

Japan's Contribution to Modern Global Buddhism: The World's Parliament of Religions Revisited

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THE FIRST SPEAKER of the Japanese delegation to the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago 1893, the layman and translator Noguchi Zenshirō 野口善四郎 (n.d.), introduced the delegation as his gift to the world:

I present to you four Buddhist sorios, who will give their addresses before you, and place in your hands many thousands of copies of English translations of Buddhist works . . . [as well as] 400 volumes of the complete Buddha Shaka's Sutras imported to this country for the first time.¹

It was, he offered with a rhetorical flourish appropriate to the occasion, a gift of gratitude: in return for Commodore Perry's kindness in opening Japan's eyes to the state of other civilized countries in the world, he would open the eyes of the world through the gift of Japanese Buddhism, "the best of all his possessions." It was, Noguchi assured the audience, the key to the future, the shortest path to the inevitable evolutionary culmination of all religions of the world in the one universal truth.

The addresses of the priests, supported by the texts of the prepared translations, would provide an introduction to Japanese Buddhism, and, although the audience could not read them, the presence of the four hundred volumes of the Tripiṭaka testified that there was a great deal more to Mahayana than the West was yet aware of. Noguchi expressed his regret that so little was yet known of this, the "highest order of Buddhist teaching," and spoke of

¹ Noguchi 1893, p. 442.

plans for translation. The Chicago presentation was, as he said, but the first step in a journey of a thousand miles.

The Japanese delegation to the World's Parliament of Religions holds a deservedly prominent place in the history of the globalization of Buddhism. It was here, in Chicago, in September 1893, that Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to the Western public. The familiar story is framed as the history of Zen in the West. It tells how the German-born American philosopher of science Dr. Paul Carus (1852–1919) befriended Shaku Sōen 釈宗演 (1859–1919), a Rinzaï Zen abbot, after hearing his paper “The Law of Cause and Effect as Taught by the Buddha.” This, in turn, opened the way to the eleven-year apprenticeship of Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966) at Carus's Open Court publishing house in La Salle (from 1897 to 1908), and his subsequent career disseminating knowledge of Mahayana Buddhism in English.

The importance of the introduction of Zen to the West should not be underestimated. It is a crucial part of the history of modern global Buddhism. Suzuki's work overcame the denigration and dismissal of Mahayana Buddhism prevalent in Western scholarship in the late nineteenth century. In establishing a wide following beyond Asia, it in turn created the space for the introduction and adoption of Tibetan Buddhism towards the end of the twentieth century. The focus on Shaku Sōen and the introduction of Zen has, however, overlooked much of the complexity of the encounter. I propose to revisit the parliament and consider what the “four sorios” presented within the context of the mission they defined. It was not Zen that they planned to introduce, but the more encompassing “Eastern Buddhism,” the thoroughly modern Mahayana Buddhism of Meiji-era (1868–1912) reform strategically repackaged for the occasion.² Although the presentation had only a limited impact on Western understanding of Buddhism at the time, as will be discussed below, Eastern Buddhism offered much that resonates with key features of global Buddhism as we now know it. Two points of particular note are the ideal of Buddhist social action based on a sense of the interconnectedness of all things and the bodhisattva path of compassion. We know, however, that the connection is far from direct, and such ideas only circulated much later.³ My aim therefore is to look more closely at what the delegates offered in their gift to the West, in part to credit their perspicacity in identifying what would become features of a modern global religion, but also to reflect on the complexities of the transmission process.

² This is discussed more fully in Snodgrass 2003.

³ See for example, McMahan 2008 and Blum 2009.

Eastern Buddhism: Meiji Buddhism for the West

Though now totally integrated into the language and a well-established field of study, “Eastern Buddhism” is a recent term, coined in 1893 by the Japanese delegates to the World’s Parliament of Religions in their attempt to intervene in the already well-established Western discourse on Buddhism. By creating the new category of Eastern Buddhism, they aimed to attach to the Mahayana Buddhism of Japan all that the West admired of Pure Buddhism, the Pali-based Orientalist construct of Theravada (referred to at that time as Southern Buddhism), and also to distance it from the then widespread denigration of other forms of Mahayana Buddhism (Northern Buddhism). This Eastern Buddhism was a selective presentation of the *shin bukkyō* 新仏教 (new Buddhism) of Meiji Japan that had emerged from the restructuring of the role of religion in society necessitated by the policies of the early Meiji state.⁴ It exhibited all the familiar characteristics of Buddhist modernity: it was philosophical, rationalized, non-sectarian, lay-centered and socially committed. It was formed to meet the needs of modern Japanese society in an intellectual climate imbued with the nineteenth-century reality of Western dominance. This was manifested domestically in the need to appeal to the Western educated elite to win their support for revival, and internationally in the discriminatory treaties imposed on Japan by Western countries. The presentation of Eastern Buddhism at the parliament was therefore also shaped by its participation in the overriding exercise of the Meiji 20s (1888 onwards), Japan’s bid for international recognition, focused at the time of the Chicago Exposition in the campaign to revise Japan’s treaties. Both projects reflect the tension inherent in creating a distinctively Japanese modernity when the West was both model and measure of the modern.

By 1893, Japanese Buddhist reformers, the delegates and their supporters, had long established intellectual engagement with Western Buddhist scholarship and the study of Western philosophy. Some had travelled to Europe and Asia to study; others had studied in the newly established universities in Japan. They were well aware of the role that Buddhism played in the intellectual debates of the time. We need therefore to look briefly at this.

Western interest in Buddhism emerged from the crisis of religion brought about by the challenges of nineteenth-century scientific knowledge. Buddhism’s significance for its Western sympathizers was that it offered a humanist alternative. Its value was not exactly that it was “scientific” as such, but that it presented an ethical system remarkably similar to Christianity’s

⁴ Ketelaar 1990.

own, one that did not depend on those aspects of the Christian system that were seen to be in conflict with scientific knowledge: it did not depend on an interventionist God, a Creator, or belief in an immortal soul.⁵ For its sympathizers, this Buddhism was not a religion but a philosophy of ethics taught by the Indian teacher, Śākyamuni; a philosophy that they believed had remarkable synergies with contemporary developments in modern Western thought.

For its Christian detractors, Buddhism's similarity to Christianity, the excellence of its teacher and his philosophy were also central. The rituals and "idol worship" they observed in Asian practice then became evidence of the necessity of God and Divine Wrath; proof of the inadequacy of philosophy, no matter how ideal, to meet the needs of mankind. Buddhism's function for them, therefore, was to exemplify the error of atheism, and by analogy, the materialist philosophy to which many were turning. Significantly, both positions depended on tying the definition of Buddhism to the historical Śākyamuni and what he is believed to have actually taught during his lifetime.

Japanese intellectuals were well aware of both sides of the debate and shaped Eastern Buddhism in response to it. Though not a member of the Chicago delegation, Buddhist reformer Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) was one of its supporters, and his career usefully illustrates Japanese engagement with Western thought. Inoue had studied philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University under the American professor, Ernest Fenollosa (1853–1908). His education had been sponsored by Higashi Honganji 東本願寺 as part of its revival program. After graduating in 1885, he resigned from the clergy to claim the title "Philosopher," not as a rejection of religion, but in the belief that he could more effectively work for Buddhist reform from this position. In 1887 he published *Bukkyō katsuron joron* 仏教活論序論 (Revitalizing Buddhism: An Introduction),⁶ in which he engaged the interest of educated Japanese by explicitly comparing Western philosophy and Buddhist thought. His aim was to show that Buddhism contained all the wisdom of the West, but then went further. As he saw it, the Buddha, three thousand years before, had taught the truth that Western philosophers were only now approaching *but did not yet possess*. More than this, the full truth was preserved in Japan alone because the higher forms of Buddhism had died out in other parts of Asia. This Buddhism was therefore the one great and unique contribution Japan could make to the modern world. It was a source of national pride and of potential international prestige.

⁵ Snodgrass 2007.

⁶ Inoue 1967. An English translation is available in Staggs 1979.

The appeal to the patriotism of his audience was deliberate and important. Buddhist revival rode a surge of enthusiasm to define Japanese modernity in distinctively indigenous terms from 1887 when earlier achievements of modernization in Western terms were discredited by yet another failure in the ongoing campaign to renew Japan's unequal treaties with foreign nations.⁷ In this atmosphere Inoue called upon "young men of talent and education," the Western educated elite, to support Buddhism as the basis of the modern, sovereign state: "The best way Japanese can be made Japanese and Japan can remain independent is to preserve and propagate Buddhism."⁸ The new philosophical Buddhism of Meiji Japan, stripped of all things irrational or superstitious, was both the ideal religion for modern Japan, and an area of human endeavour in which Japan could be a world leader. As he observed, "The advancement of science appeared to have induced an interest in Buddhism among the Christian people of the West," and, he continued, "even the Hinayana doctrine of Southern India was highly admired by them. How much more then must they glorify the wonderful doctrine of Mahayana?"

Inoue's strategy was twofold. On the one hand he aimed to win the support of the Western educated elite of the country for domestic Buddhist revival. These were people who typically regarded Buddhism as a vestige of the past. Western approval for Meiji Buddhism would endorse its modernity and legitimate their adoption of it. On the other, having Japanese Buddhism recognized as the universal religion of the future would establish Japan among the nations that contributed to world progress, a nation to be taken seriously in the international arena.

The invitation to participate in the World's Parliament of Religions, which came not long after Inoue wrote this, provided the opportunity to put the idea into practice. An open letter to the trans-sectarian Buddhist body Kakushū Kyōkai 各宗協会 (All Sects Council) from "Concerned Buddhists" seeking official endorsement for a delegation to attend the parliament echoed Inoue's sentiments.⁹ This letter, henceforth referred to as the *Manifesto*, presented both the reasons for the delegation's participation and a clear statement of what it should present. It argued, in essence, that the invitation was a chance that came but once in a thousand years because Buddhism was the one thing that Japan could transmit to the West and thereby win regard. It then listed

⁷ The condition of revision was that Japan "modernize." This, and related issues are discussed more fully in Snodgrass 2003, chapter 6, "Buddhist Revival and Japanese Nationalism," and chapter 8, "Buddhism and Treaty Revision: The Chicago Project."

⁸ Inoue 1888, p. 8.

⁹ Toyama et al. 1893.

the features of Japanese Buddhism they needed to convey to achieve this.¹⁰ When official support was withheld, four clerics—Ashitsu Jitsuzen 蘆津實全 (1841–1921), Toki Hōryū 土宜法竜 (1854–1923), Shaku Sōen, Yatsubuchi Banryū 八淵蟠龍 (1848–1926)—and two Buddhist laymen, Hirai Kinza 平井金三 (1859–1916) and Noguchi Zenshirō, formed an independent delegation to attend the event. An analysis of their papers shows how closely they followed the *Manifesto*. Though not officially endorsed, the delegates were all Buddhist scholars actively engaged with the Meiji revival. Ashitsu was a Tendai 天台 scholar and had published two books on the new Buddhism; Shaku Sōen had studied Western philosophy in Japan and Pali in Ceylon. They, along with their fellow delegate, the Shingon 真言 scholar Toki, and reform leader Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838–1911), had in 1890, been chosen to co-edit the five-volume work intended to promote Buddhist unity as part of the reform platform.¹¹ Hirai and Noguchi had organized tours of Japan by Henry Steele Olcott (1832–1907). The Concerned Buddhists of the letter openly confronted political issues of treaty revision, and the delegation was firmly embedded in the political moment.

The *Manifesto* was quite explicit in its aims. Among its highest priorities were explaining “Buddhist idealism and the similarities and differences between it and philosophic idealism,” the concepts of *inga no rihō* 因果之理法 (the law of cause and effect) and nirvana, *shōjō nimon* 聖淨二門 (the two approaches to awakening, that of the sages and that of the Pure Land), as well as Buddhism’s history, influence, present state, and future.¹²

Centering Śākyamuni

Before they could begin to introduce Buddhist idealism, however, the delegation first had to establish that Mahayana Buddhism was the Buddha’s teaching. As already mentioned, against Asian tradition, Western scholarship had defined Buddhism as the teachings of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, and since the earliest Mahayana texts were dated centuries after his life, they were, for Western scholars, simply beyond consideration. The importance the delegation placed on challenging this assumption is evident from its repetition. It is proclaimed in the titles of papers and the publications they distributed there. “The Law of Cause and Effect as Taught by the Buddha” and *Outlines of the Mahāyāna as Taught by the Buddha* are only two

¹⁰ Toyama et al. 1893, p. 297.

¹¹ For further details, see Snodgrass 2003, pp. 176–79.

¹² Toyama et al. 1893, p. 299.

examples. It was specifically argued in the presentations, and referred to at any opportunity.

Ashitsu addressed this issue with the Tendai tradition of *goji* 五時 (the five periods of the Buddha's teaching). In this scheme, he explained, the Mahayana was not only taught by the Buddha, it was his first teaching and his most complete teaching. The diversity of Buddhist sects was a consequence of the Buddha's ability to speak to the needs of his audience, and therefore each of the teachings was a graded but related revelation of the one encompassing truth. Theravada was a preliminary teaching, a stepping-stone to greater understanding. The truth it contains is encompassed within Eastern Buddhism, the *ekayāna*, the full disclosure of the universal truth that transcended boundaries of race, culture, and time.¹³

Needless to say, for an audience of nineteenth-century Western academics, the *goji* argument was unconvincing. The point is that the parameters of the Western discourse demanded that the delegates give central prominence to the historical Buddha Śākyamuni, a prominence that is more characteristic of Pali Buddhism than of traditional Mahayana, and one that remains thoroughly entrenched in modern global Buddhism in spite of the current dominance of Mahayana forms.

The Meaning of "Buddha": Buddhas, Buddha Nature, and Buddhist Idealism

The centrality of Śākyamuni in Western Buddhism created a further obstacle for the Chicago project. Identifying "buddha" with one historical personality, Śākyamuni, effectively blocked any possibility of explaining key Mahayana concepts. In particular it completely eliminated any possibility of attaining the priority objective of comparing Eastern Buddhism with philosophic idealism. This depended on a distinctively Mahayana understanding of the Buddha as *dharmakāya* (Jp. *hosshin* 法身), the principle from which the universe is manifested. Extending the meaning of the term was problematic, however, because everything the West approved of in Buddhism at that time depended on the Buddha being nothing more than a man. The Buddha had to be the world's first humanist philosopher, founder of the ethical teaching encapsulated in Pure Buddhism.¹⁴

Here too, Ashitsu took up the challenge. Appropriately entitled "Buddha," his paper introduced one of the defining formulations of Mahayana

¹³ Toki, who also spoke to this theme, introduced the term in his paper, Toki 1893. The papers presented under his name in Houghton 1894 have little resemblance to this.

¹⁴ For a fuller discussion of the importance of Gautama, the man, see Snodgrass 2009a.

traditions, the concept of the *trikāya* (Jp. *sanshin* 三身), the three bodies of the Buddha.¹⁵ He explained that the world as we perceive it, in all its complexity, is a manifestation of *dharmakāya*, the body of the Buddha as eternal, omnipresent, and unchanging principle. The second body, the *saṃbhogakāya* (Jp. *hōjin* 報身), was exemplified by Ashitsu as the bodhisattvas Monju 文殊, Kannon 觀音, and Seishi 勢至, described by him in appropriately universal terms as manifestations of “sacred wisdom, graceful humanity, and sublime courage,” respectively. Śākyamuni, the historical Buddha, he explained, was a *nirmāṇakāya* (Jp. *ōjin* 応身), a manifestation of the eternal principle sent into this world to “preach and bring enlightenment” to all beings.¹⁶ In this system Śākyamuni is *a buddha*, but not the only one; the world is a manifestation of *Buddha* as the eternal principle, which he equated with mind, “The True Mind of Absolute Unity” (described as *shinnyō* 真如 and *tathatā*). All things consequently have a Buddha nature, he explained, and all beings have the potential to become Buddhas through mental cultivation.

Although these basic Buddhist concepts are now familiar to many, in 1893, when almost nothing had been written about the Mahayana—when the one authentic form of Buddhism was understood to be a rational humanist philosophy, and when images of bodhisattvas were considered “idols”—they were extraordinarily new and different. Such ideas were literally *unheard of*, with all the pejorative connotations of the colloquial expression. Indeed, presented in a brief paper—a twenty-minute limit was enforced at the parliament—in less than perfect English, at a time before terms to translate these ideas had been worked out, and to a totally unprepared audience, the ideas were almost unintelligible.¹⁷

The full implications of Buddhist idealism depended on combining the conception of the Buddha as the nature of all things with the concept of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent arising). The concept was presented most memorably at Chicago in Shaku Sōen’s paper “The Law of Cause and Effect as Taught by the Buddha.”¹⁸ As he put it, “the world as we know it

¹⁵ Ashitsu 1893, pp. 1038–40. The paper is also available as Ashitsu 1894a, pp. 537–43. While Barrows is the “official” record of the proceedings, the latter presents a less brutally edited version. It is much longer and has retained Buddhist technical terms in Japanese, Sanskrit, and Chinese from which it is possible to perceive the argument.

¹⁶ Ashitsu 1894a, p. 538.

¹⁷ It is apparent from Barrows’s editing that he, at least, did not follow the argument.

¹⁸ Shaku Sōen 1893.

is a consequence of the law of cause and effect acting within essence of mind.”¹⁹ However, the main focus of his exposition was to demonstrate how the inexorable working out of the consequences of actions offered a non-interventionist system of moral retribution. A more complete development of the idealist connotations occurs elsewhere such as in papers by the other delegates, Ashitsu, Toki, and Yatsubuchi, and in *Outlines of the Mahāyāna as Taught by the Buddha*,²⁰ a handbook that had been prepared for distribution at the parliament which was written by Kuroda Shintō 黒田真洞 (1855–1916). The chapter headed “All Things are Nothing but Mind: The True Nature of All Existence,” explained in appropriately philosophical terminology that Buddha as *dharmakāya* is the absolute reality which transcends the multitude of forms in the phenomenal world. It is the underlying reality on which all phenomenal existence, perceptible and imperceptible, depends and out of which it is produced. All things are produced out of “essence of mind” (or *bhūtatathā*, as he also calls it) as a consequence of action under certain conditions. “All things in the universe, therefore, are mind itself.”²¹ Each of the delegates elaborated on the concept that there is nothing beyond mind, “the fundamental principle of Buddha . . . which may be compared to the boundless sea”²² and that the world as we know it is the result of the workings of the laws of cause and effect acting upon it.²³

Again, this is now very familiar, but the concept of “Buddha” presented at Chicago was a long way from the notion of “Buddha” understood in the West at that time. Indeed, for many in the audience the ideas presented were simply unthinkable. As one delegate to the parliament explained in response to Shaku Sōen’s “The Law of Cause and Effect”: if we admit that “there may be a world of dependent beings each of whom depends on another, and no one of them nor all of them depend on an independent being . . . philosophy is made impossible and theology deprived of its subject matter.” It was literally unthinkable because, as he observed, “such an admission would destroy thought itself.”²⁴ Nevertheless, it is apparent in retrospect that the assimilation of Buddhist concepts with ideas of German idealism,

¹⁹ Shaku Sōen 1893.

²⁰ Kuroda 1893, pp. 16–19. This book had been circulated among Japanese experts for approval for distribution at the parliament.

²¹ Kuroda 1893, p. 19.

²² Yatsubuchi 1893, p. 717.

²³ Kuroda 1893, pp. 19–20; Ashitsu 1894a, p. 539; Toki 1893, pp. 546–47.

²⁴ Harris 1893, p. 306.

the thought of Schelling et al., that is now a recognized feature in the later development of Buddhist modernism, had already been made by the delegates at Chicago in 1893.²⁵

Eastern Buddhism and Social Engagement

The transcendent conception of Buddha as “mind” was also fundamental to the objective of distancing Eastern Buddhism from accusations of nihilism and otherworldliness, accusations that were based on translations of “nirvana” as “annihilation” or “extinction.” As the Chicago delegates explained, Eastern Buddhism teaches four types of nirvana (*honrai jishōshōjō nehan* 本来自性清淨涅槃, *uyo nehan* 有余涅槃, *muyoe nehan* 無余依涅槃, *mujūsho nehan* 無住処涅槃), and while nirvana as it is in Pali texts may be equivalent to extinction, the Mahayana concept was different. In Eastern Buddhism, they explained, nirvana is not annihilation, not even an annihilation of the passions which might imply an ascetic detachment from the world, since accusations of “other-worldliness” were also to be avoided. “Attainment of nirvana,” in Eastern Buddhism meant “mastering the mind . . . abiding in truth . . . even among worldly relations.”²⁶ They presented a distinctively Mahayana form of nirvana, *mujūsho nehan*, “the highest state of nirvana” which was a state of perfect wisdom when one who has attained complete awareness of reality elects not to dwell in tranquillity, but to actively work in the world for the benefit of sentient beings.²⁷ This conception of nirvana, Kuroda also explained, is personified in Kannon, the bodhisattva of compassion, and in Meiji Japan, it provided a model of life in service to humanitarian ideals, and consequently evidence of Buddhism’s power to solve the problems of the modern world.

In sum, the nirvana of Eastern Buddhism was not nihilistic, and far from demanding renunciation of worldly affairs in the pursuit of personal spiritual attainment, it enjoined its followers to devote themselves and the knowledge they attained to selfless work for society as a whole, “to *engage* in active exertion for humanity.”²⁸ The bodhisattva’s vow of compassion also went some way to responding to the charge of Christian critics that Buddhism “left man unaided.” I will speak more of this below, but we can clearly see,

²⁵ See McMahan 2008 for an account of links between philosophical idealism and Buddhism in Western texts.

²⁶ Toki 1893; Kuroda 1893.

²⁷ This is from Ashitsu 1894a, but following the now standard Romanization.

²⁸ Toki 1893.

in 1893, the presentation of the bodhisattva ideal as a rationale for engaged Buddhism and Buddhist philanthropy that would become so much a feature of Buddhist modernism.

Shōjō nimon: Overcoming the Conflict of Philosophy and Religion

Also high on the *Manifesto*'s list of priorities of ideas to present was *shōjō nimon*, awakening through one's own efforts (*jiriki* 自力) and the alternative path of dependence on the compassionate vows of Amida taught by the Pure Land schools (*tariki* 他力). Eastern Buddhism's two approaches to awakening, it explained, encompassed a philosophy comparable to the highest Western achievements. But more than this, it also offered a religion that satisfied the need of the less spiritually or intellectually developed for rituals, practices, and devotional support. And since the religious practices are based on the same principles as the philosophy, they acted to introduce people to the higher modes of the one ultimate truth. Consequently, the delegation argued with reference to late nineteenth-century concerns, Eastern Buddhism stimulated the evolution of mankind and progress of civilization, delivering those who needed ritual support towards the philosophy.

The concept of *shōjō nimon* was in part, a response to the accusation that Buddhism "left man unaided," but it was also a claim to Buddhist superiority over Christianity. Eastern Buddhism was a religion that could be held without compromise of science or progress (a point of vulnerability for Christianity at the time); indeed it induced progress towards a philosophical ideal, and was appropriate for all people regardless of their state of development, infinitely adaptable, and universally applicable.

The God Question: Being "Scientific" But Not Atheistic

The nature of God was central to the formative discourses of Western Buddhism and hinged on two aspects of God in Christianity that were questioned by science: God as Creator of the universe, and God as source of divine retribution. The latter had been addressed by Shaku Sōen; both were addressed implicitly in the elaboration of the nature of the universe as manifested out of *dharmakāya*, and by the persistent repetition that there was nothing else beyond it. While these concepts successfully showed Buddhism's compatibility with philosophical idealism, and its compatibility with science, for a Christian audience, they skated perilously close to atheism and the criticisms associated with it. While Western sympathizers insisted on the humanity of Śākyamuni to preserve their construct of it as an idealized phi-

losophy, Christian critics insisted on it to preserve Buddhism as the “master error,” proof of the inadequacy of an atheistic system. Toki offered a concept of Creator to the extent that Eastern Buddhism spoke of Vairocana as “the first origin of all . . . the base of the universe.” But a concept of God as Creator in the Christian sense was superfluous, he argued, as had Shaku Sōen, because all things are without beginning or end in their reality.²⁹ Hirai Kinza attempted to explain that the question of atheism was simply beside the point, a limiting of the unlimitable. He offered Eastern Buddhism as “the perfect union between theism and atheism,” but also offered a definition of God: “God is truth, the connecting link of cause and effect, the essence of phenomena.”³⁰ *Dharmakāya* is a non-Creationist, non-interventionist God.

The related question of personal immortality, the nature of soul, was addressed on the first page of Kuroda’s *Outlines of the Mahāyāna*. He conceded that *anātman* was a general principle of Buddhism, but he translated this as “non-individuality,” a less confronting concept than the familiar “absence of soul” of Western Buddhist scholarship. He explained that it was less a denial of individuality than a device to “destroy man’s erroneous attachment to ego.”³¹ He reassured readers that the Buddha “never set forth unchanging doctrine by establishing fixed dogmas,” the now familiar formula cited as evidence that Buddhism is “scientific” in the sense of being non-dogmatic. Other speakers went further. Toki, borrowing Theosophical vocabulary, described a soul concept that was “not an incorporeal substance of reason . . . but [which] has a fine phantasmal form.”³² Shaku Sōen’s account of karma also implied the existence of an immortal soul that transmigrated from one life to the next. It would no doubt have detracted from his argument, which as it stands was praised for its clarity and intelligibility, to have introduced the radically un-Christian concepts of *anātman* and *śūnyatā*, but there was also another reason. As Shaku Sōen said some years later in his lectures to Americans, “Most people are exceedingly alarmed when they are told that the self or the soul, which they cherished so fondly, is void in its nature, and will overwhelm us with a multitude of questions.”³³ The “destruction of the popular belief relating to the nature of the ego . . . tends to emphasize the negative aspect of Buddhism,” and “we must have something positive when this erroneous belief is removed.”

²⁹ Toki 1893, p. 544.

³⁰ Hirai 1894.

³¹ Kuroda 1893, p. 1.

³² Toki 1893, p. 548.

³³ Shaku Sōen 1913.

In general then, the presentations at the World's Parliament of Religions avoided confronting the question of the nature of personal existence in order to convey an understanding of the Buddhist system of morality to the Christian audience and thereby win acceptance of Eastern Buddhism among world religions. This was an essential step in the project of establishing its pre-eminence.

Buddhism Is a Universal Religion

Much space was devoted to the history and current condition of Buddhism to demonstrate its applicability across the world from ancient times to the present, to show that it was a truth that transcended boundaries of race, nation, and time. The recently founded Mahābodhi Society received particular attention as evidence of cooperation among various Asian nations and Britain, which had also been suggested in the *Manifesto*. The current appeal of Buddhism to the West was highlighted, as was the relevance of Eastern Buddhism to solving the problems of America. The delegates were confident that “the Buddhism of great Japan will rise and spread its wings under all heaven as the grand Buddhism of the World.”³⁴

There was, of course, much more presented. Coming back to the papers after some years, I am struck by just how much the delegates tried to pack into them in spite of their keen awareness of the difficulty of the task. The papers are, particularly in their severely edited versions, cryptic and largely incomprehensible. They struck me as a gesture, not unlike that of Noguchi's gift of the four-hundred volume “complete Buddha Shaka's Sutras”: although the audience may not yet be able to understand it, it was on record, and they may at least realize that there is a lot still to learn.

Defending the Discourse

In spite of the importance now attributed to the Japanese presentation at the parliament, there was little evidence of it in the immediate response. Problems of language and delivery aside, a major obstacle to the Japanese project was the importance of the existing Western construct of Buddhism in the Western discourses on religion of the time. It was not simply something “foreign” or “exotic.” Though interpretations of it varied, as we have seen, it was pivotal in the debates over the future of Christianity in an age of science. This Buddhism belonged to the West and so attached were Western

³⁴ Toki 1894, p. 779.

scholars to it that rather than consider an amendment to concepts that would encompass Mahayana ideas, they simply ruled Japanese Buddhist scholars out of the discourse.

The problem was starkly illustrated by a post parliament exchange of letters published by Paul Carus as “A Controversy on Buddhism.”³⁵ Some time after the World’s Parliament of Religions, the Reverend John Henry Barrows, its chairman, gave a sermon in which he repeated all of the nihilist assumptions of Buddhism that the Japanese delegates had so diligently distanced themselves from. This came to Carus’s attention. Carus writing on behalf of and with the endorsement of Shaku Sōen then engaged in debate with the Reverend F. F. Ellinwood (1826–1908), representing Barrows and his Christian perspective. Shaku Sōen expressed his disappointment that even after the parliament Barrows had persisted in repeating the “errors that were common in the various Western books on Buddhism,” and explained again the meaning of nirvana in Eastern Buddhism. Ellinwood nevertheless maintained that the true definitions of Buddhism resided exclusively in the Pali texts, and, quoting leading Pali scholar T. W. Rhys Davids (1843–1922) as authority, dismissed Ashitsu’s account of the four kinds of nirvana as the misconceptions of “popular belief,” evidence of how in error “so called Buddhists” could be. For him, the claim that the Mahayana sutras had been taught by the Buddha showed how astounding “the gulf on all sides between popular beliefs and the conclusions of science” was. Eastern Buddhism was dismissed as heretical, a regional variation that had fallen from the true teaching. The incident showed very clearly that Mahayana remained beyond the pale, conveniently kept there by a determined insistence on the academic protocols of the time, a point I will return to.

Even six years after the parliament, in 1899, Barrows, given authority on Asian religion through his position as chairman of the parliament, and by his subsequent travels in Asia, continued to repeat the message of Christian antagonism: “In no religion are we so constantly reminded of our own as in Buddhism, and yet in no religion has man been so far from the truth as in the religion of the Buddha.”³⁶ His concern was not to understand Buddhism, but to maintain it as a weapon in his battle against agnosticism in the West.

Paul Carus, Buddhism, and the Religion of Science

If for the most part the messages of Eastern Buddhism fell on deaf, bewildered, or outraged ears, they resonated strongly with Paul Carus, who rec-

³⁵ Carus 1897.

³⁶ Barrows 1899, p. 179.

ognized much in common between Eastern Buddhism and his own religion of science, a post Kantian Christian monism. This is hardly surprising since the Japanese delegates had focused on those areas of religion of interest to Carus: Buddhism's compatibility with science and philosophy, and especially on philosophic idealism. The familiar narrative stresses the importance of Shaku Sōen's paper, the title of which is so obviously "scientific," but a closer analysis of Carus's post 1893 writings show that the impact was of the presentation as a whole. Most important to his future work were the conception of the world as the manifestation of the *dharmakāya* and the positive interpretation of nirvana. Carus published Ashitsu's paper in his philosophical journal, *The Monist*, in January 1894.³⁷

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this presentation of Japanese Buddhism for Carus. He had been aware of Buddhism before the Chicago event. He had written two short notes on it in 1890,³⁸ but it was only after his introduction to Eastern Buddhism that he took it seriously. In 1890 he had warned that "The idea of Nirvana, it must be said, is of a most dangerous character. . . . Buddhism of the East has produced most fatal effects of indifference and retrogression upon those races that embraced its faith."³⁹ His change of attitude is clear in "Karma and Nirvana," published in April 1894, just months after meeting the Japanese Buddhists.⁴⁰ He opens with a statement of the widespread negative assumptions of Buddhism, presumably what he had believed Buddhism to be when he wrote "Religion of Resignation" (my italics) four years earlier. He then overturns them, point by point, in the body of the paper. It is a record of Carus's own revelation through his discovery of Eastern Buddhism, establishing parallels with his own religion of science. The *trikāya* concept was central to this exercise. Disrupting the normal order in which the terms are listed to emphasize what he saw as parallels with the Christian trinity, he equated the *dharmakāya* with God the Father, the *nirmāṇakāya* with Jesus, and the *sambhogakāya* with the Holy Ghost.

Comparing Carus's paper "Religion of Science" published in April 1893, a few months before the parliament and his writings on the same subject several years later, his debt to the *dharmakāya* concept is clear.⁴¹ Carus's early account of his Monist God attempted to retain a sense of omnipotence and omnipresence, and of God as source of moral authority, but in his desire

³⁷ Ashitsu 1894b.

³⁸ Carus 1890a, 1890b.

³⁹ Carus 1890a.

⁴⁰ Carus 1894b.

⁴¹ Carus 1893.

to deny anything that defied the laws of science, he defined it by what it was not, its difference from widely accepted mainstream belief. His critics therefore saw it as atheistic.⁴² His post parliament writings, by contrast, offer a positive idea of God that is very much like the *dharmakāya*. Much the same criticisms had been levelled at Carus's philosophy as at Buddhism, and Japanese Buddhists had provided him with a model and precedent for the defense of his religion of science.

The positive, this-worldly, socially engaged interpretation of nirvana that Eastern Buddhism offered was particularly important. As Thomas Tweed has astutely observed, even for people like Carus seeking an alternative to mainstream Protestant Christianity, there were key social values that could not be sacrificed.⁴³ The religion they turned to had to be positive, life affirming, based on self-reliance. Carus found a model for this in Eastern Buddhism. The image he presented in his book, *Gospel of Buddha* (1894), which was inspired by the parliament, was not the contemplative Buddha of the East, but a robust, active, and energetic Buddha. This is apparent in the text, but also in the illustrations which first appeared in the 1915 edition. Though problematic in terms of introducing the insights of Mahayana Buddhism, it was unquestionably effective in creating the space for this to happen. His writings on Buddhism, disseminated through his journals, *The Open Court* and *The Monist*, and the books from the Open Court Publishing Company, facilitated acceptance of Buddhism among his predominantly Protestant, North American readers,⁴⁴ even though, we should remember, they were actually written not to propagate Buddhism, but to promote his Christian Monism.

Extending the Chicago Project

I have focused on the significance of Eastern Buddhism in Carus's work to unsettle the standard narrative mentioned at the start. When the story of Zen in the West begins, as it usually does, with Suzuki Daisetsu's sojourn at La Salle after translating Carus's *Gospel of Buddha*,⁴⁵ Suzuki's intellectual debt to Carus appears obvious. When we consider the profound change in Carus's own thought brought about by his exposure to the Japanese presentation, the dynamic changes. As I see it, the post 1893 writings of both men were

⁴² Carus 1893.

⁴³ Tweed 1992.

⁴⁴ Verhoven 1998.

⁴⁵ Snodgrass 1998.

inspired by ideas presented at Chicago. Suzuki's time at La Salle is undeniably a crucial episode in the history of global Buddhism and his debt to Carus is undeniable, but, I argue, it lies elsewhere.

Carus was a master communicator and an experienced publisher. His great skill is apparent in the way he marshalled all aspects of the text of *Gospel of Buddha* to effectively communicate to a targeted audience. *Gospel* was translated into Japanese by Suzuki Daisetsu at Shaku Sōen's behest because of its usefulness in the Meiji reform project. Carus aimed his work at an intelligent non-specialist, popular readership precisely because he realized that the scale of the change in mindset he aimed for—hastening the evolution of Christianity towards the religion of science—would have to take place within the body of the church, across society, not just among a few intellectuals. Meiji Buddhists were also keenly aware of the need to reach a broad, non-specialist audience because the Buddhist revival of the time required a similarly widespread change of attitude.

Suzuki went to La Salle to learn the skills required to disseminate knowledge of Buddhism in Japan and in the West at a more popular level. (The dual imperative of demonstrating Western endorsement, mentioned above, persisted.) Who better to study with than Carus, an undisputed master of popularization? Where better than the Open Court to come into contact with the latest trends in Western interests that were a crucial factor in giving the material relevance? Carus's positive response to the presentation had exemplified the importance of this.

Translation requires not just a primary source to work from, but also the language of its presentation. In this too, Suzuki owes much to Carus. While there is no doubt that certain passages, even crucial ones, sound remarkably like Carus himself, Suzuki's adoption of his vocabulary and style was, I suggest, rather more strategic. In a letter from America published in Japan in 1909, Suzuki discussed the problems of transmitting Buddhism to Westerners: "It is not enough just to have a Western education; what is most vital is to understand how the Western [mind] is prepared to receive [Buddhism]."⁴⁶ Among specific difficulties he mentioned was the need to avoid Buddhist philosophical terms that the audience would be unfamiliar with. How much, he asked, are listeners able to understand, particularly when they have no intellectual preparation? "What happens is that, to the audience, Buddhism comes off like some kind of magic show. . . . This is the experience I had at one or two places in California." His concluding question: "are we to take

⁴⁶ Suzuki 2008.

Christian thought and Buddhacize it?” suggests an inversion of the Christianization of Buddhist thought we see in Carus’s post 1893 writing. Carus had shown the way to reach a Western audience. Suzuki could follow and push the ideas more firmly towards a Buddhist understanding.

The lesson of the controversy over the meaning of nirvana was not lost either. Suzuki needed to establish his authority to speak on Buddhism through mastery of the techniques of the discipline. In spite of the fact that he had chosen the path of popularization, Carus had obtained a doctorate from a German university, knew the rules of academic scholarship, and was well able to direct Suzuki in their use. Though Suzuki did not take a formal university degree until later,⁴⁷ with his translation *Açvaghosha’s Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, published in 1900, and the related scholarly articles in professional journals that appeared while he was at La Salle—his translation of primary sources, his erudite discussions of dating, detailed and documented comparison of various surviving recensions, his demonstrated mastery of both primary and secondary sources—he successfully made the shift from the denigrated position of “popular believer” levelled at his mentors and claimed his authority to contribute to academic discourse.⁴⁸

By the end of his apprenticeship, Suzuki had acquired an appropriate philosophical vocabulary and intellectual framework for making Japanese Buddhism acceptable and meaningful to Western audiences, as well as knowledge of the publishing industry that he would put to use in Japan. He was, I argue, less Carus’s disciple than his apprentice, learning his trade; the ensemble of technologies required for the dissemination of knowledge.

It is not difficult to trace a continuation of the agenda of the Chicago delegation in Suzuki’s early writings, particularly in his 1907 book, *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism*. The Buddhism it presents is the familiar deinstitutionalized, deritualized, and philosophical description of Eastern Buddhism as a universal religion expressed in scientific terms. It reiterates the familiar themes: the Mahayana is the teaching of the Buddha; Eastern Buddhism is *not* pessimistic or nihilistic; although it is a religion of self reliance, people are not left unaided; Mahayana offers a non-interventionist system of moral retribution, is rational, and is compatible with science; “philosophical thought in this twentieth century runs parallel to Mahayana Buddhism.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Suzuki was awarded a DLitt degree from Otani University in 1925 for his translation and study of the *Laṅkāvatāra Sutra*. For an excellent summary of Suzuki’s life, see Jaffe 2010.

⁴⁸ This argument is more fully documented in Snodgrass 2009b.

⁴⁹ Suzuki 1907, p. xiii.

(Note the inversion here: “the West is catching up.”) In *Outlines of Mahayana Buddhism* Suzuki laments Western ignorance and misunderstanding of the Mahayana and addresses all of the priorities of the delegation, beginning with the need for this third discursive space to distance the Buddhism of Japan both from Theravada and from the Mahayana of China and Tibet. In a further continuity of the Chicago mission, he offered this book to Shaku Sōen with the wish that it might be of help in Japan, an alternative perhaps to his translation of Carus’s *Gospel of Buddha* (*Budda no fukuin* 仏陀の福音) as an easy reader for Western-educated Japanese.

There are nevertheless significant differences in Suzuki’s approach, new strategies in a changing discursive environment, and perhaps changes inspired by lessons learned from the Chicago experience. We see this for example in his approach to establishing the authenticity of Mahayana Buddhism as Śākyamuni’s teaching. Suzuki did not repeat the tradition of the five periods of teaching, which, he no doubt realized would never be acceptable by Western academic criteria. He chose instead to invert focus on the age of texts and spoke to the late nineteenth-century confidence in progress and evolution. “Is Mahayana Buddhism the Genuine Teaching of the Buddha?” he asked in the introduction. Unquestionably yes, but Eastern Buddhism is a living religion, the culmination of thousands of years of development; a living force; not the acorn, but the fully developed oak tree.⁵⁰ In this scheme he presents Theravada as conservative, Mahayana as progressive. Both emerged from the same origin, but one tended to preserve the monastic rules and traditions, the other unfolded the germs in the original system.⁵¹ Eastern Buddhism is the Buddha’s teaching, not in the fundamentalist sense of return to origins, but in the thoughtful development of the meaning of his teachings. It was, Suzuki argued, following the example of Carus’s *Gospel*, “Buddhism up to date.”

The Delegation in Retrospect: Eastern Buddhism’s Contribution to Modern Global Buddhism

The Japanese delegation to the Chicago World’s Parliament of Religions introduced Mahayana Buddhism to the West. The situation demanded a reinforcement of certain aspects of the prevailing Orientalist construct of Pali

⁵⁰ Suzuki 1907, p. 6.

⁵¹ Suzuki 1907, pp. 3–4. See also Suzuki 1904, where he shows using early texts that there were different interpretations of the Buddha’s words at his death and therefore even when he lived.

Buddhism, most notably the centrality of Śākyamuni as founder of the system. The delegation also offered key Mahayana ideas that, although familiar now, went unheard at the time. Among these were a positive conception of nirvana, the conception of the world as manifestation of *dharmakāya*, the consequent Buddha nature of all things, and a Mahayana conception of the bodhisattva vow of dedication to social action. The teaching of *shōjō nimon* offered the possibility that ritual, worship and religious practice are not necessarily in opposition to rational thought and truth, but act to lead people towards these goals.

What was presented by the Japanese delegation to the World's Parliament of Religions was determined by a complex set of social and political conditions, some domestic, others international. We have seen how each of the concepts described by the delegation was presented out of the strategic imperatives of 1893. We must also bear in mind that the other side of the communication, what was heard, recorded, and accepted, was similarly determined by the interests, presuppositions, and preparedness of the audience, as is evident in the contrast between the responses of Barrows and Carus, who occupy positions at opposite ends of a broad spectrum of Western reception. Though the immediate impact of the presentation was unquestionably limited, we can now see the ideas they presented in 1893 circulating in twenty-first century global practices. Much has been written about the entanglements of Eastern and Western thought in the formation of Zen in the West. The work of Suzuki and others did eventually establish an acceptance of Mahayana Buddhism, and in turn created a space for the more recent phase in the globalization of Buddhism: the popularization and spread of Tibetan Buddhism. The paths between are by no means direct, but we should, at the very least, celebrate the perspicacity of the delegation in astutely identifying what would in time become key features in a global religion.

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