

ARTICLES

FEATURE: MODERN REINTERPRETATIONS OF AMIDA AND THE PURE LAND

Introduction

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THE PROCESS of modernization in Japan—undertaken as it was under pressure from the imperialist ambitions and cultural chauvinism of the militarily superior Western powers—was profoundly disruptive at all levels of society. Buddhist institutions, which had enjoyed a privileged position during the Tokugawa 徳川 period (1603–1867) and benefited from governmental policies that insured their economic stability, were faced with a variety of new challenges as Japan modernized through the course of the Meiji 明治 and Taishō 大正 periods (1868–1912; 1912–1926). Setting aside the hostility directed toward Buddhist institutions by the new government in the early years of the Meiji period, the encounter with the nations of the West and the policies that the Japanese government undertook in order to attain parity with those nations on the international stage had profound repercussions for Japanese Buddhist schools at all levels, from administration and ministerial training to proselytization and doctrinal interpretation. The unequal nature of this encounter meant that Buddhist schools were forced to prove their legitimacy as genuine religions in accord with the standards of civilization set by the intellectual trends in the dominant Western nations and to argue against the idea that they were relics of backward superstition that would obstruct the Japanese nation's march of progress toward recognition as an equal in international politics and the reestablishment of self-determination in domestic political affairs.

Needless to say, Buddhist denominations and individual Buddhists belonging to specific traditions responded to these pressures in a variety of ways. The story of modern Japanese Buddhism as it has been painted in the abundance of scholarship on the subject in the past twenty years is in many ways the story of all the different attempts to

react to the demands of the situation created by this encounter and its consequences in Japanese society. The current feature hopes to fill in one part of the picture that often appears in those earlier sketches in greater detail by providing an introduction to some of the ways that interpretations of Amida 阿彌陀 and his Pure Land were reformulated in response to, and in conversation with, the body of Western thought regarding religion that was introduced over the course of about seventy years from the end of the Tokugawa period through to the early Shōwa 昭和 period (1926–1989). During this time, Japan shifted from scrambling to gain recognition as an equal to the modern nations of the West to pursuing its own imperialistic ambitions as a modern nation-state.

The Western thought that was introduced into Japan during this span of time not only challenged the legitimacy of traditional forms of Buddhist knowledge and discourse, it also served as a new reservoir of authority that Buddhists could appeal to in order to set forth new interpretations of traditional concepts. On the one hand, the positivistic trends in Western scientific thinking severely called into question the veracity of much scriptural language describing Amida and the Pure Land. Statements in the three Pure Land sutras such as “There is a world to the west of here a hundred thousand billion worlds away called ‘Ultimate Contentment,’”¹ or “Dharmākara Bodhisattva has now already attained buddhahood and is at present in the western direction. It is a country that is one hundred thousand billion worlds away from here. That Buddha’s world is called ‘Peace and Contentment,’”² or “Amida Buddha is not far from here at all,”³ could no longer be taken at face value as simple statements of fact. In that sense, this part of the encounter with Western thought was a potentially devastating one, in that it threatened to deprive the Pure Land tradition of two of its most central concepts.

Although some Pure Land Buddhists, as the piece by Kashiwahara Yūsen in this feature shows, in the earliest stages of this encounter attempted to meet the positivistic truth claims of Western sciences such as astronomy with their own positivistic reasoning, both the Buddhist tradition and trends in Western philosophy offered ample resources for many to deflect such challenges as lacking in nuance and failing to grasp the essential problem that is addressed by the Pure Land teachings. The fact that the three foundational sutras of the tradition quoted above leave considerable room for interpretation about the location of the Pure Land (two saying it is very far away and one saying that it is near at hand) is just one bit of evidence of the fluidity of the status of Amida and the Pure Land in the scriptural sources, which abound with explanations and interpretations that do not lend themselves easily to being interpreted as straight-

¹ *Foshuo Amituo jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 (Jp. *Bussetsu Amida kyō*), T no. 366, 12: 346c10–11.

² *Foshuo wuliangshou jing* 佛說無量壽經 (Jp. *Bussetsu muryōju kyō*), T no. 360, 12: 270a4–6.

³ *Foshuo guan wuliangshou fo jing* 佛說觀無量壽佛經 (Jp. *Bussetsu kan muryōju butsu kyō*), T no. 365, 12: 341c5–6.

forward statements of fact. The other, later authors that Kashiwahara introduces who advocated viewing the Pure Land as existing in a fundamentally different way from the mundane world, or having a primarily symbolic meaning, drew on these sorts of resources provided by the tradition in order to respond to the challenges of scientific thought. Actively incorporating ideas from nineteenth-century Western philosophy, these thinkers tried to carve out a realm substantively different from the material realm that was the object of science where Amida and the Pure Land could be said to exist.

Kashiwahara's article, originally published in 1987, shows convincingly that these authors situated this realm within the interiority of the faithful individual. Discussions of the shift toward interiority in the development of modern Japanese Buddhism have taken on a near canonical status in recent scholarship, so the position in this article may not strike many of our readers as groundbreaking today. This piece, however, was one of the first to document that thesis and trace the process with specific reference to the interpretation of the Pure Land, so we have decided to include a translation of it in this feature. Much of the discussion of the issue of how the Pure Land has been interpreted in modern Japan in both Japanese- and English-language scholarship has been framed by Kashiwahara's work, so it seems valuable to make it available to an English-reading audience. It is also quite interesting in that it shows (although not in very great detail) how Meiji-period Buddhists drew on both the resources provided by the Buddhist tradition as well as the new forms of knowledge and discourse that were being introduced from the West in order to argue for the validity and importance of concepts such as the Pure Land and Amida. In this way, the piece serves to highlight some of the complexity of Japanese Buddhist thinkers' responses to their encounter with Western thought. It was not a simple process of unilateral assimilation or steadfast resistance, but instead one where individual thinkers chose in a syncretic, eclectic manner the strands of thought from both sides that they deemed would best represent the significance of these concepts.

This sort of eclectic adoption of different strands of Western thought in the presentation of the Pure Land teachings can also be found in the works of Nonomura Naotarō 野々村直太郎 (1871–1946) and Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976) about the Pure Land, as well as in those of Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966) about Amida. The other three articles in the feature present their interpretations in detail in hopes that readers will be able to see how they each employed new categories inspired by Western ideas in order to describe Amida and the Pure Land in a way that would resonate both with themselves and their readers.

Kigoshi Yasushi shows how Nonomura created a category of authentic religion based on an eclectic borrowing of Western ideas about religion and the academic study of religion in an attempt to resurrect Pure Land Buddhism from the superstitious accretions that it had incurred over the course of its history and make it into a

true religion, arguing that it would be necessary to provide considerably more nuanced interpretations of Amida and the Pure Land in the process. Although Nonomura forcefully argues that a simplistic understanding of the literal existence of the Pure Land is an outdated, inauthentic accretion that must be discarded, Kigoshi also shows that Nonomura did not simply call for these concepts to be jettisoned entirely, but instead had in mind a constructive return to the resources provided by the scriptural tradition (in particular the descriptions of the relationship between the ornaments of the Pure Land and the ultimate truth of Buddhism described by Tanluan 曇鸞 [476–542?] and Shinran 親鸞 [1173–1262]) in order to revive Shin 真 Buddhism as an authentic religion. In that sense, for Nonomura, while the terms of authenticity are framed by the dominant discourse incorporated from the West, the source of the genuine meaning of the concepts of the Pure Land and Amida are to be found by returning to the foundational scriptures of the tradition.

The contribution by Murayama Yasushi shows how Kaneko Daiei drew on Kant's philosophical language in order to reclaim the concept of the Pure Land as a central one that could be used in talking about salvation in Shin Buddhism, as well as how his incorporation of Kant's terminology led to considerable criticism from two authorities within the denomination. Kaneko is one of the representative figures of modern doctrinal studies within the Shinshū Ōtani-ha 真宗大谷派 that grew out of the Seishinshugi 精神主義 movement initiated by Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903) at the start of the twentieth century. In the earliest iterations of Seishinshugi, Kiyozawa aimed to present the content of Shin thought without reference to the traditional jargon generally used to relay it and instead employed the language of Western philosophy, which had gained considerable currency among a wide range of people in Japan. This choice is evidence of the dominant position that discourse inspired by Western thought held at the time and the degree to which traditional Buddhist institutions had been denied recourse to the forms of discourse and authority that they had long relied upon. In contrast to Kiyozawa's turn away from traditional scriptural language, Kaneko and other members of the next generation of scholars who followed in his spirit can be seen as attempting to resurrect those terms through a process of reinterpretation such that they could be used meaningfully for themselves and their audiences. Kant's thought served as an invaluable tool for Kaneko in his attempt to breathe new life into the concept of Amida's Pure Land because it provided him with a sophisticated set of ideas that he could use to show that even though the Pure Land is not an empirically existing place far off in the western direction, it is still a meaningful and important element in human life.

Murayama also shows how this attempt to adopt Kant's vocabulary to explain the traditional Shin concept of the Pure Land opened him up to staunch criticism from different quarters of the denomination. He introduces the criticisms that were leveled at Kaneko by Tada Kanae 多田鼎 (1875–1937) and Murakami Senshō 村上專精

(1851–1929), both of whom held that Kaneko's incorporation of ideas inspired by Kant's works led to his misunderstanding the most essential portions of Shinran's thought and conflating it with the teachings of other Buddhist schools. The exchanges between Kaneko and his critics that Murayama introduces show yet another aspect of the complexity of the dynamics of attempts by Buddhist thinkers to address challenges to the authority of their scriptural tradition by employing elements of the body of thought that was a source of those challenges. Although some adoption of strands of Western thought was effective and acceptable, Murayama's piece shows that there were clearly lines that could not be crossed. Kaneko's forced resignation from Otani University and the priesthood show that there were very serious consequences for crossing such boundaries.

While the articles about Nonomura and Kaneko give us some insight into how thinkers associated with both Nishi 西 and Higashi 東 Honganji 本願寺 adopted certain ideas introduced from the West in their attempts to argue for the continued relevance of Amida and the Pure Land in modern Japan, James C. Dobbins's article shows how Suzuki highlighted the significance of Amida for an English-reading audience by arguing that he exists in a space outside of the working of karma that can only be understood through mystical experience. Although the traditional Shin perspective holds that Amida works in the world through merit transference or the karmic power of Amida's vows, Suzuki creatively upsets this discourse, arguing that Amida is entirely outside the realm of karmic causation and transcendent of every aspect of the human world of suffering. Dobbins sees the source for this stance as the Buddhist teachings about the *dharmakāya*, or Dharma body that is itself ultimate truth, but points out that Suzuki admits to considerable overlap between this world of karmic suffering and Amida existing beyond it, which Suzuki says can only be discovered in a mystical experience where the boundaries between such dichotomies are dissolved entirely. Suzuki's discussion is also an eclectic mix of ideas that draws in places on traditional Buddhist conceptions and definitions of terms and in others on categories of Western thought such as the infinite and the finite.

By presenting the ideas of these three thinkers, as well as those of others who faced similar questions, this feature provides a fuller picture of the messy nature of the encounter between thought that was prevalent in the politically and culturally dominant Western nations and Japanese Buddhist thinkers. The thinkers presented in the feature below creatively employed ideas adopted from Western thinkers in order to bolster and maintain the legitimacy of the core concepts of their denominations' traditional doctrines while also being denied recourse to an unapologetic use of those very doctrines and ideas that had long been the foundation of the religious lives of the members of the school. In that sense, the story told below is a tragic one which probably should engender shouts about the need for decolonization of the field of Shin

Buddhist studies. On the other hand, however, the thinkers presented below were also engaged in navigating a complex web of power relationships using all the resources that they had at their disposal. In the process, they selectively adopted certain strands of Western thought while choosing not to draw on some of the more traditional resources provided by the Buddhist tradition in order to establish what they thought to be a convincing presentation of Amida and the Pure Land for their modern Japanese audience, so we cannot simply call this a case of straightforward domination, or even just skillful appropriation. The articles presented below indicate that things on the ground in the seventy years covered in this feature were in fact much more complex.

Although much previous scholarship on the issue of the doctrinal modernization of Shin Buddhism in both Japanese and English has tended to valorize the reinterpretations of Amida and the Pure Land presented by Kaneko and some of his contemporaries as having been successful reframings of the traditional concepts, the content of the articles below, and the comments by the authors there, force us to question that sort of valorization. In many ways, these thinkers were trying to respond to a very difficult situation using all the resources that they had available to them at the time, but as we read through these papers, we cannot help but be struck at how limited those resources were (especially when it comes to the ideas that Nonomura and Kaneko were picking up from their studies of Western philosophy and religious studies). A great deal has happened in the worlds of both thought and politics in the past ninety years, so it is only natural that we feel considerable distance from the content of the ideas of these thinkers presented below. I do wonder, however, if, having read through the feature once, it might not be possible for us to set aside our concerns about clarifying the messy nature of the power dynamics that shaped their ideas and their lives and be inspired for just a moment by their attitudes in seeking to bring to bear all the resources provided by human cultural production to answer the questions that they deemed most central to human life.

ABBREVIATION

- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. Edited by Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaigyoku 渡邊海旭. 100 vols. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai, 1924–35.