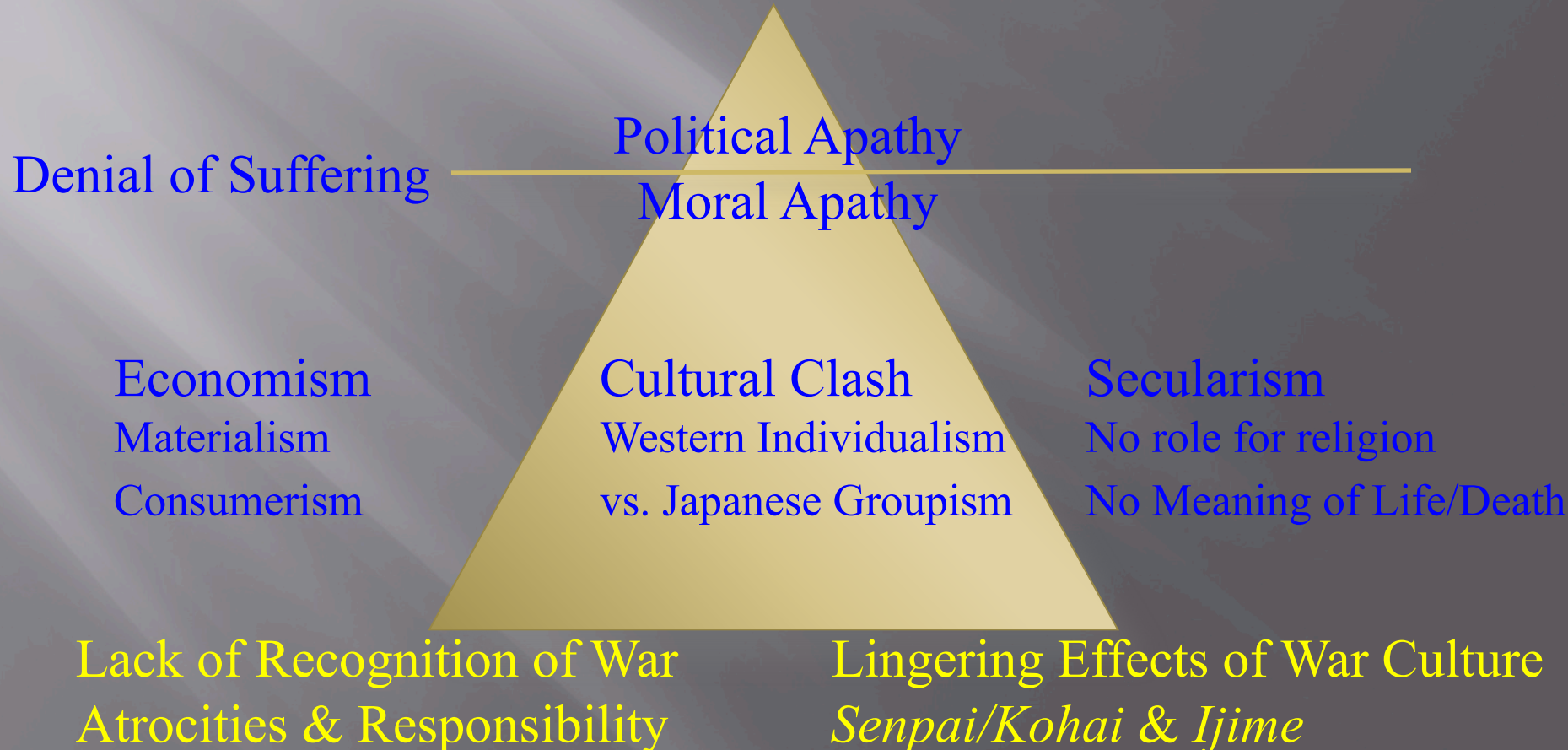


The Final Iceberg of Japanese Dukkha

The Disconnected Society

無縁社会 *Mu-en Shakai*



Reviewing Buddhism's Problems & Potentials in Japan

- Hisashi Nakamura, “Those who observed the moral confusion in Japan immediately after World War II may be led to doubt the proposition that the Japanese in the past were moralistically inclined ... Little difference seems to be discoverable between traditional and recent Japanese morality. The difference seems to lie rather in the fact that what was considered to be morally tenable in Japan's ‘closed-door’ past became untenable under rapidly changing worldwide social and economic conditions to which Japan is adapting itself. The traditional concepts of honesty as loyalty to the clan and Emperor is applicable only to the conduct of man as a member of the particular and limited human nexus to which he belongs; it is not applicable to the conduct of man as a member of human society as a whole.”

There did not develop in Japan the emphasis on a *principled* discontinuity between different regimes or “stages” of institutional change. Nor did there develop any strong conception of such changes and breaks as constituting steps in the unfolding of historical programs or cosmic plans with possible eschatological implications. In principle, no new modes of legitimization were connected with such changes. The assumed mythical continuity of the imperial symbolism—often fictitious but continuously emphasized—was crucial in this respect. The bases of legitimization—especially those rooted in the symbolism of the emperor—were continuous and could not be dismantled or changed. The epitome of this emphasis on (a reconstructed) continuity could be seen in the totally new construction of the emperor system under the Meiji regime.

-Eisenstadt, S.N. *Japanese Civilization*. p. 424.

- ❖ This leads us to question as to whether Japan, despite its highly developed social and cultural forms, is indeed a “civilization”, since the one major distinction between it and the other civilizations we have mentioned is its almost total ethnic and linguistic homogeneity.
- ❖ If we define “civilization” as “the binding together of multiple ethnicities with various languages, cultural customs, and religious or spiritual outlooks through an appeal to universal – but not necessarily transcendental – values to enrich human and perhaps all sentient life amidst a dynamic interplay of diversity”
- ❖ then it is possible to call Europe, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, and even greater China all civilizations, but it is rather untenable to denote the single nation and people of Japan as a civilization unto its own.

Key Questions for Our Course

- Could Buddhism provide the axial universal ethic for Japan to better integrate into the global system, while still preserving many of its indigenous values?
- Can socially engaged Buddhism provide Japanese Buddhism a means for re-establishing its core teachings and ethics for the present and future of Japan?

- ❖ The legacy of the Kamakura Buddhist revolution still offers a roadmap for social change based on egalitarian ethics that encourage tolerance and non-violent conflict resolution. In the spirit of Dogen, the understanding that the language, conceptual thought, and ideologies can be vehicles for the constant creation of buddha enlightenment gives us hope that such a movement is possible.
- ❖ The recent activities of engaged Buddhists in Japan indicate a new potential – along with a variety of recent social shifts like the growth of numerous localized civic works as the state recedes and the increase of long term foreign residents creating a new level of diversity.

**For a more in depth view into
these larger issues, join my
other course in the Spring!**