code stipulated that only Catholicism could be practiced in the colonies and that slaves must be given religious instruction and that they not be forced to labor on Sundays or major Catholic holidays. As concerns religious syncretism, this opened up time and space for *both* Catholicism and African traditions to flourish among the enslaved population. Most slaves lived quite far from cities and towns that actually had churches, so the free time from work was often used to gather for drumming ceremonies in the fields, forests, or hills, like the one famously described by a white observer in 1797: “What is very true of Voodoo and at the same time very remarkable, is the spirit of hypnotism, which brings the members to dance right to the edge of consciousness . . . to the sounds of drums and of rhythmic handclapping” (Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de St. Méry, *A Civilization That Perished: The Last Years of White Colonial Rule in Haiti*, trans. and abridged by Ivor D. Spencer [University Press of America, 1985 (1797–98)], 5–6).

Thus despite the intentions behind them to curb the practice of African religions in the colonial Americas and to ensure the predominance of Catholicism, some ecclesial and legal measures actually contributed to the perpetuation of African spirituality in the New World. Another key example of this was the establishment of confraternities in Brazil and Cuba, which, like the Code Noir in Saint-Domingue, provided slaves with opportunities to blend their homeland traditions with Catholicism. The confraternities (*cofradías*, *cabildos*) were mutual aid societies that grouped Africans according to ethnicity under the patronage of a particular Catholic saint. In addition to arranging burials and providing other forms of social assistance, such societies also held “dances,” which is code-speak for African religious ceremonies. Their gatherings were thus the locus par excellence both for the perpetuation of African religious customs and for Afro-Catholic religious syncretism.

As a result, most practitioners of Candomblé, Santería, and Haitian Vodou have historically also been Catholic and have never seen any contradiction in their supposed bireligiosity. By the

middle of the twentieth century, however, this began to change, especially in Brazilian, Cuban, and African American circles. The arrival of Pentecostalism in the postwar Caribbean and Latin America led to massive conversions out of both the Catholic Church and the African spirit house, and the new form of Christianity has proven to be militantly and often successfully intolerant of syncretism. Partially as a response to this, in Cuba, Brazil, and the United States, communities remaining faithful to the *orisha* have orchestrated campaigns to rid their religious practice of any Catholic elements, seeking to “re-Africanize” their faith and reestablish some kind of African spiritual “purity” in the African diaspora. For the most part, this has not happened in Haiti, however, where one still hears the old adage that “to serve the *lwa*, one must be a good Catholic.”

## Conclusion

Exactly what the future holds for these and related religions in the Americas is difficult to predict. There are signs that Vodou is on the decline in Haiti and even more so in the Haitian diaspora, while Candomblé and Santería seem to be thriving in Brazil and Cuba respectively. Devotion to the *orisha* in the United States, meanwhile, primarily among Latinos and African Americans, has been slowly on the rise since the 1940s, a form of African-derived religious practice that increasingly rejects Catholic symbolic or liturgical elements. It is safe to say, however, that African spirits and ancestors will always be part of the religious landscape in these and other New World locations. Having survived the horrors of the transatlantic slave trade, after all, there is nothing imaginable that could defeat them now, and so they live on in the devotions of millions of people in the Americas, many of whom are also Catholic in their own way. □

# On Being a Christian Influenced by Buddhism

by Jay McDaniel

***I think Zen can enrich the incarnational emphasis of Christianity, which likewise finds the infinite in the finite, the sacred in the ordinary, the word in the enfleshedness of daily life. Living Zen can help Christians enter more deeply into that form of living to which we aspire: life in Christ.***

Many years ago, when I was in seminary, I had the unusual experience of living in two religious worlds simultaneously: one Christian and one Buddhist.

In the mornings I would take classes on Christianity under the guidance of gifted seminary professors, all of whom were preparing me to become a minister. And then, in the afternoons, I would serve as the English teacher for a Zen Buddhist monk from Japan who had recently completed his monastic training in Kyoto, having had the satori (enlightenment) experience with help from his Zen master.

For a young seminarian fresh out of college, my year as an English teacher for this Zen monk—who became a Zen master—was very intense. I would leave morning classes thinking about the self's relation to God as understood in the Gospel of John, deeply steeped in the richness of a Christian path. Then I would visit with a Zen monk in the afternoon, talking about Zen and wondering if the self and God even existed.

One day in seminary illustrates the whole year. I remember going to chapel in the morning, before class, and singing "Amazing Grace" along with my fellow seminarians. I felt enveloped in God's love. That afternoon I then discussed

with my Zen friend the meaning of the well-known koan "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" He explained that there is no rational or formulaic answer but that there is an "answer," and it has to do with not having a self separated from the world. He and I were always talking about the Buddhist idea of no separate self, or *anatman*.

I left our discussion wondering if Jesus had a self in the first place, and if God had one as well. Maybe they, too, exemplified *anatman*. Maybe they could hear the sound of one hand clapping because their selves, like that of a good Zen Buddhist, were empty of substance and completed by the world. It seemed to me that the whole year was like that: trying to link the amazing grace of God's love with the sound of one hand clapping.

Of course, this year did not emerge in a vacuum. For me, it emerged as the outcome of a rather deep search, not simply for Christian identity, but for a living Christian faith. I was myself surprised to find that Buddhism might help me find that faith.

I had first become interested in Buddhism during my senior year in college. I was looking for an alternative to a form of fundamentalist Christianity

into which I had briefly fallen, and I found that alternative in the writings of the late Catholic writer Thomas Merton. He was a monk living in a monastery in Gethsemane, Kentucky, who wrote voluminously on many topics, including war and peace, social justice, contemplative prayer, mysticism, and Buddhism. Merton's interest in Buddhism struck a chord in me because I, like he, was drawn to forms of spirituality that emphasize "letting go of words" and "being aware in the present moment." Protestant Christianity often seemed too wordy to me. Buddhism pointed to a world beyond words.

One reason I especially liked Merton was that he was sensitive to the fact that Christianity, too, points to a world beyond words. It points to the world of other living beings who are to be loved on their own terms and for their own sakes, who cannot be reduced to the names we attach to them. It also points to the world of divine silence as experienced in the depths of contemplative prayer. Merton turned to Buddhism as a way of deepening his own understanding of the wordless, transtheological dimensions of Christianity, and with his help I did the same.

Under the influence of Merton's writings, then, I began to take courses in world religions during my first year in seminary, even as I also took courses in biblical studies, the history of Christianity, and Christian theology. At this stage, my interest in Buddhism was satisfied primarily through books and lectures in these courses. Growing up



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in a middle-class Protestant setting in Texas, I had not really known a Buddhist, much less a Zen Buddhist, in a personal way. I had known cowboys.

All of this changed when I was asked by one of my professors to be the English teacher for the monk from Japan. My professor, Margaret Dornish, taught world religions, and I was taking a course on Buddhism under her. Her request, and my acceptance of it, changed my life. The monk's name was Keido Fukushima, and he was being sent to the United States by his master in Japan to learn English and to learn about America. My assignment was to meet with him every day for one full year, teach him English, and also take him to numerous sites throughout Southern California, from malls to monasteries. Indeed, I myself was to be part of the experience for him. In meeting me and getting to know how young people think, he would be meeting an "American." I tried my best to be an "American" for him, but I am sure that I was, at best, a middle-class Texan. I worried, along with Dr. Dornish, that I would be teaching Keido Fukushima to speak English with a Texas accent.

I quickly learned that my student, whom I was told to call Gensho, had already had seven years of English as a student in Japan. I later learned that *gensho* means "young monk" and that I was calling him "young monk" the whole time. This was odd because he was ten years my senior, but it never seemed to bother him. In any case, he was being sent to the United States not to

learn English but, rather, to brush up on English so that he could return to Japan and field questions from Americans about Zen. Given his facility with the language, our agreement was that I would teach him English by having him explain Zen to me. Thus, we spent hours upon hours talking about Zen and Buddhism.

As soon as we began talking about Zen, he explained to me that the best way to understand Zen is to undertake a daily practice of Zen meditation, or *zazen*. Under his guidance I did take up that practice, and I have been doing it ever since. It introduced me to that world beyond words—the world of pure listening—that had led me to be interested in Zen in the first place. Twenty years of Zen meditation is at least part of the experience that I bring to this essay. The other part is twenty years of teaching Buddhism and Asian religions to college undergraduates.

But Gensho's explanations of Zen did not stop with discussions or with *zazen*. The wisest teachings he gave me in those days were the gleam in his eye, his ever-present sense of humor, and his kindness. These activities were for me then, and are for me now, living Zen. Dead Zen is what you get in books. Living Zen is what you get when you are face-to-face with a Zen person or, still more deeply, with life itself. As Gensho would often say, the ultimate koan is not the question "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" It is life itself. It is how you respond to what presents itself: the birth of children, the death of loved ones, the caress of

your beloved, the beauty of sunsets, the murder of innocents, the laughter of friends, the hunger of children. When you respond with wisdom and compassion in the immediacy of the moment, you have become living Zen. Your life is your sermon.

With his help, then, I came to realize that Zen is not about arriving at another place, called nirvana, but rather about arriving at the place where we start—namely the present moment—and living freely in the here and now of daily life. Zen is among the most down-to-earth and concrete religions I know. It is very bodily and practical. For this reason I think Zen can enrich the incarnational emphasis of Christianity, which likewise finds the infinite in the finite, the sacred in the ordinary, the word in the enfleshedness of daily life. Living Zen can help Christians enter more deeply into that form of living to which we aspire: life in Christ.

As I was spending my afternoons and many an evening with Gensho, my more conservative friends in seminary worried a little about me. They knew that Zen Buddhists do not often speak of God and that faith in God is not part of the Zen world. And they worried that I myself was falling into a dual religious identity. One of them called it "double religious belonging."

I was not comfortable with this phrase. Even as I felt that I was experiencing two different worlds each day, I did not feel that I belonged to two countries and had two passports. Rather, I felt like one person who was receiving

nourishment from two intravenous tubes: one the dharma of Buddhism and the other the wisdom of Christ. I borrow this metaphor from a wonderful Zen teacher in the United States, the late Susan Jion Postal. Intuitively I knew the two medicines were compatible, but I was trying to figure out how they were compatible with my mind. Moreover, I knew that if I had to choose one medicine over another, I would choose Christ. I was not all Buddhist and all Christian, or half Buddhist and half Christian, but rather a Christian influenced by Buddhism. Fortunately, the two fluids did indeed feel compatible and mutually enriching, so I wasn't forced to choose. Each had a healing quality that could add to the other.

What, then, was the healing quality of Christianity? Of course, it has a lot to do with God and with the healing power of faith in God. Part of this healing quality can be described if I go into greater detail about the chapel service in seminary when we sang "Amazing Grace." When I sang along with the others, I felt that there was indeed a grace at hand, both in the lyrics and melody and in the people singing it. We were somehow together in a communion of love, even as we were different persons. I sensed that there is a mysterious and encircling presence—a sky-like mind—in which we live and breathe and have our being, and that this mind is amazingly graceful. We can live from this grace and even add to it.

For my part, I felt this grace most vividly not in ideas learned from books but in the gifts of personal relationships, in the beauty of the natural world, in the depths of dreams, in hopes for peace, in the silence of the soul, in the eyes of animals, in the mysteries of music, and in acts of loving-kindness. There is something beautiful in our world even amid its tragedies. For me, this beauty is God. God is the lure toward beauty in the universe, plus more. And God is in the beauty, too. The beauty of the world is God's body.

Admittedly, even in seminary, I did not always envision God as a male deity residing off the planet. Neither did my professors, especially those who were process theologians. With their help I arrived at a way of thinking about God that has made sense to me ever since. They helped me see that the universe is not outside God, like a servant seated far beneath a throne on which sits a king, but, rather, inside God, like developing embryos are inside a womb or schools of fish are inside an ocean or clouds are inside the sky.

My professors called this perspective panentheism: a term that was coined in the nineteenth century that literally means that everything is in God even as God is more than everything. It seemed to me then and seems to me now that panentheism is closer to the truth of amazing grace. Grace is not something we approach from afar, like a throne on which sits a king, but rather something

that is "always already here" as pure gift. Just as the ocean is always already here for a fish swimming in it, so grace is always already here for human beings. Our task, as humans, is to awaken to what is always already here.

I have said that from a panentheistic perspective God is more than everything added together. This is certainly the case for process theologians. Just as an ocean is more than all the fish swimming in it, so God is more than our experience of God. Imagine a fish swimming off the coast of the Gulf of Mexico in North America and imagining that it knew everything about the ocean, including what it is like off the coasts of New Zealand and South Africa and the Arctic. This fish would be equating its own experience of God with the whole of God.

Unfortunately, that is what I did during my senior year in college when I was a fundamentalist. I was pretty sure that I knew the whole of God and that others who disagreed with me were wrong. And that is why I am so glad to have discovered Thomas Merton, who helped me realize that the divine ocean is always more than our experience of it, and we can lie back gently in its waters. From Merton I learned about God the moreness and about how silent listening was a profound way to be connected with this God.

Oftentimes in seminary, before I went to sleep at night, I would pray to the divine moreness. Not only the contemplative prayer that Thomas Merton described but also the more traditional prayer of address that is at the heart of so much lived religion. I would open my heart to the divine ocean and say "Please be with them, O Lord" or "I am so sorry, God" or "Thank you, it is so beautiful" or "May all beings be happy." Indeed, in times of sadness, I would also pray the harder prayers, the lamentations and protests, such as "Why did you let this happen?" and "Where are you, anyway?" and "Why have you

forsaken me?" These were for me a kind of primal speech of the heart, more like poetry than prose. They were reaching out into the vastness of a mystery beyond my imagination yet present even in its absence.

At first I felt a little guilty about these harder prayers. I knew that you find this kind of praying in the Bible quite often, in the Psalms, for example, but for some reason I thought I was supposed to be nicer to God than the biblical authors. Thankfully, my professors explained that all of these ways of praying are authentic if they come from the heart, because the divine ocean is big enough and powerful enough to receive and absorb all doubts, pains, sufferings, and even all sins.

How did they know this? Most of them appealed to experience and also to Jesus. In the minds of most of my teachers, Jesus was not a supernatural figure who descended to the earth from above but, rather, a man among men whose opened heart revealed a special aspect of God: namely God's openhearted reception of the world into the divine life, with a tender care that nothing be lost. If we imagine God as an ocean, they said, then let us imagine Jesus as a fish among fish, whose opened heart reveals the empathy and eros of ocean itself. Jesus was, as it were, a window to the divine. I liked to think of Jesus as one of those fish with especially shining eyes. You would look into his eyes and see the ocean. Its name was not power or control or fear. Its name was compassion. You could feel this ocean every time you listened to other fish and cared for them. You could feel it when you had compassion for yourself, too. It was a very wide ocean, without boundaries, and somehow people saw it in the eyes of Jesus. Not his alone, of course, but also in the eyes of others.

Of course, not all eyes reveal compassion. Some are all about power and control. People with power-hungry eyes have somehow lost sight of their

capacities for vulnerable love. Their victims need our special love and care, and our hope that somehow the journey of life continues afterward, so that their hearts find peace. And those with power-hungry eyes also need our love. This is a teaching of the Buddha and Jesus. We must not draw boundaries around love.

I think that the ocean of compassion is also an ocean of listening. It is affected by everything that happens at all the time: omnivulnerable, like a man on a cross. I had a few friends in seminary, and I have many friends now, who do not believe in prayer. Some of my friends in the college where I teach don't believe there is a divine ocean in the first place. They believe that the great receptacle in which the universe unfolds is an empty space rather than an amazing grace, more like a vacuum than an opened heart. And, of course, they may be right. When it comes to the mystery within which we all swim like fish in the sea, we all see through a glass darkly. No one can grasp the ocean, not even Christians.

Additionally, I have other religious friends who do indeed believe in a divine mystery of sorts but do not believe it receives prayers. They see the mystery more like an energy or force that can act upon things but that cannot be acted upon. It has the power to give but not to receive. Our task, they say, is to do the will of God, cognizant that God does not need us in any way. For these friends, God is more like the male deity residing off the planet than an ocean of compassion. He stands above the earth, watching from time to time, and intervening from time to time, but he would do just fine if the earth and the whole universe ceased to exist.

For my part, I have no objection to other people's imagining God as a male deity residing off the planet. I think we need many different images of God in our imaginations and that this image is one among many that can help us. I

have met people whose lives have been empowered to deal with great suffering, with great courage, through this image of God. But I do indeed have a problem with people who imagine this male deity as having the power to give but not to receive, the power to issue commands but not to empathize, the power to act in the world but not to be acted upon by the world. When God is imagined in this way, we have, as the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once put it, rendered unto God that which belongs to Caesar.

I'm with Whitehead. A God who lacks the power to receive, who doesn't need the world in any way, is too monarchical. He is a lot like Caesar but not much like Christ. When I say "God" in this essay, I mean the Christ-like God as opposed to the Caesar-like God. I mean the God who is present to each living being on our planet and throughout the universe with a tender care that nothing be lost. I mean the God who is filled by the universe, just as an embryo fills a womb or stars fill a dark and starlit sky or fish fill the sea. I mean the God whose face is compassion, not power, whose body is the world itself. I mean the God who is an ocean. The God whom Christians see revealed, but not exhausted, in the healing ministry of Jesus.

Faith in God is trust in the availability of fresh possibilities. And life in God lies in being present to each situation in a kindly way, open to surprise, honest about suffering, and seeking wisdom for daily life. I saw this kind of faith in Gensho. He did not have an image of God in whom he placed that faith. When God becomes an ocean, we must sit loose with images, too, lest we make idols of them. Still we can have faith in something more, maybe even someone more: someone who listens and seeks our well-being. This is a faith to which I am drawn, moment by moment, as I try to walk with Christ with help from Zen. □

# Buddhism and Social Engagement (3)

## Social Reform and Environmental Protection

by Ranjana Mukhopadhyaya

***Spiritual development underlies the economic development that Buddhists and development monks are working toward, in contrast to modern theories of economic development that ignore spiritual cultivation and growth.***

### Social Reform

Buddhism teaches that this world is marked by suffering and that the ultimate objective of human existence is attainment of nirvana and liberation from the shackles of reincarnation. With the development of Mahayana Buddhism, this goal became centered on bodhisattva practice: individuals do not pursue nirvana for themselves alone but work in a spirit of compassion for the liberation of all living beings from suffering and the cycle of transmigration. Many Buddhists pursue the bodhisattva way by working to build an ideal society based on Buddhist teachings and to combat various forms of social inequality and social ills, such as gender discrimination, human rights violations, and poverty.

One such person was the Indian politician and social reformer Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891–1956). Born into the lowest caste of Hindu society, the untouchables, he overcame a great many social obstacles to acquire a higher education, studying at famous universities in the United States and England and eventually becoming a lawyer. He advocated an anticaste movement to improve the human rights and the socio-economic condition of low-caste people.

Between 1927 and 1932, he and his supporters launched movements demanding the rights of untouchables to enter Hindu temples, from which they were excluded, and to use public wells and water tanks. He also established an institution called the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha to promote education and culture among the untouchables and to improve

their economic condition, and he started many periodicals, by these means giving a voice to the dissatisfaction felt by members of the oppressed classes. As India's first law minister and a key figure in the drafting of the Constitution of India, he aimed to improve the economic condition of members of the lower castes, working for the expansion of education among them and proposing job quotas for them in the civil service, public bodies, and schools and colleges.

On October 14, 1956, shortly before his death the following December, Ambedkar took part in a mass ceremony of conversion from Hinduism to Buddhism for around half a million lower-caste people as a way of eradicating the deep-rooted discrimination inherent in the caste system. This was the beginning of the movement to revive Buddhism in India, the so-called Neo-Buddhist movement. People like Ambedkar who converted to Buddhism and those who continue his ideals and reform movement are known as Neo-Buddhists.

Ambedkar, who had converted to Buddhism as a way to escape the traditional caste system, looked to the Buddha's teachings for a spirit of social revolution, as is clear in his *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, published in 1957. Here he displayed an understanding of Neo-Buddhism as very different from traditional Buddhism, denying fatalistic concepts like karma, transmigration, and rebirth—ideas that he considered underpinned the caste system and discrimination; questioning the role of the clergy; and regarding the Four Noble



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Truths as non-Buddhist. He proclaimed a rational interpretation of Buddhism, one that functioned as the ideology of social improvement and appealed to the intellect of modern people.

Perhaps the best-known movement for social betterment and development is the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement of Sri Lanka (<http://www.sarvodaya.org/>). It had its beginnings in 1958, when A. T. Ariyaratne, a high school teacher, took a group of students to a poor farming village to offer their labor, and it grew to become the largest grass-roots movement in Sri Lanka, active in a large number of villages. Today it runs programs in some fifteen thousand villages, concerning health, education, agriculture, welfare, local industry, and small-scale financing.

*Sarvodaya* means “the awakening of all,” and *shramadana* means “sharing labor.” The movement is one of social development through people offering their labor in a spirit of sharing. It is not concerned only with policies to relieve poverty and encourage growth in rural villages. By highlighting the ideal of awakening the individual, the village, and finally the nation, it also attaches great importance to religion and traditional culture and to spiritual and ethical values and looks to construct a society based on self-reliance. According to George D. Bond, the concept of *sarvodaya* derives from Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence and pacifism, which Ariyaratne has interpreted in Buddhist terms, introducing the ideas of *metta* (loving-kindness), *dāna* (giving,

sharing), and awakening (enlightenment) (*Buddhism at Work: Community Development, Social Empowerment, and the Sarvodaya Movement* [Kumarian Press, 2003], 126–33). Ariyaratne wrote:

Advocacy of the idea of Sarvodaya or the well-being of all necessarily follows that the Sarvodaya Movement has to accept Metta—Loving-Kindness—which is the opposite of violence. So non-violence becomes a cardinal principle of Sarvodaya. Does this mean that Sarvodaya accepts in principle unjust structural arrangements in the present day world which keep the vast majority of people in want and misery? When Lord Buddha rejected Tanha and showed it as the root cause of all suffering it was clear that he rejected the promotion of acquisitive instinct in man but encouraged Dana—Sharing and Beneficence—a means to realize egolessness and supreme happiness. Non-violence could be utilized as a very effective weapon more than violence to bring about lasting structural changes without demeaning the dignity and worth of the human being. What Sarvodaya is attempting to do is to apply the Buddhist principles in development action including an effort to eradicate social, economic and political evils and injustices that plague our societies. (“Sarvodaya in a Buddhist Society,” in *The Sri Lanka Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, ed. John Clifford Holt [Duke University Press, 2011], 377)

Joanna Macy, an American scholar of Buddhism and an activist who has studied the Sarvodaya movement, explains why it adopted the awakening of people as its motto. She wrote in her 1983 work, *Dharma and Development*, that a root problem standing in the way of the alleviation of poverty and of economic development is people’s unconsciousness and their sense of powerlessness. Advocates of the Sarvodaya movement have as their aim a cognitive revolution, a shift in the consciousness of people, based on their indigenous religious culture. A person so awakened can display a physical, intellectual, and spiritual potential through which eventually social reform can take place.

There are also Buddhist reform and social improvement movements in Thailand. These propose a return to the original form of Buddhism and aim at social improvement through a modern interpretation of Buddhism. A pioneer here was Buddhadasa Bhikkhu (1906–93). He criticized Thai Buddhism and the sangha for compromising with the monarchy, nationalism, capitalism, and superstition and advocated a rational explanation of Buddhism. Going back to the original Pali scriptures, he severely criticized traditional interpretations regarding transmigration, dependent origination, and merit. For example, he rejected the explanation that dependent origination arises over three connected lifetimes, the past, the present, and the future; rather, since it rises out of everyday events, it shows us how to bring about the cessation of suffering,



A Buddhist monk and lay believers take care of planting stock in a temple precinct. Photographed by the author in Cambodia in 2008.

he asserted, emphasizing the practice of religion in this life. He also regarded the Three Treasures (the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha) as obstructions to the attainment of nirvana. He criticized the centrality of the idea among laypeople that making offerings to monks accumulates merit and that karma is related to these allegedly merit-making activities. Asserting that it was possible for Theravada monks, who normally do not work, to work instead of only studying as they cultivated “the three ways of learning” (keeping the precepts, mastering meditation, and obtaining wisdom), he called on monks to engage with society (Kōji Nozu, “Puttatāto biku no shisō to shōgai” [The ideas and life of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu] in *Bukkyō, kaihotsu, NGO: Tai kaihotsu-sō ni manabu kyōsei no chie* [Buddhism, development, and NGOs: Wisdom for harmonious coexistence learned from development monks in Thailand], ed. Jun Nishikawa and Masato Noda [Shinhyōron, 2001], 85–107).

Buddhadasa also advocated the concept of “Dhammic socialism” (Thai, *Thammik sangkhomniyom*) as the ideal society of Buddhism, based on teachings including dependent origination, the repaying of kindness, and the Middle Way. His socialism emphasizes people’s spiritual development rather than the materialistic benefits that capitalism or

communism prioritize. It seeks the peace and prosperity of the whole society, not just the interests of particular people within it. This idea of a society based on Buddhadasa’s own interpretation of Buddhism provides an ethical foundation for social engagement by monks in both the cities and the countryside, as well as for social activities by Buddhist laypeople. It has exerted a great influence on Buddhist reform movements in Thailand (Christopher S. Queen and Sallie B. King, eds., *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* [State University of New York Press, 1996], 167–79).

There are many other examples of social reform movements by Buddhists, and their common feature is not only the material improvement and social advancement of the poor and victims of discrimination but also an emphasis on a shift in their consciousness, because human awakening is indispensable to social reform. The role of Buddhist thought in such movements is to stimulate such an awakening.

## Environmental Protection

As environmental issues have grown more serious, Buddhists are increasingly becoming involved in environmental protection movements. Theravada monks in Thailand and throughout Southeast Asia, for example, have been working to protect forests, based on Buddhist ideas of dependent origination and the wisdom of coexistence. They are called development monks (*phra nak phathanaa*) or ecology monks (*phra nak anuraksaa*).

In Thailand, monks traditionally do not engage at all in labor or profit-making economic activities but live supported by the almsgiving of laypeople. Since the 1980s, however, a new tendency for engaging in rural development or environmental protection movements can be discerned among them. Jun Nishikawa and Masato Noda, two

Japanese scholars who have conducted research into Thai development monks, see a reform of Buddhism and its doctrines in Thailand coming from within traditional Buddhist culture. Moreover, they have also found that there is a turning away from “economist” development paradigms toward a human-centered development policy advocated by the Buddhist monks as well as the intellectuals and NGOs allied with them. This policy is voluntary and autonomous and is based on the wisdom of coexistence and the unique traditional culture, that is, Buddhism in a Thai context (Nishikawa and Noda, *Bukkyō, kaihotsu, NGO*, 17). Thailand and other developing countries have introduced Western developmental models and encouraged economic growth, but development policies that overemphasize growth have resulted in the destruction of the environment through pollution and the cutting down of forests. The rural development and environmental protection movements of monks at the grassroots level are noteworthy as a voluntary and sustainable development model that contrasts with extrinsic development policies put in place from above.

Development, as conceived in the activities of the development monks, places great importance on both the material and the spiritual. The forest preservation movements and rural development work in which monks have taken the initiative do not aim simply to raise living standards and beautify the environment but also to encourage spiritual development and awakening through means such as meditation. They aim at rural development and self-reliance, at self-restraint in the face of excess materialism and consumerism, and at environmental protection based on spiritual awakening. Yoshihide Sakurai, who has studied social movements by monks in northeastern Thailand, an area that has produced large numbers of development monks, writes: “Development monks’ understanding about growth

and expansion is based on the development of a human being who has acquired the subjective yardstick taught by Buddhism and rejects the objective standard of wealth created by capitalism, so that farmers will have self-respect and a sense of well-being at the level of independent regeneration" (*Tōhoku Tai no kaihotsusō: Shūkyō to shakai kōken* [Development monks in northeastern Thailand: Religion and social contribution] [Azusa Shuppansha, 2008], 94 [translated from the Japanese]).

Development monks' social work is an application of the traditions of mutual assistance that exist within village communities to relieve poverty and promote self-reliance and focuses on setting up mutual aid associations, such as cooperatives, rice banks, and credit unions. The monks also engage in ecological conservation projects by cooperating with NGOs concerned with environmental protection. They work to protect forests, encourage the employment of natural farming methods and multiple cropping, and conduct "tree ordination" to prevent forests' being cut down. They are not, however, concerned solely with rural issues. They now actively tackle urban problems as well, in matters such as the care of AIDS sufferers; the promotion of ethical and moral education to combat the collapse of traditional values and the resulting moral deterioration; the establishment of educational projects and vocational training in the slums; the development of drug addiction programs; and the opening of meditation centers for spiritual care.

In Cambodia, the Buddhist sangha, which was devastated by the Pol Pot regime, has been revived in recent years. An important part of this revival has been the social engagement of monks through community development activities. Buddhist temples (*wats*) stand at the center of village society, and monks traditionally have an active social role. They teach in schools attached to the

temples and act as advisers to the farming community. They are involved, for example, in repairing roads and bridges, digging irrigation ponds, and protecting forests. This traditional social role of temples and monks has been restored along with Buddhism itself in the post-civil war era.

An example of a Buddhist-based development model in Cambodia is Buddhism for Development (BFD), whose founding director is Heng Monychenda, a former Buddhist priest. After the invasion of Cambodia by the Vietnamese army in 1979, Heng fled to a refugee camp inside Cambodia and there took ordination as a monk (he has now returned to lay life). Later he moved to a camp on the Cambodian-Thai border, where he opened a Buddhist school and directed the Khmer Buddhist Research Center. In 1990 he founded BFD in the camp as a local Buddhist-based NGO. He returned to Cambodia in 1993, after the end of the war, and conducted developmental activities, mainly in Battambang Province. BFD's vision is for "an educated, democratic society free from poverty and preventable illnesses, law abiding and respectful of human rights and the environment. A moral society with respect for Buddhism and Cambodian culture and traditions whilst being aware of the threats and opportunities presented by globalization."

According to Heng Monychenda, Buddhist development means sharing the Buddha's enlightenment and aiming to raise the living standards through compassion and wisdom. Understanding rural development and the preservation of Khmer culture to be the important ingredients in the rehabilitation of Cambodia, he emphasizes the key role of Buddhist monks. His development model accordingly uses monks in their position as community leaders as the core persons in local development. He has therefore thrown his energy into the training of monks, inviting young monks, people of religion, and representatives

of rural development bureaus from all over the country to seminars and workshops that he has organized. BFD conducts projects to combat poverty and raise living standards in rural villages by making loans available through, for example, rice banks, livestock banks, and microcredit; provides courses in health and hygiene; and addresses the problem of HIV. BFD also seeks to democratize Cambodian society by promoting participation in human rights education and local governance (according to an interview with Heng Monychenda at a BFD office in Wat Anlongvil in Battambang City, March 17, 2008).

Another prominent Cambodian development organization is the Santi Sena Organization, founded in 1994 to work for village restoration and development, centering on environmental protection. Its main activities, which are based on a philosophy of encouraging both physical and spiritual development, focus on afforestation, agricultural and village development, distribution of saplings, and education in environmental protection. Santi Sena has made common cause with environmental protection movements both within Cambodia and abroad, and they play a guiding role in the Association of Buddhists for the Environment, organized by monks and laypeople connected with various conservation groups (according to an interview with Santi Sena staff at Wat Prey Chlak in Svay Rieng Province, March 11, 2008).

Spiritual development underlies the economic development that Buddhists and development monks are working toward, in contrast to modern theories of economic development that ignore spiritual cultivation and growth. The Buddhist development model, which takes local participation and the preservation of nature into account, based on local religious traditions and social order, is receiving growing attention.

*To be continued*



# Islamic State and the Questions It Now Poses

by Yoshiaki Sanada

***Why have Islamic State and radical groups like it continued to engage in fierce armed combat despite strong criticism in the Islamic world of the non-Islamic nature of their military activity? How do Islamic militant groups and the religion of Islam interrelate, spiritually and politically?***

Just what is the organization known as Islamic State that is now exciting so much media interest? Are its members simply terrorists, or are they champions of an Islamic movement?

The true picture is hard to grasp from media reports alone. What was originally behind the emergence of Islamic State in the Middle East? Why have Islamic State and radical groups like it continued to engage in fierce armed combat despite strong criticism

in the Islamic world of the non-Islamic nature of their military activity? How do Islamic militant groups and the religion of Islam interrelate, spiritually and politically? And why the current upsurge in armed “terrorist” insurgents in the Islamic world? Fair, objective, and insightful information that is untainted by Orientalism and that would help us answer these questions seems to be either never or only very rarely reported.

## The Chaos of Postwar Iraq and Islamic State

It was in April 2013 that Islamic State’s predecessor, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (*al-daulatu al-’islamiya fi al-’iraqi wa al-sham*, known by the sobriquet “Da’ish”), emerged. The Islamic State of Iraq (*al-daulatu al-’iraqi al-’islamiya*), active in Iraq since 2006, adopted this name when it moved into Syria, and the name “Islamic State” (*al-daulatu al-’islamiya*) then began to be used following the announcement of the establishment of the caliphate at the end of June 2014.

Why then did Islamic State emerge in Iraq? In short, it was nothing less than a product of the United States’ invasion of Iraq.

On March 16, 2015, US president Barack Obama officially recognized the failure of the Iraq War when he acknowledged in an interview with Vice News that Islamic State is a “direct outgrowth of al-Qaeda in Iraq that grew out of our invasion, which is an example of unintended consequences” (as reported by Fox News and other media outlets). Such an admission comes infuriatingly late in the day, however, as just such an outcome had been predicted even before the outbreak of the war.

Following the commencement of hostilities, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt had told Egyptian soldiers in the city of Suez on March 31, 2003, “This war will have horrible consequences. Instead of having one [Osama] bin Laden, we will have 100 bin Ladens” (“Mubarak warns of ‘100 bin Ladens,’” CNN.com., April 1, 2003, <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/03/31/iraq.egypt.mubarak.reut/>). In fact, Mubarak’s prophecy was overly optimistic, and the situation engendered by the war turned out to be even more serious than he had imagined.

Organizations declaring their support for and allegiance to Islamic State have sprouted all over the world, including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen in the Middle East; Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Sudan, Algeria, and Nigeria in Africa; and Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Indonesia, and the Philippines in Asia.



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## Islamic State Rose from the Ashes of Iraq

In March 2003 the United States invaded Iraq, without the support of the UN Security Council, on the grounds that Iraq was developing and possessed weapons of mass destruction—despite the fact that this was later discovered to be a fabrication—and two months later the regime of Saddam Hussein fell.

Iraq is a complex state that is multi-ethnic, multiracial, and multireligious in makeup, and it was the autocratic dictatorship of Saddam Hussein that made it just governable. The regime's collapse also led to the dismantling of the Iraqi military and security apparatus, leaving more than half a million Iraqis unemployed.

With their exit from the stage after the war, the groups that had been oppressed by the Hussein regime—namely the Shias and the Kurds—extended their influence. However, in those regions with Sunni majorities, which had tended to be supporters of the former regime, uprisings repeatedly broke out. These were relentlessly suppressed by the US-led occupation forces, causing great suffering to the people of Iraq (including civilians) in the process.

The political turmoil created the conditions for a crucible of violence. The chaos that existed in the absence of a strong, unified political power laid the foundations that allowed new armed groups to run rampant, and thus emerged Islamic State.

## Factors Allowing Islamic State to Function as Quasi State

What made it possible for Islamic State to gain military control of a vast area stretching from Iraq to northern Syria, to create a quasi-state apparatus there, and to govern as a state? There are several reasons for this, although here we will consider only three of them.

First, Islamic State counted among its number technocrats with experience of government and administration under the pre-Iraq War regime, and former Iraqi officers who had seen action in the Iran-Iraq War, Gulf War, and Iraq War and were familiar with what had been some of the most modern military technology and hardware in the Arab world, and they have played a leading role in expanding Islamic State's influence.

Second, the states of today's Islamic world are artificial creations born of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonialism of the European powers. As these states were created with disregard for ethnic, religious, cultural, and traditional identities, people's national sense of belonging to these states was inevitably weakened.

And third, for this reason the Islamic community, or Ummah (*ummat al-Islamiyah*), became the ultimate ideological and behavioral rallying point defining the identity of believers in Islam, that is, Muslims. Whenever the Ummah itself is beset by a critical situation, Muslims will unite in solidarity,

regardless of nationality and ethnicity, to fight together in self-defense. Thus, whether they are motivated by money, by the need for employment, or by ideology, herein lies the real reason why there are Muslims in Western society as well as in the Islamic world who join Islamic State to fight on the front line.

## The Teachings of Islam and Islamic State

Islamic State is designated "Islamic," but does Islam really endorse the atrocities committed by Islamic State? Certainly not. Islam is a religion of peace whose concrete goal is to protect people's lives, persons, property, and honor.

In the Qur'an, it is written that God said, "Because of that We ordained for the

Children of Israel that if anyone killed a person not in retaliation of murder, or (and) to spread mischief in the land—it would be as if he killed all mankind, and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of all mankind” (Sura 5:32). Moreover, Islam prohibits Muslims from waging wars of aggression and permits only wars of self-defense: “And fight in the Way of Allah those who fight you, but transgress not the limits. Truly, Allah likes not the transgressors” (Sura 2:190).

Fighting an enemy in a war of self-defense to protect Islam and the Ummah is jihad. The Arabic word *jihād* is often translated as “holy war,” but this translation is tainted by Western Orientalism, and the term’s true meaning is to “strive hard in Allah’s Cause as you ought to strive” (Sura 22:78).

Rules of conduct to be followed by the Ummah and warriors engaging in jihad are established by the framework of Islamic international law for wartime, called *siyar*. Twelve centuries ago, the Islamic world already had international law to rank alongside present-day international humanitarian law, such as the Third Geneva Convention on the treatment of prisoners of war, signed in 1949. Under the *siyar*, the beheading of hostages, slaughter of enemy soldiers and hostile tribespeople, terrorist bombings targeting innocent civilians, and wars of Islamization are all unlawful and certainly not permitted under Islamic law.

Why then have acts of violent terrorism engulfed Iraq, Syria, and other parts of the Islamic world? On this point it is worth reflecting on the words of Jacques Attali, the first president of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, who observed that the word *terrorism* has often been used by the powerful to belittle national liberation movements.

Who in the Islamic world has been the aggressor and who the victim of aggression? Are there today any Islamic countries that have sent troops and used

armed force against Western countries? From the viewpoint of the ordinary Muslim, the US military and its allies have been nothing but aggressors. Accordingly, Muslims’ “terrorist acts” are simply jihad waged in self-defense to liberate territory and peoples from the United States and its allies.

In this sense, too, it must not be forgotten that at the bottom of terrorism in the Islamic world is the creation of the state of Israel and partitioning of Palestine, and in particular the acts of expulsion, terrorism, and massacre against Palestinian residents; the subsequent flouting of international law and UN decisions and the inhumane attacks on and massacres of Palestinians by Israel; the waning influence of Arab countries as a result of the repeated Arab-Israeli wars; and the double standards of Western countries’ foreign policies. The terrorism now sweeping the Islamic world is in a very real sense an outgrowth of the violence bred by the wars with Israel.

## Severing the Chain of Islamic State Violence

How then should we go about solving this problem? The challenges are legion and the solutions diverse, so here I would like to suggest just five starting points.

First, the prime concern should be with finding a political, peaceful solution based on direct dialogue between the parties concerned, without recourse to force and unaligned with the US-led “war on terror” waged by military means.

Second, a clear stand should be taken against Islamic State’s unique interpretation of Islam and its enforcement of compliance with this interpretation, through religious dialogue with fair and enlightened religious figures of authority in the Islamic world. This religious dialogue may on occasion be led by the United Nations and in some instances aided by leaders of the world religions engaging in similar dialogue and providing religious cooperation.

Third, humanitarian aid for refugees and victims of war must be delivered by appropriate international humanitarian aid agencies, such as the International Red Cross and Religions for Peace (also called the World Conference of Religions for Peace, an international nongovernmental organization that has engaged in conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and other peace-building activities through dialogue and cooperation among religions), without the involvement of “aggressor” states that have used military force.

Fourth, conflicts and confrontations within a country should be tackled by creating an environment that allows a democratic, independent solution respecting the country’s internal conditions and interests, led by its people.

And fifth, the most important concern should be with finding a permanent solution to the Palestinian problem. Moving from resolution through force to resolution through dialogue, efforts should be made to render effective an agreement between Israel and Palestine under UN leadership to suspend military action. □

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All excerpts from the Qur’an in this article are from Muhammad Taqi-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, trans., *The Noble Qur’an: The English Translation of the Meanings and Commentary* [King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qur’an, 1998].

# The Lotus Sutra: Time, Space, and Culture

by Adam Lyons

***This is a report on the 2015 International Lotus Sutra Seminar, sponsored by Rissho Kosei-kai and held May 28–June 1, 2015, at the National Women's Education Center of Japan in the town of Ranzan, Saitama Prefecture.***

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The annual International Lotus Sutra Seminar sponsored by Rissho Kosei-kai provides a forum of intellectual exchange for leading scholars from various fields to discuss a constellation of issues connected to the Lotus Sutra and its history, practice, and philosophy. This year's conference on the theme "The Lotus Sutra: Time, Space, and Culture" heard from specialists representing a variety of disciplines, including Japanese literature, Chinese religions, Buddhology, and modern Japanese religions and society. In what follows, this report briefly summarizes each presentation and ensuing conversation.

## **"Miracle Tales as Scripture Reception: A Case Study of Tales Involving the Lotus Sutra in China, ca. 370–720 CE"**

*Rob Campany, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN*

Dr. Rob Campany opened the first panel session with a nod to an overlap between Buddhist metaphysics and academic methodology: "I am interested in studying religion to see how things arise codependently." He went on to note that seeking to understand the "codependent

origination" of particular texts—in this case, sutras and miracle tales—does not mean simply addressing cultural context. Rather, Dr. Campany employed a theoretical model from communications theory to assert that these texts, or rather, genres, exist in relation to each other. Thus "there is an interlocking, rhetorical function between miracle tales and sutras, a dovetailing of rhetorical structures in these two genres." Miracle tales show the claims that sutras make in action in people's lives.

One important implication of Dr. Campany's work is that he offers an insightful answer to a vexing problem: Why do some texts "succeed" where others fail? Success here means being transmitted and bearing an influence. Scholars know that there were once thousands of sutra texts circulating in China. However, the overwhelming majority of these have been lost or forgotten (that is, they have failed). On the other hand, the Lotus Sutra has been passed down from generation to generation and has had a tremendous influence. It is therefore an example of a successful text. However, this success cannot be explained simply by the fact that Zhiyi (538–97) opted to give the Lotus Sutra pride of place in his systematization

of the Buddhist canon. What if Zhiyi was actually responding to the place of the Lotus in the broader culture? Then what factors may have contributed to its success?

Dr. Campany argues that the sacred authority of a text like the Lotus Sutra functions in a network with other texts and not in a vacuum. Miracle-tale texts therefore serve to bear witness to the claims for sacred authority made in the Lotus. In this sense, commentaries (both ancient and contemporary) can also be understood as texts functioning in the textual network that orbits the Lotus Sutra and contributes to its transmission, influence, and authority. Dr. Campany concluded: "I am arguing that the Lotus Sutra teaches very interesting and powerful ideas that come to life when people respond and interact with it, and the miracle tales are the textual record of such responses."

## **“The Influence of Modern Japanese Sectarian Taxonomies on Modern Chinese Buddhism”**

*Erik Schicketanz, University of Tokyo*

Dr. Erik Schicketanz presented a paper outlining his research on the interactions between Chinese and Japanese Buddhists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dr. Schicketanz noted that when Chinese Buddhist reformers tried to make sense of Chinese Buddhism, they employed a sectarian taxonomy originally developed by the thirteenth-century Japanese scholar-monk Gyōnen (1240–1321). Gyōnen’s taxonomy was an influential document in Japan at the time. It divided Japanese Buddhism into thirteen sects, or *shū*, and this schema became the textbook understanding of the history of Japanese Buddhism. In that sense, Gyōnen’s work has cast a long shadow on historical studies of Buddhism in Japan and beyond.

When Japanese missionaries traveled to China around the turn of the twentieth century, they used Gyōnen’s taxonomy to make value judgments about the state of Chinese Buddhism. The typical narrative was that “Chinese Buddhism is in a state of decline.” This story provided a rationale for Japanese Buddhist missionary activities in China. Thus, a discourse on “reviving sectarian movements in China” was developed by Japanese missionaries and their Chinese counterparts. Dr. Schicketanz argues that Japanese academic Buddhist studies exported influence onto the structures of modern sectarian Chinese Buddhism through Gyōnen’s taxonomy. Thus, we

can see that the history of East Asian Buddhism has been profoundly influenced by the dual processes of imperialism and historiography. Moreover, these processes are connected to the development of the concept of religion, or *shūkyō* (lit., sectarian doctrine), in East Asia.

## **“Thich Nhat Hanh and the Lotus Sutra”**

*Miriam Levering, Professor Emerita, University of Tennessee, Nashville, TN*

Dr. Miriam Levering discussed her research about the contemporary Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who has a wide audience throughout the world. It is common in recent popular Buddhist literature to refer to him as one of the founders of the mindfulness movement popular in the Western world. He is known for combining an emphasis on mindfulness with a commitment to social action.

Although some have criticized Thich Nhat Hanh’s Buddhist teaching as disconnected from the mainstream of Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism, Dr. Levering argues that the story is more complex: in recent years, Thich Nhat Hanh has in fact drawn on the Buddhist textual tradition. Dr. Levering explores some of the ways in which Thich Nhat Hanh has attempted to ground his teachings in Mahayana doctrine. Nhat Hanh has written commentaries on the Lotus Sutra. Since 2003, his sangha has also practiced an ordination rite that references Avalokitesvara, the bodhisattva of compassion (Jpn., Kannon), who appears in the Lotus Sutra. Thich Nhat Hanh interprets the Lotus Sutra in light

of two primary teachings: “everyone has the capacity to be a buddha, and the Buddha is present everywhere, all the time.” Dr. Levering’s study of Thich Nhat Hanh serves as a call for a reconsideration of the relationship between mindfulness movements and the other Buddhist traditions.

## **“Making Buddhism Personal: Yamada Etai and Tendai Practice in Contemporary Japan”**

*Stephen Covell, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo, MI*

Dr. Stephen Covell presented a paper on an important figure in twentieth-century Tendai Buddhism, Etai Yamada. Dr. Hiroshi M. Niwano, president of the Risho Kosei-kai Gakurin Seminary, noted the significance of the friendship between Risho Kosei-kai founder Nikkyō Niwano and Etai Yamada, the man who became the leader of Tendai. Their common interest is perhaps most closely evident in a shared desire to make religion personal and to share the teachings of the Buddha. Dr. Covell writes, “Yamada strove to plant the seeds of Buddhism and create religious sentiment in his audience. For Yamada, religion was fundamental to character development and the recovery of spiritual strength.” Of course, for Yamada, the call to develop religious sentiment was connected with a call to reform and revive temple Buddhism.

Dr. Covell extracted two main themes from Yamada’s body of work: the centrality of prayer and faith, and the importance of experiencing the divine, or numinous. It is important to note that these themes undergird Yamada’s vision of a possible future for temple Buddhism. He wanted to see Tendai imbued with the “new religion spirit” of personalized religion. Yamada hoped that temple Buddhism could change its moribund image and transform its focus from performing



funerals to providing consultation for the faithful about how to lead better lives. Thus, Yamada may have been a Tendai priest, but together with Nikkyo Niwano and others, he sought to bring Buddhism into the daily lives of ordinary people.

### **“Sōka Gakkai: Buddhism and Romantic Heroism in Modern Japan”**

*Levi McLaughlin, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC*

Dr. Levi McLaughlin presented a paper based on a chapter from his upcoming book about Sōka Gakkai. He began his presentation by noting that there is very little objective scholarship about this group and that neither writers working for Sōka Gakkai nor detractors of the group ask certain kinds of questions: Why, for example, would people want to join a group that has a negative public image? For scholars of religious movements, this question is particularly important—but it is not an easy one to answer.

In an effort to do so, Dr. McLaughlin employs an organizing metaphor: “Sōka Gakkai is a mimetic nation.” This heuristic provides a way to think about Sōka Gakkai’s organizational structure and its history. The group has a flag, anthems, territory, a security force, educational institutions, and its own sacred texts or canonical literature. Dr. McLaughlin argues that the serialized novel *Ningen kakumei* (The human revolution) played a central role in the expansion of the group. This work provides a version of orthodox history for members, but—as a serialized novel that includes scenes based upon real events and persons—it also provides a “participatory canon” for group members. Understanding how members think about this literature and why it appeals to them can help scholars to understand the growth of Sōka Gakkai. Moreover, the theoretical

framework and questions posed by Dr. McLaughlin can be applied to other movements as well.

### **“The Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging”**

*Hiroshi M. Munehiro Niwano, Rissho Kosei-kai Gakurin Seminary, Tokyo*

Dr. Hiroshi Niwano presented a paper about the theological significance of the Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging in Rissho Kosei-kai. The Bodhisattva Never-Disparaging (Jōfukyō Bosatsu) appears in the Lotus Sutra. This particular bodhisattva was regarded by Founder Nikkyo Niwano as an exemplary model for Buddhists to follow. Dr. Niwano asserted that the standard translation of the name Never-Disparaging actually conceals another translation possibility: “never to be disrespected.” Thus the bodhisattva who never disparages others is also himself never to be disrespected.

Dr. Niwano analyzed the chapter of the Lotus Sutra dealing with this bodhisattva according to narrative structure by dividing the chapter into introduction, development, reversal, and conclusion (*kishōtenketsu*). The narrative and theological analysis reveals that this bodhisattva’s deeds are presented in the sutra as exemplary, while those who disparage the bodhisattva are, in turn, cast in an unfavorable light.

Dr. Niwano concluded that it is his belief that members of Rissho Kosei-kai should continue to hold up this bodhisattva as a model of practice. He cited the practice of *gasshō*, or formally bowing to others with hands clasped, as a common daily practice that could serve as an occasion for reminding ourselves to respect others in the spirit of this bodhisattva. The bodhisattva practiced for many years, and although he was subjected to harsh criticism and even slander, he was never disrespectful toward others. Dr. Niwano’s conclusion: “I believe it is important for us

members of Rissho Kosei-kai to move forward with our simple Buddhist practice inspired by this Never-Disparaging Bodhisattva.”

### **“The Other Tendai: The Medieval History of the Jimon through the Lens of Shinra Myōjin”**

*Sujung Kim, DePauw University, Greencastle, IN*

Dr. Sujung Kim discussed her work on Shinra Myōjin, an amalgamated Shintō-Buddhist deity associated with the Jimon branch of Tendai. Although this deity is largely unknown today, the primary argument of Dr. Kim’s paper is that Shinra Myōjin was a much more important figure than has been thought. One significant feature of Shinra Myōjin is the deity’s “international” status. Dr. Kim invoked the notion of an “East Asian Mediterranean” to explain how this divinity associated with Korean immigrants eventually came to be transmitted by the Minamoto clan as they were rising to power.

In addition to the political history of Shinra Myōjin, Dr. Kim also noted the divinity’s appearance in literary works and its role in rituals. She noted that she first read about Shinra Myōjin in a thirteenth-century Tendai encyclopedia while studying in a graduate seminar with Professor Bernard Faure at Columbia University. However, the deity appears in various medieval texts, depicted as either a benevolent power or a malignant force. In ritual practice, the deity Shinra Myōjin was connected with rites at Onjōji, part of the Mount Hiei temple complex and a center of the Jimon lineage of Tendai. In connection with the ascension of Onjōji, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there were grand festivals for Shinra Myōjin held at the temple. This previously unknown aspect of medieval Tendai sheds new light on medieval Japanese Tendai.

## **“The Lotus Sutra in the Liturgies and Teachings of Sukawa Kōgen, Dissident of Early Meiji Sōtō”**

*Dominick Scarangelo, International Advisor, Rissho Kosei-kai, Tokyo*

Dr. Dominick Scarangelo presented a paper about the Sōtō Zen monk Sukawa Kōgen’s lay proselytization efforts in the 1870s. During that period, the government was establishing a Shintō character for itself, and thus Buddhism was undergoing a period of persecution. The Buddhist sects were struggling to find a place in the new order that was emerging in the wake of the Meiji Restoration, and part of that struggle was developing a doctrine that could appeal to laypersons. Kōgen’s story is a part of this larger story. Dr. Scarangelo writes that “Kōgen developed a set of ritual practices and doctrines for laypersons he associated with the benefits of faith in the teaching of the eternal Buddha in the second half, or ‘original gate’ (*honmon*), of the *Lotus Sutra*.” Thus Kōgen, a Sōtō monk, worked to create a lay form of Sōtō Buddhist religion. However, the sect itself opted to move in a different direction: “Within Sōtō, Kōgen is remembered, even dismissed, as one of the advocates of a heterodox ‘Śakyamuni *nenbutsu*.’” Dr. Scarangelo’s paper turns scholarly attention to the religious path developed for laypersons by Kōgen.

Ultimately, the Sōtō sect opted to promote a vision of “spiritual solace” for laypeople as expressed in the sectarian creed of *shushōgi* (adopted in 1890), rejecting Kōgen’s proposals for a Lotus Sutra–based soteriology. In this sense, Kōgen’s spiritual vision may have been a failure. However, his dream of encouraging lay devotion and engagement through the provision of a comprehensive soteriological doctrine is in many ways representative of the religious atmosphere of his time. Moreover, Kōgen’s vision of an alternative Sōtō

Zen is further evidence that even within individual sects, religions are not static and monolithic entities—they are full of internal diversity.

## **“Joining the Ranks of Bodhisattvas: A Visual Narrative of the Lotus Sutra Caves at the Medieval Dunhuang Caves”**

*Fan Lin, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada*

Dr. Fan Lin presented a paper detailing the art found in several cave-temple complexes in China, including a particularly notable cave temple created between 781 and 847 that forms part of the famous Dunhuang complex. Dr. Fan’s paper is a study of the pictorial relationship between the Lotus Sūtra, the Vimalakīrtinirdeśa Sūtra, and the Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra. These sutras are represented in various forms in the paintings found on the walls of cave-temple complexes, but there is much disagreement among scholars as to how they should be interpreted.

Dr. Fan began her presentation with several guiding questions: “What is the relationship between text and image? Why do the cave paintings take the forms that they do? Are the paintings just visual aids to the texts and sutras?” She then offered a set of common features to be considered: “First, there are certainly intentions behind the art production—and not merely on the part of the artists. We must consider the patrons. Second, there are also styles, stylistic features, that can influence the form of a cave painting. And then there are political factors we must consider. In the case of Dunhuang, it was controlled first by the Tang, then the Tibetans, then the local people.” All of these factors may influence the forms of the Lotus, Nirvana, and Vimalakīrti sutras as they are expressed in cave temple wall paintings.

## **“Why Don’t We Translate Spells in Our Scriptures? Chinese Exegesis on the Untranslatable *Dharani* of the Lotus Scripture”**

*Ryan Overbey, University of California, Berkeley, CA*

Dr. Ryan Overbey discussed the difficulties of translating *dharani* (spells). His paper compares early Chinese translations of the Lotus Sutra *dharani* written by Dharmarakṣa (whose translation approximated the meanings of the original) and Kumārajīva (who transliterated phonemes). Both of these approaches imply theological perspectives, and Dr. Overbey’s work traced the commentarial tradition to unearth what these perspectives may have been. One important implication of Dr. Overbey’s work is that the problems faced by Dharmarakṣa and Kumārajīva are in many ways the same as those faced by contemporary translators. Should the spells be translated or not, and why?

Dr. Overbey began his presentation by noting that his interest in *dharani* is connected to his biography. He was raised in a Christian church in which glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, was practiced. This connection, he said, was in the back of his mind when he began to study *dharani*. He then provided a brief overview of scholarship on *dharani*. Dr. Overbey pointed out that early Buddhist-studies scholars and translators like Eugène Burnouf and Max Müller looked down on the *dharani* chapter of the Lotus Sutra. They cared more for “rational philosophical systems” than this “magic.” However, later scholars like Étienne Lamotte emphasized that *dharani* could serve as mnemonic devices to help people memorize scriptures. Thus, Lamotte brought forth the idea that *dharani* allowed people to preserve and condense doctrine—they were not merely magic. So the idea developed that *dharani* are intellectual practices, not merely “debased” popular practices.

In the 1980s and the 1990s, scholars of religion like the Buddhologist Gregory Schopen argued for the significance of lived religion or religion on the ground. This new direction in Buddhist studies was informed by a recognition on the part of scholars that an excessive focus on textual or philosophical traditions was in part the result of a Protestant bias in religious studies. (Protestant Christian traditions favor the written word over the rituals that play a central role in Catholic Christianity.) Thus, the picture of Buddhism that emerged from an exclusive focus on the intellectual or textual tradition reflected the values of Protestant Christianity. This “Protestant Buddhism” came to be seen as a distortion: ritual life has always been central to the practice of the overwhelming majority of Buddhists throughout history, but scholars hadn’t paid enough attention to it. Schopen and others attempted to correct this oversight by studying lived religion. This scholarship carries a Marxist flavor in that it attempts to study the practices of people other than the elites, the nondiscursive practices of the masses. Dr. Overbey places himself between this “lived religion” camp and Étienne Lamotte’s philosophical bent. His approach is an attempt to understand *dharani* as both lived religion practiced at the popular level and a practice woven into a feedback loop with exegetical and theological ideas. One advantage of this approach is that it avoids drawing a distinction between the elite and the popular tradition, therefore offering the opportunity for a more comprehensive understanding of what *dharani* are and how they work.

### “Saving Women in Kamakura Buddhism”

Mark Blum, *University of California, Berkeley, CA*

Dr. Mark Blum presented a paper about attempts to rethink the role of women in Buddhism. It is typical for

typologies of Japanese Buddhist history to speak of the Kamakura period (1185–1333) as a sea change: Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen, Nichiren, and other leaders emerged whose legacies forever changed the Buddhist world. It has been argued that one common characteristic of these thinkers can be found in their attempt to create a new universal appeal without restriction to class or gender. Professor Blum argues that if this thesis is true, then the place of women is at the core of what makes Kamakura Buddhism take the form that it does: “[Kamakura-period Buddhist leaders’] attempts to include women in their own salvific schema may be read as attempts to redefine the core of their very religious identities.”

Dr. Blum’s paper focuses specifically on the enlightenment of women as presented in the writings of Nichiren, Hōnen, Shinran, and Dōgen. Hōnen was the first Japanese to write original soteriological treatises that were not commentaries on Chinese texts. Hōnen and these other figures all allow for the possibility of the enlightenment of women in some capacity or other. Thus, one key common characteristic of these Kamakura-period Buddhist reformers can be seen in the fact that they approach problems of gender. It may be fair to say that all of these clerics were trying to find ways beyond the closed misogyny of male-only temple complexes.

### “Who Miyazawa Kenji Saved by Proselytizing the Lotus Sutra through Letters to a Friend”

Jon Holt, *Portland State University, Portland, OR*

Dr. Jon Holt discussed the celebrated writer Kenji Miyazawa (1896–1933) and his relationship with his friend Kanai Hosaka as it appears in their letters. Miyazawa attempted to convert his friend—who was a nihilist—to

Miyazawa’s own Nichiren Buddhist faith. These letters reveal aspects of Miyazawa’s religious beliefs and a side to his personal life that would remain otherwise unknown. Dr. Holt notes that Miyazawa himself wrote that he considered his works to be part of a larger “Lotus [Sūtra] Literature” (*Hokke bungaku*). Therefore, the study of Miyazawa’s letters in the context of his corpus can help us to bridge the gap between religion and literature. Professor Holt hopes that this bridge will “provide a way to understand how religion shapes literary expression and, vice versa, how literary expression aids in the development of one’s faith.”

Dr. Holt argues that if we take these letters seriously, then we can see that Miyazawa’s relationship with Kanai Hosaka had a tremendous influence on Miyazawa’s written works. For example, Miyazawa appears to have recreated his relationship with Hosaka in the characters of Giovanni and Campanella in his most famous work, *Night on the Milky Way Railway*. Moreover, in *Night on the Milky Way Railway* and other works, Miyazawa was proselytizing faith in the Lotus Sutra just as he did in his letters to Hosaka. Professor Holt’s research opens new directions in the study of both Nichiren Buddhist literature and “epistolary conversion.”

## Concluding Remarks

As should be clear from the summaries of the papers outlined above, the 2015 International Lotus Sutra Seminar, sponsored by Rissho Kosei-kai, was a great success. All of the scholars involved expressed their gratitude at having been invited by their generous hosts, and they also voiced their admiration of the high-quality work of their colleagues. It is to be hoped that this annual seminar series will continue in the future, providing opportunities to build bridges between Rissho Kosei-kai and the academic community and between scholars from Japan and the West. □

# Twists and Turns on the Path to Peace

by Nikkyo Niwano

*In March 1999 an autobiography by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), the founder of Rissho Koseikai, was published in Japanese under the title Kono michi: Ichibutsujo no sekai o mezashite (The path that we have walked: Aspiring to the world of the One Buddha Vehicle). The book is a lively account of the life of Founder Niwano as a leader of an international lay Buddhist association and a pioneer of interreligious cooperation who dedicated himself to liberating all people from suffering with firm faith in the Lotus Sutra. Dharma World will continue to publish excerpts from the book in installments.*

The encounters I had at the first assembly of the World Conference of Religions for Peace in Kyoto with people of religion from all over the world made a profound impression on me, and I resolved that the conference should not fizzle out like a spent firework, since its continuity would make it one of the most important movements for peace.

I shared the idea, which had been forged among the like-minded people who brought about the Kyoto conference, that we must not delude ourselves into thinking that just because it had been a

success, the bell of peace would immediately toll throughout the world. The conference was only one step toward peace. But as religious leaders continued to meet time and time again and exchange ideas and experiences, surely strong ties would be forged among them and then among millions of their followers. Peace could be achieved only by many such small steps.

This thinking, springing from the Kyoto conference, led to the establishment of Religions for Peace, an organization that aims to promote peace

movements through interreligious cooperation. An international committee and an international secretariat were set up, made up of officers from the major nations, along with regional and national committees.

When the Japanese committee of Religions for Peace was inaugurated, I was appointed its first chairman. The first event I was involved with in this capacity was the Inter-Religious Consultation on Japanese-American Relations, which took place in Hawaii in June 1972 at a hotel in Honolulu, with fourteen representatives from Japan and twenty from the United States.

At that time, Japan's extraordinary economic recovery had resulted in a steady increase of exports to the United States, and trade friction between the two countries was rising. There was strong resentment there, expressed when a senior American official publicly declared, "The aggressive import of Japanese textiles is plunging the American textile industry into near crisis. Furthermore, the Japanese have gained a big market share of products like radios, motorbikes, cameras, and desktop calculators in the United States,



*Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, was an honorary president of Religions for Peace and honorary chairman of Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan) at the time of his death in October 1999. He was awarded the 1979 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.*

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and Japan's government and industry have seemed to be working together to wage economic war on America." The climate was hostile.

Because the Japanese and American participants in the consultation were concerned about the situation, they felt that the influence of people of religion was needed to prevent a crisis.

In my opening address I first offered words of contrition, as a Japanese person of faith. "Thirty-one years ago, an appalling war broke out at this very place between Japan and America. And today we are told that our two countries are again facing a crisis in their relations. However, I do not agree. We Japanese cannot hear the words engraved on the hearts of all Americans, 'Remember Pearl Harbor,' without feeling pain in our own hearts. I express my deep regret and sorrow. However, we who are now assembled here at the same place are like-minded in praying sincerely that we may bring about peace, not war. In the event that some unhappy situation should arise between our two countries, I venture to use the very words 'Remember Pearl Harbor' in the sense that we who are gathered here today seeking peace should not forget that day."

When I had finished, Dr. Dana McLean Greeley, the chairman of the American committee, rose and said, "Rev. Niwano's words have struck me deeply. As American persons of religion, we must also repent with all our heart the crime of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A Japanese

Buddhist once said to me: 'If we had known you thirty years ago, we could not have bombed Pearl Harbor, and if you had known us thirty years ago, you could not have rained that horrendous destruction down on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.'"

How great are the misconceptions that grow out of a sense of being victimized, when that sense arises from a lack of understanding of what is actually going on in each other's countries. It is very dangerous when all the people in both countries are swept along by emotional rhetoric based on misconceptions. This kind of danger is not confined only to relations between Japan and the United States.

It is not just a matter of economics. Most conflicts throughout the world are based on emotions fueled by mutual lack of understanding and misunderstanding. It is the task of people of religion to dispel such misunderstanding and seek paths to mutual understanding.

There are many kinds of peace. For example, there are peace-building efforts such as the peacekeeping activities of a NATO-led multinational peacekeeping force deployed in the war-torn regions of Bosnia, and the American initiatives to resolve the conflict between Israel and Palestine. So, too, is development assistance intended to build a world where people can live in a truly human way. In the broad range of these activities, the

providing what international diplomacy cannot.

## A Bitter Journey

One question that I was often asked by many people as I was traveling around seeking support for a world conference of religious leaders was, “Even if people of religion organize a world conference, aren’t they helpless in the face of military might?” Similarly, some religious leaders involved in the activities of Religions for Peace thought people of faith who believe in nonviolence hardly have any power to prevent war. They contended that countries without military power are at the mercy of the countries that have it, and that global justice would be destroyed without military power.

This is not just a conflict in some people’s minds. It is a hard fact of the world that it is difficult to break free of that illusion, so people just revolve the question in their minds. Surely the United Nations is the one international organization that can grapple with this difficult problem.

Religions for Peace made its first direct approach to the UN in February 1971, a year after the Kyoto conference, when it presented the UN with the conference’s proceedings—the decisions, the declaration, and the reports from the various workshops. That autumn Religions for Peace sent observers to the twenty-sixth UN General Assembly.

I also visited UN Headquarters that November when I was in New York attending the preparatory meetings of the executive committee of Religions for Peace for the second World Assembly. I met Adam Malik, president of the UN General Assembly, and told him about the activities of Religions for Peace and asked for his cooperation.

This trip was to last two weeks, but it became a bitter journey I would never forget. I left Japan on October 27, and a large group of people came to Haneda Airport in Tokyo to see me off. Just

before I was going to board the plane, the general manager of Kosei General Hospital came up to me, his face serious. So that the people around could not hear, he whispered in my ear, “Mr. Izumita has passed away.” I caught my breath. He said, “It just happened, about ten minutes ago. Doctors from Kosei General Hospital rushed to his side. They did what they could but it was too late.”

Takao Izumita was the husband of my third daughter, Yoshiko. Just two days previously, members of my children’s families had come to my house for a small party to celebrate my wife’s birthday and to wish me a good trip. Takao had been in good spirits and poured sake for us all. However, the following day he collapsed during a business trip, and I was told about it that evening. He was admitted to a local hospital, and there was concern for his condition. Now he had passed away, just a few minutes ago. He had died of a heart attack.

I nodded silently to the general manager of Kosei General Hospital, who was biting his lip. Just then the boarding call came for my flight and I rose to my feet. None of those who had come to see me off knew anything as yet. I said my good-byes, waved, and boarded the plane.

Yoshiko had three young sons, one nine, one eight, and one born just that year. The sudden, undreamed-of death of her husband, in the prime of his working life, had to have left her crushed with grief. I could see her sorrowful face in my mind’s eye.

Twenty-seven years before, when my wife and children were sent to my birthplace in Suganuma, Niigata Prefecture, Yoshiko was in the third grade. It was only natural that our family’s ten-year separation should have raised doubts in her mind. These doubts, and the hurt the separation had brought her, made her distrust me.

As I have said often, my training for Rissho Kosei-kai at that time, which required me to send my wife and children away to the countryside, was extremely

problems that interreligious cooperation has to deal with are truly piling up.

The time has passed when peace simply means no war. Wars today kill many more noncombatants than combatants. Many are killed by brute force, in bombardments, for example, but many others are victims of unseen violence, such as poverty or famine. According to a report issued in the 1990s by Professor Kuniko Inoguchi of Sophia University in Tokyo, wells could be dug in three hundred thousand places throughout the Third World, providing local people with safe drinking water, for the cost of just two bombers, and the cost of one underground nuclear test would pay for the training of four hundred thousand community health workers, so vital in the Third World.

U Thant, a former UN secretary-general, spoke of loyalty to nation-states and to humanity itself. Another important aspect of the peace movement should therefore be creating an international code that seeks to reconcile love of country with love of humanity. NGO activities in particular will certainly grow increasingly important,

severe. When it comes to following the words of the deities faithfully, there can be absolutely no compromise. I had to live apart from my family, and their return to Tokyo was not readily allowed because we were following divine messages conveyed through Myoko Sensei [Myoko Naganuma, cofounder of Rissho Kosei-kai].

My first three children were girls, and they were followed by three boys. At that time, the two eldest children were of an age to more or less understand how things were, but I was most worried about how the other children, in particular my three sons, would take it. It was only natural that the boys, seeing their mother working in the fields in Suganuma, her skin burned by the sun, would take her side, and inevitable that they should have felt antipathy toward me. My second daughter, Kyoko (who has now passed away), once came to me and said, "Father, you will lose the boys if you continue the way you are going." There were no words other than hers that pierced me so deeply. These words, which might be called her will, forced me to change my attitude to my children. Up until then, I had put my mission before everything else, leaving no room to consider their feelings. I said to myself, "This is not right. It's important that we should all get along with one another." So I changed my mind.

The world contains many types of people, and my children taught me that I could not insist on my own opinions and that nothing could be done unless I took into account the views of others to a large extent.

When Takao, carrying his son on his back, was leaving the small family party just two days before my departure for the United States, he courteously wished me a safe journey. I smiled and nodded in response. But those words were our final exchange in this life. I could still see his face before me as he said farewell. I wanted to be by my daughter's side above all now, offering her

comfort and support. However, I had been entrusted with an important mission, so I sat up straight in my seat on the plane, closed my eyes, and recited the sutra, praying for Takao's repose.

Early the following morning, alone in my hotel room in San Francisco, I read excerpts from the Lotus Sutra and four whole chapters, the twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-fifth, and twenty-eighth. I had woken during the night and could not get back to sleep. I got up and sat until dawn, as a wake for Takao. I happened to be carrying in my luggage a book by Professor Daigaku Hanaoka called *Jinsei no hanataba* (A bouquet of life). One passage speaks about Ejo (1198–1280), the second head priest of the Zen temple Eihei-ji, in Fukui Prefecture. When he had been training under Zen master Dogen (1200–1253), the founder of the Soto Zen school of Japanese Buddhism, he learned that his mother had fallen gravely ill. However, according to temple regulations, he could not return home. His fellow novices urged him to get special permission to return, since it would be unfilial of him not to be with his mother when she was on her deathbed. He flatly refused. "If I went against the Buddha's teachings out of love for my mother, even though as a priest I have to lead her to the Buddha Way, it would be even more unfilial of me." So saying, he continued with his training.

When I read this, I felt that the Buddha was showing me how I should act in my situation, and I resolved to do my duty. Even though I could not

even offer a flower in Takao's memory, I felt I had been able to hold a wake for him in my own way. I wrote my feelings at this time in a letter to Yoshiko.

The entry in my diary for October 27 was very short. It reads: "Fine weather. All things occur because of causes and conditions, but I don't know how to express my grief and sympathy to Yoshiko, or what words to use. Truly this emphasizes the Buddhist teaching that everything is transient and constantly changing."

Of course, I am not the only one who has had to carry out an assigned responsibility, keeping such sadness within me. Rissho Kosei-kai is what it is today because all of its leading members have sacrificed their home lives and affection for their families to devote themselves to the Buddhist teachings.

I believe Takao Izumita would have rejoiced if I accomplish the task entrusted to me.

*To be continued*



# The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

## Chapter 25

### The All-Sidedness of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World (2)

*This is the 123rd installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.*

**TEXT** At that time the Bodhisattva Infinite Thought rose up from his seat, and wholeheartedly baring his right shoulder and folding his hands toward the Buddha, spoke thus: “World-honored One! For what reason is the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara named Regarder of the Cries of the World?”

**COMMENTARY** *Baring his right shoulder.* Baring the right shoulder has long been an Indian custom. Because the right arm is usually the more dexterous, baring it shows obedience and a desire to be of service. This is why Indians often greet worthy people by baring the right shoulder.

Moreover, “right” symbolizes wisdom. One can recognize this in the images of Shakyamuni flanked on the right by Manjushri Bodhisattva, representing wisdom, and on the left by the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, representing the truth, practice, and meditation (*dhyana*).

Before meditating on the Buddha and hearing the preaching of the Dharma or asking to be taught, we must summon up and apply all our wisdom. One ought to take that kind of attitude toward the Buddha as well as one’s teachers, and that is the origin of the custom of baring the right shoulder as a mark of great courtesy.

It is still an Indian custom, and even on ordinary occasions, men in white robes and women in saris bare the right shoulder.

**TEXT** The Buddha answered the Bodhisattva Infinite Thought: “Good son! If there be countless hundred thousand myriad kotis of living beings suffering from pain and distress who hear of this Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, and with all their mind call upon his name, the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World will instantly regard their cries, and all of them will be delivered.



**COMMENTARY** *Regard their cries.* In the Japanese names for Avalokiteshvara, which are Kanzeon and Kannon, the character for *kan* means “intently observe” or “clearly discern.” As I have noted before, the characters for *zeon* refer to sounds of the world, of which the cries of human beings are the most important.

People not only cry out audibly, but silently in their hearts. Their internal sufferings and fervent wishes are also the cries of the world.

The Bodhisattva Kanzeon is so named because he is capable of “beholding” the cries of people, whether they express suffering or desires, and he delivers them from suffering and leads them to fulfillment of their wishes in ways best suited to each individual.

This kind of attention is an absolutely indispensable requirement for those who are in a position to teach and guide others.

To bring up their children right, parents must always watch over their children’s health and states of mind, as if they had entered their minds and bodies.

When parents sense the silent cries of their children and notice that a child lacks some nutrient, is suffering for some reason, or seeking something, the parents respond appropriately. They prepare balanced meals and give good advice. Parents must bring up their children in ways that are best for their health and inclinations. Parents worthy of the name have to do their best for the happiness of their children, even at the expense of themselves. This is the spirit of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World. This may seem very difficult, but parents completely devoted to their children do this naturally.

When her baby cries, a truly concerned mother will immediately wonder why. The mother truly “regards the cries” of her baby concerning hunger, wet diapers, physical pain, or whatever else. She then promptly takes appropriate measures. In doing so, the mother is a true manifestation of the spirit of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World.

In the workplace, supervisors must discern each worker’s character—his or her good points, bad points, abilities, dissatisfactions, worries, hopes, and ambitions. They must guide and manage each employee in the way best suited to that person. If supervisors take full account of their workers, they can lead them, encourage them to work well, and cultivate their abilities. Supervisors can then ensure that the work they are responsible for is done efficiently.

The need for such a spirit and ability is becoming even greater among company executives, teachers responsible for the education of many students, civil servants in charge of government administration, legislators, and government ministers. All leaders must emulate the Bodhisattva Regarder

of the Cries of the World through accurate insight, flexible leadership making the most of that insight, and compassion great enough to be willing to make any self-sacrifice for many other suffering people.

As practitioners of the Lotus Sutra, we disseminate the Buddha’s teachings worldwide to guide all people in perfecting themselves and their communities. In the spirit of great benevolence and compassion shown by that bodhisattva, we must clearly discern the worries, sufferings, and desires in the minds of those around us. If we can lead these people flexibly with the tactful means best suited to each, we may effectively carry out our bodhisattva practice.

**TEXT** If there be any who keep the name of that Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, though they fall into a great fire, the fire will not be able to burn them, by virtue of the supernatural power of that bodhisattva’s majesty. If any, carried away by a flood, call upon his name, they will immediately reach the shallows.

**COMMENTARY** *Keep the name of that Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World.* There is deep significance in keeping this name in mind, because it is a manifestation of the entity itself. Therefore, to keep his name devoutly in mind is to become one with his entity. By banishing stray thoughts, and keeping one’s mind only on that bodhisattva, one can embody his boundless wisdom, benevolence, and compassion.

**Misfortune of fire.** It is said that even if one enters a fire in that state of mind, one will not be consumed. I myself have had such an experience.

When I was sixteen I went to Tokyo and became a live-in errand boy for a retail rice shop called Isetoyo near Hatchobori in central Tokyo. I started work on August 28, 1923. Little did I know that a mere four days later the fateful Great Kanto Earthquake would occur, on September 1.

The early hours of that morning felt hot, leaden, and somehow ominous. I recall that it was 11:58 when the shopkeeper turned to us and said, “Let’s break for lunch.” Then the whole earth groaned.

The building trembled; dust from the crumbling clay of the walls billowed everywhere. Things fell from shelves, and bales of rice began rolling about. Without thinking, I dashed outdoors to see tiles tumbling from the roof and the shop sign falling over me. I was certain that the world was coming to an end.

When the initial tremors subsided, I dashed into the street, where the streetcar used to run. People from all the houses around headed for the same street. But the streetcar sat derailed across the road. Dangerous electrical cables dangled overhead. Before long, it seemed that a fire broke out

in nearby Kakigara-cho. Black smoke rose in great clouds. I looked around and I found fires breaking out here and there. From all directions, I could hear the people shouting, "Fire! Fire!" and everyone was thrown into panic, screaming. I must have made part of the din. After all, I was only a country hick come to the big city four days earlier. For a while, I was at a loss to know what to think or do. Then I remembered something my father had told me just before I left home: "In Tokyo, they are always having fires and big earthquakes. If you act surprised and shocked when these things happen, people will laugh and call you a country bumpkin. Just drink some water and calm down."

After returning to the shop, I went to the sink, drank several deep gulps of cold water, and pulled myself together. "I've got to do something fast! This place is going to burn down too!"

Then I ran into the street, where I found the shopkeeper wandering about aimlessly. "Come on. We've got to get out of here!" I urged as I pulled him by the arm. I began loading whatever valuable possessions I could find onto two big carts. I wanted the other workers to help me, but they were out on business.

But as the shopkeeper and I were tying things down on the carts, they came back one by one. When we were all together, I started pulling one of the big carts. The streets were already jammed with other people, all frantically trying to get away. We decided to go to the open compound of the large temple Tsukiji Hongwanji. Of course, not knowing the way, I could only pull and follow the shopkeeper's directions. When we arrived near the temple, we saw billows of sooty smoke, brightened by crimson tongues of flame, rising from the great roof. "This is no good! Too dangerous! We'll have to go somewhere else." We turned back. I had absolutely no idea what route we took after that, pulling the carts behind us. All I knew was that the roads were thronged with people evacuating and pulling carts of their possessions. I was later told, "If we had taken much longer, we probably would not have escaped." At any rate, we finally came to rest in the plaza in front of the Nijubashi Bridge at the Imperial Palace, in the center of the city. I was deeply touched by my first sight of the palace, especially since it was so unexpected, and in such extraordinary circumstances.

As the sun set, an unbroken stream of refugees flowed into the plaza. Before long the huge space was packed with people and their luggage. All around the open park roared a sea of flames that dyed the sky scarlet. Fear aroused by rumors of tsunamis, which would come or had come, kept all of us awake that night. On the following day, the rice shop's senior employees went to Hatchobori and returned with the report that the Isetoyo rice shop had burned to the ground. Nevertheless, amidst all the clamor and confusion,

my father's advice to me had produced impressive results. I cannot assert that my quick recovery of my composure and beginning of preparations for evacuation were solely responsible for saving both myself and my employer and his family. Yet, considering that as time passed the roads became completely jammed and that flames were rising in every direction, there is no doubt. I do not say this out of self-praise, but my composure was the major contributing factor in our successful evacuation.

From this point of view, my father's advice just to drink some water and calm down was truly the voice of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World. His guidance was based on that bodhisattva's wisdom and compassion. Thanks to this, despite being encircled by a great conflagration, we were not consumed by it.

I did not embrace any particular religious faith at that time, but since childhood I had always listened obediently to my schoolteachers and my grandparents. It may sound strange for me to say that ever since the principal of my school told us, "Place your palms together in prayer before the gods and buddhas," I had always prayed at my family's Shinto and Buddhist altars, at Suwa Shrine (a tutelary shrine along our road to school), and before the statues of Koyasu Kannon (the guardian Kannon for safe and easy childbirth) and of Jizo (Kshitigarbha Bodhisattva) along the roadside or in front of stones engraved with the name of Dainichi Nyorai ("Great Sun," the Tathagata Mahavairocana) placed for protection in areas of frequent avalanches.

It is probably because of that feeling of mine, responding to the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World in my father's mind, that in the confusion of that great disaster I clearly recalled my father's advice.

The verse "Though they fall into a great fire, the fire will not be able to burn them" moves me deeply, and I believe it to be absolutely true.

**The fire of defilements.** When we speak of fire, we do not mean only actual flames that burn and destroy. There is also the fire of defilements. Of course, as a teaching, this is far more important than real fire. The Buddha often compared human defilements to fire. His first mention of it is in the well-known "Burning" sermon in the Samyukta Agama (Connected Discourses).

You are probably acquainted with the story of Shakyamuni's first journey of his teaching ministry after his enlightenment, from Deer Park in Benares to the ancient kingdom of Magadha, in central India. The story tells of Shakyamuni's teaching the three Kashyapa brothers, who worshipped the god of fire, and their thousand disciples at Uruvilva.

On his way to Rajagriha, the capital of Magadha, with his

new disciples, Shakyamuni climbed with them to the top of Mount Gaya. As he looked over the vast plain, he preached to them: “Bhikshus, everything is burning. Everything is burning fiercely. Before all else, you must understand this.”

This unexpected sermon must have astonished those who believed in the worship of fire until a little while ago. The adroitness of the Buddha’s sermon best suited to each person’s capacity and situation is apparent.

“Bhikshus, what does it mean to say that everything is burning? Bhikshus, are not the eyes of human beings burning? Do they not burn when they see something? Are not the ears of human beings burning? Are not the noses of human beings on fire? Is not the tongue on fire? Is not the skin on fire? Are not the minds of human beings on fire? Bhikshus, what is it that causes them to burn? They are burning with none other than the flames of greed, anger, and foolishness.”

It is hardly necessary to point out that one of the essential elements in the framework of Buddhism is this tenet that true peace of mind comes from extinguishing the flames of those defilements.

This concept of Shakyamuni is frequently mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, specifically in chapter 3, “A Parable,” where he preaches that the real world is enveloped in the flames of defilement, but people are unaware of this because they seek gratification of the five desires. The teaching of chapter 3 shows the skillful means by which the Buddha’s compassion saves people from this great fire.

Hence, here “great fire” means the causes of human suffering, that is, human defilements. “Though they fall into a great fire, the fire will not be able to burn them” means that even though life is full of defilements, they will not consume us if we respond to the true wisdom of the

Cry Regarder. The defilements as they are will become a force for good. This is the concept that the defilements are inseparable from bodhi (enlightenment). In other words, the essence of defilements is nondual, or indivisible from enlightenment.

This is how we should embrace the teaching in the above passage.

**Misfortune of water.** *If any, carried away by a flood, call upon his name, they will immediately reach the shallows.* This passage means being saved from the misfortune of water. That is, survival without being nearly drowned.

Do people drown only in water? Actually, the number of people unlucky enough to drown is extremely small. Yet we can definitely say that much of humanity is “drowning” figuratively; that is, indulging in something.

People drown in money, alcohol, lust, desire for fame or power, and vanity.

Since people are weak willed, they are easily swept away and ruined by inner desires and outer temptations.

If, however, they invoke the Cry Regarder, they will recover the view of “the truth of the Middle,” avoiding ruin and returning to the right path. That is what is meant by “they will immediately reach the shallows.”

**TEXT** If there be hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of living beings who in search of gold, silver, lapis lazuli, moonstones, agate, coral, amber, pearls, and other treasures go out on the ocean, and if a black gale blows their ships to drift upon the land of the rakshasa demons, and if amongst them there be even a single person who calls upon the name of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, all those people will be delivered from

the throes of the rakshasas. It is for this reason that [he] is named Regarder of the Cries of the World.

**COMMENTARY** *Black gale.* This is literally an ominous wind that blows under black clouds or a whirlwind that raises a cloud of dust, which blocks the rays of the sun. The reference here is to the wind under black clouds.

• *Rakshasa demons.* In Sanskrit rakshasa are male and rakshasi are female. These evil demons possessing supernatural power were held to deceive humans or even devour them. Once they were converted to the Buddha Dharma, they became guardian deities for Buddhism. This is described in the following chapter 26, “Dharanis.” Suffice it to say at this point that they are mysterious beings.

**Misfortune of wind.** The treasures spoken of here refer to the purposes of human life.

All people have something to live for, but some are satisfied only with having enough to eat and raising children. The ambitious seek wealth or advancement. Still others try to achieve as much as they can as scholars or artists. Then there are those who devote themselves to serving others in the cause of human happiness.

These are the treasures some people seek. Some of these treasures are so common as to be found anywhere, while others are so precious as to be virtually unobtainable. All people devote their lives to something they desire when launching forth upon the great sea of life.

However, life is not always as one would want it, and one can never tell when or where one will be struck by an unfavorable wind or a windstorm. One might not reach the port one aims for, and may be blown to some unbearable land inhabited by demons, where they fall prey to various evils and become corrupted. One may be completely ruined by such evils. Indeed, we see this happening everywhere. This is what we mean by “misfortune of wind.”

This passage of the text tells us that in a ship in a storm, if even one crewman or passenger invokes the Cry Regarder, the ship will be saved.

The person who calls the name of that bodhisattva is a truly honorable teacher of human life, a preacher of the Truth (the Wonderful Dharma). If such a person is with others aboard a ship on the sea of life and teaches them how to live in the light of the wisdom of “the truth of the Middle,” then those others (who have a causal relation with that person) will be saved from yielding to the temptation of evil.

**TEXT** If, again, there be any man on the verge of [deadly] harm who calls upon the name of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Cries of the World, the sword of the attacker will instantly snap asunder and he will be set free.

**COMMENTARY** **Misfortune of the sword.** When the Buddhist priest Nichiren was imprisoned by the Kamakura shogunate and about to be beheaded at Tatsunokuchi (now Fujisawa City, in Kanagawa Prefecture) in 1271, as he calmly recited the holy formula, or daimoku, expressing his devotion to the Lotus Sutra, there was a sudden flash of lightning and the executioner’s upraised sword was shattered. This is a famous story. Because this impressive scene has been passed down to us, we might think that being saved from “misfortune of the sword” only means being spared physical violence. This simple understanding is all right as far as it goes, but it is only a superficial point of view and may lead us to overlook an important point.

Holy people suffer physical violence for various reasons. Jesus Christ was crucified. Maudgalyayana, a man of noble character and one of the ten great disciples of Shakyamuni, died a violent death at the hands of non-Buddhists. The sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln (1809–65), and Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), considered the father of the Indian independence movement, were assassinated. Even Shakyamuni was injured in the leg by fragments of rock hurled by Devadatta, Shakyamuni’s cousin and a former disciple, and bled profusely. Therefore, whether one escapes physical violence is not actually the essential issue.

Far more important is to overcome psychological violence. The issue is whether we are injured by hatred, jealousy, insult, or suspicion.

Today the possibility of being cut by the blade of a sword or knife is much diminished as compared to former times. One is much more likely to be cut by words, whether spoken or printed, such as rumors or public opinion.

If in such a situation one determines to keep in mind and respond with great benevolence, compassion, and true wisdom, which are the true nature of the Cry Regarder, and cultivates these virtues wholeheartedly, one will not be injured psychologically, however many swords hang over one. That is because nothing is stronger than true wisdom. If we firmly maintain the notion of true wisdom, whatever our hardships, we will feel deeply confident that we will never surrender to them. So we will not be dejected or hurt, but keep calm. This is the most significant point of this teaching.

*To be continued*

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In this series, passages in the **TEXT** sections are quoted from *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1975, with slight revisions. The diacritical marks originally used for several Sanskrit terms in the **TEXT** sections are omitted here for easier reading.