

FEATURE:

Japanese Buddhism and Hansen's Disease

Editors' Note

RECENTLY, we have been hearing calls for Japanese Buddhist priests to reproach themselves for and reflect upon their long-term attitude toward Hansen's disease (leprosy) sufferers as this was not always in accordance with the Buddha's teachings. After modern medicine had proven that this disease was caused by a bacterium, called *Mycobacterium leprae*, thought to be contagious in those days, patients were forcibly quarantined by the Japanese government. However, as it became clear that this policy had little scientific basis, it began to be severely criticized as a serious violation of human rights. Nevertheless, the absolute compulsory quarantine policy, as it was called, remained in effect for ninety years, until 1996. In the meantime, however, several Japanese Buddhist denominations systematically engaged in missionary work so as to comfort these quarantined patients (*imon hukyō* 慰問布教). On the surface, such activity seemed beneficial to them, but actually, it merely displayed acquiescence to, and support of, this quarantine policy. In other words, Japanese Buddhism cannot avoid the criticism that it was also an accomplice to the violation of human rights.

Moreover, this problem also demonstrates to us that Japanese Buddhist denominations were definitely used by the nation in the past. Especially before World War II, they, whether willingly or not, participated in nationalism, for example, by holding ceremonies for the future victory of the Japanese army on the battlefield. In most normal pre-modern societies, however, the relationship between spiritual authority and temporal power was quite the opposite, in that the former ruled the latter. A typical example can be found in the relationship between *brāhmanas* and *ksātriyas* in Hinduism, or between *Sacerdotium* and *Regnum* in Medieval Europe. In Japan too, Buddhism had continued to greatly influence national politics right from its initial phase in that country. Of course, occasionally, governments did persecute or oppress certain priests, monks and religious orders, yet it was unprecedented that, due to the complete aberration of their relationship, religious authority was systematically placed under the control of temporal power and used as a political tool. In this way,

the self-reflection by Japanese Buddhists on having supported the quarantine policy which was enforced upon Hansen's disease patients mainly needs to have a dual purpose: reproach for the violation of human rights itself, and review of the problem, lying behind it, i.e., the subordination of a religion to a particular nation.

Although absolute compulsory quarantine was the national policy and state authority was very strong in the pre-democratized days of Japan, not many Buddhist priests objected to this policy. However, there were a few who did engage in relief work to help Hansen's disease patients. In this feature, therefore, we first introduce two such Buddhists, Tsunawaki Ryūmyō 綱脇龍妙 and Ogasawara Noboru 小笠原登, after which we present the opinions of Kajiwara Keiichi 梶原敬一, a present-day medical doctor who is also a Pure Land priest (Shinshū Ōtani-ha 真宗大谷派), regarding the relationship between Japanese Buddhism and Hansen's disease. From these perspectives, it is hoped that Japanese Buddhists as well as others will be able to reflect honestly upon the above-mentioned problems.

Before concluding, it must be noted that this disease was originally called *rai-byō* らい病 in Japan. However, in the course of the struggle to correct this long-term violation of these patients' human rights, the negative connotations of this appellation became apparent. As a result, in Japan, this disease is now generally known as *Hansen-byō* ハンセン病 (Hansen's disease), after the person who discovered *Mycobacterium leprae*. On the other hand, the English term "Hansen's disease" is not so well known elsewhere outside Japan where the appellation "leprosy" is not regarded so negatively. However, as all three articles published here are translations from Japanese, we use both these terms at the discretion of the authors and translators concerned.