

ARTICLES

FEATURE:

Japanese Buddhism and Social Ethics

Editors' Note

SINCE publication first began in 1921, *The Eastern Buddhist* has carried articles on a wide range of topics, from philological studies of Buddhist texts to philosophical and historical explorations of Buddhist thought and essays on the contemporary significance of the tradition. If one turns to the table of contents of volume 1, number 4 (November-December 1921),¹ for example, one will find D. T. Suzuki's translation of *Avataṃsaka Sūtra* preceded by four articles on Buddhism and world peace. In the Editorial of this issue, Suzuki stated the following as "the sentiments and thoughts of the Editors:"

We must find some means to assert our position most emphatically and unequivocally that religion may not be charged as a matter of pure idealism, too weak to effect or work out its dreams.

Each religion has its virtues and shortcomings like individuals, which in fact make up its characteristic features; but as far as we can see there are no religions that will try to see one individual or nation against another; indeed, they all desire world-peace and brotherly love and the spiritual advance of all humanity regardless of colour and nationality. Such movements as a League of Nations or a disarmament conference ought to have come from the religious leaders of all nations and not from practical men of affairs. Religion has been constantly losing its spiritual hold on us, being too busy in repairing and maintaining the old weather-beaten structure known as Buddhism or Christianity or something else. Outwardly, they retain what they have so far gained, but morally and inwardly neither of them, Buddhism or Christianity, is what each once was. They have been too ready slaves to secular power, they have supported those that were wielding the most power at the time, they have

¹ This may be found in the Index to Back Issues on our website: <<http://www.otani.ac.jp/EBS/1921-1958.html>>.

given themselves up sometimes to the despotism of autocracy, or to that of aristocracy or plutocracy; they have sometimes been a "lantern-bearer" to state absolutism and militarism. It is high time now for all religions to free themselves from all ties and to carry forward boldly the standard of love and light, disregarding all worldly conditions and facing whatever consequences their unflinching attitude may bring upon them.²

In light of the critical stance and aspirations found in this statement, the current Editors have decided that the journal, "devoted to an open and critical study of Mahayana Buddhism in all of its aspects" (a theme created by D. T. Suzuki for the New Series in 1965), should include, in addition to philological and historical studies, more articles covering a broad range of contemporary issues related to Buddhist tradition or treated from Buddhist perspectives.

Our decision to highlight "Japanese Buddhism and Social Ethics" in this issue was prompted by the following letter from Mrs. Ina Buitendijk of the Netherlands in October 2000, titled "After reading Brian Victoria's *Zen at War*:"

I have been a Zen student for many years and I am married to a man who was interned by the Japanese army in the former Dutch East Indies during the Second World War. The country became independent after the war and the Dutch citizens returned to The Netherlands. Gradually it appeared that tens of thousands were suffering from a concentration camp syndrome, which has left its marks on family life and the next generations.

I have always been impressed by the remarkable wisdom of the Zen tradition and its preoccupation with diminishing suffering. I trusted that its highest representatives: priests and Zen masters, had attained such levels of non-attachment that they would be able to adhere to the teachings of the Buddha even in the direst circumstances.

Victoria's book makes clear that I was totally wrong. During the Second World War and before, when Japan attacked Asian countries for various reasons, most Zen masters fully cooperated, promoting these "holy wars", applying "the sword which kills" to supposed enemies and promising enlightenment to young Kamikaze pilots. The writings of D. T. Suzuki even became popular in Nazi Germany.

After 1945 it took more than forty years for some sects to express collective regret and repentance. Some never did. Ichikawa Hakugen by way of exception, investigated his personal responsibility and the reasons that might make Buddhism susceptible to failings of this kind. If soul-searching took place, very little of it became known in the West. *Zen at War*

² *The Eastern Buddhist* (original series), vol. 1, no. 4 (November-December 1921), pp. 293-94.

took even western teachers who had been authorised by Japanese masters by surprise.

In her letter, Mrs. Buitendijk further details the sufferings of the Dutch internees and questions why Japanese Buddhist institutions have not been able to admit their war responsibility more willingly. She closes with the following words:

If the deed cannot be undone, at least reconciliation can be sought by acknowledging the failures of the past. It means exercising compassion. The outcome may not only be beneficial to the victims, but to the practitioners of Zen all over the world as well.³

Mrs. Buitendijk's original request for us was to print her letter in *The Eastern Buddhist* and to ask the readers for their opinions. However, in view of the importance of the topic, we have decided to carry a featured section dedicated to this sensitive matter.

The role of Japanese Buddhist monks, clergy, and temple institutions in promoting the war effort surely remains a significant topic in the study of Buddhist traditions in Japan. In order to contribute to the exploration of the issues raised in Mrs. Buitendijk's letter and Victoria's book, we have gathered articles that probe the recent history of Japanese Buddhist institutions and the potential of Buddhist thought to guide social life. This concern has become even more pressing over the last few months as this issue was being prepared.

The first article, "Protect the Dharma, Protect the Country: Buddhist War Responsibility and Social Ethics" by Prof. Christopher Ives, provides a historical overview of the problem by reviewing Victoria's *Zen at War*, and discusses the basis of the formulation of Buddhist social ethics by introducing the works of Ichikawa Hakugen. The second article, "Towards a Shin Buddhist Social Ethics" by Prof. Ama Toshimaro, deals with the case of Jōdo Shinshū, which, like Zen, has a history of actively supporting Japanese imperialism and militarism. Through historical and doctrinal analyses, the article demonstrates the need for a Shin Buddhist social ethics and discusses its foundation and possibilities by focusing on the thought of Kiyozawa Manshi and Takagi Kenmyō, who pursued such ideas about a century ago. The translation of the latter's "My Socialism (*Yo ga shakaishugi*)" is attached as an appendix.

In addition to these articles, we include Prof. Yanagida Seizan's "Passion for Zen," a series of talks delivered at the San Francisco Zen Center in 1989. Here, we can see that behind his influential studies of early Zen texts lie his deep self-examination, critical reflection on traditional Zen, and passion "to find a real Buddhism of the future which cannot go astray a second time!"

³ The full text of this letter may be found on our website: <<http://www.otani.ac.jp/EBS/journal.html>>.