

War Responsibility & Social Discrimination: The Problem of Moral Authority in Modern Japanese Buddhism

Jonathan S. Watts
Keio University, Tokyo, Japan

The Sudden Shift to Peace

- Yanagida Seizan 柳田聖山 (1922-2006)—a prominent post-war Rinzai Zen monk and director of the Institute for Humanistic Studies at Kyoto University—explained that:

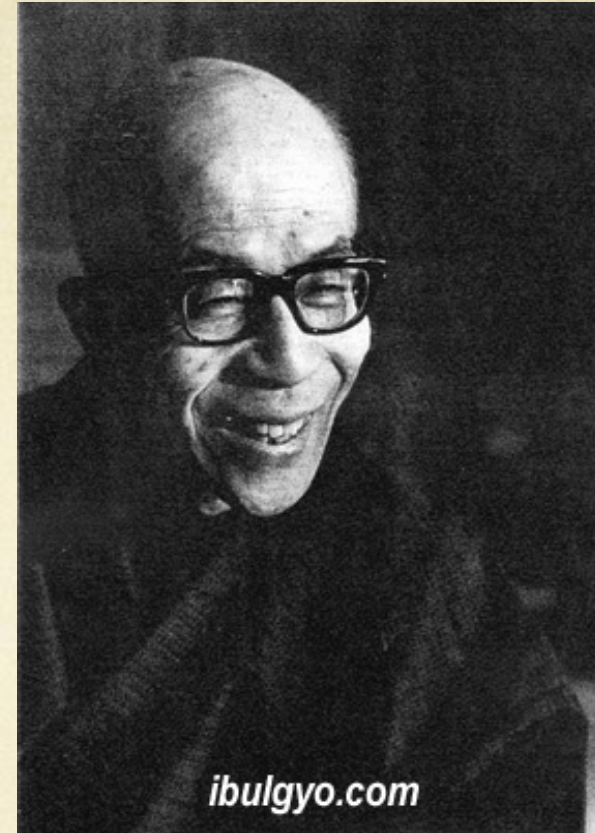
All of Japan's Buddhist sects flipped around as smoothly as one turns one's hand and proceeded to ring the bells of peace. The leaders of Japan's Buddhist sects had been among the leaders of the country who had egged us on by uttering big words about the righteousness [of the war]. Now, however, these same leaders acted shamelessly, thinking nothing of it. (Victoria, Brian. *Zen at War*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997), p. 159

- Reminds us of Nakamura Hajime's comments:

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. Nakamura, Hajime. *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples India-China-Tibet-Japan*. Revised English Translation Ed. Philip P. Wiener. (University of Hawaii Press, 1964), p. 521.

The War Responsibility of Buddhists

- Rev. Kono Taitsu's mentor as a student at the Rinzai Zen affiliated Hanazono University was the well-known Rinzai Zen scholar Ichikawa Hakugen. In 1970, he published his research on *The War Responsibility of Buddhists* (仏教の戦争責任 *Bukkyo-no senso sekinin*).
- 12 points for how Japanese Buddhism became receptive to the growing authoritarian nationalism of the Taisho and early Showa periods.
 - 1) a subservience to the state for protection by focusing on the limited social nexus of nation as one larger family while denying transnationalism
 - 2) an overvaluing of the archaic over critical creativity
 - 3) an emphasis on karmic determinism, which is also shared by many other Buddhist cultures
 - 4) an emphasis on inner peace over social justice
 - 5) the lack of a transcendental power to which people can dedicate themselves, resulting in the neglect of discursive thought and logic
 - 6) the immanent logic of *soku* 即, "just as it is", which leads to a static, aesthetic, subjective harmony with things—a pointed criticism of the Kyoto School and D.T. Suzuki



Shields, James Mark. *Against Harmony: Progressive and Radical Buddhism in Modern Japan*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 144. & Victoria. *Zen at War*: pp. 173-74.

Taking War Responsibility 戦争責任

- It took a level of **international embarrassment** about the issue—specifically through Brian Victoria's presentation of Prof. Ichikawa's work in *Zen and War* published in 1997 along with personal appeals by shocked Western devotees—for the Rinzai Zen denomination to issue a declaration of war responsibility in 2001.
- This followed a **movement that had begun earlier** by the Jodo Shin Pure Land denominations, which issued such declarations in 1987 by the Otani sub-sect and in 1991 by the Hongan-ji sub-sect. The Soto Zen denomination also made one in 1992.
- These fell **in line with the political movement** towards apologizing for the war begun in 1985 with the first reference to the war as one of “aggression” by Prime Minister Nakasone. **The first use of the term “apology” was made in 1993** by Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihiro, and what is considered the first clear and explicit apology was made in August 1995 on the 50th anniversary of the ending of the war by Prime Minister Maruyama Tomi-ichi. These latter two prime ministers were the first ones not from the conservative LDP since 1955 when they took over Japanese politics.
- Finally, the Jodo Pure Land denomination in issued a declaration in 2008. Ironically, because of the active peace work of many lay Nichiren based denominations, the **mainstream Nichiren denomination still has not directly addressed the issue.**
- Shoji, Jun-ichiro. “Historical Perception in Postwar Japan: Concerning the Pacific War”. National Institute for Defense Studies (防衛研究所 *Boei Kenkyu-jo*). *NIDS Security Reports*. No.4 (March 2003). p. 123.

“Critical Buddhism” 批判仏教

- The Critical Buddhist movement that subsequently emerged in the 1980s made an even **more in-depth examination of the various potholes in the East Asian Mahayana tradition that enable the total loss of a critical logic**—the very skill that made Shakyamuni such a transformational figure in the history of human thought and religious development.
- **Hakamaya Noriaki** 袴谷憲昭 (1943-) in his numerous critical essays that begin to emerge in 1990, like many other critical post-war Buddhist writers, has looked at **the problematic cultural value of “harmony” (和 *wa*)** and its role in Buddhism since it was first promoted by **Prince Shotoku in his 17-Article Constitution**. For Hakamaya, the value of *wa* became a way of encouraging an **uncritical acceptance of any teaching or ideology**, which during the war period led Japanese citizens to silently sacrifice themselves. For Hakamaya, emperor worship is another example of the murky logic and syncretism found in the teachings of **“innate enlightenment” (*hongaku*)** and the Shinto gods as manifestations of enlightened dharma (本地垂迹 *honji suijaku*) that serve to muffle any ideological criticism. He extends this critique to Buddhists like D.T. Suzuki, who also embraced ideas of mysticism and the Zen value of wisdom that lies beyond language.
- He feels **Buddhists must rely on critical thinking**, the type of which is found in the classical explanation of Buddhist **“faith”** through the Pali and Sanskrit terms *saddha* or *sraddha*. Buddhists must respond with words and actions against such mistaken views as opposed to the uncritical mentality of *wa* used during the war. In the end, Buddhism for Hakamaya must **teach causality, promote altruism and the well-being of the other, and value the use of language to express truth**.
- Swanson, Paul L. “Why They Say Zen is Not Buddhism: Recent Japanese Critiques of Buddha-Nature”. In *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*. Edited by Jamie Hubbard & Paul L. Swanson (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997) pp. 18-20.

Social Discrimination in Japanese Buddhism

- **The Machida Incident of 1979:** Rev. Machida Muneo 町田宗夫 (1916-2009), acting as the Director-General of the Soto Zen denomination in tandem with being President of the Japan Buddhist Federation (JBF) that represents all the traditional denominations, participated at the **3rd World Conference on Religion and Peace** which **Rissho Kosei-kai** founded.
- Near the end of the conference, a motion was put forward for a group declaration to **condemn the legitimization of the practice of “untouchability” on religious grounds**. This was clearly directed at the ancient practice of “untouchability” in India based on certain teachings in the **Hindu tradition sanctifying a caste system**. However, it was also directed at a similar practice that developed in Japan and was institutionalized during the **Tokugawa era**, specifically towards a group of people called **Burakumin** 部落民—literally “people of the village”, but sometimes also referred to as *eta* (穢多 “those full of defilement”) or *hi-nin* (非人 “non-humans”).
- **Buddhist temples were highly complicit** in the stigmatization of these people by assigning them derogatory posthumous names during funeral and memorial rites. While the Meiji government abolished these practices in 1871, long held Japanese **customs surrounding “impurity”** (汚れ *kegare*) meant these practices continued on, especially in more western regions of Japan.
- **A 1983 study** revealed the practice of keeping records on discriminatory names in 5,649 Soto Zen temples, 1,771 Jodo Pure Land temples, 254 Tendai temples, and 40 Shingon Koyasan temples, along with discriminatory tombstones found at 1,911 Soto temples, 231 Jodo Pure Land temples, 10 Tendai temples, and 102 Shingon Koyasan temples. Further, it became known that **families with engaged children were still hiring private investigators to illegally gain information from temples** as to whether the fiancé came from such a *dowa* background or not. Bodiford, William. “Zen and the Art of Religious Prejudice: Efforts to Reform a Tradition of Social Discrimination”. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*. Vol. 23, No. 1-2 (Spring, 1996).
- By 1993, the Japanese government still recognized 4,442 such communities known as *dowa-chiku* 同和地区, under the less pejorative name *dowa*, along with 298,385 *dowa* households, and 892,751 *dowa* people who qualified for government aid. However, as many *dowa* wish to not be identified, the Buraku Liberation League estimates there are actually 6,000 such communities with a population of 3 million.

A Voice in the Wilderness:

Seno-o Giro 妹尾義郎 (1889-1961)

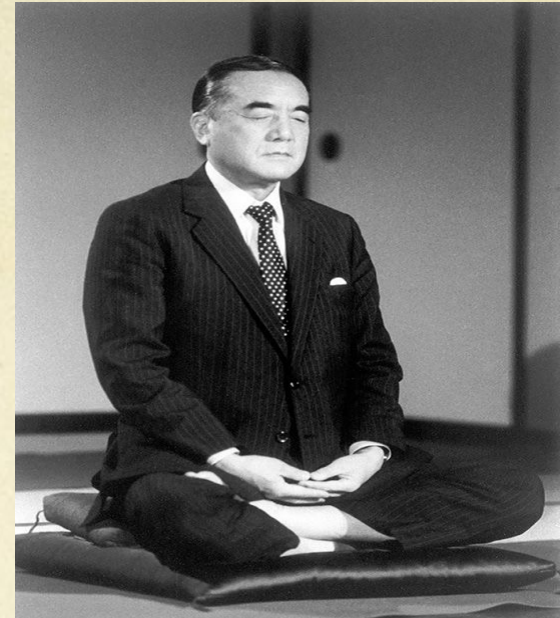
- Formed the Youth League for Revitalizing Buddhism in 1931 and became active in protests against Japanese militarism and fascism in consort with numerous anti-war labor strikes and those of the Anti-Nazi League to Crush Fascism (反ナチスファッショ同盟 *han-nachism-fassho domei*). For these activities, he was arrested in December 1936 and, under intense pressure in prison, committed *tenko*.
- In July 1946, he revived the pre-war Youth League with many of the same members under the new title, the Buddhist Socialist Alliance (仏教社会主義同盟 *Bukkyo shakai-shugi domei*), which declared its support for the Japan Socialist Party (JSP).
- To promote the principled neutrality of Japan, Seno-o helped direct two organizations for making friendly relations with Korea and China. He became director of the Japan Peace Promotion Association (日本平和推進会議 *Nihon Heiwa Suishin Kaigi*) in July 1951 that worked with the trade union federation Sohyo. The Japan Peace Promotion Association took on a prominent role in organizing the large-scale peace rallies in opposition to American military bases. While a minority within their own denominations, progressive Buddhists of this period both in the traditional world with Seno-o and his colleagues and in the new world with Nipponzan Myohoji “became a major force in the peace movement”.



Large, Stephen S. “For Self and Society: Seno-o Giro and Buddhist Socialism in the Post-war Japanese Peace Movement”. In *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*. Eds. Gavan McCormack & Yoshio Sugimoto. (Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 89.

Is Imperial Way Zen Still Alive?

- Abe Shinzo's (1954-2022) conservative values follow those of Nakasone Yasuhiro 中曾根康弘 (1918-2019), the first postwar prime minister to visit the Yasukuni Shrine, where numerous Japanese war criminals are enshrined, to the outrage of the Chinese and Korean governments.
- Nakasone also introduced Abe to a Rinzai Zen temple named Zensho-an 全生庵 located in Tokyo, where he supposedly went after his first failed tenure as prime minister to revive his spirit for his second, long running tenure.



Is Imperial Way Zen Still Alive?

- The temple and its master, Yamamoto Genpo 山本玄峰 (1866–1961), seem to have been on the side of the Imperial Zen movement. Yamamoto was a confidant of Suzuki Kantaro 鈴木貫太郎 (1868–1948), an admiral in the Imperial Navy who served as the last prime minister of the war era.
- He also counted among his disciples the influential political advisor Yotsumoto Yoshitaka 四元義隆 (1908-2004), a leading member of the ultranationalist League of Blood (血盟団 *ketsumeidan*), which in 1932 attempted to assassinate important capitalists and liberal politicians, succeeding in two such plots.
- The League was in fact masterminded by a follower of Nichirenism founder Tanaka Chigaku, a Nichiren Buddhist priest named Inoue Nissho 井上日召 (1887-1967), for whom Master Yamamoto testified in support during his court trial for these plots.
- In the immediate postwar era, Yotsumoto's influence grew as he forged a reputation as a power broker, serving as adviser to prime ministers Yoshida Shigeru (1946–47, 1948–54), Ikeda Hayato (1960–64), Sato Eisaku (1964–72) and eventually Nakasone, whom he introduced to Zensho-an and Master Yamamoto.

Can It Happen Again?

Two Lingering Questions

1. The Problem of Democracy

- The **Liberal Democratic Party** has ruled Japan since 1955 except two brief periods 1993-96 & 2009-2012. As a “one-party state”, can we call Japan a functioning democracy?
- Perhaps the more central problem are the **elite bureaucrats** who form policy and control the politicians. They are **un-elected** and have ruled Japan, except during the war period, since **Tokyo University** was created in the **Meiji Restoration**.
- Recently, they two have experienced the *Mu-En Shakai* from overwork preparing all the speeches the LDP and other politicians have to give in public and have begun quitting their jobs.

- “Vox Populi: Extreme work hours crushing staff in seat of Japanese power”. *Asahi Shimbun*. March 9, 2021. Sakakibara, Ken. “Young officials explain exodus of overworked bureaucrats”. *Asahi Shimbun*. March 28, 2022.

Can It Happen Again?

Two Lingering Questions

The Problem of Autonomy (主体性 *shutaisei*) & Social Ethics

- Many postwar intellectuals, like Maruyama Masao, reflected that Japanese do not stand up independently for **universal norms** and tend to go along with the norms their group, company, leader, nation has created. **They lack the critical “autonomy” needed for a modern democratic society.**
- Since the Tokugawa era, **Neo-Confucian ethics** that emphasize **loyalty and service to nation and authority** (國王恩 *kuni-o-on*) and to one’s “limited social nexus” constrain the development of autonomy. Neo-Confucianism became the religion of the samurai and then these bureaucratic elite in the modern era, and **eventually the public social ethics while religion was made “private”.**
- Buddhist ethics, in theory, are universal and put an emphasis on **“serving all sentient beings”** (衆生恩 *shujo-on*). We have seen in this class, many Buddhist priests serving people outside of their “limited social nexus”; those who have become *mu-en*.
- Shimazono Susumu, the leading scholar on postwar Japanese religion, calls this **“autonomous Buddhist social ethics”** (自律的な仏教社会倫理 *jiritsu-teki Bukkyo shakai rinri*). **Could it provide a new form of social ethics in the 21st century?**