

Buddhism in Japan Today: The Agony of the New Generation

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I. JAPANESE SOCIETY AFTER WORLD WAR II

Japanese Buddhism was ill-equipped when Japan entered the exciting Meiji period. Buddhism was unprepared for modernization, as it had not divested itself of feudalistic elements, nor had it familiarized itself with modern institutions. Several decades later the defeat of Japan brought further confusion to Buddhism, for it had helped suppress democratic movements in the 1920's and had provided spokesmen for aggressive wars in the 1930's and early 1940's. Thus the results of the war negated the very ideas that Buddhism had endorsed as important for Japan's rise to world power.

Defeat in World War II proved to be a turning point in the history of Japanese Buddhism. The program for the democratization of religion instituted in December, 1945, by the Allied occupation took the form of the separation of State and Shintoism. This was followed by the renunciation of the dogma of divinity of the emperor in January, 1946. The directive on the separation of State and Shintoism identified Shintoism as an ideology which had contributed to bringing about war, defeat, and the inevitable consequences. Elements that contributed to militarism and nationalism were therefore stripped away, and Shintoism was demoted to a status equal with other forms of religion. The emperor no longer was considered a spiritual head whose position was rooted in Shinto mythology, but a symbol of secular power.

How, then, did Japanese religious consciousness react to the new

events of history? A survey conducted by the Jiji Press in 1946¹ revealed that a great number of laborers, students, and intellectuals were either critical of or indifferent to religion, and that the bulk of believers were from the rural population and shopkeepers, among whom strong family ties existed. The survey indicated that a religion enforced by the state had not succeeded in developing religious consciousness among its people. Buddhism, which had remained relatively idle under the Tokugawas and bewildered from the Meiji to the Showa periods, had to transform itself from an institutionalized religion to a personal religion to meet the new demands of the postwar period. The transformation, however, required not only the reorganization of the *sangha*, but the spiritual reconstruction of individuals as well. However, Buddhist leaders failed to produce positive measures compatible with the needs of postwar Japan. Recognizing that democratization of Buddhism would be difficult to accomplish within the bounds of institutionalized religion, secessionists attempted to realize a closer contact with the people under conditions free from the dictates of the established *sangha*. Those who succeeded became the leaders of the new religions.

II. NEW RELIGIONS

The term "new religions," specifically known as *shinkō-shūkyō*, is employed in contradistinction to the established religions and generally points to those religions founded during the chaotic period of World War II and after. However, the roots of these religions can be traced back to the prewar period, when they remained units of the established religions, an administrative arrangement made necessary by a government ordinance which controlled all aspects of religious organizations. The postwar constitution reaffirmed the freedom of religion and contributed to producing the "rush hour of the gods," as can be attested by the fact that between 1945 and 1951 some 742 new religious bodies emerged.² This abrupt mushrooming of new religious schools required a reorganization of religious groups. The Ministry of Education, which administered all religious organizations, therefore kept the number of religious bodies in the three hundreds during the 1950's.

In terms of membership, the 1963 *Yearbook on Religion (Shūkyō Nenkan)* published by the Ministry of Education gives the following statistics:

<i>Religions</i>	<i>Membership</i>
Shintoism	68,465,708
Buddhism	66,968,131
Christianity	649,354
Others	20,107,243
Total	156,190,436

The basic religions of the Japanese thus are Shintoism and Buddhism. However, the total population of Japan for that year was 96,160,000. The fact that the number of religious believers actually exceeded the total population by some sixty million indicates that a great many Japanese maintain a plurality of religious affiliations.

Major new religious bodies and their membership are given below.⁴

<i>Major New Religious Bodies of Shinto Origin</i>	<i>Approximate Membership During the 1950's</i>	<i>Membership in 1963</i>
Tenri-kyō	2,350,000	2,284,656
Izumo Taisha-kyō	2,330,000	2,254,275
Kurozumi-kyō	720,000	780,106
Mitake-kyō	710,000	530,414
Konkō-kyō	630,000	557,084

<i>Major New Religious Bodies of Buddhist Origin</i>	<i>Approximate Membership During the 1950's</i>	<i>Membership in 1963</i>
Reiyū-kai	3,465,000	4,328,266
Rissho Kōsei-kai	1,349,000	1,980,348
Nichiren Shō-shū ¹	429,000	14,446,855

Among the established schools of Buddhism, the Nichiren, Shin-gon, and Shin schools, each with over nine million believers (inclusive of its kindred sects), are the largest, according to the findings of the Ministry of Education. Collectively, the established schools form the main current of religious belief, but the new religious bodies are forces that cannot be ignored. The new religious schools are essentially lay organizations and their doctrines are eclectic and simple, but unlike the "professional" Buddhist and Shinto priests,

the founders, or more frequently the foundresses, of the new religious schools make claims of unusual spiritual power in divination, sorcery, and faith healing. They are of humble origin, share the same problems with the masses, offer to their followers an intimate sense of belonging, and are seriously devoted to their faith. In spite of their pseudo-intellectualism, they offer a clear solution to the problems of the masses by appealing to the mentality of the masses. Critics accuse the new religions of contributing to superstition and spreading perverted doctrines, and enviously claim that they are exceedingly successful business enterprises, which they undoubtedly are. But the same may be said of the old religions.

What is important in the final analysis is that the new religions do offer the masses a solution to immediate problems. The fact that their doctrines are nonintellectual or anti-intellectual merely reflects the nonintellectuality or the anti-intellectuality of the masses. The development of modern science and technology does not wipe out their existence. On the contrary, it stimulates the demand for them because the stress and anxiety created by science and technology are the conditions under which the masses must constantly exist. Thus the new religions are capable of easing the pain of modern living for the masses who, by and large, are suffering from an acute case of cultural lag. Although they are exposed to the mechanics of modern civilization physically, their social, cultural, and psychological world is often not unlike that of feudal Japan. The catch phrase of the new religious schools is, therefore, "to assure prosperity and to bring about health, security, and happiness to the members of the family." In order to realize these objectives, they practice incantation, divination, sorcery, and magic. Although anxiety and insecurity are often caused by political, economic, and social factors, believers of the new religions desperately seek solutions within the confines of their own religious organization. The new religious schools therefore are extremely exclusive.

Many of the new schools are derived from either the Nichiren or the Shingon schools. The Reiyū-kai, derived from the Nichiren school and one of the largest of the new religious bodies, claims over 4,000,000 believers. In 1959 alone, its membership registered an increase of over 100,000, and its churches and teachers increased tenfold. From the Reiyū-kai emerged many subsets, some of which are: Rishū Kōsei-kai, with a total membership of

1,980,348; Myō-chū-kai, with 151,378; and Hosshi-kai, with 116,193. Among other major new religious schools derived from Buddhism include the Daijō-kyō, with 803,724; Shinnyo-en, with 124,260; and Kōdō-dan, with 335,782. Of particular interest is the Sōka Gakkai, literally, the Value Creation Society, a Nichiren splinter sect founded in 1930. Since 1951, it has become one of the most militant religious bodies and active political entities of postwar Japan. At the present it claims a membership of close to 13,000,000.⁵ In 1956, it sent 3 of its representatives to the national Diet; in 1959, 9; in 1962, 15; in 1965, 21. In November, 1964, it formed the Kōmei party, a political power in the Diet whose presence cannot be ignored.

The immense success of the new religious schools points out the fact that when the masses are armed with a unified idea and an organization through which they can demonstrate their abilities, they can muster an enormous concentration of strength. Thus, in spite of the fact that conservatism rules the old schools, changes brought about in the spiritual demands of the masses, who actually form the basis of any religious organization, inevitably influence the character of the Buddhist *sangha*. Consequently, secularization of the *sangha*, as it comes into contact with modern sociopolitical systems, is inevitable. But secularization at this moment does not indicate the adaptability of Japanese Buddhism, be it of the old or the new school, to modern society; rather it reflects its servility to the popular trend. The problem is that secularization of the *sangha* inevitably involves the possibility of corruption, as history has well demonstrated. The Buddhist leaders must therefore regain confidence in their ability to spiritually liberate and enlighten the masses. While making efforts to learn from them, these leaders must also cooperate with the people in order to bring about the spiritualization of the laity. This is possible only if the Buddhist leaders can discover a new blend of Eastern spiritual wisdom and Western rationalism which can cope with the complex problems of modern social organization.

III. THE JAPANESE RELIGIOUS CONSCIOUSNESS

A Study of the Japanese National Character, published by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics in August 1961, reveals that only 35 per

cent of the Japanese believe in some form of religion. With reference to age groups, the study shows that 16 per cent in the twenties, 30 per cent in the thirties, 41 per cent in the forties, 51 per cent in the fifties, and 65 per cent in the sixties and over believe in some form of religion. With reference to education, 48 per cent of those having six years of schooling believe in some form of religion, in contrast to only 25 per cent among those having completed college. It can be established, therefore, that the number of believers increases in direct proportion to the advancement of age and in inverse proportion to the amount of education received. With reference to occupation, 49 per cent of small businessmen are believers, topping the list, while only 22 per cent of the clerical and sales personnel are believers. With reference to geographical distribution, central to southern Japan is the stronghold of religious beliefs. The study, based upon 920 subjects twenty years of age and over, also reveals that among the believers 68 per cent were Buddhist. Shin commanded the greatest preference, followed in order by Zen, Nichiren, and Shingon. Central and southern Japan are the strongholds of the Shin and Shingon schools; central to northern Japan is the stronghold of the Nichiren school.

The study also made other queries. To the question "Do you believe that people give adequate consideration to religion?" 65 per cent answered in the negative, 14 per cent in the affirmative. To the nonbelievers, the question "Do you think religion is an important matter?" was also asked. Seventy-two per cent answered affirmatively. This means that although 65 per cent identified themselves as nonbelievers, and 35 per cent as believers, the majority of the people surveyed considered religion an important matter. Findings also indicated that the majority of the Japanese feel "happy" and even among those who claimed not to feel so, the causes of their unhappiness are very seldom rooted in a spiritual problem. Nevertheless, 70 per cent of the subjects sampled did not feel that science and technology alone can solve all problems, and expressed the view that religious concern is a matter of importance. The study concludes by stating that if the question "What do you think is the most important thing in life?" were put to the Japanese, it is most probable that religion, gods, or the buddhas would not be the answers one could expect from them. Nevertheless, 77 per cent honored their ancestors, while only 5 per cent did not. Fifteen per

cent claimed that the most important item in the household is the family Buddhist altar. Japanese religion is a family issue and is greatly influenced by ancestral worship. Inasmuch as it is regarded as a traditional household matter and exists in the form of rites, it is extremely doubtful that such a form of religion can be employed as an instrument to promote the causes of universal humanity; it is incapable of perceiving a spiritual horizon beyond the limits of one's own family's concern.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

(1) *Japanese Religion is a Household Matter.* The fact that Japanese religion, whether the old or the new, is basically a household matter and is greatly influenced by primitive ancestral worship means that the average Japanese does not consider religion as a means of solving spiritual problems, but simply as a matter of custom handed down by tradition. In spite of Japan's remarkable industrial recovery and economic prosperity in the postwar period, the desire of the Japanese to preserve the family tradition is still very strong. Cemeteries found in the rear of the temples and family Buddhist altars displayed within the average homes serve as integral parts of the religious life of the Japanese. The Buddhist services for the deceased, the Bon festival, etc., which are designed to maintain close family ties, are significant socioreligious functions. Thus the priesthood is that group which administers the rites and ceremonies, and the temples are the institutions in which the rites and ceremonies are held. The average Japanese has no desire to understand the philosophical and ethical implications of Buddhism, but has learned to build temples and statues and to observe various forms of Buddhist rites instead. Because religious behavior is not imbedded in a spiritual experience, a highly formalized religion has been produced.

(2) *Reaction of the Intellectuals.* Under such circumstances, what, then, is the reaction of the Japanese intellectuals, the foremost critics of Buddhism today? As can be expected, the intellectuals are concerned primarily with the ideological aspects of Buddhism. But as laymen, they do not attempt to involve themselves in the understanding of the complex doctrinal system of Buddhism. They are merely interested in, and in some instances attracted to, the Buddhist

view of life. However, because their information on Buddhism to a large extent is derived from their contacts with the masses, who aspire to spiritual powers only to gain worldly profits, and from Buddhist social institutions, which merely function as centers of ritualism, the despair of the intellectuals is to be expected. Buddhism, once symbolized by serene temples and a contemplative priesthood, actually offers no vitality or spiritual satisfaction to the critical mind; the temples are staffed by self-conceited dogmatists who carry on rites and ceremonies in absolute boredom; the priesthood, incapable of understanding the modern mentality, represents nothing but anachronism. With the exception of a very few, leaders of men are no longer found in the temples. Those with exceptional abilities prefer to leave the temple and the priesthood altogether in favor of a secular life. Buddhism does not attract the young men of Japan today as it did centuries ago, and the prestige associated with the priesthood in the past has miserably dwindled. Thus a Japanese intellectual prefers to maintain that he belongs to no religious order.

The fact that the Japanese intellectuals are indifferent to Buddhism does not mean, however, that they are overtly anti-Buddhist. Although they do maintain a nonreligious view individually, they will unhesitatingly acknowledge the depth of influence Buddhism has had in shaping Japanese culture and thought. They do not unite in an all-out cry against Buddhism and identify themselves as antisocial nonconformists. They continue to observe Buddhist rites and attend Buddhist services when the occasion demands their presence, as a matter of social obligation. There are very few who seriously consider the conflict between their personal outlook on life and that represented by the present Buddhist institutions. Even if they do, they quietly suffer the agony of conscience within themselves. This does not mean that the Japanese intellectuals are unaware of contradictions. On the contrary, they take extreme delight in discussing contradictions but make no serious effort to come to a logical and reasonable solution. To them contradiction is not necessarily a source of conflict to be overcome but merely an object of intellectual curiosity to be played with. As such, they frequently find themselves thoroughly intoxicated by the logic of contradiction and amuse themselves satirically. They drift away from all forms of

institutionalized religion, denounce all forms of faith, and seek meaning in the agony of their intellect.

(3) *Reaction of the Masses.* If Western civilization gave scientism and rationalism to the Japanese intellectuals, it stimulated material wants and a life of intense industrial activity among the masses. In the midst of modernization, industrialization, and the constantly demanding ideological advances, the masses select, utilize, and absorb only that which gives them meaning and profits in regard to immediate realities. Reason devoid of utility has no meaning whatsoever as far as the masses are concerned. But popular Buddhism, which maintains no function other than that of performing funeral rites, and new religions, which are dedicated to curing the sick and realizing secular benefits in dubious manners, represent remnants of primitive religion. If these forms of religion are guilty of lowering the intellectual standard of Buddhism, it is due to the idleness and the unimaginative minds of the Japanese Buddhist leaders.

The fact remains, however, that in Japan even Christianity, which was granted religious freedom some one hundred years ago, faces an impasse. Granting the fact that it was unpopular prior to the end of World War II, mainly due to its opposition to the dogma of the divinity of the emperor, it has failed to advance the frontiers of its activities to any significant degree after the war, even with the aid of American funds. Contrary to statistics, Shintoism and Buddhism, as well as Christianity, have lost the serious attention of the Japanese. What attracts the masses is a religion devoted to giving immediate secular benefits.

(4) *Buddhism as a Form of Social Therapy.* That the Japanese are predominantly indifferent to religion does not suggest the declining power of Buddhism by any means. Traditionally Japan is a Buddhist country. Whereas Christianity commands the interest of a select group of urban intellectuals, the major support of Buddhism lies in the rural population, whose commitment to that faith remains a matter of mere household tradition. It is in the underdeveloped regions of Japan that Buddhist and Shinto festivals, reminiscent of the Edo Period, continue to be observed and function as significant unifying forces in the community. Of course, the Bon festival and funeral services remain virtual monopolies of the Buddhists in both the urban and rural areas. That the people

take part in ancestral worship, rites, and festivals does not necessarily indicate the compatibility of Buddhism with modern social organizations, which are far better equipped for providing other forms of recreation of a far more stimulating nature.

However, aside from such rites and festivals, it is of importance in assessing Japanese Buddhism today to note that many Japanese politicians, intellectuals, and businessmen who are fired with lofty idealism during the prime of their lives take to Buddhism, or at least enjoy the proximity of a Buddhist spiritual environment in their later years. Novelists find inspiration in varying degrees for their works in the Buddhist tradition, and in turn are influencing the masses in immeasurable degree. Finally, traditional Japanese art reflects the secularization of Buddhism. Buddhism today is neither denied nor encouraged. It lives silently within the depth of the Japanese consciousness, enwrapped in a culture to which it has contributed much.

Various forms of religion co-exist in Japan, and freedom of religion as a concept was never an issue because the Japanese have not experienced religious persecution to the degree known in the West. With the exception of cases involving the Tokugawa Christians, religious persecution in Japan is rare, because neither Shintoism nor Buddhism supports a monotheistic faith. Both Shintoism and Buddhism reveal a marked tendency toward syncretism; historically they have developed what is described as the *honji-suijaku* theory, a form of religious syncretism. Classification of Japanese under specific categories of religion is therefore difficult, since the Japanese live in a climate of religious syncretism. They traditionally pay respect to the Shinto deities in the morning and revere the Buddha in the evening. Simple miniature Shinto shrines placed on shelves near the ceiling, an elaborately displayed Buddhist altar located in the tearoom, and Taoist deities found in the kitchen and other strategic points of the house, all co-exist in the common household, although it must be admitted that in recent construction of public housing units in the urban areas which allow only one or two rooms with four-and-one-half to eight-mat space each, television sets, washing machines and refrigerators are replacing the seats of the gods and buddhas at a rapid pace.

But religious rites and festivals have an inherent attraction for the Japanese mind. A Japanese will continue to pay respect to a

Shinto shrine on the occasion of the birth of a child; that child upon reaching maturity will most likely exchange the vows of marriage in a Christian church as a demonstration of his "modernity"; but he will, in all probability, receive the traditional Buddhist burial. Teenagers, armed with portable radios which incessantly blare jazz, rock-a-billy, twist, etc., will continue to visit Shinto shrines and ancient Buddhist temples and piously fold their hands and tilt their heads in reverence to the gods and the Buddhas in an attempt to realize greater secular benefits, while the bells of the Greek Orthodox cathedral in the heart of Tokyo will continue to inspire the romantic "I-novel" writers of Japan with their themes centering on love, tragedy, and the delicacy of emotion. Religion in all forms will continue to be tolerated in the same manner as the *pachinko* pinball machines are tolerated, for both are, like the traditional public bath houses, forms of inexpensive but effective therapy built into the Japanese social structure.

(5) *The Agony of the New Generation.* As the foregoing remarks have indicated, in spite of the fact that Japan has made remarkable progress in industrialization and modernization, she continues to maintain a premodern social structure which breeds outdated modes of thought. The large Kaannon statues erected at popular excursion areas in recent times symbolize the character of Japanese Buddhism today. Though elegant in outward appearance, they do not seem to symbolize spiritual depth, religious insight, or a passion for humanity. Just as great art pieces of Buddhism are carefully displayed at a distance as museum pieces, so is Buddhist philosophy carefully tucked away in the ivory tower, accessible only to esoteric scholars.

On the other hand, the catastrophe that befell Japan in 1945 has brought about a serious attempt toward critical self-examination among a great number of Japanese. They have come to realize the urgent need to understand clearly and objectively the place they occupy in world history, and the path that they must tread in remaking a new generation, rather than to capriciously idealize themselves and their nation. What the Japanese of the new breed demand is the complete uprooting of outdated modes of thought and the development of cosmopolitan thought. Whether Japanese Buddhism of the postwar era can fulfill their demands still remains a matter of speculation.

NOTES

1. For details of the findings based on the survey conducted by the Jiji Press, see *Shūkyō Binsan* (Handbook on Religion) published by the Shūkyō Renmei, 1948. Akio Sasaki, in his essay "Shūkyō o sasaeru mono," in *Shin Shingakka Kōza* (Kawade Shobō, 1956), Vol. IV, provides a detailed analysis of the findings of the Jiji Press survey.

2. *Bokkyō Dai Nenshan*, 1961, p. 801.

3. Figures for the 1950's are approximations derived from the *Shūkyō Nenshan* of that period; those for 1963 are from the 1965 issue of the *Asahi Nenshan*.

4. Sōka Gakkai is technically a unit of the Nichiren Shō-shū. In the late 1950's, it maintained a membership of over 200,000; in 1963, it claimed 11,904,726; in 1965, approximately 13,000,000. The phenomenal rise of membership of the Nichiren Shō-shū is due to the success of Sōka Gakkai. However, the relation between Sōka Gakkai and Nichiren Shō-shū is not without tension at the present.

5. Membership figures for the new schools are derived from the 1965 issue of the *Asahi Nenshan*.