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Recent Trends Concerning the Issue of 'Buddhism and Practice' in Contemporary Japan

Abstract

When discussing Buddhism in practice, we should first note that the word *practice* has a multilayered meaning in Buddhism. For the purposes of this paper, I would like to simplify things considerably, and divide those multiple meanings into two groups. The first involves the training of one's mind and body. By engaging in such training, the practitioner is said to draw closer to Buddhist enlightenment. This practice takes various forms depending on the time and place, such as observing the precepts or engaging in meditation, and is referred to as 'benefiting the self' (*jiri* 自利). Second, there is the practice that consists of Buddhists' activities vis-à-vis society. Even Buddhists, whose fundamental orientation is towards leaving the secular world (*shusseken* 出世間), have engaged in activities in society that have taken a variety of forms. There are records of Śākyamuni having given various pieces of advice to rulers during ancient times. We also find many records of later Buddhists engaging in missionary and charitable activities. This is referred to as 'benefiting others' (*rita* 利他). In particular, Mahayana Buddhism emphasizes the inseparability of 'benefiting the self' and 'benefiting others.'

Although Buddhist practice is traditionally divided into two categories: self-interest and altruism, it would not be true to say, in fact, that 'benefiting others' has always been as much of a primary concern as 'benefiting the self.' Rather, it can be said that concern for others has always been a weakness of Buddhism, overshadowed by concerns with 'benefiting the self.' Thus, Mahayana Buddhism's emphasis on the importance of benefiting others, on the contrary, could be said to imply that this was a weakness of the Buddhism at the time of the Mahayana arose.

My paper focuses on recent developments surrounding Buddhism and its practice in contemporary Japan, particularly the element of 'benefiting others.' The question of how Buddhists should contribute to society has continually and repeatedly appeared from the origins of Mahayana Buddhism to the present. Against this backdrop, an event occurred in Japan in recent years that marked a major turning point in the issue of Buddhist contributions to society. That event is the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011. In this paper, I consider the issue of 'benefiting others' in Buddhism in light of the effects of the tragic earthquake disaster.

Keywords: practice, benefiting the self, benefiting others, Mahayana Buddhism, contemporary Japan, Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011.

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About Buddhist Practice

When discussing *Buddhism in practice*, we should first note that the word *practice* has a multilayered meaning in Buddhism. So that our discussions at this symposium can proceed smoothly, I would like to simplify things considerably, and divide their meaning into two senses. The first involves the training of one's mind and body. By engaging in such training, the practitioner is said to draw closer to Buddhist enlightenment. This practice takes various forms depending on the time and place, such as observing the precepts or engaging in meditation, and is referred to as 'benefiting the self' (*jiri* 自利). Second, there is the practice that consists of Buddhists' activities vis-à-vis society. This is referred to as 'benefiting others' (*rita* 利他). Even Buddhists, whose fundamental orientation is towards leaving the secular world (*shusseken* 出世間), have engaged in activities in society that have taken a variety of forms. There are records of Śākyamuni having given various pieces of advice to rulers during ancient times. We also find many records of later Buddhists engaging in missionary and charitable activities, a practice that continues up through the present.

This volume consists of various paper, and we should take note of the sense in which each author is using the term 'practice.' Some will probably emphasize practice that involves the training of the self, while others might discuss issues relating to the salvation of others. Particularly in Mahayana Buddhism, one finds an emphasis on the inseparability of benefiting the self and benefiting others. Self-benefit is seen as a necessary condition for benefiting others, and vice versa. Therefore, we also must keep in mind that one cannot simply discuss these two kinds of practice as separate entities. My paper will focus on recent trends surrounding Buddhism and practice in contemporary Japan and consider practice in society in relation to these concepts of 'benefiting the self' and 'benefiting others.'

Two Issues in Buddhist Societal Practice

There is no exhausting the discussion surrounding societal practice in Buddhism. These discussions focus on two issues: the content of such practice, and its meaning.

The former is concerned with the kind of societal demands to which 'Buddhist practice' should respond, as well as the ways in which this should be done. Ever since Siddhartha Gautama left home, Buddhism has placed a certain distance between itself and the secular or mundane world. This is symbolized by

the following exchange between Gautama, when he was going to engage in religious training, and Bimbisara.

> (Bimbisara) 'I shall give you objects of enjoyment; enjoy them. But tell me your birth, when asked.'
>
> (Gautama) 'They are Adicca by clan, Sakiya by birth. From the family, I went forth, King, not desiring sensuous pleasures. Having seen the peril in sensual pleasures, having seen going-forth as safety, I shall go in order to strive.'[1]

King Bimbisara was trying to bring Gautama into the world of secular power by giving him 'objects of enjoyment.' However, holding that doing away with rather than fulfilling mundane desires is true peace, Gautama rejected this and asserted that he would seek a path that transcends the mundane world. This would mean that Buddhist societal practice does not respond to society's demands in a straightforward fashion. Rather, Buddhism presents outcomes that are the polar opposite of these demands as what is truly beneficial. To laypeople seeking salvation, Śākyamuni preached not wealth but its renunciation,[2] and not life but the acceptance of death.[3] There is a need to carefully discuss the kind of role such a supra-mundane view of salvation can play in society. (This becomes an issue of the place and time in which Buddhist practice tries to be involved in society. I will touch upon this again at the end of my paper.)

The meaning of Buddhist societal practice is another theme that receives frequent attention, with discussions focusing on the necessity of engaging in practice that benefits others. Buddhism is a religion that began with Siddhartha Gautama's unease regarding old age, illness, and death, and seeks to establish psycho-spiritual subjects that can overcome these. After becoming enlightened, Śākyamuni preached the Four Noble Truths in his first sermon, explaining that one should 'extinguish, discard, and leave behind' attachment to the self in order to do away with the suffering of old age, illness, and death. He also presented the Noble Eightfold Path, consisting of Right View, Right Thought, and so on. Such practice largely involves the training of the self and does not directly give rise to the social concern of saving others. As a result, an issue in practice seeking Buddhist enlightenment is that it is predominantly oriented towards benefiting the self rather than benefiting others.

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[1] Norman 2001: 421-424.

[2] Horner 2015: 21. 'The son of great merchant called Yasa' (Yasa leaving home).

[3] Watson Burlingame 2018: 258. Kisa Gotami seeks a mustard seed to cure her dead child.

However, it is not the case that Śākyamuni took absolutely no interest in benefiting others. When recommending to his disciples that they engage in itinerant practice, he said the following:

> (Buddha) 'Walk, monks, on tour for the blessing of the manyfolk, for the happiness of the manyfolk out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the blessing, the happiness of *devas* and men. Let not two (of you) go by one (way). Monks, teach *Dhamma* which is lovely at the beginning, lovely in the middle, lovely at the ending. Explain with the spirit and the letter the Brahma-faring completely fulfilled, wholly pure.'[4]

Despite the existence of such teachings, prominent Buddhists were entirely focused on the training of the self and would eventually confront the problem of the closed-off nature of the sangha. There are many Buddhists who attempted to confront this problem, and their interest can be seen as proof that they were trying to follow Śākyamuni's recommendation to benefit others. Through my paper we will see that these issues found in Buddhist societal practice have continued to exist up through the present.

Societal Practice as a Reaction to Insularity

The emphasis on societal practice in reaction to the closed-off nature of the self and sangha was very apparent when Mahayana Buddhism was growing out of what would later, and inappropriately, come to be called 'Hinayana Buddhism.' Various understandings have been offered, and still are being proposed, regarding the background to the appearance of Mahayana Buddhism. First the theory was proposed that Buddhist religious institutions broke into two groups and that one of them, the Mahāsāṃghika, developed into Mahayana Buddhism. One also finds the claim that Mahayana Buddhism emerged separately from the renunciate leaders of early Buddhism, out of laypeople centered around Buddhist stupas that enshrined the bones of Śākyamuni. Other scholars have claimed that Mahayana Buddhism has its origins in elements that were dispersed throughout early Buddhist renunciate groups. Some now even claim an approach that tries to find a clear historical origin for the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism is mistaken.[5] While it is now difficult to definitively establish the time of the emergence of Mahayana Buddhism and the group(s) out of which it appeared, it is certain that doubts regarding the teachings that have been passed down as

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[4] Horner 2015: 28.

[5] See Shimoda 2011.

those of Śākyamuni contributed to a great shift in the subsequent direction of Buddhist institutions. Shimoda Masahiro holds that these doubts took the form of the 'conscious question' of 'what are the true teachings of the Buddha?'[6] This 'conscious question' would in the end be expressed by the word 'Mahayana' (in contradistinction to 'Hinayana'), and Mahayana Buddhism would subsequently grow in India and China in the form of religious institutions. An important element in all of this was the issue of the closed-off nature of the Buddhist organization. Here we can find a driving force that apparently led Buddhist practice to grow to encompass others, rather than the self alone.

Sasaki Shizuka, who has written many articles regarding the origins of Mahayana Buddhism, states the following:

> Buddhism from the time of Śākyamuni had tried to run away from the suffering of existence by remodeling the self in renunciate religious practice. It then turned into Mahayana Buddhism, which attempts to achieve Buddhahood through salvific activities in society based on the bodhisattva practice of benefiting others. This turning point was undoubtedly a confrontation with the question of how Buddhists should and can contribute to society.[7]

As I mentioned above, Śākyamuni taught his disciples to engage in activities 'for the blessing of the manyfolk, for the happiness of the manyfolk.' However, these early period Buddhists, seeking to establish religious belief, entirely focused on reconstructing the self, and were unable to adequately fulfill their promise to benefit others as Śākyamuni taught. According to Sasaki, contributing to society emerged as a major interest of these Buddhist renunciates, and a new Buddhism developed that had a strong inclination towards benefiting others.

In Mahayana Buddhism, Buddhist practitioners were called 'bodhisattvas.' The word was first used in tales of Śākyamuni's past lives (Jātaka tales) to refer to him. This bodhisattva is depicted as a practitioner who repeatedly abandoned his own life to save others. This was a new image of Śākyamuni that emerged against the background of a strong interest in how Buddhists should contribute to society. In response to the conscious question of the nature of the true teachings of the Buddha, Buddhism would develop into a religion that was actively involved in the salvation of others based on compassion.

While Mahayana Buddhism started in this way, the question of how Buddhists should contribute to society has, surprisingly, constantly and repeatedly appeared up through the present. Next, to think about this problem, I will turn to developments in contemporary Japanese Buddhism.

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[6] See Shimoda 2011.

[7] See Sasaki 2014.

Developments in Japanese Buddhism Related to 'Buddhism and Practice'

Although I say, 'turn to developments in contemporary Japanese Buddhism,' it is difficult to point to one specific thing that represents 'contemporary Japanese Buddhism.' Such is the nature of contemporary Buddhism that one is unable to overcome the limits of diversification and single out one specific person or group that preserves the Buddhist tradition in an orthodox way. Thus, here I would like to provisionally take as representative the societies that attempt to clarify the nature of the Buddhist tradition through academic methods. In Japan at present, there are two large academic societies. The first is the Nippon Buddhist Research Association, which began in 1928, and the second is the Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies, which was founded in 1951. Members of the former include multiple Buddhist universities and national universities, such as the University of Tokyo, and the latter is made up of individuals that research Buddhism and Indian philosophy.

Because the former, the Nippon Buddhist Research Association, is made up of multiple organizations, a common theme is set for the annual conference, and the different representatives share their findings. Themes related to things such as faith, awakening, and history are common, but in 1969 the 39th conference was held under the theme 'The Various Issues for Buddhism and Society.' The conference records explain its motives as follows:

> Buddhism was originally concerned with the issue of individuals' faith, practice, and realization. However, despite this, while continuing to criticize society for its secularity, Buddhism also hopes to enter into the secular world and realize its ideals while standing in a supra-mundane position.[8]

Here it is posited that Buddhism was 'originally' an issue of faith, practice, and realization for the individual. However, 'despite this,' it is not completely removed from society, and 'hopes to enter into the secular world and realize its ideals while standing in a supra-mundane position.' Because Buddhism shifts from 'originally' being an issue for the individual to become something that 'enters into the secular world . . . while standing in a supra-mundane position,' one can see that a divide was already assumed to exist between the individual and the secular world. The issue of the insularity that Buddhism has embraced since its earliest stage also surely stems from this divide. Hirakawa Akira, who presented what were at the time revolutionary findings concerning the origins of Mahayana Buddhism, spoke as follows on the theme of 'The Buddhist Organization's Involvement in Society':

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[8] See the Introduction in Nihon Bukkyō Gakkai 1970.

> Even if the central interest of Buddhism is the liberation of the individual, human beings are social creatures by necessity, so as long as a human is alive he or she cannot ignore his or her social side and live solely through his or her individual side […]. However, traditionally, Buddhists have not sufficiently reflected on their social lives. Thus, the 'human' side is overlooked, and there has been a tendency to understand human beings entirely from the individual side. Thus, Buddhism must proceed to deal with this issue in the future.[9]

Now I want to focus on the other society, the Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies. Because this group is made up of individual members its discussions do not take the form of shared themes. However, on the issue of Buddhism and societal practice, the following noteworthy proposal was made at the board of directors meeting of the 1965 conference.

> Some members have suggested that, for the further development of the association, perhaps we should create a section for so-called 'Applied Buddhist Studies,' encompassing fields such as Buddhist sociology, arts, and welfare work. And, along with placing an increased focus on the importance of basic research, it is desirable that Buddhist studies are advanced in both of these areas.[10]

This proposal was put forward by the then chairperson of the association, Miyamoto Shōson of University of Tokyo. There was, then, at the conference the next year in 1966, a section for applied studies that was separate from the general research section. At this conference, Nishi Yoshio, who was a professor at Toyo University at that time, proposed the following definition for the new field of Buddhist studies that had been given the name 'Applied Buddhist Studies':

> Buddhism has its own unique form of scholarship and a research methodology for realizing that scholarship. Through this, we can establish foundational studies that thoroughly investigate the Mahayana teachings on ultimate truths, such as those on Buddhism's fundamental wisdom and its conception of the Buddha, Nirvana, and the Middle Way. From that standpoint, let us review the various modes of life in the secular world, and call this reconstruction of the teachings of conventional truths 'Applied Buddhist Studies.'[11]

What Nishi refers to here as 'foundational studies' means something different from the scholastic stance on Buddhist research at the time (and perhaps also now), where the greatest emphasis is placed on areas such as literature and his-

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[9] See Hirakawa 1970.
[10] See 'Dai jūrokkai gakujutsu taikai kiji' 第十六回学術大会記事 (1965).
[11] See Nishi 1966.

tory studies. Nishi contrasts this stance on foundational studies with what he calls 'education on the living Buddha.' 'Education on the living Buddha,' seeks to treat Buddhist wisdom, on ideas such as *śūnyatā* (空; emptiness) and *anātman* (無我; no-self), not as 'thought' (i.e., records), but rather as 'self-realization' (i.e., experience). Thus, it is from this position that 'applied Buddhist studies' is taken to mean 'the reviewing of the various modes of life in the secular world and the reconstruction of the teachings.' On applied Buddhist studies, Nishi concludes by saying he is confident that, 'it will bring about the removal of all hindrances to awakening, and involvement in social welfare planning, and ultimately contribute to worldwide happiness and peace.'

As seen above, academic societies that represent Japan, while basing themselves in reflections on passivity toward Buddhist societal practice, have also been making the assertion that there should be proactive discussions concerning societal practice. However, on 'Buddhists' mode of social life,' contrary to the thoughts of people such as Hirakawa, who said that 'Buddhism must proceed to deal with this issue in the future,' and Nishi, who was confident that 'it will bring about … involvement in social welfare planning, and ultimately contribute to worldwide happiness and peace,' things did not proceed in a clear way following that, and there has been a repetition of reflections on Buddhism's passive approach to societal practice. After this, especially among Japanese Buddhist studies societies, academic conferences were held with themes such as 'social ethics' and 'cohabitation' but it could be said that these actually worked to deepen the divide between societal practice and individuals' interest in Buddhism. Further, according to the records, the applied section of the Japanese Association of Indian and Buddhist Studies was absorbed into the general Buddhist studies section after just two years. One of the causes behind the de facto dissolution of the applied section may have been the fact that, in the same year as that proposal, researchers with a particular interest in welfare-based activities, separately founded the Japanese Association for Buddhist Social Welfare Studies. It appears that, due to the founding of this new academic society, the divide that existed between foundational Buddhist studies and applied Buddhist studies was unintentionally widened.

Buddhism and Societal Practice Today

Considering the above, it very much seems that societal practice in the context of Buddhism has been treated by Japanese Buddhists as 'secondary.' However, in recent years, discussions concerning Buddhist societal practice have been drawing unprecedented attention. In 2014 and 2015 the Nippon Buddhist

Research Association held consecutive conferences under the theme 'Questioning Societal Practice in Buddhism.' Discussions were held over those two years on the topics of 'Principles of Societal Practice' and 'The History of Societal Practice and Prospects for the Future.' There is a reason why Buddhist academic meetings were repeatedly held with these sorts of themes in recent years—and that is the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami that struck the northeast of the country.

On March 11, 2011, a great earthquake occurred centered off the coast of Miyagi prefecture in the Tōhoku region. The earthquake was the largest recorded in Japan, with a magnitude of 9.0 and a large hypocentral region spanning approximately 500 kilometers. This earthquake generated a tsunami that exceeded 40 meters in height depending on the location and brought devastating damage to the coastal area. The number of lives lost exceed 20,000, including those still missing.

Support came in from around the world for this disaster of a size rarely experienced in history, and in Japan, too, many people became involved in volunteer efforts, including many Buddhists. In the area of support activities during disasters, in contrast with the active involvement in social activities by Christians, Buddhists had frequently been an object of criticism due to their passivity. But, this time, many Buddhists who had been faced with the overwhelming scope of the damage also became seriously involved in disaster relief support activities.

Since the Edo period, Japanese Buddhists have been bound into inflexible relationships with individual temples and specifically affiliated people, giving them religious direction and performing funeral ceremonies (if one counts from the beginning of the *jidan* system, enacted in 1671, this arrangement has a history spanning almost three hundred and fifty years). However, during the disaster, temporary relationships that transcended affiliation and sect were formed between disaster victims and monks, and funeral ceremonies, etc., were conducted for those who lost their lives. Temple facilities were also opened to the public as evacuation centers, and Buddhists engaged in various support activities, even providing food and taking personal care of victims. The sects also gave organizational backup for these efforts and provided manpower, funds, and resources to the individuals and facilities working on the frontlines.

It was against this sort of backdrop that the conference was repeated under the theme of 'Questioning practice in Buddhism.' This was an experience in re-questioning the meaning and content of Buddhist societal practice for the Buddhists who had become aware of their insular stance concerning societal practice. The question that had been asked since ancient times, namely, 'how should Buddhist practitioners contribute to society?' was once again thrown onto the chopping board for discussion.

Why must Buddhists become aware of their own passivity concerning contributing to society and continually re-question its meaning and content? This issue originates from the main body of Buddhist thought itself and can be said to be the essence of Buddhism. When one understands that, from the perspective of a desire to transcend the secular world, one's views on salvation are deeply connected to the individual's inner self, and consequently practice in Buddhism does not naturally lead to a philanthropic attitude.

Buddhists always have their interest directed toward the issue of the liberation of the individual spirit from a supra-mundane position. That said, Buddhism has at times also repentantly opened its eyes to the closed-ness that comes from that interest and focused on others-benefiting activities. One must be careful to note, however, that this is not a demand that comes from within and it is essentially the result of being guided by outside demand. That is to say, this may in fact be an inherent factor in Buddhist societal practice. In devout Buddhist practice, there is no direct demand for benefitting others, and it is the overwhelming suffering of people that makes these insular Buddhists open their eyes to societal practice.

Looking back further, it might be said that this is a feature also seen in the old records of Śākyamuni. It is well known that when Śākyamuni achieved awakening, he hesitated over whether he should explain the *Dhamma* and share the content of his awakening with others. What convinced the hesitant Śākyamuni to share the *Dhamma* and contribute to society was, in fact, strong external demand.

> (Buddha) 'This that through many toils. I've won — enough! Why should I make it known, by folk with lust and hate consumed? This *Dhamma* is not understood.'
>
> (Brahma) 'Alas, the world is lost, alas, the world is destroyed, inasmuch as the mind of the Truth-finder, the perfected one, the fully awakened one, inclines to little effort and not to teaching *Dharma...'* 'Lord, let the Lord teach *Dhamma*, let the well-farer teach *Dhamma.*'[12]

In the case of Śākyamuni, too, the opening of the pathways to others-benefitting activities was a demand from the suffering secular world. Śākyamuni had no interest in explaining the *Dhamma*. What opened up that lack of interest was the sense of secular crisis in the words, 'Alas, the world is lost.' In accordance with the secular world's demand that 'the Lord teach *Dhamma*,' Śākyamuni established his first connection with society.

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[12] Horner 2015: 7–8.

That kind of demand from the secular world appeared in extremely serious form in recent years with the 2011 Great Earthquake. The voice of a suffering society demanded Buddhists' others-benefitting practice, and through this arose the question of 'practice in Buddhism.'

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I noted how there are two main issues in the discussions surrounding Buddhist societal practice. The first is the issue of 'content' and the second is that of 'meaning.' On the meaning of why practice is done, it appears from what we have seen above that one must conclude that it comes from societal demand rather than from inside Buddhism itself. Of course, one does see claims of orthodox meaning in societal practice deriving from within Buddhism, but these too can actually be seen as a reaction by earnest Buddhist practitioners to the issue of Buddhism's insularity.

Finally, I want to touch on the issue of 'content' in Buddhist societal practice; that is to say, if the demand comes from outside, what kind of response can really be called 'Buddhist'? Of the criticisms leveled at Buddhists engaged in various relief efforts at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake, this was called into question. Was the provision of things such as food and shelter really something that was being done by Buddhists?

To skip to the conclusion, because even Buddhism, which positions itself outside of the secular world, responds with societal practice to demands from that world, it is not particularly strange if that practice temporarily takes on a secular face. It may be inevitable that Buddhist societal practice appears at first glance to start out of non-Buddhist activities. Śākyamuni, when healing King Ajātaśatru who was suffering from the sin of patricide, first healed the physical pain before applying Buddhism's original spiritual healing. In the *Nirvana Sutra*, it says, 'He radiates light, first healing the king's body, then proceeding to his heart.'[13] This means first alleviating people's urgent sufferings and then moving on to Buddhism's original salvific activities.

The activities of the Buddhists at the time of the Great East Japan Earthquake were a repeat of the general support activities, such as clearing away rubble, providing food, and securing housing. Simply lending an ear to those affected was likely another of those sorts of activities. In their practice, it is not possible to distinguish between 'general' and 'Buddhist'; and there is really no need

[13] *Daihan nehankyō* 2008: 531.

to do so. Perhaps over time Buddhists will develop salvific activities that are characteristically Buddhist.

In that case, it may be that such is developed over time, but it may also be the case that activities are finished without the chance for any lasting distinction between that and general social philanthropy. The question of where practice becomes 'Buddhist' is a multifaceted issue, and the line shifts depending on the situation. Consequently, even if activities end before that chance arises, perhaps it is necessary to also view that as a societal practice by Buddhists.

Practice in Buddhism, in its self-benefitting aspect, and especially in its others-benefitting aspect, is a large issue that remains hanging over the world of contemporary Japanese Buddhism. Through this symposium, I hope we will see a deepening of understanding of practice in Buddhism, from traditional understandings through to the issues of contemporary society.

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