

BUDDHA FOR CHRISTIANS

I. INTRODUCTION

1. *Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo*

It is a privilege to grow up in a house of prayer. In the Yagi household in Hilo, Hawaii, during the Second World War, an old man walked quietly into the living room at 6:30 every morning. He burned incense at the altar, rang a small bell three times--ching, ching, ching--and sat cross-legged on the *zabuton* cushion on the floor. He began his morning prayers, “*Namu daishi henjo kongo, namu daishi henjo kongo, namu daishi henjo kongo.*”

Of course, these are not Christian prayers. These prayers are from Shingon Buddhism--esoteric Vajrayana coming to Japan from Tibet, through China. The old man is Seiryu Yagi, my grandfather, patriarch of the Yagi clan in Hawaii, who came from Okinawa in 1907. A few times Grandpa would have me sit on the floor with him below the Buddha altar to chant, “*Namu daishi henjo kongo.*”

Grandpa spoke good Okinawan dialect, passable Japanese, and broken English. I am a 3rd generation Okinawan American. I spoke perfect Hawaiian pidgin English, and broken Japanese. I said, “Jitchan, what does *Namu daishi henjo kongo* mean?” Grandpa thought of the language gap for a while and said, “Who cares what it means, just say it.” Many years later in Japan, I learned what it meant: “I take refuge in the Great Teacher, Kukai, the Diamond Who Lights Up the Entire Universe.” This is the slogan chant of Shingon Buddhism.

2. The Yagi Buddha Altar

My Uncle Ernest died in the Korean War. After basic training when he left for Korea, he told me that he would probably come home in a box. He did come home in a box. That night Rev. Sasai, the head priest of Hoganji, Shingon Buddhist Temple in Hilo, would

come to our house to do the wake service.

A zealous Christian in the family phoned the Baptist preacher. She wanted to sneak in something Christian because the wake service and funeral was to be Buddhist. The Baptist missionary pastor knocked on the door.¹ He was relaxed and smiling as he entered the living room. When he saw the Buddha altar, he tensed up. It must have been the first time he was face to face with a Buddha altar. He did a Christian service and left.

We were stunned! The Buddha altar that we cherished and the Baptist missionary pastor whom we loved and respected--we could not put them together in the same room. There was anger, fear, and tears in his eyes. He saw the devil himself inside the Buddha image. I learned that night that we could never expect a Baptist missionary to share our respect for our Buddha altar. Many years later I met a few missionaries who respected Japanese religions, but these were missionaries one generation later.

The Yagi extended family is split between Buddhists and Christians. The Buddhists would be angry if Christian worship were insulted. The Christians would be angry if Buddhist worship were insulted. We are one family, Buddhists and Christians together. Almost all Japanese American families in California and Hawaii are like this—Buddhists and Christians together.

3. Tear Down the Buddha Altar!

A first-term furloughing Japan missionary came to our church in Hilo. We were 3rd generation Japanese youth, and we couldn't speak Japanese. The missionary told us the meaning of our Japanese names. We were amazed at a white man speaking our language! Then he asked me if we had a Buddha altar in our house. I said yes, we did. He read to me the Old Testament story about Gideon tearing down the village idol. He said I must tear down the Buddha idol in our living room!

That night after everybody had gone to their rooms, I stood in our living room and

¹ Hawaii before statehood, dominated by Asian cultures and Asian religions, was placed under the Foreign Mission Board instead of the Home Mission Board by the Southern Baptist Convention.

looked at the Buddha altar. It centered on the fierce Buddha Protector, *Fudo-Myo-O*. He was painted black with sharp fangs, holding a sword in one hand and a looped rope in the other. It was Grandpa's greatest treasure. I looked at the Buddha altar for a long time. My head said I should do it. But my heart stopped me. I couldn't tear down Grandpa's Buddha altar. I was a fifth grader, just 10 years old.

Many years later when I read the Bible for myself, I saw what the missionary did not see. When Gideon tore down the village idol, he fled the village that night. The Bible says he left that night before the sun came up (Judges 6:25-27). The missionary should have told me that when I tear down Grandpa's Buddha altar, I have to leave home that night before the sun came up and never come home again. When I was 10 years old, I learned not to trust American ministers when they trash Japanese religions.

4. The Japanese Invasion of China

Of all the evils of the 20th century in Asia, none are as grievous as the horrors unleashed by the Japanese army in the Pacific phase of the Second World War. Images of the Rape of Nanjing, the brutal 1910-1945 occupation of Korea, the forced recruitment of Taiwanese into the Japanese army, the recruitment of unwilling women in the occupied territories of Korea, Taiwan, and the Dutch East Indies as “comfort women” prostitutes for the Japanese army, the sadistic chemical-biological warfare experiments performed on captured Allied prisoners at Kyushu University², and programmed release of dangerous specimens into the atmosphere above Chinese cities—all these atrocities can hardly be forgotten nor forgiven by living victims.

The Japanese invasion of China made it necessary for all Chinese missionaries to leave. When the U. S. entered the war after the attack on Pearl Harbor, most Japan missionaries also were forced to leave. Those left behind were sent to internment camps in Japan, some temporarily and others for the duration of the war.

² The historical novel, *The Sea and Poison (Umi to Dokuyaku)*, by reknown Catholic novelist, Shusaku Endo, graphically described this secret project of the Japanese army. It is available in English translation. My home in Fukuoka was about 4 miles from Kyushu University. In exchange for receiving documentary results of all these toxic biological human experiments, the U. S. Occupation Forces promised not to prosecute Japanese scientists and military officers directly responsible for these crimes against humanity.

Instead of waiting out the war in the U.S. homeland, many Southern Baptist missionaries forced out of China and Japan came to Hawaii to work until the war ended. A tall veteran missionary from Inland China, Dr. Charles Leonard, came to Hilo to start a mission. He was joined by a brilliant young scholar missionary, Dr. Tucker Callaway. I was baptized by Dr. Tucker Callaway on Easter morning, April, 1946. So the massive evil of the Japanese army's Pacific invasion resulted in a little good in bringing thousands of Hawaii residents to faith in Jesus Christ. That is why I could become a Christian to say, "I believe in Jesus Christ as my Savior and Lord," instead of saying, "*Namu daishi henjo kongo.*"

5. Make Me a Zafu

God called me to become a missionary to Japan. I was accepted for admission to four American seminaries. I turned down Princeton Seminary. I turned down Fuller Seminary. I turned down Southern Baptist Seminary. I turned down Southwestern Baptist Seminary. I took a ship from Honolulu to Yokohama. I went to Tokyo Union Theological Seminary partly because I didn't want to hear American theologians trash Japanese religions.

In 1972 I joined the faculty of a university in Fukuoka. There was a tour of Zen Buddhist monasteries for foreign scholars. We first went to Hosshinji, a small monastery in a fishing village called Obama on the Japan Sea. The small monastery has some kind of celebrity status today because Obama is the same name as the first black President of the United States. We imitated the daily life of monks in training. We woke up to the loud racket of a monk running down the hall, banging a metal pot with a wooden spoon.

The next day we traveled to Eiheiiji closeby. Eiheiiji was famous as one of the two headquarter monasteries for Soto Zen. We woke up at 4:30 a.m. We sat on our meditation cushions by 5 a.m., joining hundreds of pilgrims in a large hall. When I came home to Fukuoka, I asked my wife, Ellen, to make me a *zafu* meditation cushion. That was my start in Zen meditations about 30 years ago.

II. BASIC TEACHING

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

1. Life is suffering (*dukkha*=suffering, affliction, unsatisfactory).
2. Suffering comes from desire (*tanha*=craving) Attachments to survival, wealth, possessions, power, youth, sex, food.
3. Cutting desires ends suffering (renunciation, non-attachment)
4. Cut desires through the Eight-Fold Path.

EIGHT-FOLD PATH

MIND: 1. right views 2. right thought

ACTION: 3. right speech 4. right action 5. right job

MEDITATION: 6. right effort 7. right mindfulness 8. right concentration

THREE MARKS OF EXISTENCE

1. *Anicca* impermanence (nothing is permanent, not even your soul nor Gods)
2. *Anatta* no self (non-substantiality of all things)
3. *Dukkha* suffering (insufficient, unsatisfactory). Life is suffering; not fulfillment, adventure, or pleasure. Old age, sickness, and death begins the list of 8 basic sufferings. Of course, the varieties of suffering are countless³

III. EARLY BUDDHISM

1. The Hindu Background

Just as Christianity came out of Judaism and cannot be understood without its background in the Hebrew Scriptures, so Buddhism came out of Hinduism and cannot be understood without its Hindu background. Brahmanism and its later development, Hinduism, are the cumulative result of the religion of Aryan invaders from the Northwest. They imposed their Vedic religion on the conquered Dravidian tribes as they won control over the sub-continent over the centuries. Tight-fisted control over the priesthood and the sacrificial system by the Brahmin caste slowly created a backlash. Besides Islam, the religion of a foreign conquering dynasty, three native heretical religions rose up to defy Brahmin controlled religion—Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism. Their heresy is defined by their open

³ Pain is physically unavoidable. But suffering is avoidable mental stress.

rejection of caste and the sacred Scriptures of Hinduism--*the Vedas*.

The cultural influence of Brahmanism and the later Hinduism on Buddhism were many: karma, countless cycles of rebirth, non-attachment, homeless holy men, inward Vedanta meditation, and liberating *moksha* enlightenment experience. The non-violence in the backbone of Buddhist ethics points to the Jain foundation principle of *ahimsa* that informs all Indian culture and religions. Against popular views of simplistic, legalistic karma, the Buddha's teaching was more an ethical principle. Karma was complex, encompassing a comprehensive mix of individual, family, and tribal responsibility. Accounting for intention and repentance, the total effect of any one action was beyond human calculation. No one could predict when in the future the fruit of any specific action would appear.⁴

2. Gautama Buddha

The lifetime of Gautama Buddha was 80 years. There is some debate over when this was: Western scholars think of 566-486 B.C.E.; Sri Lanka and Southeast Asian scholars, 624-544 B.C.E.; and other scholars, 448-368 B.C.E.⁵ The ancient traditional Chinese dates are about 900 B.C.E. The idealized traditional story reads like an extremely re-worked script in a drama. Siddhartha was born in Lumbini, near the capital city of Kapilavastu, in the region now divided between India and Nepal in the foothills of the Himalayas. Siddhartha belonged to the Gautama family of the Sakya tribe. Sakyamuni is his title of honor, Sage of the Sakya tribe.

The traditional texts pictured Siddhartha as a prince coddled in royal luxury, brought up to inherit the kingdom.⁶ By chance he met an old man, a sick man, a dead man, and a holy man. Deeply troubled by the inevitable suffering in human life, he bade farewell

⁴ David J. Kalupahana, *Buddhist Philosophy: A Historical Analysis*, University of Hawaii Press, 1976, pp. 44-55.

⁵ Leo D. Lefebure, *The Buddha & The Christ*, Orbis Books, 1997 (1993), p. 5. Other options on dates are offered by Andrew Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, Barnes and Noble Books, 2000 (1994), p. 19. Modern scholarship has shown little consensus for Buddha's dates, differing over a hundred years.

⁶ Most likely his father, instead of being a king, was the presiding ruler of the oligarchy governing the Sakya clan-based republic. Some clan-based republics in the Himalayan foothills were not swallowed up yet by the rising new monarchies arising in the central Ganges basin. Skilton, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

to his sleeping wife, Yasodhara, and their infant son, Rahula. He fled the privileges and powers of the throne to overcome the problem of human suffering. The story is embellished with numerous miracles that allowed him to escape the castle at age 29 for the ascetic life of a begging holy man in the forest.

For six years he trained in spiritual disciplines. His first teacher, Alara Kalama, taught him meditative absorption into a state of “no-thing-ness.” His second teacher, Udakra Ramaputra, led him to a meditative trance of “neither perception nor non-perception.” He then gave himself to severe asceticism, testing his limits in holding his breath and in extreme fasting. Finding asceticism to be a dead end, he ate some food and recovered his strength. At Bodh Gaya he sat under a large tree and passed through several stages of advanced yogic absorption. Finally reaching the highest level of enlightenment, he became at age 35 a Buddha—one who wakes up to his true self. His five companion seekers became his first disciples.

As many others subjected themselves to Gautama’s path, the Sangha community of monks was born. They were wandering holy men who at first came together only in the few months of the rainy season. Gautama taught and trained disciples for 45 years, traveling back and forth across north India, to the cities and towns of the central Ganges basin. He continued teaching his Sangha monks until he died at age 80.⁷

Over the years the Sangha of celibate monks formed settled communities near villages. They made regular visits with their begging bowls to gather food from sympathetic villagers. The material dependence of the monastery on the village was reciprocated on the spiritual level. That is, the villagers in giving food were piling up good merit for a better rebirth. Families whose sons became monks were honored by both monastery and village. This living bond between monastery and village is what guaranteed the survival of the monks through hard times.

2. Theravada and Mahayana

In time, Mahayana, a new branch of Buddhism arose with distinctive social and

⁷ Skilton, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-24.

theological developments. The earlier Theravada is a two-tiered system of monks and villagers. The monks trained through temple chores, meditation, and Scripture studies aimed at a three-pronged deliverance: psychologically at non-attachment, chronologically at breaking out of the cycles of rebirth, and spiritually at a transforming mystical enlightenment experience. The villagers were excluded from any hope of deliverance. Their highest hope was to earn good merits through good deeds and through generosity in putting food into the monks' bowls on their regular begging schedule. A good accumulation of merits at death would propel the villager to a good rebirth as a man worthy of becoming a monk. By the traditional model no woman could gain non-attachment and enlightenment to become a "never-returner." But if she earned enough good merit, she could be reborn as a man, become a monk, and then train for nirvana.⁸ Many monks would not reach enlightenment in a lifetime of training, and may need to try again next time around or for several lifetimes—so difficult is it to reach enlightenment. So it was fantastic good news for villagers that Mahayana offered liberation even to those outside the monastery.

Several doctrinal developments gave birth to Mahayana. First is savior Bodhisattvas. A Bodhisattva is simply a person on the last stage before becoming a Buddha. In Mahayana as the "Great Raft," however, the Bodhisattva became a principle of absolute compassion. The Bodhisattva refused to enter Nirvana as a Buddha, until he could save all beings.⁹ Of course, since Buddhist cosmic history is thought of as endless cycles with no beginning and no end, there is no conceivable time when all will be saved. The temporary Bodhisattva status, then, became a permanent icon of absolute compassion—the description of a Buddha. Super-hero Bodhisattvas, then, are revered and worshipped equally with Buddhas.

There are Bodhisattvas whose extreme compassion has won the adoration of millions, and whose cultic fame rivals that of any Buddha. Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva

⁸ Many insightful monks, of course, see beyond party-line propaganda that excludes women and laymen.

⁹ This is in contrast to Theravada which offers no saviors, not even Gautama Buddha. Gautama Buddha instructed his monks not to depend on him, but to work out their own salvation by their own practice. This is radicalized in Lin Chi, the founder of Rinzai Zen in China. His famous slogan proverb is: "If you meet the Buddha, kill him." That is, it is better to kill the messenger and fulfill his message, than to worship the messenger and forget the message.

of Compassion, is known as Kuan Yin in China and as Kannon¹⁰ in Japan. Although a male in India, he was transformed into a female mother figure in China, Korea, and Japan. She often stands, cradling an infant in her arms.¹¹

Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, is the focus of veneration along with Avalokiteshvara in most Zen circles. By tradition Zen practitioners prostrate themselves completely on the floor three times at every zazen session—not before any Buddha, but before these two Bodhisattvas. Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva (*Jizo*) with a staff in his right hand and a pearl in his left hand is greatly beloved for leading deceased children through the long journey to heaven. Maitreya Bodhisattva, the Buddha to come, is invoked by Tibetan Buddhists in the Red Crown Ceremony to appear before his time to bless us now with the powerful blessings of the New Age still to come. The ability of Bodhisattvas to bless us comes from the infinite surplus of merits they earned through countless lifetimes of self-sacrifice. In contrast to the severe path of Theravada monks, Mahayana showers blessings of grace on both monks and villagers from a multitude of savior Bodhisattvas.

A second doctrinal development is savior Bibles. **The Perfection of Wisdom Sutras** claim guaranteed power to deliver the believer safely to the other shore.¹² By far the most celebrated savior Bible in East Asia is the **Lotus Sutra**. The first and second largest religions in Japan, Soka Gakkai and Rissho Kosei Kai, are both Lotus Sutra religions. It is salvation by grace in chanting the holy slogan, “I Take Refuge In the Wonderful Law of the Lotus Sutra—*Namu myoho rengo-kyo.*” The collective power of the countless Buddhas in the macrocosm is concentrated in the microcosm of the 7 syllables of this powerful mantra

¹⁰ The owner of the Japanese Canon camera company is a devotee of Kannon, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Canon is the westernized spelling of Kannon, whose name means the Bodhisattva “Who Listens to the Groanings of All Suffering Beings.”

¹¹ A Buddhist priest explained how a male Buddha could so easily become female. He said it was a matter of lowering truth to the level of human understanding. Of course, there is no male or female in the world of Buddhas.

¹² “All past, present, and future Buddhas live this **Perfection of Wisdom** and attain supreme, perfect enlightenment. So know that this **Perfection of Wisdom** is the holy mantra, the luminous mantra, the supreme mantra, the incomparable mantra by which all suffering is swept away. This is totally true. Proclaim this **Perfection of Wisdom** mantra and say, ‘*Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svaha.*’” Closing lines of the *Heart of the Perfection of Wisdom Sutra*.

invoking the title of the **Lotus Sutra**.¹³

A third development is Pure Land Buddhism. The Pure Land religion of grace stands on the foundation of the three Pure Land Sutras available in Pali and Chinese translations. The story is about Dharmakara Bodhisattva. He made 48 vows refusing to become a Buddha unless 48 miraculous conditions were guaranteed in his Buddha Land of Bliss and Purity to be built in the West. Since Dharmakara Bodhisattva did become Amida Buddha, all 48 qualities are now guaranteed realities. By the Foundational Vow, the 18th Vow, all creatures who call on his name would be welcomed to this Pure land to be purified. The purification is by overwhelming their bad karma by the infinite surplus of merits earned by Dharmakara through countless lifetimes.

By chanting the slogan, “I take Refuge in Amida Buddha,” *Namo Omitofo* (Chinese) or *Namu Amida Butsu* (Japanese), not only does Amida’s store of merit flow into the believer’s account, but also, the absolute faith of Amida replaces the wavering faith of the believer. The Protestant Principles of “grace alone,” and “faith alone” of Martin Luther and the “once saved, always saved”¹⁴ perseverance doctrine of Calvin are amazingly preached in Pure Land Buddhism, especially in the Shin Buddhism of Shinran in Japan. Mahayana grace of savior Bodhisattvas, savior Bibles, savior Buddhas, and savior mudras, mantras, and mandalas all effectively short circuit the tortuous route of multiple rebirths to immediate salvation now—in this lifetime. That is, multiple cycles of rebirth are no longer an effective psychological model in Japan.¹⁵

A fourth development is the Madhyamaka “Middle Path” School of Nagarjuna (2nd century CE). Whereas Gautama taught the psychological middle path between hedonism and asceticism, Nagarjuna taught the philosophical middle path between eternalism and nihilism. The everyday world does not exist as ultimate truth (*paramartha-satya*) or inherent existence, but it does exist as conventional truth, though radically impermanent. It is in this realm of conventional reality that the Buddha’s path was meant to be applied. Besides the middle path,

¹³ They become ten syllables when read in Japanese as *namu myo-o ho-o rengo kyo-o*.

¹⁴ Impossible to back-slide in Pure Land, *fu-tentai* 不転退.

¹⁵ Speakers at graduation ceremonies speak of *tatta ikkai dake no tootoi jinsei* “this one precious chance at life.”

Nagarjuna's slogan was *sunya*, emptiness. Everything is empty in lacking *svabhava*, inherent existence.

A fifth development is the Yogachara "Mind Only" School of Asanga (c.310-390 CE) and Vasubandhu (c.320-400 CE). The Yogachara School, of course, is based on the experiences of yoga meditations. They saw Nagarjuna's claim that the everyday world does not exist as ultimate truth as leaning too far toward nihilism. Against Madhyamaka's claim that nothing has inherent existence, the Yogachara insisted that mind has inherent existence. Whereas Madhyamaka defined emptiness as devoid of *svabhava*, inherent existence, Yogachara redefined emptiness as devoid of subject-object duality.¹⁶

Consciousness was analyzed into 8 levels. The lower levels involved physical awareness through our six senses of eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The highest 8th level is the *alaya-vijnana*, storehouse consciousness. The Himalaya is the *alaya* (storehouse) of the *hima* white [snow]. The specific mixture of good and bad karma accumulated over multiple lifetimes determines the quality of consciousness that is ours in this lifetime. The quality changes for our next lifetime according to the mix of good and bad karma we contribute in this lifetime. The Buddha denied the natural immortality of the soul. How can there be cycles of rebirth if there is no soul to be reborn? The Yogachara answer was that the *alaya-vijnana*, the ever-changing "repository of consciousness," is what is transmitted from rebirth to rebirth.

A sixth development is the *tathagata-garbha* doctrine. *Tathagata* is a euphemism for the Buddha. *Garbha* means womb. *Tathagata-garbha* teaches that the womb containing the Buddha is already present in all living beings. The womb-buddha is Buddha as an embryo or seed. In the early teaching all beings were said to have the potential of becoming Buddhas. But later the womb-buddha began to be spoken of as some definite thing with substance. Whereas Madhyamaka claimed that all things were empty of *svabhava*, inherent reality, this new teaching claimed that the *tathagata-garbha* was an indestructible, permanent core to all beings.¹⁷

¹⁶ Skilton, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-27.

¹⁷ Skilton, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

It has become a presupposition of Tibetan Buddhism and Japanese Buddhism that we all are guaranteed to become Buddhas in some lifetime because we are already Buddhas at our core. The **Lankavatara Sutra** and the **Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana Sutra** connected the dots in stating that the *alaya-vijnana* (storehouse consciousness) was identical to the *tathagata-garbha* (womb-buddha).¹⁸ This doctrine in Japan has been called *hon-gaku*, “Original Enlightenment,” in contrast to the “original sin” of traditional Christianity. Mahayana displays this radical optimism of guaranteed buddhahood lacking in Theravada.

3. Vajrayana

A new type of Buddhist literature appeared from the 3rd century to 11th century CE, called *tantras*, meaning “thread.” Although the new movement related to this literature holds essentially to Mahayana doctrine and is often classified as such, it is also given a distinct name, Vajrayana, because of radically distinct practices. *Vajra* means diamond and thunderbolt. Vajrayana is esoteric, hiding its secrets from all except monks initiated into their ranks. All esoteric religions, of course, protect mystical practices heavy with magical overtones. Central is what may be called “the 3 M’s” in English, *mudras, mantras, and mandalas*.

Mudras are secret hand gestures formed while both hands are hidden under a piece of cloth during funerals. In monthly fire ceremonies monks use mudras to built invisible walls around the worshippers at the start of a service to protect them from evil spirits and various forms of curses. They use other mudras to call the Buddhas to attend the service. They use mudras in conducting the service. At the end of a service they use mudras to bid the Buddhas to depart. Then they use the mudras to dissolve the invisible protective walls they created at the start of the service. At my uncle’s wake service I asked the tantric head priest, Rev. Sasai, how many mudras there were in all. He said about four hundred.

My friend, an esoteric Tendai monk, said that if he made a mistake in his mudra during a funeral, the dead would not “go to heaven”. The head priest of a Shingon temple made three beautiful mudras, one flowing into another, to show my students upon my request.

¹⁸ Skilton, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

The next year he would not show us any, even at my request. He had remembered that they were secret. Dale Saunders has published a book called, *Mudras*, with hundreds of photographs of mudras.¹⁹ How could he publish it, since everybody knows they are esoteric secrets! All Buddha images hold their fingers in mudra positions.

Mantras are secret word formulas. A former Jesuit priest became an apprentice to a high ranking Tantric Taoist priest on Taiwan. In the class on Taoism, which he taught at the University of Hawaii, a student asked that he teach us some mantras for protection against evil spirits, spells, and curses. He said it might be more effective for us to say our “Hail Marys” than to try to manipulate powerful mantras that we did not believe or understand. When my students went into the sacred waterfall of a Shingon temple in Japan, rugged veteran mountain adepts screamed mantras from the creek bank to protect them from demons, spells, and curses.

Mandalas are geometric pictures crammed full of powerful Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Unlike secret mudras and mantras, mandalas, as magnificent religious art, are impossible to keep secret today. They are readily available in bookstores as photo collections. Vajrayana temples openly display their main mandalas prominently on the wall for all to see. The central Diamond and Womb Mandala of Shingon and Tendai are displayed as giant ceiling-to-floor hanging rug mandalas in the two story Toji museum of Shingon esoteric art in Kyoto. Poster copies of mandalas are sold in art shops everywhere in Buddhist countries. In Tibet mandalas are called *thangkas*. Any tourist can buy them. Carl Jung studied mandalas as archetypal images of the racial subconscious. Jung claimed that religious adepts sank into trances in which they descended into the depths of their psyche. After returning to normal consciousness, they drew as mandalas what they saw in their trances.

The main Vajrayana worship service is the fire ceremony. They build a fire in a special fire altar in the temple enclosed on three sides with a sacred rope. Small dishes of many varieties of seeds and plant oils sit on the altar. Preparation is made with the prostration of priests and a succession of mudras. A fire is built in the midst of loud chanting, banging of drums, and cymbals. The small metal dishes of seeds and oils are poured into the

¹⁹ The book is available in most university libraries.

fire throughout the ceremony. Pieces of firewood the size and shape of 12 inch rulers are collected in 3 or 4 participating temples. Each stick has been chosen by a temple member for a specific prayer written on it for secular benefits: safety from fire, painless childbirth, passing university exams, a raise in salary, safety from traffic accidents, protection from disease, and others. These sticks are collected for that month, tied in huge bundles. These sticks are tossed into the fire throughout the service. Often the believer thinks his prayer will be granted, while the priest is praying the opposite—that his prayer greed will be consumed in the fire.

Any explanation of Vajrayana would be incomplete without mentioning sexual yoga—the use of sex between a monk and his consort for intensifying spiritual energy. I asked a senior Vajrayana theologian from Nepal about prescribed sexual activity in the training of monks. He said that the master monk would consider the spiritual condition of all monks under his care. He would select only those monks who would benefit by sexual practice. All other monks would know nothing, he said. He would be naïve, of course, if he thought the monks would not gossip.²⁰ A professor at the University of Hawaii went to the airport to greet eminent Vajrayana monks from Nepal. Several women dressed as nuns followed them off the plane. He asked the monks who the women were. They did not give him an answer.²¹

IV. THEISM OR ATHEISM?

1. Trans-personal

In India, Hinduism has three kinds of Gods. First are personal Gods like Kali, Shiva, Varuna, Agni, Krishna, Rama, and 330 million other Gods. You worship the Gods with *puja* offerings of water, flowers, buttered honey, music, and bloody sacrifices of

²⁰ For an academic description of tantric literature explaining sexual intercourse as spiritual practice, see Skilton, *op. cit.* pp. 140-41.

²¹ Shingon and Tendai are Vajrayana in Japan. They both have rejected sexual practices in the training of monks. Japanese society would not tolerate them. Tachikawa, a Shingon sect, is infamous for their past sexual practices.

chickens and goats. If you praise the Gods enough to make them happy, they will take care of you.

Alongside this popular religion, thoughtful Hindus have sought to find the underlying divine unity. The Upanishads, the last section in the Vedas, moved toward a monistic paradigm. The many Gods are no more than masks of the One. This was systematized in the Vedanta school of philosophy formulated most influentially by Shankara. The slogan of his followers is ***Brahman=Atman*** (God=self). Brahman is the ultimate reality or ground of all things, very much like what in the West is called Being Itself. Atman is the ultimate reality or ground of the human person. The formula means that my ultimate ground is identical with the ultimate ground of the universe. There are not two things, therefore, the self and Brahman or Being Itself. Instead what each person ultimately is, like everything else, is an instance of Brahman or Being Itself.

All the characteristics that differentiate us and other things are appearances rather than reality in the fullest sense. Thus Brahman is not a person or any kind of being alongside other beings or person alongside other persons. Brahman is trans-personal. You do not talk to this God or seek to please this God. Rather you seek through spiritual exercises and meditation to become aware of your identity with God. By realizing existentially that this God is also you, or that you always already are this God, you transcend your illusory, ephemeral self and make real the divine Self that is God.

However, not all those who sought the unity of the divine underlying the myriads of Gods, moved in this trans-personal direction. The clearest expression of the monotheistic tendencies in India is found in the work of Ramanuja. His philosophy offers a version of panentheism, that is, the idea that all things are in God, thus contributing to the divine reality. This divine reality is distinct from and more than the sum of other beings. It is personal in a way the Brahman or Being Itself is not.

2. Impermanence

Buddhism arose in the context of popular polytheism. It opposed any sort of worship of these Gods or seeking their favor. Whatever Gods there may be are caught up in

the same cycles of birth, death, and rebirth as are we. Individuals must liberate themselves by personal disciplines. Like the Vedantists, Buddhists oriented themselves to the trans-personal reality equally present in all things. But whereas Vedantists thought of this reality as enduring through all change endlessly and unchangingly, Buddhists taught that it, too, was characterized by impermanence. For Buddhists nothing is permanent. Everything is in flux.

In place of Brahman and Atman, Buddhists speak of Buddha nature. This is often defined as “dependent origination.” That is, all things are instances of dependent origination, and this means that they are nothing in themselves but rather products of other things, which are, of course, themselves products of other things. Each of these things is transitory. None has being in itself. Buddhist meditation is, then, not designed to realize within ourselves the being that is at the same time the being of all things. It is designed instead to enable us to realize that we have no self in the sense of something permanent underlying the flux of experience. We are empty of any such being and therefore open to everything. Hinduism and Buddhism both teach non-attachment. For Vedantists, attachment to anything impermanent prevents us from realizing the permanent being that is truly what we are. For Buddhists, attachment to anything blocks our disinterested openness to whatever is as it is.

On the other hand, the negative melting of the false self into no-self is synonymous with the dynamic action of “riding the tiger” or “going with the flow” in popular Zen vocabulary. Manjusri is often portrayed as riding a tiger. Tibetan Buddhists speak of the “Wind Horse,” which charges the disciple for action. Just as Jesus appears as a Spirit-charged being in the Gospel of Luke-Acts, the seeming Buddhist quietism of no-self is only the preliminary condition to the adventure of riding the tiger in hot pursuit of Manjusri and Kannon, the Bodhisattvas of Wisdom and Compassion. They beckon the disciple forward with vision, direction, and energy. Buddhists see divinity in verbs, and not in nouns. This basic dynamism is what we see in the “engaged Buddhism” of the last section of this essay.

3. Are Buddhists Atheists?

Jesus was God-centered; Gautama was not. That is, Jesus prayed to God as to a divine person. Gautama sought to realize his true nature. He meditated intensively, but he did not pray for help. Although the doctrine of impermanence easily leads to atheism, Gautama was not interested in drawing out its metaphysical implications. As his famous parable of the poisoned arrow²² indicates, he viewed theoretical questions of this kind as a distraction from the urgent work of enlightenment or liberation.

The primary issues for early Buddhists were the relation to polytheism and the understanding of what is ultimate and universal. They dealt with polytheism by asserting the irrelevance of these gods to the urgent task of liberation from false consciousness. Buddhists as Buddhists neither affirm nor deny the existence of polytheistic deities, but they do oppose paying attention to them.

Buddhists have also opposed the Vedantist tendency to treat the trans-personal as having its own substantial reality, but they have affirmed the trans-personal reality as of ultimate spiritual importance, calling it Buddha nature. In many forms of Buddhism the Buddhas, or Enlightened Ones, are divine realities. Buddhism in general is not theistic, but since its understanding of reality was shaped in a quite different context, not in opposition to Abrahamic theism, it is quite misleading to call it atheistic.

The possibility that Buddhists should be considered atheistic is hardly considered in Asia. Even Christian theologians there do not raise it. It is a question that arises only as Westerners impose their categories on a spirituality that arose and developed in a different context facing different questions. Just as it would be unreasonable for Buddhists to demand that Christians believe in Buddhas, it is unreasonable for Christians to demand that Buddhists believe in God. Is there a naïve assumption that God is a religiously neutral word of absolute value in evaluating religions? God is a Christian word with Christian content and Christian philosophical frameworks. We cannot ignore controversies among Christians

²² A man is shot with a poisoned arrow. The feather in the tail of the arrow could occupy our time and attention. What kind of bird did this feather come from? What kind of tree did the arrow come from? If we allowed ourselves to be occupied with such curiosities instead of hurrying to find a doctor, the man would die. We must not be distracted by theoretical questions and focus on the mission at hand—the practical problem of relieving suffering.

today concerning omnipotence, impassibility, predestination, and determinism within God-talk. At the center of popular Christianity is the Father God. Too often male chauvinism is expressed through the Father God in the patriarchal hierarchies of church institutions and priesthood.²³ For all these reasons, Ken Tanaka, a Japanese American Buddhist theologian, wrote that Buddhists can answer positively or negatively about God only after Christians have defined what they mean by God.²⁴

The Trinity as a thought structure allows for the transcendence of God the Father to be balanced with the immanence of the Holy Spirit. But the history of Christian doctrine and popular Christianity see God the Father and Jesus the Son overwhelming the role of the Holy Spirit. The dominant posture of Christian spirituality is talking to God the Father, instead of merging with the Holy Spirit. Many of the Christians who now practice Zen silent meditations are bold to claim authenticity for their practice through the Holy Spirit within the Trinity.

4. Buddhist and Christian Idolatry

Jews, Christians, and Muslims share the Bible's abhorrence of idols. Buddhism, on the other hand, has charmed the human spirit through the creative imagination of religious art in the brilliant colors, intricate patterns, and multiplicity of images--Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and *devas*. The missionary knows that as Christian hymns have been the effective weapon of Christian evangelism, so Buddhist images have been the awesome weapon of Buddhist evangelism. The ferocious power and subtle beauty of Buddhist and Hindu images have overwhelmed Asian aesthetic and mystic consciousness. So it is a big surprise to Westerners to hear that Buddhism has little interest in Gods! A multitude of idols, but no dependence on Gods? The Jewish-Christian-Muslim taboo of idolatry has especially

²³ Buddhists duck for cover at the charge of male chauvinism. Male domination and patriarchal systems are far more extreme in Buddhism of Southeast Asia and East Asia. Traditionally, the most senior nun must subject herself to the authority of the lowest ranking monk, even someone ordained just yesterday.

²⁴ "If God is defined primarily as cosmic compassion and wisdom, then some Buddhists...may be inclined to say they believe in "God."...On the other hand, if God is a supreme personal being who created the universe, lives in heaven, watches over me, and knows my thoughts and actions, then Buddhists clearly do not believe in God." Ken Tanaka, *Ocean: An Introduction to Jodo-Shinshu Buddhism in America*, Wisdom Ocean Publications, 1998 (1997), p. 26.

targeted Hinduism and Buddhism.

When Moses climbed Mt. Sinai and met God for the first time in the burning bush, he asked God what was his name. To lead a crushed slave people out of Egypt, Moses needed to know God's name. God's answer was "I AM WHO I AM." That can mean, "I refuse to reduce myself down to something humans can understand." Of course, in the rest of the Bible God does exactly what he refused to do for Moses at the burning bush. To save human beings, God lowered himself into earthly forms as *El, Elohim* (God), *El-Elyon* (God Most High), *El-'Olam* (Everlasting God), *Shaddai* (Almighty), *Abir* (Mighty One), *Adonai* (Lord), *Sebaoth* (Hosts), *Pahad* (Fear), and *El Roi* (God Who Sees Me). For Jesus, God was especially *Abba*, Father.

The original hesitancy of God to be revealed in a human way was reinforced in Judaism with the prohibition of representing God by idols. This taboo of idolatry was to be the high wall to forever remind the Jews that God was beyond anything in their world. The symbol of God as wind, breath, and spirit in the Hebrew *ruah* and the Greek *pneuma* reinforced this mystery about God. Though we benefit from wind, breath, and spirit, we cannot define or control them. They are invisible.

The need to protect the transcendence and mystery of God and at the same time to satisfy the craving of the people for earthly models of God was brought to a head in the Iconoclastic Controversies (A.D. 787-794). Was it permissible to use three dimensional images of Christ and the saints in worship (salutation, reverence, adoration, and homage)? These intense disputes promoted by Charlemagne, Empress Irene of Constantinople, and Pope Hadrian I were complicated by problems in Greek-Latin translations. Today, three dimensional images are prohibited in worship by Protestants, but allowed by Roman Catholics. Eastern Orthodox icons are two dimensional. Describing the character of God through earthly models, while protecting God's formless mystery, has been a never-ending problem for both Christianity and Buddhism.

5. Mahayana Trinity

In dealing with the Western word “God,” Mahayana Buddhists should describe what they mean by *Tri-Kaya*, Three Bodies of the Buddha, 三身. This three-fold thought framework corresponds well with the Christian Trinity. First is *Dharmakaya*, the formless form of absolute Truth. Second is *Sambhogakaya*, the relative forms taken by absolute Truth to save all beings. Here live the countless Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who never descend into human history. Third is *Nirmanakaya*, the Buddhas of form who enter our world of history. This list is headed by Gautama Buddha, and includes Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, and the founders of Buddhist denominations. Taking to heart this Mahayana parallel to the Christian Trinity, can anyone accuse Buddhists of being atheists?

IV. YIN YANG: REDEMPTIVE DEFEAT

The God of the Jews had become a Man of War, Exodus 15:3.²⁵ Their religion had become triumphalist—a winning army under a winning God with a winning strategy under a winning commander, Joshua. It was win, win, win; kill, kill, kill! The Canaanite inhabitants of the land were being punished, the Book of Joshua claimed, for polluting the land with their evil. Evil cannot be rehabilitated. Evil must be destroyed. Take no prisoners. Every Canaanite must be killed, even women and children.²⁶ Defeat was impossible under a God of victory.

Then the unthinkable happened. Assyria defeated with finality the Northern Kingdom, Samaria, in 722 B.C.E. Babylon defeated the Southern Kingdom, Judah, in 586 B.C.E. The leading classes were taken into exile and lived in the land of their conquerors. A religion of victory is not worth 5 cents when you lose. The defeated Israelites buried their dead, bound their wounds, and sank into despair. Then their prophets heard something. They heard a voice that turned their religion upside down. They heard God crying with the losers instead of celebrating with the winners. If God was crying with the losers instead of celebrating with the winners, then the winners are losers and the losers are winners. It was

²⁵ In the hymn of praise celebrating the drowning of Pharaoh’s army is the startling sentence: “The LORD is a man of war; the LORD is his name,” Exodus 15:3 RSV.

²⁶ Some scholars say that there was no conquest. They claim that some Canaanites actually joined Hebrews to form the Confederation of 12 Tribes. But that is not the theme of our present Book of Joshua.

just a matter of time. So time became a key to New Testament religion—that the Kingdom was near, that it was already here but still coming. They looked for the time when losers will become winners, and winners will become losers.²⁷

The new Judaism, the Judaism of the exile, was the opposite of the Good and Evil triumphalism of the Book of Joshua. The new icon of exile Judaism greets us in Isaiah 53. The hero is so ugly that people turn away their eyes. They pity him and despise him for being so brutally punished by God and abandoned by all. The big surprise is that he was punished for our sins--by his wounds we are healed. The old Judaism was about winning. The new Judaism is about losing—redemptive suffering. The God of losers claimed all losers as his own. Their badge of membership was their suffering. So Jesus chose all losers of society as his friends. The new message was that evil can and must be redeemed. No revenge. Love your enemies, forgive your enemies, pray for your enemies. Jesus died for his enemies. Return good for evil, so evil might be transformed into good. Contradicting the Good and Evil theme of the Book of Joshua, the Gospel of Jesus was Yin Yang.

It is regrettable that the Book of Revelation of St. John ignored or rejected the message of Jesus and returned to the Good and Evil theme of the Book of Joshua. Evil cannot be redeemed. Win, win, win; kill, kill, kill! No returning good for evil. No loving enemies, no forgiving enemies, no praying for enemies. No turning enemies into friends. The Christianity that promotes the Good and Evil theme against the Yin Yang of Buddhism is a Christianity that ignores or rejects the Yin Yang Gospel of Jesus.²⁸ Can we reject the violence of triumphalism in the Book of Joshua and the Book of Revelation to choose the

²⁷ Losers becoming winners, and winners becoming losers is the clear framework for the New Testament Beatitudes.

²⁸ Redeemability is the foundation for all evangelism, pastoral ministry, peace and justice projects, and world missions. So Yin Yang with its framework of redeemability is a better fit for the message of Jesus. In Yin Yang, Good can become Evil; and Evil can become Good. People committed to Good fall into temporary Evil; people committed to Evil often find themselves doing momentary good. Nobody is all Good or all Bad. So the path is repentance, confession, and rededication. Christianity crusading for Good has at times committed massive evil—in the Crusades, in the persecution of Jews, in the near genocide of American Indian tribes, in the demonization of Hawaiian religion, and in the brutal enslavement of Afro-Americans. All this fits better in the ambiguous framework of Yin Yang that opens up possibilities of redeemability. Walter Wink confirmed Yin Yang as the appropriate framework for the Gospel of Jesus in his book, *The Powers That Be*, A Galilee Book, 1999 (1998).

revolutionary peace of Jesus, the wounded healer? Walter Wink said it well:

When Jesus said, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it” (Luke 17:33), he drew a line in the sand and asked if we would step across--step out of one entire world, where violence is always the ultimate solution, into another world, where the spiral of violence is finally broken by those willing to absorb its impact with their own flesh. That new approach to living is nonviolence, Jesus’ “third way.”²⁹

V. NO SELF AND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

Dogen Zenji, founder of Soto Zen in Japan:

“To study the Buddha is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be awakened by all beings.”

Shobogenzo, “*Genjo Koan*.”

1. Jesus Christ Is a Buddha

Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki was the primary advocate of Zen Buddhism to the West. After his death, Zen Buddhism has been promoted in Western universities by another giant, Masao Abe. Abe lectured that the Buddhist slogan of emptiness is fulfilled in the self-emptying of Christ in Philippians, Chapter 2. The Buddhist word for emptiness in Sanskrit is *Sunyata*. The word for emptying in New Testament Greek is *kenosis*. So Masao Abe wrote a book with the title *Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata*.³⁰ Abe does lectured from Philippians 2:5-8.

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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

²⁹ Walter Wink, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

³⁰ Masao Abe lectured from Philippians 2:5-11 to eminent Christian theologians at the Second International Buddhist-Christian Conference at Hawaii Loa College in January, 1984. Hans Küng was there to state his objections to “self-emptying” as a key to Christology.

Because Christ made himself nothing, God made him everything (At the name of Jesus, all bow the knee and confess Jesus is Lord). All Christians are instructed to imitate Christ's self-emptying (Have this same mind in you which you have in Christ Jesus). Christ is the model Buddha for all Christians for no-self. This was an issue in the series of debates between Masao Abe and John Cobb, Jr. known in Buddhist Christians circles as the **Cobb-Abe debates** that continued for years. John Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives edited *The Emptying God*, essays in response to Abe's multiple challenges to Christian theology.³¹ Buddhist scholars see Philippians 2:5-8 as a Buddhist passage in the Christian Bible.

2. The Apostle Paul Is a Buddha

Koshiro Tamaki, renowned Emeritus Professor of Tokyo University, had immersed himself in Buddhism in a lifetime of studies in Theravada and Mahayana sacred texts. Now he vowed to meet the Christian God. He traveled to Europe. In interviews with Tamaki, theologians and pastors explained the amazing grace in the message of Christ as what was so special. Tamaki was disappointed. All Japanese as children learn exactly this same logic of radical grace from Shin Buddhism. The Christian God must be great, but Christian theologians did not know where the power was. So when he returned to Japan, he took his Bible up to a mountain hut and vowed never to come back down until he met the Christian God. Of course, being a Buddhist scholar of religious texts, he brought his Greek Bible to the mountain hut as well as his Japanese Bible.

Tamaki lectured to Buddhist and Christian scholars about where he found the power in the Bible. Paul wrote in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Paul died while he was still alive. He became no-self. That is, Paul died to his trivial, puny, false self who lives for me, myself, and I. He now lives by his True Self—"Christ lives in me." Paul experienced a personality shift. Paul had become a Buddha, one who wakes up to his true Self.

³¹ John B. Cobb, Jr. and Christopher Ives, editors, *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation with Masao Abe on God, Kenosis, and Sunyata*, 2005 (1990).

Tamaki asked the Christian theologians how many Japanese they had converted so far. Less than 1% of the population! He said, “You Christians don’t know where the power is in your Bible. You Christians don’t know what happened to Paul. Pointing to the monks, he said, “These Zen Buddhist monks know what happened to Paul. The same thing that happened to Paul happened to them. When the same thing happens to you, you will convert the whole Japanese nation!

Ryomin Akizuki, brilliant editor of a Japan Zen journal, often gave lectures to Christians and Buddhists from Galatians 2:20. He did exegesis from the Greek text. He had an extraordinary grasp of Christian thought and Christian feeling, because he was a Congregational Christian until his sophomore year in college. Like Tamaki, Akizuki found the Apostle Paul’s crucifixion with Christ an unmistakable sign of no-self and buddhahood. Paul had become a Buddha in finding his true self. Both Akizuki and Tamaki were prominent members of the Japan Branch of the Society of Buddhist Christian Studies. I heard their lectures at their annual 3-day-conferences at the Palace Hotel in Kyoto.

3. St. Francis of Assisi Is a Buddha

Celebrated Zen scholar, Shinichi Hisamatsu, published in Japanese an essay on Francis. He identified five events in the life of Francis that show genuine enlightenment—that Francis had become a Buddha. One event was the red-hot blade. Francis was wounded. The wound festered. They brought in a red-hot blade to cauterize the wound. Francis chased everybody out of the room, saying they would not want to hear a grown man yell, scream, and cry. Alone, Francis talked to the blade about how he was a coward, feared pain, and hated heat. He talked to the red-hot blade until he became one with the blade. Then he said, “Welcome Sister Fire.” Nobody heard that grown man yell, scream, or cry.

4. Monks on Mt. Athos

Mt. Athos is famous for its string of Eastern Orthodox monasteries. Monks practicing prolonged meditation sessions are often startled when they experience overwhelming flashes. They sought older veteran monks for counseling. The veteran monks calmed them by saying, “You have seen the light of Tabor!” Mt. Tabor by tradition, of course, is the New Testament Mountain of Transfiguration.³²

No-self, shift in personal identity, transforming flashes of enlightenment, becoming True Self—these are universal experiences found at all times throughout the world in most religions. They are not the exclusive property of Buddhists. They are especially common in Buddhists, Taoists, Neo-Confucianists, Sufi Muslims, Christian mystics, and Romanticists in British literature—all nature mystics. The Sufis even major on the theme of “No-Self.” The Christian group whose worship is centered on silent meditation is Quakers. The Quakers’ move away from the Father God toward the “inner light” places them close to the world of Zen Buddhists.

Islam means to submit; to submit to the will of God. When you submit your will to the will of God, you become no-self. A Muslim Imam told a Methodist congregation that all Christians who submit to the will of God are actually Muslims, because Islam means “to submit.” No-self, then, is not exclusively a Buddhist theme. Jesus said in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will but thine be done.” Jesus Christ was no-self.

VI. DISAPPOINTING DEVELOPMENTS

1. Ancestor Worship

By the themes of “no-self” and “impermanence,” Buddhism taught that when we die, we disappear. But the first ethic of the Chinese was filial piety with its foundation in ancestor worship. “No self” was subversive to ancestor worship—you cannot worship ancestors if they simply disappeared at death. So the waves of Buddhism entering China through the silk routes caused spasms. Sons took vows of celibacy and entered monasteries, abandoning their parents. Sons were expected to care for parents in their old age, maintain

³² From unpublished lectures I heard by Dale Moody, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, KY, 1965-72.

the family land for posterity, marry and produce the line of descendents who were the necessary worshippers in ancestor worship. Buddhist monks even defended their betrayal of filial piety by claiming that in the countless cycles of rebirth all beings were their parents in some lifetime. Why show preference only for their parents of this lifetime? Although the direct causes of the three persecutions of Buddhism in China were complex, this sabotage of the ancestor worship system was a contributing factor each time. After the third persecution, they compromised with ancestor worship by adopting the doctrine of the 49 days.³³

Some people have earned so much bad karma that when they die, they are already destined for a bad rebirth. Some people earned so much good karma that they are already destined for a good rebirth. Most people, however, are not that good and not that bad. When they die, the quality of their rebirth is suspended for 49 days—7 weeks of 7 days. During this period, the family can create good karma for the deceased by proxy to guarantee a good rebirth. The good karma is created by the family through Buddhist memorial services during the 49 days. Through this concept of 49 days, ancestor worship effectively entered Buddhism in China, Korea, and Japan. In many countries, as in Japan, ancestor worship has become the tail that wags the dog. The man in the street has come to see Buddhism as ancestor worship, a practice that contradicts the foundations of Buddhism.³⁴

2. Japanese Persecution of Christianity

In 1549 Francisco Xavier, Cosme de Torres, and John Fernandes arrived in Kagoshima, Southern Kyushu Island, to begin Roman Catholic mission work. Feudal Japan was ruled by *daimyo*, feudal lords, who schemed to lure the lucrative Portuguese trade into their ports, to steal the technology of canons, and to stock saltpeter for gunpowder. Understandably many daimyo became Christians. The daimyo of Oomura, Arima, Tsushima Island, Bungo, Kameoka and Ooshu all became Christians. Two outstanding Christian

³³ The first step toward ancestor worship was benign. Public services were held in 706, during the reign of Chung-tsung, in which Buddhist monks honored deceased emperors by vegetarian meals and incense burning. These services that spread throughout the empire did not involve ordinary citizens. Through the 49 day services, however, ancestor worship entered every Chinese Buddhist household.

³⁴ See Dickson Kazuo Yagi, "Protestant Perspectives on Ancestor Worship in Japanese Buddhism: The Funeral and the Buddhist Altar," *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, Vol. 15, 1995, pp. 43-60. Shin Buddhists are perhaps the only Buddhist denomination that consistently rejected ancestor worship syncretism.

daimyo were Takayama Ukon and Konishi Yukinaga. Between 1553 and 1620, eighty-six daimyo were officially baptized. It seemed for a while that Japan might become a Christian nation.

But everything slowly unraveled. Spanish trade arrived through Manila, bringing Franciscan and Dominican missionaries. They challenged the Portuguese trade and the Portuguese Jesuits. Then the Protestant English and Dutch traders arrived, bringing not only friction in trade, but also in religion. Things came to a head in the shipwreck of the *San Felipe* in 1596. The Spanish crew took out a world map and showed the Japanese soldiers the conquered colonies of Philippines, Mexico, and Peru. This confirmed rumors through Protestant traders of the alleged Roman Catholic agenda of trade, missionaries, converts, then conquest.

The reaction of the Shogun Toyotomi Hideyoshi was immediate. In 1597, 26 Christian clergy and laymen were arrested in Kyoto and Osaka, forced to march 400 miles to the southern edge of Honshu Island, put on a ship to Kyushu Island, and were crucified on Nishizaka Hill just outside Nagasaki Harbor. In 1638 there was a major revolt of Christian peasants of the Amakusa Islands in Kyushu. They defeated the local armies. The Shogun had to send in government troops. The peasants crossed Nagasaki Bay in boats and defended themselves in Hara Castle in Shimabara near Nagasaki. After a siege, all rebels were killed, a number between 17,000 and 37,000.³⁵

The persecution begun in 1597 with the 26 Martyrs of Nagasaki reached its peak after the Shimabara Revolt of 1638. More than 650 missionaries and thousands of lay Christians were beheaded, burned at the stake, and executed in imaginative ways of torture.³⁶ To be a Christian became a capital offense. Christianity virtually disappeared until 1855, marking 258 years of persecution, annihilation, and prohibition of Christianity.³⁷

³⁵ The Amakusa government and Catholic devotional literature list 37,000 martyrs. Some conservative scholars reduce the number down to 17,000.

³⁶ For the persecution era, see *A History of Christianity in Japan* by Otis Cary, Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1976 (1909). See also *History of Japanese Religions*, by Masaharu Anesaki, 1975 (1928), Charles E. Tuttle Company, pp. 240-58. For recent reference, see Kazuo Kasahara (ed.) Paul McCarthy and Gaynor Sekimori (trans.), *A History of Japan*, Kosei Publishing Company, 2002, pp. 435-40.

³⁷ A few Christian groups went underground and survived intact for six to seven generations. After 217 years,

3. Buddhist Certificates (*Tera-uke*)

The method by which Christians were weeded out was the *danka* (temple-householder system) or *tera-uke* (Buddhist Certificate System) established by the shogunate in 1635.³⁸ All Japanese were required on the pain of death to register at Buddhist temples as believers, even families of Shinto priests. The temple would give out certificates vouching that that person was not a Christian. Anyone without a certificate would be arrested and executed. A daimyo was appointed *jisha bugyou*, the secular government official to oversee the *tera-uke* system in all temples nationwide. The government did not trust Buddhist priests to police Buddhist priests.

Secret Christians who sneaked into the registration lines were weeded out by a clever method of *fumie*. “To step on” is *fumu*. “Picture” is *e*. Everybody in the registration lines was forced to step on a stone image or wooden picture of Jesus or Mary. This was *fumie*. People who could not bring themselves step on such sacred images were then identified as Christians. They were given a chance to recant. Some did recant, but most were tortured and executed.

The *tera-uke* system was devastating to Christians, of course. But it had debilitating results on Buddhism also. Evangelism is unnecessary when everybody must register as believers by government decree. To this day, many Buddhist priests in Japan do little evangelism, confident that the masses will come for funerals and post-mortuary rituals. The intimate trust and respect between families and priest disappeared as the priest became a government agent with powers to criminalize anyone at will. The priest was overcome with administrative work as a registrar. There was little time for counseling or pastoral care. Many temples in rural areas became local landlords, and many temples in urban areas became money lenders.³⁹ Changing your family registration temple to another Buddhist

some of these underground Christians came out to greet Catholic missionaries when they first returned in 1855. They are known as “hidden Christians” or *Kakure Kirishitan*. See Kasahara, *op. cit.* pp. 437-40.

³⁸ Kasahara, *op. cit.*, pp. 342-44.

³⁹ Fumio Tamamuro, “Local Society and the Temple-Parishioner Relationship within the Bakufu’s Governance Structure,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 2001 28/3-4, pp. 261-292. See also Nam-lin Hur, “The Rise of Funerary Buddhism in Tokugawa Japan,” *Death and Social Order in Tokugawa Japan: Buddhism*,

temple was not allowed throughout the Tokugawa era. Children were tied to registration temples of their parents. That is, just as the priesthood was a closed caste, the believers also were a closed community. The believers were set free by the Meiji regime, which at first favored Shinto, and later proclaimed freedom of religion.

4. Funeral Business

It was predictable that Buddhism would take over funerals from Shinto. The Shinto concept of clean-unclean centered on “red pollution” and “black pollution.” Red pollution was blood. Black pollution was death. If a corpse were brought into the sacred area of worship, the whole Shinto complex would be unclean. So funerals naturally gravitated to Buddhism, the new continental religion that invaded Japan in the 6th century. The *tera-uke* system decreed that all Japanese must register as believers at the Buddhist temple on pain of death, and all who registered must have their funerals done by the Buddhist priest. Where people had related to Buddhism and Shinto out of personal faith and family heritage, now everybody was ordered by law to have a Buddhist funeral! So in Japan today, generally speaking, all weddings are Shinto and all funerals are Buddhist.⁴⁰

Funerals are lucrative. The priest must be paid to officiate. There are hefty fees for use of the temple buildings. There are fees for cremation. There are fees for burial plots. There are fees for the 49-day services. There are fees for services on death anniversaries up to the 33rd or 50th anniversary. There are fees for maintenance of ancestral ashes if kept in temple storage in Buddha altars.

The most notorious fee is for posthumous names given to the dead. Our birth names are useful only during this life on earth. Upon death the priest gave new Buddhist names, *kaimyo*, written in Chinese for use in the next world. The war dead were heroes who sacrificed their lives for the nation. It became a custom during the Second World War for the war dead to receive elaborately exalted Buddhist names. After the war, business companies,

Antichristianity, and the Danka System, pp. 1-30, Harvard University Asia Center, 2007.

⁴⁰ A rapidly growing fad of the past 20 years in Japan is to have Christian weddings. Since there are not enough Christian churches or ministers, any Caucasian can be hired as a “fake priest” by wedding business companies.

political parties, elite blue-blood families, and rich people began to demand these elaborate names at funerals as a matter of status. Being that these were powerful groups and families making special requests from vanity, Buddhist priests felt no guilt in charging exorbitant fees for these names. After a while it became common knowledge in the neighborhood what the fee was for adding each new Chinese ideograph for the death name. This was scandalous! It was obvious to all that Buddhist temples had become funeral business. The common people often ridicule Buddhist temples as *soshiki bukkyo*, “funeral Buddhism.”⁴¹

5. Temples as Family Dynasties

The urgent need for permanent priests in each temple to administer the *tera-uke* system was a contributing cause in transforming the Japanese Buddhist priesthood from celibate monks in monasteries to married priests in hereditary family temple dynasties. Historically Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism, is credited with the break with celibacy. He, a celibate monk, officially married. Shinran’s example and pressure from the Meiji government are usually the acknowledged causes of the cloudy subject of how and when monks started breaking their vows of celibacy and officially married in public. Eldest sons in Japan are pressured to take over the temple even if they have little religious interest. That is, the priesthood by rejecting celibacy has become a closed caste of hereditary priests. As a strict rule, only sons of priests are allowed to matriculate in Buddhist seminaries.⁴² An elitism of priests has become a wall separating the common people from the treasures of the faith.

Laymen in esoteric Shingon and Tendai are not initiated into the mysteries of the mudra, mantra, and mandala. Most Japan Zen temples offer no meditation classes for laymen. “If you are serious about meditation, why don’t you become a priest?”-- seems to

⁴¹ When the Zen master was leaving the monastery to officiate at a memorial service, I challenged him saying, “Why are you doing ancestor worship which Buddhism denies?” He thought for a while and answered, “We have to eat, too.”

⁴² When the Mt. Hiei Tendai headquarters seminary opened three spots for incoming freshmen from non-priest families about 25 years ago, it was front page news in Japanese newspapers.

be their attitude.⁴³ Commoners can become priests only by marrying daughters of priests with no sons. They are then adopted into the priest's family, taking the family name. The impression in Japan is that laypeople are not supposed to be really interested in religion, the hierarchy being a closed caste of priestly families. Once I telephoned the head priest of a Shingon temple, my good friend, to ask how my American, Caucasian, male friend could enter a Shingon seminary. He laughed in surprise at the thought and grew silent. He never gave me an answer for the next decade.

As a backlash, the so-called “new religions” that emerged in the 20th century completely rejected the priesthood, claiming the equality of laypersons (priesthood of all believers). Soka Gakkai and Rissho Kosei Kai, two of the largest religions in Japan are both Buddhist “new religions” with no priesthood. Laypersons flock to Zen Centers in the West run by laypersons for laypersons—not to Japanese Zen temples. Two Buddhist denominations are exceptions. Sanbo Kyodan, Soto members doing Rinzai practice, is a Zen movement with an iconoclastic bent and a definite lay focus.⁴⁴ Shin Buddhism, whose founder Shinran was the first monk to officially marry, also has a strong lay emphasis.

Japanese Buddhist temples in Hawaii and the West Coast, lacking the powerful and lucrative *danka/tera-uke* system, have been forced to rely on evangelism, pastoral counseling, and rites of passage. Besides teaching religion, they, for good or for ill, have become Japanese culture centers to promote Japanese psycho-social values, Japanese festivals, Japanese dance, Japanese music (especially taiko drum corps), judo, Japanese language, Japanese calligraphy, and Japanese flower arranging (ikebana). Because Shinto is so anchored on the physical Japanese archipelago and on the political rule of the divine imperial family, Shinto has shown little enthusiasm for transplanting its faith and institutions overseas.⁴⁵ In the absence of Shinto weddings, Japanese Buddhism in the West not only does

⁴³ I sat weekly with a group of laymen sitting with monks-in-training at a Fukuoka monastery. Over a period of six months, never did any priest come over to the laymen's lounge to say even one word to encourage us in sitting. How outrageous!

⁴⁴ In their zeal for laypeople, outstanding leaders have come to the West. Many Zen Centers in the U.S. are directly founded by inspired masters of Sanbo Kyodan and their dharma heirs, including the Diamond Sangha in Honolulu, the Zen Center of Los Angeles, and the Yokoji Zen Mountain Center in Southern California.

⁴⁵ Honolulu has the large Kotohira Jinja Shinto Shrine near the airport. Across the Pali is the magnificent Byodoin Shinto Shrine, a copy of the famous Byodoin in Japan. On the Big Island there is a small Shinto

funerals, but does weddings as well. So the accusation of Buddhism degenerating into “funeral Buddhism” does not hold true for Buddhism in the West. Freed from the *danka/tera-uke* system, the social demand for ancestor worship, the closed caste system of family temple dynasties, and the Japanese government’s manipulation of religion until the close of the Second World War, Japanese Buddhism in the West has some aspects of a purer Buddhism.⁴⁶

There is another advantage to Buddhism in the West. The Tendai Bishop Ara, a highly revered Japan missionary to Honolulu for many decades, wrote that Buddhism in Japan is “unconscious Buddhism,” while Buddhism in the West is “conscious Buddhism.” That is, Buddhism in Japan that has not yet confronted Christianity is “unconscious Buddhism,” while Buddhism in the West that has confronted Christianity is “conscious Buddhism.”

VII. ENCOURAGING DEVELOPMENTS

There are internal and external sources for the breadth of Buddhist social action of the last half century. We see a modern social, economic, psychological, and political analysis adopted from the West. There is the deep inspiration from Gandhi. There are the apocalyptic crises of genocide in Cambodia, nuclear bombing in Japan, war in Vietnam, civil war in Sri Lanka, invasion and cultural genocide in Tibet, repressive regimes in Myanmar and Thailand, and ecological disasters in Southeast Asia. Chronic issues have come to a head—social inequality, bigotry, and poverty, especially for the outcaste Buddhist converts in India.⁴⁷ For

Shrine less than a mile from my family home. This Shinto presence, however, is infinitesimal compared to the enthusiastic and successful transplanting of Japanese Buddhist faith and temple institutions in Hawaii and the West Coast. In the Japanese phone book in Los Angeles there is not even one phone number listed under Shinto. What is visible is the Shinto related Konkokyo religion in Boyle Heights (Los Angeles), and in San Francisco.

⁴⁶ In the headquarter temple of Nishi Shin Buddhism on Pali Highway in Honolulu, I attended the funeral of a distant relative. To my surprise no one on the program called out to address the deceased by name saying, “I am speaking to the spirit of Mr. Tanaka.” No one talked directly to the dead to praise him, to scold him for dying so early, and to bid him sayonara as they always do in Buddhist funerals in Japan. Buddhism in Japan must accommodate such heretical practices of ancestor worship out of consideration for the strong feelings of the family of the deceased. But 2nd and 3rd generation Japanese Americans in the U. S. are no longer sure what is Japanese custom and tradition. The Buddhist priest, then, is almost completely free to do a purely Buddhist funeral in the U. S. Nobody spoke to the dead.

⁴⁷ Sallie B. King, “Contemporary Buddhist Spirituality and Social Activism,” Yoshinori Takeuchi, ed.,

Westerners the myth of Buddhist quietism was shattered in 2007 by the non-violent revolt of monks in Myanmar, who rose up to march in the streets in open defiance of their government. Furthermore, who can forget the courageous decades-long struggles of Aung San Suu Kyi against the military dictators in Myanmar.

1. Sri Lanka: Sarvodaya Shramadana

A Buddhist organization, Sarvodaya Shramadana,⁴⁸ emerged in Sri Lanka for village reform out of rural poverty. Founded by A. T. Ariyaratne,⁴⁹ Sarvodaya is perhaps the best example of Buddhist environmental action in Asia. It linked economic development with spiritual development. It rejected Western development models for promoting consumerism—the nurture of greed and the growth of debt. The Middle Path of Gautama taught the meeting of needs, not insatiable greeds. Theravada taught self-reliance. The monks of Sarvodaya may provide assistance and guidance, but they may not make decisions or actually execute programs. They may help organize and inspire, but the villagers themselves must decide the priorities in projects—a school building, sanitation system, a road, or a day care center. They do not wait for government initiatives or funding. Foreign contributions are accepted, but the villagers themselves essentially raise the project funds by countless small donations.

Basic needs pertaining to a healthy environment, clean water, adequate clothing, optimum food requirements, sanitation and health, energy needs, communication, education, and cultural as well as spiritual needs have to be satisfied first. Without looking to governments or other external agencies, the Sarvodaya Movement assists people to organize themselves with their own self-reliance and community participation to satisfy as many of these needs as possible.⁵⁰

The labor is donated by the villagers themselves. Each village family that joins a work camp must donate at least a matchbox of rice in order to eat at the communal meal. All

Buddhist Spirituality; Later China, Korea, Japan, and the Modern World, Herder and Herder, 1999, p. 457.

⁴⁸ “**Sarvodaya**” is a word coined by Mahatma Gandhi that means “well-being/enlightenment of all.” “**Shramadana**” is “the sharing of labor and resources.” Both words together mean “sharing of labor and resources for the enlightenment of all.” King, *op. cit.*, p.70.

⁴⁹ Today Sarvodaya Shramadana is active in over 11,600 villages. Ariyaratne’s writings are available in the seven volumes of *Collected Works* published by Nandasena Ratnapala. See A.T. Ariyaratne, “Sarvodaya Shramadana’s Approach to Peacebuilding,” *Buddhist Peacework*, edited by David Chappell, Wisdom Publications, 1999, pp. 69-77.

⁵⁰ Ariyaratne, *op. cit.*, p.70.

feel they are contributors and none feel diminished by the generosity of others. This heals the sense of worthlessness that accompanies the poverty syndrome.⁵¹ Going beyond the boundaries of any one religion or village, Sarvodaya's vision includes all people of the world as one family:

The idea behind the term "family gathering" is that the whole world is one family, and all of them represent humanity in microcosm. All religious, caste, race, linguistic, class, national, or political differences are of no importance in these family gatherings. Instead, meditations on loving kindness for all beings, songs, dances, and other cultural items that promote the concept of "one world, one people," occur.⁵²

2. Thailand: Abbott Nan Sutasilo and Sulak Sivaraksa

Throughout Theravada countries, villagers give to the monks and temples. This forms the economic base for the monasteries, and the villagers also earn merits for a better rebirth. Today most temples are financially stable in land and buildings. Abbot Nan Sutasilo has courageously initiated creative practices in his temple, proclaiming that the temple money is the people's money. He began transferring money out of his temple and depositing it into his village projects, such as a Fertilizer Bank and a Village Rice Bank. He promoted Buddhist vows for lay people to resist consumerism, to reduce spending so the money saved could be donated to a village savings system. The funds were used to set up a medical cooperative and to pay off villagers' loans before bank foreclosure and the seizure of land. Abbott Nan transformed the annual three-day robe presentation ceremony, the main festival for giving to the temple. He turned it into a fund raising drive for village development projects.⁵³

Acharn Sulak Sivaraksa was born in Thailand and educated in England and Wales. Returning home in 1961, he taught at Thammasat and Chulanlongkorn Universities. For six years he edited the *Social Science Review*, which he had founded in 1963. By these writings, he awakened student awareness that escalated to the overthrow of the military government in 1973. Beginning in the late 1960s he worked with several service-oriented, rural

⁵¹ King, *op. cit.*, pp.457-59, 471.

⁵² Ariyaratne, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁵³ King, *op. cit.*, pp.357-59.

development projects with Buddhist monks and student activists. During the 1970s Sulak became the central figure in the Komol Keemthong Foundation, the Pridi Banomyong Institute, the Slum Childcare Foundation, the Co-ordinating Group for Religion and Society, the Thai Inter-Religious Commission for Development, and Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute. Through his involvement with these non-governmental organizations, Sulak aimed for indigenous, sustainable, and spiritual models for change. He has co-founded the Asian Cultural Forum on Development and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

In the 1976 bloody coup, hundreds of students were killed and thousands were jailed. The soldiers burnt everything in Sulak's bookstore and ordered his arrest. He spent the next two years of exile, lecturing in American, Canadian, and European universities. In 1984 he was arrested in Bangkok for criticizing the King, but was released after a storm of international protest. In 1991 a warrant for his arrest sent him into forced exile once more. He returned in 1992 and won the court case in 1995. Sulak gains insight through Buddhism by questioning everything and questioning himself. By this insight, he moves into action. His themes include democracy, human rights, and accountable government.⁵⁴ He is among a handful of Buddhist activists promoting socially-engaged Buddhism. His passion for social change is expressed forcefully in his writings:

Spiritual considerations and social change cannot be separated. Forces in our social environment, such as consumerism, with its emphasis on craving and dissatisfaction, can hinder our spiritual development. People seeking to live spiritually must be concerned with their social and physical environment, To be truly religious is not to reject society but to work for social justice and change. Religion is at the heart of social change, and social change is the essence of religion.⁵⁵

3. Viet Nam: Thich Nhat Hanh

In 1963 the South Vietnamese government of President Ngo Dinh Diem oppressed Buddhism. Eighty percent of the people were Buddhist, while Diem was Catholic. In May his troops fired on a crowd of protesters, who rose up in indignation to his shutting down

⁵⁴ Acharn Sulak Sivaraksa, "Buddhism and a Culture of Peace," *Buddhist Peacework*, edited by David Chappell, pp. 39-46.

⁵⁵ Sulak Sivaraksa, www.sulak-sivaraksa.org.

public celebrations of Buddha's birthday. There were strikes, marches, protests, fasts, and self-immolation of several monks. In August Diem's forces raided Buddhist temples throughout the country, arresting many monks. Protests and arrests continued into October. In November Diem and his brother Nhu were executed in a coup.

A series of governments followed, some affirming the Buddhist anti-war stance. Other governments supported by the U.S.-backed military tried to marshal the society to battle the Ho Chi Minh threat from the North. In 1966 the Thieu-Ky regime crushed military factions that had withdrawn support from the government and arrested virtually all the Buddhist activist leadership in the Buddhist Struggle Movement for peace. Besides the anti-war struggle, Buddhists at this time developed a new social work program. In 1964 the monk Thich Nhat Hanh started the School of Youth for Social Service. Through social work of this kind, monks and nuns erected public buildings, cared for the needy, and helped promote agriculture, sanitation, and roads.

The Buddhist Struggle Movement was non-violent. There was determined effort to protect deserters and draft resisters. The few monks who burned themselves to death consciously accepted the bad karma of violence against themselves for the greater good of ending the war for the many. The Buddhist Struggle Movement refused to take sides between the communist North and the capitalist South. In the Buddhist analysis the karma of this war was a gigantic tangle of interconnected interests of national groups, political ideologies, Russia, and the U. S. Instead of dividing everybody into "them and us," the monks saw their role in reconciling and healing all factions.

The reunification of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh has been bad for the monks. The communist government has exerted tight control over the Buddhist leadership and many monks are under house arrest.⁵⁶ They refused a return visa for Thich Nhat Hanh, who lives in exile in France. During the boat people crisis, Nhat Hanh rented boats to rescue floundering boat people. His group continues to find ways to send money to Vietnam for war orphans and poor war victims. He has established many Buddhist sangha groups in the West, including

⁵⁶ King, *op. cit.*, pp. 461-64.

France and Southern California.⁵⁷ He is a prolific author. He is also an immensely popular conference speaker in Europe and the U.S.

4. Tibet: Dalai Lama

Tibet was invaded by China in 1949 and fell completely under Chinese control in 1959. The Dalai Lama escaped to India in that year. He lives there today with about 100,000 Tibetan refugees. The Cultural Revolution was an especially horrible time for Tibet. Over one million people are estimated to have died from torture, inhumane prison conditions, execution, and famine. This was one-fifth of the population of Tibet.

The damage since the Cultural Revolution includes the massive transfer of Han Chinese into Tibet, threatening to make Tibetans a minority population within their own country. Over 6,000 monasteries, temples, and historic buildings have been destroyed. A huge number of monks and nuns have been forcibly returned to lay life. Many call this “cultural genocide.” The Dalai Lama, in his government-in-exile in Dharamsala, has responded with the deepest principles of his religion. He consistently held to non-violence in all relations with the Chinese government. He has also instituted fundamental reform of the Tibetan government-in-exile, reforming top-down patriarchal religious institutions to representative rule by democratic process. He is intent on preserving Tibetan culture and religion.

The Dalai Lama consistently calls for the demilitarization of Tibet, the restoration of human rights to their people, the end of the population transfer, the protection of the natural environment (land, vegetation, and animals), and a negotiated settlement of Tibetan-Chinese relations. The Chinese had virtually wiped out all wildlife through organized hunts using machine guns on entire herds. They wreaked havoc on the environment by clear-cutting seventy per cent of the forests. He warns his people against anger and violence, calling for peaceful third-party mediation. He pleads for his people to be

⁵⁷ I sat next to young Vietnamese nuns at a large public reception for Thich Nhat Hanh in 2006 at Loyola Marymount University. When I asked, they said they were from a Thich Nhat Hanh sangha in Southern California.

as forbearing as they can be. Anger is no solution, he claims. Love takes longer, but in the end love is the only real alternative.⁵⁸ The Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989.

5. India: Ambedkarite Buddhists

Although Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was an outcaste in India, a sponsor financed his graduate studies in Great Britain, Germany, and America. Returning to India, he became the Father of the Constitution of modern India. Even with such fame, he was still subject to humiliation and insults as an untouchable. Gifted in organizational skills, he organized mass rallies of Dalits, as untouchables call themselves today (broken, smashed people). In his major address, Ambedkar said it was not his fault he was born a Hindu. But he would be a fool if he died a Hindu. Hinduism was the religion that had relegated Dalits to non-human status. He would convert to the religion that welcomed Dalits most warmly. Five hundred thousand Dalits joined him to convert to Buddhism⁵⁹ at the Diksha Bhumi in Nagpur in 1956.⁶⁰ Instead of turning to the violent revolution of communism, Ambedkar sought to build a society of liberty, equality, and fraternity—principles he claimed were not from the French Revolution, but from Buddhism. That is, he sought to build a Dhammaraja, a society born of the Buddhist Dhamma. Against the traditional Theravada two-tier hierarchy of monks dominating village laypeople, Ambedkar sought to democratize the communities of new outcaste converts. He claimed a new sangha that raised laypeople to equality with monks. He, a layman, led the mass conversion service, instead of relying on monks.

⁵⁸ King, *op. cit.*, pp. 464-67.

⁵⁹ Seminary professors at Bishops College, the main seminary of the Church of North India in Calcutta, hung their heads in shame as they explained to me why Christians failed to welcome Dalits more enthusiastically. High caste Christians feared that a flood of Dalits would make it unlikely that other high caste Indians would become Christians. Others complained that the primary concern for economic-social benefits made suspect their conversion motivation. On the other hand, the most convincing reason why Ambedkar converted to Buddhism, instead of Christianity, is that Buddhism was an Indian religion. In the past three decades, however, great numbers of Dalits have been converting to Christianity. Christian converts have grown to such numbers that radical Hindus in several states, such as Orissa, have installed anti-conversion laws relating to Christianity.

⁶⁰ Dhammachari Lokamitra, "The Dhamma Revolution in India," *Buddhist Peacework*, David Chappell (ed.), Wisdom Publications, 1999, pp. 29-30.

This new breed of Ambedkarite Buddhists has been a challenge to Buddhism. They have had a primary social and economic focus. Meditation, renunciation, and no-self had only a secondary appeal. They demanded social justice in this life, not in the next rebirth or in a nirvana several lifetimes away. They rejected the “blame the victim” rationale within the karma concept. They demanded social and institutional reasons for their sufferings. In 1978 Sangharakshita established the Trailokya Bauddha Mahasangha, which today has more than 20 centers spreading much needed Buddhist teaching and social activities among the Ambedkarite communities. These communities have now grown to several million. Under the name Bahujan Hitay, they operate 19 dormitories where poor village children can live while attending school. The uplifting Buddhist teachings and the teamwork of village communities have done much to alleviate the feelings of worthlessness, helplessness, inertia, and passivity that have accompanied the untouchable castes for centuries.⁶¹ Some Ambedkarites have begun to gain an interest in traditional Buddhist spiritual practices.⁶²

6. Thailand: Ordaining Trees

Thailand was a country 80% covered with trees. Within only 40 years, only 20% of the land had trees. The consequences were reduced harvest, loss of topsoil, flooding, aridity, loss of water sources, and ruined farmers. After exhausting other methods of protest and appeal, the Buddhist leadership decided to ordain trees. It is a serious evil in Theravada to harm a monk. So they began clothing trees in monk’s robes and conducting ordination ceremonies. Thus transforming trees into monks, it would be a rare logger with the courage to cut down one of these trees.

7. Japan: Nihonzan Myohoji and Soka Gakkai

August is the season in Japan for two gigantic ceremonies that shake the hearts of the people—the commemoration of the tragic atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

⁶¹ Lokamitra, *op. cit.*, pp. 31-35.

⁶² King, *op. cit.*, pp. 472-73.

The Nihonzan Myohoji sect of Nichiren Buddhism was founded by Nichidatsu Fujii. It has chapters in several countries. Even before World War 2, Fujii was an active anti-war activist. He was moved by meeting Mahatma Gandhi. Today the sect is known for its peace poles erected everywhere in Japan. The peace poles are about four feet high and written in about five different languages saying, “May peace prevail on earth.” A peace pole movement has begun in America among Christian churches with no indication of its Buddhist origins. In the peace pole website, however, the basic literature offered is written by Japanese. Nihonzan Myohoji is also known for its peace marches by monks beating on small hand drums and chanting, “*Namu Myoho Rengekyo*” (I take refuge in the Wonderful Gospel of the Lotus Sutra). They lead long lines of Buddhist and non-Buddhist followers. Their monks often sit beating their hand drums and chanting in protest at armament shipment sites and exhibitions of new weapons. They believe that war and the making of weapons are criminal activities. They aim to raise public awareness of the need for global nuclear disarmament.⁶³

Soka Gakkai has major long-standing anti-war projects. Soka Gakkai is a Lotus Sutra religion of Nichiren Buddhism. They are known for exhibitions of the evils of war, especially about victims of nuclear war. Some Soka Gakkai exhibitions are periodic and others are permanent at local headquarters. They are conscious of the urgent need to display graphic photos of war victims so the post-war youth may also become anti-war and anti-nuclear advocates.⁶⁴ Soka Gakkai has its American national headquarters in Santa Monica in Los Angeles. Soka Gakkai has an unquestionable pacifist heritage. It is easy to be pacifist in times of peace, but it can be dangerous to be pacifist in times of war. The founder of Soka Gakkai, Tsunesaburo Makiguchi (1871-1944), his successor, Josei Toda, and close associates were imprisoned (1943-45) for preaching peace while the militarist government was heading for war.⁶⁵

⁶³ King, *op. cit.*, pp. 466- 67.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ www.joseitoda.org. Makiguchi and Toda created the *Soka Kyoiku Gakkai* (Value Creating Education Society), which proclaimed a “human revolution” of individuals and society. promoting social and religious reform through the practice of Nichiren Buddhism. While the government promoted education to mold obedient subjects, they sought to empower ordinary people to become self-reliant individuals.

VIII. STORIES

1. Two Waves

Two ocean waves were racing from Hawaii across the Pacific. They were having a hilarious time, seeing who could jump the highest, who could dash the fastest. Then they came to the shores of Japan. One wave was horrified. “Did you see what happened to the waves? They rushed in to shore, got smashed on the rocks, and disappeared!” The other wave said, “No sweat.”

What do you mean, “No Sweat?” Don’t you see the waves rushing in to shore, getting smashed on the rocks and disappearing? “No Sweat!” What do you mean, “No Sweat?” Don’t you know that’s what’s going to happen to us? We’re going to rush into shore, get smashed on the rocks, and disappear. “No sweat! We are the ocean.”

Two waves racing across the Pacific. They look exactly alike. But one wave was just a wave. The other wave had already become ocean while he was still a wave. How? By insight into his true nature. What do I want to do before I die? I want to become ocean while I am still a wave—by insight into my true nature.

2. After the Parrot Left the Cage

A man had a parrot in a cage. He put the parrot on his shoulder while he read the newspaper. He pets the parrot before putting him back in the cage. In the morning he made sure there was enough seed in the cage before he left for work. The first thing he did when he came home was to take the parrot out and play with it.

But when he came home from work one day, the parrot was not in the cage. The door of the cage was open. He got in a panic, running from room to room, but no parrot. He ran downstairs. Still no parrot. And then he saw it. The window was open. He ran outside down the street. He saw trees, clouds, dogs, children at play. He was so surprised. He had never looked down the street before. He ran to the next street and was surprised at what he saw. There were mothers pushing babies in their carriages. Boys playing baseball.

Bright colored flowers. He never noticed them before. As he looked to find his parrot, he paid attention and saw the whole world for the first time. He would never have noticed the whole world, if he had not lost his parrot.

I sit facing the wall with my feet folded on my thighs. My mind can be ruled by fantasy. My mind can be slanted by anger or frustration. My mind at times is depressed by worry and panic. There might not seem to be any signs of progress in 30 years of sitting. But a mentor once said that our minds are like the many layers of onions. Regardless of the storms of thoughts and feelings on the outer layers, the inner layers of the mind are always being nourished towards the still point. Often meditation does seem to be a waste of time. Yet meditation creates a soul environment that nurtures insight into our true nature. For some, insight is unexpectedly sudden (Rinzai and Obaku Zen). Insight for most of us duller people is a day-by-day affair (Soto Zen). Not waiting for an overwhelming mystical experience, we practice insight day-by-day. We focus on enlightened thoughts, enlightened feelings, and enlightened decisions—refusing to wait for a mystical experience before we start.

Is the parrot leaving the cage? Am I slowly disappearing? As I lose myself, I look everywhere to find myself. Where did I go? As I look everywhere, I find myself in the dog, in the tree, in the flower, in the sun, in the moon, and in the ocean waves. I find myself in the goldfish, the toddler, and in my companions at the dinner table. Is my counterfeit self getting lighter and thinner? Dig deep enough in your backyard, and you end up in China! Dig deep enough into your belly, and you end up in God!

3. No Self: Liberation From Guilt

I was the interim pastor of a church in Hawaii. One day there was a knock at our parsonage door. There stood a girl from a hippie community. She said she had just been released from a detox facility (drugs, alcohol?). She wanted a place to sleep. Her eyes looked dazed and her feet unstable. My mind immediately turned negative. Once she was

asleep in our parsonage, we would not be able to get her out until she had recovered her health. I said, “No,” that we would need church approval. I pointed out to her the city health service offices just down the street. She was desperate and pleaded that we let her sleep just for an hour. But she seemed ready for a 20-hour-sleep. So I would not let her in our door and pointed her down the street. And she left.

Within the hour, I felt so terrible. I should have immediately opened our home to her, glad to retrieve a wayward Baptist youth. We should have been ready to die with her and die for her. My heart condemned me for many months. I could not believe that I had turned her away. When I shared this story with a small group of ministers, they said what was the strongest Protestant medicine for guilt. “God has forgiven you; therefore, you must forgive yourself.” I did believe that God had forgiven me. But for some reason I could not manage to forgive myself.

Then a strange thing happened. I had been doing Zen meditations for decades. No-Self came to me both from Zen and from the witness of Paul in Galatians 2:20. Paul had been crucified with Christ and was, therefore, No-Self. There was a personality shift—Christ living through Paul. There was no longer any Paul to be praised or blamed! For whatever reason, I felt liberation from guilt. There was no longer any Dickson Yagi to be praised or blamed! Someone protested that this was total irresponsibility. But it was liberation for me and for the Apostle Paul. No-Self is liberating Good News!

4. Living Under Vows

Buddhists do not have the equivalent of creeds and confessions of faith that demand assent to religious doctrines, although Theravada monks in monasteries have hundreds of *vinaya* rules by which they are examined monthly for confession, repentance, and rededication. Instead of creeds, Mahayana Buddhism has the Four Bodhisattva Vows. They are unattainable ethical principles that inspire committed disciples all the days of their life.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ These vows are recited at many Mahayana gatherings. They are carved in Chinese into the gigantic wooden pillars at the entrance of Hsi Lai Temple in Hacienda Heights, Los Angeles.

衆生無邊誓願渡 Living beings are numberless, I vow to save them. (environment)
煩惱無盡誓願斷 Desires are inexhaustible, I vow to cut them off. (consumerism)
法門無量誓願學 Gates to truth are countless, I vow to open them. (truth seeking)
佛道無上誓願成 The awakened path is unsurpassable, I vow to embody it.
(insight/compassion)