

Counting the Cost of Buddhist Syncretism


Brian Victoria

Abstract

This article explores the changes that occurred in Buddhism, both doctrinally and ethically, as a direct or indirect result of its tolerance of other faiths, particularly the indigenous animistic faiths it encountered in the course of spreading to various Asian countries. While the history of Buddhism's relationship to indigenous animistic religions differs in its particulars in each Asian country, this article suggests that the relationship between Buddhism and the animistic faith of Shintō in Japan is broadly representative of this larger, transnational phenomenon. Thus, a study of this interfaith relationship in Japan will facilitate a better understanding of the impact that Buddhism's tolerance of other faiths had on Buddhism itself.

Introduction

Observant visitors to most, though not all, Buddhist temples in Japan will notice that somewhere on the temple grounds are located one or more small, architecturally incongruous buildings – Shintō shrines. To first-time Western adherents of one of the Abrahamic faiths, this is a puzzling scene, for in what Western country would one, for example, find a small Muslim mosque on the grounds of a Christian church, or a Christian chapel on the grounds of a Jewish synagogue?

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*Highlighted text links to an associated image.

It is not difficult to find textual evidence of this religious exclusivism, for it lies in the traditional intolerance of Abrahamic religions towards faiths other than their own. For example, Deuteronomy 13:6-10 of the Hebrew Bible states:

If your very own brother, or your son or daughter, or the wife you love, or your closest friend secretly entices you, saying, “Let us go and worship other gods” (gods that neither you nor your ancestors have known, gods of the peoples around you, whether near or far, from one end of the land to the other), do not yield to them or listen to them. Show them no pity. Do not spare them or shield them. You must certainly put them to death. Your hand must be the first in putting them to death, and then the hands of all the people. Stone them to death, because they tried to turn you away from the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.¹

Needless to say, this intolerance is not limited to the Hebrew Bible or Judaism. In Christianity its echoes may be seen in the Crusaders of the 11-13th centuries who, when killing Muslims and Jews, shouted, “God wills it!” This was followed by multiple Christian Inquisitions from the 16th century onwards as well as long and bloody confrontations between Catholics and Protestants. And, of course, the persecution and death of infidels and apostates has a long history in Islam extending to the present day and so-called Islamic terrorism. However, it is noteworthy that Islam has been the most tolerant of the three Abrahamic faiths, at least with regard to Jews and Christians: they are recognized as fellow “people of the Book (Bible)”. Yet this Islamic tolerance does not extend to non-Abrahamic faiths. The Taliban’s destruction of the “idolatrous” Buddha statues in Bamiyan, Afghanistan in March 2001 is but one recent example.

By comparison, Buddhism’s historical willingness to live side by side with other faiths may be considered exemplary. For example, the Buddhist King Aśoka (aka Piyadasi), r. c. 268 to 232 BCE, wrote in one of his famous stone edicts:

Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, honors both ascetics and the householders of all religions, and he honors them with gifts and honors

¹ Text according to the New International Version of the Bible.

of various kinds. . . . One should listen to and respect the doctrines professed by others. Beloved-of-the-Gods, King Piyadasi, desires that all should be well-learned in the good doctrines of other religions.

In a more contemporary expression of Buddhist tolerance and the thinking behind it, the American Theravāda Buddhist monk Bhikkhu Bodhi wrote: “Buddhist tolerance springs from the recognition that the dispositions and spiritual needs of human beings are too vastly diverse to be encompassed by any single teaching, and thus that these needs will naturally find expression in a wide variety of religious forms”.²

As admirable as Buddhist tolerance of other religions is, this tolerance raises a question that has seldom been explored. Namely, what cost did Buddhism have to pay doctrinally and ethically for its tolerance of other faiths, in particular the indigenous animistic faiths it encountered. By “animism” is meant the belief that all natural things, such as plants, animals, rocks, trees and the sun, can have spirits and influence human events.³ While it is true that Buddhism had a significant impact on indigenous animistic faiths, was Buddhism itself able to escape being significantly altered in the process?

This article is a preliminary exploration of this topic. It will explore the interaction that took place in Japan between Buddhism and the animistic faith that later came to be called Shintō (Way of the *Kami*). One reason for this exploration is that Shintō, albeit rooted in animistic practices dating from prehistory, remains a popular, vibrant and organizationally independent religion in Japan. Shintō and Buddhism have a long history of interaction.

The history of Buddhism’s relationship to indigenous animistic religions differs in particulars in each of the Asian countries which Buddhism penetrated, but the relationship between Buddhism and Shintō in Japan is broadly representative of what may be called this larger, transnational phenomenon. As Buddhist scholar Richard Gombrich notes:

The system which complements Buddhism by dealing with matters of this world varies from country to country. In Japan it is called Shinto. In the Theravadin societies of Sri Lanka and

² Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi. “Tolerance and Diversity.” Access to Insight (BCBS Edition), 5 June 2010. Available on the Web at: http://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/bodhi/bps-essay_24.html (accessed 07-22-2018).

³ Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus. Cambridge University Press.

continental southeast Asia it has no all-embracing indigenous name, and modern anthropologists have used such names as 'the spirit religion' and 'the spirit cults'. . . . Despite the lack of a local name for the system as a whole, it is indeed a system and closely comparable to Shinto.⁴

Early conflict between Buddhism and Japan's indigenous faith

The relationship between Buddhism and Japan's indigenous religious practices was in the beginning far from harmonious. Unsurprisingly, those responsible for the conduct of indigenous religious rituals at the nascent imperial court viewed Buddhism as a threat, not least to their own position. The struggle occurred between contending members of the Soga and Mononobe clans. In 552 the king of the Korean kingdom of Paekche sent a statue of the Buddha to Emperor Kimmei (r. 531-71), hoping this gift would lead to the formation of a military alliance with Japan. Although Japan ultimately refused the king's entreaty, the head of the Soga clan, Soga no Iname, favored accepting the statue inasmuch as it was widely worshipped in foreign lands. On the other hand, Mononobe no Okoshi, head of the militarily strong Mononobe clan, opposed acceptance of the statue, claiming that "the *kami* (Shintō deities) of our land will be offended if we worship a foreign *kami*".⁵

The Buddha as a Deity

Both of the clans struggling over the acceptance or rejection of the Buddha agreed that he was a *kami*, i.e. an animistic deity with superhuman powers and a personality.⁶ This agreement would eventually lead to the formulation of the well-known Japanese phrases *shinbutsu shūgō* (unification of *kami* and Buddhas) and *shinbutsu ichinyo* (*kami* and Buddhas are one). Thus, the struggle was not one between two separate religions, but, instead, whether or not a foreign deity, of the same character as indigenous deities, was more powerful than indigenous deities. In other words, the critical question was whether the Buddha's alleged magical powers were superior to those of indigenous deities.

⁴ Gombrich, "A Buddhologist's Impression of Japanese Buddhism." In *Japanese New Religions in the West*, p. 16.

⁵ Quoted in Tamura, *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History*, p. 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

Initially it appeared that the Buddha was the loser. When a plague subsequently broke out, the Mononobe clan was quick to blame the worship of a foreign deity. This resulted in the image of the Buddha being unceremoniously dumped in the nearby Naniwa canal. However, when still later Soga no Umako fell ill, Emperor Kimmei's successor, Emperor Bidatsu (r. 572-585) allowed the image to be restored in hope of curing Umako's illness. It was not until 587, however, that the issue was finally settled thanks to the Soga clan's military defeat of the Mononobe, a feat ascribed to the Buddha's protection.

The Soga clan prevailed due to the Buddha's association with the powerful continental civilizations of Korea and China. These countries, Japanese leaders believed, could not have become as powerful as they were without the support of equally powerful deities. As Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga note, Buddhism was "merely regarded . . . as a possible superior form of magic long practiced by the advanced civilizations they respected and sought to emulate".⁷ Thus it is not surprising to learn that the first Japanese emperor personally to espouse Buddhism, i.e. Yōmei (r. 585-587), did so to enlist the aid of the Medicine Buddha, Yakushi (Skt. Bhaiṣajyaguru), in curing his grave illness.

The Buddha as Guardian of the State

To this day, miraculous cures remain attributed in Japan to various Buddhas, bodhisattvas and even certain Buddhist clerics. However, there was one additional area in which the magical powers ascribed to one or another of the Buddhas introduced to Japan was even more important than curing illness: protection of the state. This is hardly surprising in that sixth century Japan was still a confederation of clans only nominally under control of the Yamato clan and its head, the emperor. This magical power could be accessed through the adoption of three sutras – the *Golden Light Sutra* (Skt. *Suvarṇaprabhā sottamasūtreṇḍrarājah*), the *Sutra on the Benevolent King* (Ch., *Rén Wáng Jīng*), and the *Lotus Sutra* (Skt. *Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*). Elaborate ceremonial recitations of these sutras were held, and, as Tamura notes, "Most of the temples were built to ensure the Buddhas' and Bodhisattvas' protection of the nation".⁸

The *Golden Light Sutra* teaches that the Four Heavenly Kings protect a ruler who governs his country in the proper manner. This sutra was highly esteemed

⁷ Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism* (Vol. I), p. 10.

⁸ Tamura, *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History*, p. 40.

for the protection it offered not only in Japan but also in China and Korea, where it was publicly recited to ward off threats and disasters. In China it was first read at a court ceremony during the Tang dynasty around 660, and in Korea when the state of Silla defeated the state of Paekche in 663. When in 741 Japanese Emperor Shōmu (r. 724-749) founded provincial monasteries for monks and nuns in each province, he designated them as “Temples for Protection of the State by the Four Heavenly Kings Golden Light Sutra” (J. & Ch., 金光明經四天王護国之寺). The 20 monks who lived in each of these temples regularly recited the *Golden Light Sutra* to protect the country.

Following Buddhism’s acceptance in Japan, many powerful clans also erected their own temples. As Miyata Koichi notes, “Each clan had autonomy and the right to govern their land and people directly. The heads of the clans could make some of their people become priests without restraint and make them dwell in their clan temples to pray for the clan’s prosperity”.⁹ Once again, Buddhas were invoked for the decidedly worldly benefits their worship would produce. It was not until 701 that the central government was sufficiently powerful to bring all male and female clerics under its strict control, including permission to be ordained.

The *Sutra on the Benevolent King*, also known as *Inwang-gyeong* in Korean and *Ninnō-gyō* in Japanese, is purported to be a translation from Sanskrit, though it is generally believed to be an apocryphal text first composed in China. The *Sutra on the Benevolent King* is unusual because, unlike most sutras, its target audience is not *arhats* or *bodhisattvas* but the kings of sixteen ancient countries in India. Further, instead of expounding on the merits of meditation and wisdom, the virtues of benevolence and forbearance are promoted as the most important criteria for a ruler to possess.

In Japan, a ceremonial lecture on the *Sutra on the Benevolent King* was first held at court in 660. Stress was placed on a passage stating that when a foreign threat appears, 100 demons or gods will protect the king if he will make 100 images of the Buddha and invite 100 priests to lecture on it. Such protection was of no idle concern to the government at the time, given that a military alliance between the governments of the Chinese Tang dynasty and the Korean state of Silla had defeated Paikche, a second Korean state, and were threatening Japan. The ceremony was thus of critical importance to the emperor and his court.

⁹ Miyata, “The Acceptance and Impact of the Lotus Sutra in Japan,” *Journal of Oriental Studies*, Vol 11, p. 124.

The *Lotus Sutra* is without doubt the most famous and influential sutra in East Asian Buddhism, especially in Japan. It is considered to bestow innumerable benefits on believers, including protection of the state. Rōben (689-773) was the first Buddhist priest to hold a ceremonial lecture on the *Lotus Sutra* in 749, something destined to become an annual event sponsored by the government. Included in the ceremony were prayers for the prosperity of the Imperial House and noble families, security of the state, and a rich harvest, all of which were integral to the protection of the state. Additionally, the *Lotus Sutra* was chanted to ensure recovery from disease and used in memorial services for deceased parents and ancestors. For example, as early as 726 Emperor Shōmu ordered additional copies of the *Lotus Sutra* to be made in order to pray for the recovery of his aunt, retired Empress Genshō (r. 715-724). When she died in 748, Emperor Shōmu ordered 1000 copies of the *Lotus Sutra* to be produced as part of her memorial service.

The Emperor as a Buddha

One temple in particular became the center of the state-protecting cult: Tōdaiji temple in Nara. Nara was established as Japan's first permanent capital in 710, part of the process of creating a strong, unified and centralized government. As the cultic center of this effort, Tōdaiji was chosen as the site for Rōben's first ceremonial lecture on the *Lotus Sutra*. Moreover, Tōdaiji served as the headquarters of the state-protecting monasteries established by Emperor Shōmu, one in each province of Japan.

Befitting its leading position, Tōdaiji's main hall was completed in 757. Housed in what was then the largest wooden building in the world was a "Great Buddha" statue, i.e. Mahāvairocana, a universal Buddha regarded as a symbol of the unity of the cosmos. Mahāvairocana's cosmic, universal nature served as the ideal embodiment of Emperor Shōmu's desire for a unified nation-state. Additionally, Vairocana's name in Sino-Japanese is Dainichi (lit. Great Sun [Buddha]).

Legend states that in order to gain approval for the construction of Dainichi's statue, Emperor Shōmu sent the Buddhist priest Gyōgi (668-748) to the paramount Shintō shrine of Ise to seek the approval of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu. Gyōgi spent seven days and nights reciting sutras until the oracle declared Mahāvairocana compatible with worship of the Sun Goddess. The shrine oracle's response suggested that Dainichi was the universal essence of the indigenous Sun Goddess. This identification, in turn, enhanced Shōmu's

position, for like emperors before him, he was regarded as a descendant of the Sun Goddess. Thanks to the oracle, Shōmu could be connected to a universal Buddha in the celestial sphere, further justifying his reign on earth. Whatever other virtues Japanese Buddhism may have had, it was definitely a valuable tool in the hands of the state.

A Shintō/Bodhisattva “God of War”

A good argument can be made that Buddhism cannot be held responsible for the manner in which Buddha(s) were deified and used for political purposes in Japan by its secular authorities. However, as Yoshio Tamura notes: “[Japanese Buddhist priests] certainly were aware of the Buddhist rejection of reality and its supramundane claims, but their awareness failed to give birth to any resistance to secular rule”.¹⁰ The identification of Mahāvairocana/Dainichi with the Sun Goddess marked only the beginning of a doctrinal process that in following centuries culminated in the emergence of the Japanese Buddhist doctrine of *honji-suijaku* (lit. true nature-manifestation). According to this concept, Shintō *kami* were regarded as local manifestations (*suijaku*) of universal Buddhas as well as bodhisattvas.

The underlying elements of the *honji-suijaku* doctrine were not an invention of Japanese Buddhism, for its roots can be traced back to early Buddhism, perhaps even to the time of the founder himself. Early Buddhists regarded *devas* (gods) as supernatural beings who were capable of being converted and realizing Enlightenment. However, in order to attain Enlightenment, *devas* first needed to be reborn as humans in the human world. Nevertheless, they were assigned roles as guardians of the Dharma.

In Japan the Tendai sect, like its Chinese antecedent T’ien T’ai, regarded the *Lotus Sūtra* as composed of two parts. The first consisted of a description of the historical Buddha, i.e. the phenomenal manifestation of the Buddha Dharma. The second half, however, explicated the Absolute in the form of the Original Buddha. This division is also found in the esoteric *Dainichikyō* (Skt. *Mahāvairocana Sutra*), in which *Dainichi* is regarded as the Original or Absolute Buddha.

Although firmly rooted in the Buddhist tradition of assimilation, the *honji-suijaku* doctrine promulgated in Japan did contain one unique feature: “the *kami* or *suijaku* is afforded a philosophical equality with its Buddha or bodhisattva

¹⁰ Tamura, *Japanese Buddhism: A Cultural History*, p. 38.

honji".¹¹ In India, it was not until the rise of Tantrism in the 5th to 7th centuries of the common era that native deities achieved a degree of equality with Buddhas and bodhisattvas.

On the one hand, the granting of equality on the part of Japanese Buddhists may be considered a magnanimous gesture, a further sign of Buddhist tolerance. At the same time there was no doubt an element of self-interest in granting this status, since it contributed to Buddhism's acceptance in Japan. Yet it can also be regarded as a denigration of Buddhas and bodhisattvas, in that they were reduced to the status of *kami*, i.e. powerful supramundane beings whose main function was to grant blessings in response to believers' petitions.

A further element of the *honji-suijaku* doctrine is the concept of a *gongen*, lit. incarnation, according to which Buddhas and bodhisattvas choose to manifest themselves in the form of a *kami* in order to save sentient beings. This concept was rooted in the Mahāyāna Buddhist notion of *upāya* or "expedient/skillful means" whereby a teaching, technique, etc., though not ultimately true in the highest sense, may nevertheless be helpful in bringing the practitioner closer to true realization. In other words, *upāya* refers to skillfully adapting one's message to the intended audience. This understanding also reinforced the belief that *kami* (*suijaku*) were the equals of Buddhas and bodhisattvas (*honji*).

By the end of the eighth century it was possible for certain *kami*, who had allegedly converted to Buddhism, to acquire the title of 'bodhisattva', albeit not yet a full-fledged Buddha. The first to receive this honor was a *kami* by the name of Hachiman, originally a Shintō god of war whose roots can be traced to two semi-legendary rulers: Empress Jingu and her son, Emperor Ōjin (r. 270-310?). Both of these figures were regarded as avatars of Hachiman due to their great feats in both warfare and culture – Jingu for her invasion of Korea, and Ōjin for inviting Chinese and Korean scholars to Japan.

Hachiman's first connection to Buddhism occurred in 747 when, as the chief deity of Usa Shrine on the southern island of Kyushu, he issued an oracle expressing his wish to travel to Tōdaiji to pay homage to the Great Buddha. A shrine maiden transported Hachiman to Tōdaiji, where he was installed as the temple's official protector. This subsequently led to various Shintō *kami* being incorporated as protectors of Buddhist temples throughout the country. Even today one can see these guardian deities honored in small Shintō shrines located on temple grounds.

¹¹ Matsunaga, *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism* (Vol. I), p. 239.

It is noteworthy that Shintō deities were relegated to the role of protecting Buddhist temples, not the other way round. Their role as protectors was justified on the basis that, like all sentient beings, *kami* were suffering creatures seeking to escape their present condition and attain Enlightenment. Buddhist priests created a series of tales describing the desire of various *kami* to receive Buddhist teachings, thereby overcoming the negative karma that had caused them to remain as no more than deities. Some *kami*, it was claimed, even expressed their desire to become Buddhists by taking refuge in the Three Treasures, i.e. Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

In the following centuries, Shintō clergy accepted (no doubt unwillingly) what was essentially second class status for themselves and their deities. This included Buddhist control of major Shintō shrines as embodied in the construction of *jinguji* (shrine-temples), built with the encouragement of the government. At these shrine-temples, Buddhist priests recited Buddhist sutras for the sake of the *kami* who had, it was claimed, decided to protect the foreign faith in hopes of spiritual advancement. However, by relegating *kami* to a second class status, Buddhism laid the groundwork for its own suppression more than 1,000 years later.

In 937 Hachiman was officially declared to be a bodhisattva, the first of many *kami* to be given this status. In effect Hachiman had completed his transition to a Buddhist deity although Shintōists continued to view him as one of their own. This resulted in Buddhist monks being given the responsibility for interpreting Hachiman's oracular proclamations. Hachiman proved so popular that he was eventually elevated to the rank of Great Bodhisattva (J. *Daibosatsu*) with his duties expanded to become the guardian of all Tōdaiji's subordinate temples in the provinces. Befitting his martial image, Hachiman's symbol was originally that of a bow and arrow, the ancient weapon of choice of Japan's warriors. In his Buddhist incarnation, however, **Hachiman was depicted in the form** of a Buddhist priest both on scrolls and in statuary.

One of Japan's greatest religious leaders was Kūkai (aka Kōbō-Daishi, 774-835), founder of the esoteric Shingon (True Word/Mantra) school of Buddhism. In 816, when Kūkai was searching for a suitable spot to establish a mountain retreat on Mount Kōya, legend states that he came across a hunter whose two dogs, one black and one white, led him to a hidden valley. The hunter was considered to be the son of the Shintō goddess Niutsuhime, i.e. Princess Niutsu, who readily granted him permission to **build his monastery on her land**. This event marked Kūkai's recognition of the existence of *kami* and led to the building

of shrines throughout the mountain. These shrines were serviced by Shingon sect priests, and the deities they enshrined were, like Hachiman at Tōdaiji, believed to protect the monastic compound. This event also contributed to the creation of similar Shintō shrines on the grounds of other Buddhist temples throughout the country.

In the 11th century the militarily powerful Minamoto clan selected Hachiman as its tutelary deity in order to claim descent from Emperor Ōjin. Minamoto Yorinobu (968-1048) made this claim in 1046, and his son Yoriyoshi (988-1075) strengthened the family ties to Hachiman by crediting the deity for his victory over the Abe clan in 1062. When the Minamoto and Taira clans went to war in the Gempei War of 1180–1185, Minamoto Yoritomo (1147-1199), founder of the Kamakura Shōgunate, first put on ceremonial robes and bowed towards the Iwashimizu Hachiman shrine, requesting Hachiman's protection. Hachiman's greatest alleged triumph, however, occurred at the time when Japan faced repeated Mongol invasions in the late 13th century. The deity was credited with responding to prayers for divine intervention by sending the *kamikaze*, lit. 'kami wind', in the form of typhoons, to destroy the two Mongol invasion fleets sent by Kublai Khan in 1274 and 1281.

Thus it is not surprising that during the Asia-Pacific War of 1937-45 Hachiman was once again called upon to protect Japan, this time from Allied invasion. In this instance, his protection took the form of the aptly named *kamikaze* suicidal (and futile) air attacks. With some 25,000 shrines dedicated to him, Hachiman remains a popular deity to this day, as both a Shintō god and a Buddhist bodhisattva.

Kannon as a “God of War”

If a Shintō *kami* could become a Buddhist bodhisattva, it is perhaps not surprising that a bodhisattva could be turned into a *kami*, at least in function. This is exactly what happened to possibly the most popular bodhisattva in East Asia, i.e. Kannon (Skt. Avalokiteśvara). Inasmuch as Kannon is the Buddhist personification of compassion, this bodhisattva would appear to be the least likely of the pantheon of Mahāyāna bodhisattvas to play the role of Hachiman, a god of war. To some extent, this transformation in Japan was foreshadowed by what had already occurred in China. In Chinese art Kannon (Ch. Guānyīn) is sometimes depicted flanked by two warriors. The two warriors are the historical General Guan Yu (d. 220) of the late Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) and the

warrior representation of the bodhisattva Skanda.¹² With Kannon in the center, these three figures are understood to protect both the temple where they are enshrined and Buddhism itself.

In Japan Kannon was turned into a god of war by the Minamoto clan, specifically Minamoto Yoritomo. As noted above, Yoritomo initially prayed to Hachiman for his clan's protection at the time of the Gempei War. Nevertheless in 1189 Yoritomo had a personal temple built that became known as the Hokkedō (lit. "Lotus Sutra hall") after his death in 1199. The main object of worship chosen by Yoritomo was a 6 cm silver statue of Shō-Kannon (lit. holy/proper Kannon). Given its small size, this statue is likely to be the one Yoritomo always carried under his helmet, inserted in his hair topknot, during battle.¹³ Due to the alleged unity of *kami* and deified Buddhas/bodhisattvas, Yoritomo was able to enjoy the protection of figures in both religions.

It is certainly possible to argue, as Buddhist scholar John Nelson does, that in Japan, if not all of East Asia, Kannon is no longer a specifically Buddhist deity. Nelson states:

Kannon has been so widely dispersed in Japanese culture, like the air one breathes, she has become part of the social and cultural landscape in ways that transcend sectarian doctrine. . . . Perhaps we are limiting the possibilities by thinking of Kannon as a specifically Buddhist deity. Surely it makes as much sense in the context of the Japanese religious culture to see her role as similar to that of a Shinto *kami* – specific to the situations of any place and its people, and attentive to sincere petitions.¹⁴

¹² Skanda, also known as Wei Tuo in Chinese, is a Mahāyāna bodhisattva regarded as a devoted guardian of Buddhist monasteries who also guards the teachings of Buddhism. Skanda is depicted as a young man fully clad in the armor and headgear of a Chinese general, and is usually depicted leaning on a vajra-shaped sword. Son of Śiva and commander-in-chief of the army of the devas (gods), Skanda came into Buddhism from Hinduism. One of his other names is Kārtikeya, the Hindu god of war. Skanda may also be a manifestation of Vajrapāṇi, a bodhisattva who bears some relation to Skanda because they both wield vajras as weapons, are portrayed with flaming halos, and are both heavenly protectors of Buddhism. Alternatively, Skanda may be connected through Vajrapāṇi to Greco-Buddhism, as Skanda's image is reminiscent of the depiction of Vajrapāṇi as Heracles.

¹³ See reference in "Miraculous Japanese Legends About Kannon" section of Kannon Notebook, Buddhist Statuary. Available on the Web at: <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/kannon.shtml> (accessed 08-15-2018).

¹⁴ John Nelson, "From Battlefield to Atomic Bomb to the Pure Land of Paradise: Employing



Skanda in China

Further supporting Nelson's argument is the fact that in Shintō art yet another form of Kannon, Jūichimen Kannon (Eleven-Headed Kannon, Skt. Ekādaśamukha), is a common choice as the *honji-butsu* (Buddhist counterpart) of female Shintō deities. Indeed, Jūichimen Kannon is one of the two most common choices as *honji-butsu* to the Shintō Sun Goddess Amaterasu. As previously noted, the other common Buddhist identification of the Sun Goddess is Dainichi/Vairocana Buddha. Yet the question must be asked, isn't this easy identification of Buddhas and bodhisattvas with animistic *kami* problematic? For example, when Buddhas and bodhisattvas become identified with gods of war, what happens to Buddhism's first ethical precept, not to take life?

Buddhas as gods of war

It was not only bodhisattvas who were capable of becoming gods of war. Buddhas, especially Amida (Skt. Amitābha), was also capable of playing this role. The great warlord and ultimate unifier of medieval Japan, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543 -1616), exemplifies this possibility. Ieyasu was a devoted follower of the Jōdo (Pure Land) sect, of which the chief object of veneration is Amida Buddha. Ieyasu had the Pure Land temple of Zōjōji relocated to Edo (present-day Tokyo) in 1598. Thereafter Zōjōji became the family temple of the Tokugawa clan and the site of a grand cathedral.

One of the smaller forty-eight attached temples built on Zōjōji's spacious grounds was Ankokuden. The following description of this temple can be found on the English language version of the temple's contemporary website:

Enshrined in this building is the **Black Image of Amida Buddha**, which was deeply worshiped by Tokugawa Ieyasu. This wonder-working image is said to have repeatedly saved Ieyasu from dangers and enabled him to win battles. Since the Edo period [1603-1868], it has been widely revered as a Buddhist image which brings victory and wards off evils.¹⁵

However, whether by design or accident, it is not until one reads Zōjōji's explanation of this "Black Image" in *Japanese* that one learns the process by which it became black:

the Bodhisattva of Compassion to Calm Japan's Spirits of the Dead," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 1, no. 2 (2002): pp. 160-61.

¹⁵ Available on the Web at: <https://www.zojoji.or.jp/en> (accessed 08-20-2018).

Tokugawa Ieyasu deeply revered the statue of Amida Buddha said to be the work of Eshin Sozu (aka Genshin)[942-1017]. Ieyasu carried it to battlefield campsites where he prayed for victory. After Ieyasu's death, it was presented to Zōjōji where, during the Edo period, it was widely believed to be a miraculous Buddha ensuring luck at winning and eliminating misfortune. Its name "Kurohonzon" (lit. black principal image of worship) comes from having been darkened by incense smoke offered at campsites over the years and is also due to Amida's willingness to accept in his own body the wrongdoings and misfortunes of others, thereby contributing to turning his body black. Tradition states it was Ieyasu who named the statue.¹⁶

Unlike Minimoto Yoritomo's miniature Kannon, the black statute of Amida Buddha was full-sized, so large that it had to be transported to battlefield camps in a special case mounted on wheels. Further, it became black due to the smoke emanating from countless campfires, not just incense. However, the most surprising feature of the above description, whether in English or Japanese, is that the contemporary Zōjōji-affiliated priests who placed this description on the temple's website did not hesitate to claim that Amida Buddha not only saved Ieyasu from dangers but "enabled him to win battles". In making this claim they clearly support the idea that Amida is a god of war.

As for Ieyasu, while yet alive he expressed the wish to be deified after his death in order to protect his descendants from evil. Accordingly, he was posthumously deified with the name Tōshō Daigongen, the "Great Gongen, Light of the East". This signifies, as previously noted, that Ieyasu regarded himself as nothing less than a Buddha appearing on Earth in the shape of a *kami* to save sentient beings. In this we can see that the emperor was not the only one to justify his rule through claiming linkage to cosmic Buddhist figures.

No doubt some would argue that the preceding reference notwithstanding, it is incorrect to label Amida, let alone Hachiman or Kannon, as gods of war. After all, the vast majority of prayers made to them are for *protection*, not killing or victory. In reality, this is exactly the nature of the prayer political leaders and military chaplains of every faith, past and present, make to their respective deities as the faithful go into battle. For example, in ending his speech on Afghanistan

¹⁶ Available on the Web at: <http://www.zojoji.or.jp/info/history.html> (accessed 08-20-2018).

of July 6, 2016, US President Barack Obama called on God to “bless our troops and all who serve to protect us”. Would it be accurate to claim that in asking for God’s blessing Obama had changed the Judeo-Christian God into a god of war?

As difficult as this question may seem, the answer is clear if one but considers how to determine whether the deity in question answered prayers for protection. Those warriors who are the beneficiaries of the deity’s protection return safely from battle, while the enemy, who has no such protection (or protection offered by an ineffective/false deity), are all killed. In ensuring this result, the deity whose protection is sought has effectively been turned into a god of war. In the case of Buddhism, is it conceivable, doctrinally speaking, that Buddhas and bodhisattvas could act to ensure the deaths of the vast numbers of combatants who inevitably die in warfare?

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge once again that what happened to Buddhism in Japan is, except in its particulars, certainly not limited to that country alone. For example, it is clear that Buddha(s) and bodhisattvas were deified long before their arrival in Japan, beginning perhaps as long ago as the creation of the first Buddhist statuary some two thousand years ago. While Buddhist statues may have initially been created to recall the founder, it did not take long for certain of them to be regarded, at least by some adherents, as possessing magical powers. For example, the Mahāyāna “Medicine Buddha” emerged prior to the 7th century CE in India. According to the *Medicine Buddha Sutra* (Skt. Bhaiṣajya-guru-vaīḍūrya-prabhā-rāja Sutra) this Buddha, while yet a bodhisattva, vowed to cure any form of illness, assist the poor, feed the starving, etc. for those devotees who recited his *mantra* or even just heard his name. The Medicine Buddha has been particularly popular in China, where he is depicted as one of three prominent Buddhas, together with Śākyamuni and Amitābha (Amida) Buddhas.

In addition, the belief that Buddhas could act as protectors of a nation and its rulers has clear antecedents in both China and Korea, if not other Asian nations. In Korea, for example, this function of Buddhism was known as *hoguk pulgyo* (state-protecting Buddhism). During the Koryō period (918-1392), lectures were held on Buddhist sutras and elaborate ceremonies conducted to ensure the safety of the state. The *hoguk pulgyo* tradition continued during the following Joseon period (1392-1897), but this time monks took up arms and fought against successive Japanese invasions from 1592 through 1598.

Buddhism has, moreover, co-existed, if not coalesced, with animistic deities in every country to which it has spread. In Thailand, for example, houses for the guardian spirit of a place, *san phra phum* in Thai, are found throughout the country, mounted on a pillar or dais. The long-standing tradition is to leave offerings of food and drink at the spirit house, rice, bananas, and coconuts being among the most common offerings. It is believed that friendly spirits will congregate in the spirit houses to enjoy free food and drink, thereby serving to keep more malign spirits at bay. Given the widespread and enduring presence of animistic practices like these throughout Buddhist Asia, what happened in Japan was no aberration in Buddhist history, but just one additional example in a long line of similar developments. If there are lessons to be learned from these developments, they certainly extend far beyond Japan.

As for Japan, the Japanese have two folk sayings that seem relevant in this situation. The first is: *shū ni majiwareba, akaku naru* (If you rub up against a stick of vermillion, you'll become red.) As has been observed, Buddhism in Japan took on many of the characteristics of the Shintō faith, to the point that, at least in the eyes of many laity, there is today little doctrinal difference between the two faiths. As previously noted, this identity is expressed by the term *shinbutsu shūgō* (the unity of *kami* and Buddhas). This does not mean, however, that there were no Buddhist leaders who recognized that Buddhism was significantly different from Shintō. For example, while Shinran (1173-1263), founder of the Jōdo Shin (True Pure Land) sect, acknowledged the existence of *kami*, he believed they were irrelevant in comparison to the power of Amida Buddha. As a result, associated amulets and other charms, so ubiquitous today at all large Shintō shrines and many Buddhist temples, are not sold at Jōdo Shin sect temples.

From a purely pragmatic viewpoint, a good argument can be made that had Buddhism not initially accommodated itself to the indigenous animistic traditions of the host country it would have been impossible to take root in Japan (or other Asian countries). Furthermore, this accommodation was far more humane than the strenuous efforts of the Abrahamic faiths to physically eradicate the animistic faiths they encountered. From a Buddhist viewpoint, the proposition can be advanced that Buddhism's accommodation to animistic faiths was a form of *upāya* or skillful means: rather than seeking to destroy indigenous faiths, reconciliation with them was seen as the first step in leading their adherents on the path to understanding Buddhism's true ethos.

Buddhist scholar Richard Gombrich provides a positive interpretation of the relationship between the two religions, stressing their mutual, though hierarchical, complementarity:

When, therefore, Japanologists say that Japanese Buddhists have two religions, because they hold Shinto weddings, but Buddhist funerals, they are pointing to a feature which has been common to Buddhists everywhere. Since Buddhism is a pure soteriology, those Buddhists who live in the world, and to the extent that they live in the world, need another system to supply their worldly needs, notably that orderly continuation of society which marriage is designed to ensure. . . .

At the same time, however, the complementarity between Buddhism and the local spirit religion is hierarchic: Buddhism, from its own point of view as a soteriology, is superior to the spirit religion and in a way subsumes it, since it sets the cosmological framework and prescribes the overarching values. The Japanese tradition of attaching Buddhist priests to Shinto shrines to bring the gods within the Buddhist fold and thus serve their spiritual needs, a practice which was stopped by the modernism of the Meiji Restoration, exemplifies this hierarchic complementarity, as does the Theravadin system of offering the merit accruing from Buddhist acts of piety to the gods in exchange for their material help and protection.¹⁷

In support of Gombrich's position one can point to what may be viewed as today's 'division of labor' between the two faiths. Ritualistically speaking, Shintō currently has a near monopoly on life's happier moments, e.g. birth-related celebrations and the conduct of marriage ceremonies, something Gombrich describes as meeting "worldly needs". On the other hand, Japanese Buddhism has a near monopoly on life's ultimate sadness, i.e. funerary rituals and repeated memorial services for the deceased extending up to 100 hundred years or more. This is because, as Gombrich elaborates, "The only life crisis which it is normal for Buddhism to solemnize is death, because death is an apt occasion for pondering on ultimate concerns".¹⁸

¹⁷ Gombrich, "A Buddhologist's Impression of Japanese Buddhism." In *Japanese New Religions in the West*, pp. 16-17.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Gombrich's insights are both accurate and insightful in establishing a theoretical construct for understanding the positive relationship between the two faiths. However, the question is, do they explain the entirety of that relationship? Has the nearly 1500-year close relationship between these two faiths in Japan had no negative impact on Buddhist doctrine and ethics?

As this article demonstrates, the negative impact of this close relationship is equally clear. In short, what happened in Japan, if not in other Asian countries, is that Buddhism devolved into yet another *transactional* religion. This means that Buddhas and bodhisattvas were transformed into supramundane deities who, when properly propitiated, were believed to bestow abundant secular blessings, including on the battlefield, to those who worshipped them.

Just how at odds this development was with Buddhism's traditional teachings can be seen, among other things, in the teaching of the *Ittha Sutta*. In this sutra, the Buddha lists five things people commonly pray for, i.e. long life, beauty, happiness, status, and rebirth in heaven. He goes on to say, "'Now, I tell you, these five things are not to be obtained by reason of prayers or wishes".¹⁹ This teaching of the Buddha was echoed in the stone edicts written by King Aśoka. As Gombrich notes, "[Aśoka] says that people go in for all sorts of ceremonies on family occasions such as marriages, and women especially perform all kinds of paltry and useless rites for good luck, but the only rewarding ceremony is to practise *dhamma* (Skt. *dharma*). . . ."²⁰

Thus, when Buddhas and bodhisattvas are turned into transactional deities who bestow the blessings people commonly pray for, they have turned the Buddha's message into the mirror opposite of what he taught. Further, when these blessings are believed to be acquired through the practice of elaborate and costly rituals, e.g. Buddhist funerals in today's Japan, the betrayal of the Buddha's teachings is only compounded, for the Buddha taught that rituals were useless apart from a very few ceremonies related to Sangha affairs such as full ordination.²¹ This is truly an illustration of a second Japanese folk saying, "*miiratori wa miira ni natta* (The person searching for a mummy became a mummy). In other words, what passes for Buddhism in Japan, on the whole, has become a moribund, if not *mummified*, religion – the very opposite of its liberating purpose.

¹⁹ Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans. Ittha Sutta. Available on the Web at: http://buddhasutra.com/files/ittha_sutta.htm (accessed 09-26-2018).

²⁰ Gombrich, Theravada Buddhism, p. 131.

²¹ The comments concerning the Buddha's teaching regarding the overall uselessness of ritual were shared by Richard Gombrich in an e-mail message to the author on March 7, 2018.

Expressed in Buddhist terminology, it can be argued that the Buddhist acceptance of *kami* as a form of *upāya* never led to a broad or deep understanding of the Buddha Dharma in Japan. On the contrary, the alleged unity of *kami* with Buddhas and bodhisattvas came to be, for all intents and purposes, a permanent replacement, even a refutation, of the Buddha's essential message. In other words, it was the Buddhas and bodhisattvas who ended up as blessing-bestowing *kami*, not the other way around. Buddhist priests were left with little more to do than conduct funerals and memorial services, turning Japanese Buddhism as a whole into today's "funerary Buddhism" (J. *sōshiki bukkō*).

The final result is what many find to be the greatest danger Japanese Buddhism has ever faced, a danger even greater than the severe threat Buddhism faced at the beginning of the Meiji period (1868-1912). At that time outside forces attempted to physically eradicate Buddhism in a movement known as "abolish Buddhism and destroy Shākyamuni" (J. *haibutsu kishaku*). That movement resulted in the destruction of hundreds if not thousands of Buddhist temples and paralleled the Japanese government's decision strongly to encourage Shinto practices which emphasized the emperor as a divine descendant of the Sun Goddess. Government control over shrine finances and the training of priests was used to accomplish this goal. This essentially political program, popularly known as "State Shintō" (J. *kokka Shintō*), was created by the Japanese government to promote national unity and absolute obedience to the emperor's dictates. It would last until Japan's defeat in WW II.

Unsurprisingly, Shintōists enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to free themselves from a thousand years of Buddhist control at the time of the Meiji Restoration. No longer was Shintō relegated to a subservient position, one in which Shintōists were expected to protect the Buddhist faith. At long last Shintō could be independent, even though the cost of this independence was the requirement that Shintō leaders support the policies of the Japanese government without question.

As Japan expanded and became an empire in the 1900s, Shintō became an important spiritual support mechanism justifying Japanese expansion. This may be considered the Achilles heel of not just Shintō but all animistic faiths: they are easily captured by the tribal or ethnic *Zeitgeist*, especially in wartime. Thus Shintō leaders readily supported the political policies of their ethnic leaders, no matter how aggressive those policies might be. With Shintō's support, the Japanese people were taught to regard Japan as a divine land, protected by *kami*, and ruled over by a divine emperor.

Buddhism's reaction to this momentous change in its fortunes was both dramatic and far-reaching. Inasmuch as this was a long and complicated affair, however, it is a story for another day. Suffice it to say that Buddhism was, in the long term, weakened substantially. Nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say that the danger Japanese Buddhism faces today is even greater than what occurred when it was under direct assault.

Today the danger Buddhism faces is simply its growing irrelevance to Japanese life. Even its past near monopoly in funerary rites is being challenged by a growing trend to conduct secular, and less expensive, memorial services with minimal or no priestly involvement. A 2015 article in *The Guardian Weekly* noted:

Over the next 25 years, 27,000 of the country's 77,000 temples are expected to close, in one of the biggest existential crises facing Japanese Buddhism since it was introduced from Korea in the sixth century. . . . Society is changing at a rapid rate, but the Buddhist world has missed out on that because its connection with ordinary people is focused on funerals and memorials for the dead Buddhism must start dismantling the wall it has built around itself, before it is too late.²²

Lest this assessment be thought too pessimistic or one-sided, it should be acknowledged that there are Buddhist priests in Japan who are attempting to break out of traditional norms. For example, some priests have opened cafes in their temples, while others support volunteer activities, and still others host music and theatre productions. In Tokyo, priests have even opened a bar, named Vowz, to dispense spiritual guidance while serving alcohol to their young clientele.

Moreover, at the time of the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami, many temples opened their doors to survivors, and priests walked the length of the disaster zone offering spiritual advice and comfort. Commenting on these actions, Bunkei Shibata, abbot of Kaigenji temple, said, "That's exactly what they should be doing. When people are going through difficult times in their lives, it is our responsibility to help them".²³

²² Justin McCurry. "Zen no more: Japan shuns its Buddhist traditions as temples close," *The Guardian Weekly*, November 6, 2018. Available on the Web at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/06/zen-no-more-japan-shuns-its-buddhist-traditions-as-temples-close>.

²³ *Ibid.*

While the merit of Buddhist priests “dispensing spiritual guidance” together with mind-clouding alcoholic drinks can be debated, it is noteworthy that none of these recent attempts to make Buddhism relevant to contemporary society depend on the existence of transactional Buddhist deities bestowing blessings on adherents. It is equally clear that not all of Japanese Buddhism’s current woes and bleak future prospects can be blamed on the transformation of Buddhas and bodhisattvas into transactional deities, or its nearly exclusive focus on the performance of funerary rites.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that there is no recorded instance of the historical Buddha having ever conducted so much as a single funeral. Nor, of course, did the Buddha ever lay claim to being a deity capable of bestowing supernatural blessings of any kind on his followers. On the contrary, he encouraged his followers to live an ethical life as expressed in the Holy Eightfold Path, part of the Four Noble Truths. This ethical life can be undermined, if not ignored completely, when Buddhas are called on to protect the state and its rulers, bring victory in war, and produce miracles of whatever kind. In attempts to fulfill decidedly worldly desires, the Buddha Dharma all but disappears.

At the same time, the fundamental impetus for Buddhist practice, i.e. the unavoidable suffering associated with old age, sickness and death, remains as relevant today as it was at the time of the historical Buddha. At its best, Buddhism has always offered a clear method for addressing the basic cause of suffering through an understanding of the true nature of the individual and reality. This understanding has no need of transactional deities of any kind.

In days long past, in the absence of advanced medical and scientific understanding of the world around us, it is understandable that human beings looked to transactional deities to miraculously/magically solve the challenges they faced. Where else could they look? Fortunately, those days are, for the most part, long gone. At least for Buddhism, which never relied on the existence of transactional deities in the first place, this is a true “blessing”. Buddhism should now in theory be free to return to what it once was at the time of the historical Buddha.

But let no one be under the illusion that separating the “wheat from the chaff” can be easily accomplished. For starters, there will always be differences in determining what is “wheat” and what is “chaff”. Nevertheless, the need to divorce Buddhism from the widely accepted belief in transactional deities has never been greater, for at least in the case of Buddhism in Japan, if not in other Asian countries, its future viability may well depend on it.

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