

Is It Possible for an Entire Sangha to be ‘Defeated’ in the Holy Life?

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Abstract

In the spring of 2019 a major peace exhibition took place at Higashi Honganji temple in Kyoto. The exhibition was entitled “No War – Peace” with the subtitle: “Tragic — Human Beings — How Brutal They Are!” While sectarian leaders admitted their own sect's war culpability, the exhibition's focus was almost exclusively on Japan as a victim of war, thereby, at least implicitly, avoiding an examination of both Japan's role as war victimizer and their own sect's unconditional support of Japan's wartime aggression. The historical reality is, of course, that not only Higashi Honganji but all traditional sects in Japan were united as one in their support of Japan's war effort. This reality raises the question of how to deal with the longstanding Buddhist practice that clerics who intentionally broke one of the four *pārājika* rules, including killing, were declared to have been “defeated” and barred from the Sangha for life. In light of the massive loss of life resulting from Japanese aggression abroad, are postwar Buddhist peace exhibitions focused on Japan as a victim of war sufficient to restore the Buddhist affiliation of their sects?

Introduction

From the time of its establishment by Shakyamuni Buddha, it is clear that the Buddhist Sangha, one of the three core components or jewels of Buddhism, was designed to be a self-governing, self-regulating group of spiritual practitioners. When necessary, it was, as a last resort, prepared to expel those members who had violated the precepts all initiates pledged themselves to follow. The four *pārājikas* (defeats) describe those rules that, if broken, require expulsion from the Sangha. Should Buddhist practitioners break any one of these rules they are automatically “defeated” in the holy life and immediately forfeit membership in the Sangha. Further, they are not allowed to become practitioners again for the remainder of their lives. However, it should be noted that in all four cases Sangha members must have purposely intended to commit a proscribed act for an offence to have occurred.

The four *pārājikas* for bhikkhus (male clerics) are:

1. Sexual intercourse: engaging in any sexual intercourse.
2. Stealing: the robbery of anything worth more than 1/24 troy ounce of gold (as determined by local law).
3. Intentionally bringing about the death of a human being — whether by killing the person, arranging for an assassin to kill the person, inciting the person to die, or describing the advantages of death.
4. Deliberately lying to another person that one has attained a superior human state, e.g. claiming to be an *arahant* when one knows one is not, or claiming to have attained one of the *jhānas* when one knows one has not.

In creating this system it is clear the assumption was made that the Sangha, by virtue of its adherence to the *Pātimokkha*, i.e. the basic code of monastic discipline, is in a position to pass judgement on the intentional acts of its members. A second assumption is that the Sangha itself is capable of judging possible offenders without recourse to assistance, much less interference, from outside parties. Nowhere, it seems, is there any provision, or even consideration, that the entire Sangha itself, not simply individual members, might be responsible for violating one or more of the four *pārājikas*. Farfetched as this possibility might seem, there appears to be no prescribed method for the Sangha to address it.

Looked at historically, it is clear that early in Buddhist history the Sangha was no longer able to police its members without outside assistance. As Richard Gombrich notes:

The Sangha, and hence Buddhism, has a particular need of political patronage if it is to flourish. Monks can reach decisions to expel malefactors – or pronounce that they have automatically expelled themselves – but they lack the power to enforce those decisions. History has shown time and again that without state support – which need not mean *exclusive* state support – the Sangha declines for this very reason.¹

One early example of outside intervention occurred at the hands of the Indian Emperor Ashoka (c. 304-232 BCE) with regard to what the correct teaching of the Buddha was. Ashoka had the following question put to an assembly of bhikkhus who were suspected of embracing heretical doctrines:

‘Sir, what did the Blessed One teach?’ And they each expounded their wrong doctrine, the *Sassata*-doctrine and so forth.² And all these adherents of false doctrine did King [Ashoka] cause to be expelled from the order; those who were expelled were in all sixty thousand.³

The Sangha, in having to call on Emperor Ashoka to expel 60,000 monks harbouring “false views,” was clearly no longer able to police, or cleanse, itself without the aid of a powerful secular force, i.e., Emperor Ashoka. However, one of the universal problems of doctrinal “heresy” is that, as history reveals, this label can be as readily used to silence justified criticism, particularly of unjust rulers, as it can to protect the “purity” of the faith. Additionally, Ashoka is said to have had the power to prescribe passages from the sutras which Sangha members were required to study, and those who failed to do so could be defrocked by his officers.⁴ In fact, it is said that it became necessary to receive Ashoka’s permission even to enter the priesthood.⁵

¹ Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 117.

² The *Sassata*-doctrine is a form of “eternalism”, centered on the belief that the *ātman* (soul) and the universe are eternal.

³ Chapter Five, “The Third Council,” *The Mahāvamsa*, available on the Web at: <https://mahavamsa.org/mahavamsa/original-version/05-third-council/>.

⁴ Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 56.

⁵ Basham, *The Wonder That Was India*, p. 56.

Although the details of these accounts remain contentious, their import reveals that by the time of King Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE, the Sangha was no longer, at least in part, a self-governing, self-regulating entity. That is to say, it had already come under the influence, if not control, of secular rulers. One example of the close relationship that existed between the Sangha and an early Sinhalese ruler, extending even to waging war, is made clear in the epic poem *Mahāvamsa* (Great Chronicle), attributed to a Sinhalese Buddhist cleric of the sixth century CE.

The *Mahāvamsa* contains a description of a war fought between the Sinhalese Buddhist King Duṭṭhagāmaṇi (r. 161–137 BCE) and the Tamil King Eḷāra (204–164 BCE). The claim is made that Duṭṭhagāmaṇi deeply regretted the loss of life the war entailed. This regret led to the following conversation between the king and his Buddhist cleric advisors:

How shall there be any comfort for me, O venerable sirs, since by me was caused the slaughter of a great host numbering millions?" [One monk advisor replied]: "From this deed arises no hindrance in thy way to heaven. Only one and a half human beings have been slain here by thee, O lord of men. The one had come unto the (three) refuges, the other had taken on himself the five precepts [of Buddhism]. Unbelievers and men of evil life were the rest, not more to be esteemed than beasts. But as for thee, thou wilt bring glory to the doctrine of the Buddha in manifold ways; therefore cast away care from thy heart, O ruler of men!"⁶

Although the *Mahāvamsa* is noncanonical, it has nevertheless played an influential role within not only Sri Lanka but other Theravādan Buddhist countries as well. This is because its denial of the humanity of "unbelievers and men of evil life" has been used over the centuries to justify killing, extending to the present day. For example, in mid-1970s Thailand, there was increasing domestic unrest, with demonstrations by farmers, labourers, and students. Senior Thai Buddhist cleric Kittiwutto Bhikkhu was a coleader of the psychological warfare unit Nawapol, a legacy of CIA counterinsurgency operations in that country. He taught that "communists were the national enemy" and therefore "non-Thai". These supposedly non-Thai communists should be killed: "Because whoever

⁶ "The Victory of Duṭṭhagāmaṇi," *Mahāvamsa*, chap. 25, <http://www.vipassana.com/resources/mahavamsa/mhv25.php>.

destroys the nation, the religion or the monarchy, such bestial types [of man] are not complete persons. Thus we must intend not to kill people but kill the Deva [Māra]; this is the duty of all Thai.”⁷

In Sri Lanka, during the twenty-six years of civil war ending in 2009, many Buddhist leaders and laity also invoked the *Mahāvamsa* to justify the Sri Lanka military’s use of deadly force to defeat the Tamil Tiger insurgency. Even more recently, on October 30, 2017, Sitagu Sayadaw, a high-ranking monk in Myanmar, gave a speech to military officers urging them not to fear the karmic consequences of taking human life. He said:

Don’t worry . . . it’s only a little bit of sin. Don’t worry, even though you killed millions of people, they were only one and a half real human beings. Now I’m not saying that, monks from Sri Lanka said that. . . . Our soldiers should bear this [story] in mind.⁸

Needless to say, Sitagu was also referring to the *Mahāvamsa*, and the killing he alluded to was, first and foremost, the Myanmar military’s use of force against the non-Buddhist, Muslim Rohingya.

Despite the preceding, it must be admitted that state interference in Sangha affairs did not always have a negative impact. As Richard Gombrich has noted, the Sangha often benefitted from the patronage of the rulers of those countries in which it flourished. In fact, it can be said that, historically speaking, Buddhism would not have spread throughout Asia without this patronage. However, there was a cost attached to this patronage, i.e., a degree of state interference in the Sangha’s internal affairs. Nor should it be forgotten that it was Shakyamuni Buddha himself who is said to have admonished his followers, “I prescribe, monks, that you meet kings’ wishes.”⁹

Given this background, it is hardly surprising that over the centuries the Sangha seldom if ever dared to criticize, let alone challenge, the state and its rulers no matter how despotic and cruel their actions might be. On the contrary,

⁷ Quoted in Michael Jerryson and Mark Juergensmeyer, eds., *Buddhist Warfare*, p. 189. Originally, Māra was the demon who assaulted Shakyamuni Buddha beneath the bodhi tree, using violence, sensory pleasure, and mockery in an attempt to prevent the Buddha from attaining enlightenment. In popular usage, Māra represents the personification of Death, the Evil One, the Tempter (the Buddhist counterpart of the Devil or Principle of Destruction).

⁸ “Sayadaw: Killing Non-Buddhists Is Not a Sin,” *Engage Dharma*, November 3, 2017, <https://engagedharma.net/2017/11/03/sayadaw-killing-non-buddhists-is-not-a-sin/>.

⁹ *Vinaya I*, 138. Quoted in Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 117.

as in the case of the *Mahāvamsa*, the Sangha ended up not only collaborating with state warfare but justifying its use of violence. This historical background should be borne in mind as we turn our attention to the complete subservience of traditional Japanese Buddhist sects to Japanese totalitarianism and foreign aggression in the 20th century.

Higashi Honganji's 2019 "Peace Exhibition"

In the spring of 2019 a major peace exhibition took place at Higashi Honganji temple in Kyoto. The exhibition was entitled "No War – Peace" with the subtitle: "Tragic — Human Beings — How Brutal They Are!" A further inscription noted this was the nineteenth year that the exhibition had taken place.¹⁰ Immediately adjacent to the exhibition title were words of welcome in Japanese, with Chinese, Korean and English translations, written by Bishop Hiroshi Tajima, Chief Administrator of the Ōtani branch of the Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land) sect, popularly known, and frequently referred to in this article, as Higashi Honganji:

The Gathering in Memory of the War Dead which we once hold [sic] annually has been renamed as the Dharma Gathering in Memory of All War Dead, with the words "Dharma" and "All" added since 1987. This year's gathering marks the thirty-third year since the renaming. The addition of these two words is the embodiment of our sincere repentance for our denomination's cooperation in the war effort during World War II, which contributed to tremendous suffering of people in many countries, and of our firm determination to remember the frightful calamity of the war that devastated not only the battlefields in other lands but in our own country as well. We hold this Dharma Gathering in order to be face to face with each of the war victims and to listen to their unfathomable grief whether they were soldiers or civilians.

The words of welcome make it clear they were written on behalf of the annual war memorial gathering rather than specifically for the peace exhibition. While this is of little consequence, it is interesting to note the changes in the

¹⁰ A further exhibition was scheduled to be held in April 2020 but was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

formal title of the memorial gathering, i.e. the addition of the words “Dharma” and “All” to the title. In other words, prior to the name change, the annual gathering had been dedicated solely to the memory of those *Japanese* soldiers and civilians who perished during the war. On the one hand, the 1987 addition of the word “all” to the memorial gathering’s title may be considered a welcome addition, for it signals the sponsors’ recognition, as Buddhists, that the tragedy and pain of war are not limited to one side alone. That is to say, they are indeed universal and fully deserve to be recognized as such. On the other hand, it can be said that, in the light of the war’s end in 1945, the addition of the word “all” for the first time in 1987 was a change late in coming. At the same time, the question must be asked: how often, if ever, do religious war memorial services in Western countries recognize the pain and suffering of former enemies, military or civilian?

In Japan, the practice of holding memorial services dedicated to both one’s own war dead and those of the enemy has a long history. Since the Middle Ages, victorious warlords have established the tradition of holding a mass for the repose of the war dead of both friend and foe, including building cenotaphs in memory of both parties. One of the largest of these cenotaphs is located at Rinzaï Zen sect-affiliated Engakuji temple in Kamakura. It was built by Regent Hōjō Tokimune (1251–1284) to commemorate both Mongol and Japanese warriors who died during the Mongols’ attempted invasions of Japan in the 13th century. In Japan this practice is regarded as stemming from the Buddhist idea of the “equality of friend and foe” (J. *onshin byōdō*) and rooted in the teaching that it is wrong to kill out of hatred.

War Responsibility

It is also significant that Bishop Tajima clearly recognized his branch’s war responsibility when he expressed, “our sincere repentance for our denomination’s cooperation in the war effort during World War II, which contributed to tremendous suffering of people in many countries, and of our firm determination to remember the frightful calamity of the war that devastated not only the battlefields in other lands but in our own country as well.” This recognition, too, had been long in coming, for, although Bishop Tajima didn’t mention it, it was not until 1987, i.e. the same year that “all” was added to the title of the annual war memorial service, that Higashi Honganji first admitted its war responsibility as follows:

As we recall the war years, it was our sect that called the war a “sacred war”. It was we who said, “The heroic spirits [of the war dead] who have been enshrined in [Shinto’s] Yasukuni Shrine have served in the great undertaking of guarding and maintaining the prosperity of the Imperial Throne. They should therefore be revered for having done the great work of a Bodhisattva.” This was an expression of deep ignorance and shamelessness on our part. When recalling this now, we are attacked by a sense of shame from which there is no escape. . . .

Calling that war a “sacred war” was a double lie. Those who participate in war are both victims and victimizers. In light of the great sin we have committed, we must not pass it by as being nothing more than a “mistake”. The sect proposed to revere things that were never taught by the Saint [Shinran]. When we who are priests think about this sin, we can only hang our heads in silence before all who are gathered here.¹¹

Late as this postwar admission of war responsibility was, it was nevertheless the first time any of Japan’s traditional Buddhist sects had done so. By comparison, the United Church of Christ in Japan, Japan’s largest Protestant denomination, admitted its own war responsibility in 1967, twenty years earlier. Albeit late, it was certainly appropriate for Higashi Honganji to express its contrition. For example, in March 1943, on the occasion of the sect’s Twenty-Fourth General Assembly, the branch’s organ, *Shinshū*, trumpeted the following headline: “The Imperial Way-Shin Sect Establishes the Path for Public Service.” The term “Imperial Way-Shin Sect” meant the recognition of the absolute power and authority of the emperor. It must be stressed, however, that there was nothing fundamentally new in this development. Shin scholar Daitō Satoshi recognized this when he wrote: “During the fifteen years of war [1931-45] the content, i.e., the actual activities, of the sect can be said to have been those of the ‘Imperial Way-Shin Sect’. In fact, to be precise, it can be said that the Imperial Way-Shin sect was only the completion of what had been passed down from the Meiji [1868-1912] and Taishō [1912-1926] periods.”¹²

¹¹ Quoted in *Nihon Shūkyō-sha Heiwa Kyōgikai*, ed. *Shūkyō-sha no Sensō Sekinin; Zange, Kokuhaku, Shiryō-shū*, p. 34.

¹² Daitō, *Otera no Kane wa naranakatta*, p. 110.

What was it that this branch actually taught its adherents about fighting in Japan's wars as True Pure Land Buddhists? The answer came as early as April 1905 when Japan was in the midst of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-5). It was then that scholar-priest Ōsuga Shūdō (1876-1962) penned a pamphlet entitled, "An Overview of Evangelism during Wartime" (*Senji Dendō Taikan*). Its content became the standard expression of Higashi Honganji's doctrinal approach to war up through Japan's defeat in August 1945. The following passage is representative of the pamphlet's content:

Reciting the name of Amida [Skt. Amitābha] Buddha makes it possible to march onto the battlefield, firm in the belief that death will bring rebirth in Paradise. Being prepared for death, one can fight strenuously, knowing that it is a just fight, a fight employing the compassionate mind of the Buddha, a fight of a loyal subject. Truly, what could be more fortunate than knowing that, should you die, a welcome awaits you in the Pure Land [of Amida Buddha].¹³

The Exhibit Proper

In the light of the branch's unconditional endorsement of Japan's wartime aggression, one might expect that references to the war-affirming teachings of the True Pure Land faith would form part of the exhibition. However, the branch's wartime teachings were not addressed. Instead, the first section of the exhibition moved directly from words of welcome to a series of depictions of wartime Japan, not as aggressor but as victim, i.e., victim of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The first photograph in the exhibition vividly captured the utter devastation resulting from the bombing that instantly killed some 70,000–126,000 civilians and 20,000 soldiers. Over the next two to four months, the bomb's after effects would kill an additional 90,000 to 146,000 people in Hiroshima.

¹³ Quoted in Daitō Satoshi, *Otera no Kane wa naranakatta*, pp. 131-32.



“Hiroshima after dropping the atomic bomb. October 26, 1945.”

At this point the exhibit took something of an unusual turn in that photographs gave way to drawings of the victims. The exhibit explained this development in English as follows:

These drawings on display in this gallery depict the scenes that happened in Hiroshima. These drawings were drawn as a joint work by witnesses who experienced the atomic bombing and the students of the Hiroshima Municipal Motomachi Senior High School Course of Creative Expression. . . . There was the determination of the witnesses who talk about a painful experience, and the high school students’ will to convey it while feeling the suffering by listening to the story and facing the reality.

The first drawing depicted one of the most poignant scenes to result from the bombing.



*“A young mother carrying her dead baby on her back.”
An additional description of the scene stated:*

Mrs. Kishida found a young mother in a line of refugee[s]. With a bloody face, she was carrying her baby, who was to all appearances dead. She said to each person, “Please give my baby something to eat. Please give him water.” Since all anyone could do was to protect himself or herself, no one could do anything else.

Hiroshima consists of a series of large islands located on the broad fan-shaped delta of the Ōta River. The cry for water was a universal characteristic of those wounded by the bomb. They stumbled, sometimes crawled, to the river’s nearest channel, where they often died after taking a last drink.



*“Drifting dead bodies under Miyuki Bridge.”
The student artist who made this drawing stated:*

Naturally, I have never seen floating bodies. So I felt horrible when I imagined the sight while creating this drawing. When I thought that a sight which I feared was real about 70 years ago. I will be grateful if many people come to think deeply about the A-bomb through this drawing.

In the face of many thousands of deaths, there was no time, space or fuel available for traditional individual cremations of the dead. The cremations took place en masse with no time to record names or personal details. To this day, the cremated remains of about 70,000 A-bomb victims are buried in the Atomic Bomb Memorial Mound, located in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. Of this number, only the identities of 814 are known.



*The drawing's caption read: "Corpses waiting to be cremated."
An A-bomb survivor commented:*

It was difficult to cremate a large number of bodies if they were piled up into a heap. So instead, they were cremated as pictured in the drawing. I watched as they burned bodies this way.

While the initial blast from the A-bomb destroyed many buildings, not to mention their occupants both inside and out, this was quickly followed by massive fires that swept through the many wooden buildings in the city. Inasmuch as both Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples are traditionally constructed of wood, they were quickly set alight and nearly always consumed in the flames.



*“The temple suffered from the tornado of fire.
” The scene was described as follows:*

When Mr. Kuniwake and his father looked toward a temple from a bank of the river, the temple, the shrine and the forest of ginkgoes and camphor trees were all on fire. The fire became a tornado, and was swallowed up into the sky. After that, they went to the river bank and lay down there.

The final panel in the first section of the exhibition consisted of a single color photo. This photo featured the exhibition's only reference to the dropping of a second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki, three days after the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, i.e., on August 9, 1945.



“A Buddhist ceremony held to celebrate the construction of a ‘No-Nuclear, No-War Cenotaph.’” An additional explanation stated:

A “No-Nuclear, Anti-War Cenotaph” was constructed in 1999 in front of a Nagasaki [Christian] Church where a new building to hold the remains of those killed by the A-bomb was built. On the ninth day of every month, a no-nuclear, no-war Buddhist memorial service is held as well as a yearly no-nuclear, no-war service on August 9th.

The Second Section of the Exhibition

The second section of the exhibition was quite short, consisting of only one explanatory panel and a second panel featuring a collage of photos. Interestingly, there was no English or other foreign language explanation provided for this section. For whatever reason, it was meant for “Japanese eyes only”, perhaps because this was the first time in the exhibition an attempt was made to elaborate on the sect’s complicity with Japanese imperialism. The Japanese explanation, entitled “Revering Things that St. Shinran Never Revered”, suggests the sect now realized that its prewar and wartime proselytism on the Korean peninsula was, in fact, an integral part of Japan’s colonial efforts. The description of the sect’s efforts in this regard is translated here in its entirety:

The year 2010 marks the 100th anniversary of the March 1st Movement seeking Korea’s liberation and independence from Japanese colonialism. What kind of history does the Ōtani branch have on the Korean peninsula in the modern era? Let us recall the steps taken by the Ōtani branch of Jōdo Shinshū on the road to war.

In 1876 the Japan-Korea Treaty of Amity was signed, opening up Korea and providing for such exclusive rights as consular jurisdiction for Japanese residents in Korea, thereby marking the first unequal treaty. The Ōtani branch took advantage of this treaty to begin mission work in the port city of Busan, using the [Japanese] settlement as its base. In August 1877, the Ōtani branch, acting on the recommendation of Lord of Foreign Affairs Terashima Munenori and Lord of Home Affairs Ōkubo Toshimichi, dispatched Okumura Enshin [1843-1913] to Korea. Okumura Enshin was thought to be a descendant of Okumura Jōshin who founded the temple of Kōtokuji in Busan in 1585 at the time Toyotomi Hideyoshi [1537-1598] dispatched troops to Korea. Okumura Enshin was the elder brother of Okumura Ioko, the first head of the Patriotic Women’s Association.

In November 1877, Okumura Enshin and others rented and restored the former offices of the Tsushima island envoy in Busan, turning it into a missionary station. Thereafter they opened an elementary school for the children of Japanese residents in the city, engaged in welfare activities for the poor and established a missionary society

to aid those who had fallen ill on the street. The following year they renamed their mission station as the Busan branch temple of Higashi Honganji, with Okumura serving as its first head on a rotating basis. Thereafter, they established mission stations in Wonsan in 1881, Incheon in 1885 and Keijō (Seoul) in 1890. In 1893 they created a prison chaplaincy for the Japanese consular prison in Keijō and began missionary work among the city's defense forces. The following year, following the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War [1894-95], they created a military chaplaincy as well.

In 1910 Japan annexed Korea, turning it into a colony. Accompanying this, the Ōtani branch strengthened its proselytism on the Korean peninsula, changing the name of its missionary operation from "Manchuria-Empire of Korea Missionary Division" to "Korea Missionary Division".

On March 1, 1919 the people of Korea issued a "Declaration of Independence" in which they expressed their desire to free themselves from colonial control. Demonstrators shouting "Long live Korean Independence" could be found throughout the country. However, the Japanese military and police suppressed these demonstrations. Korean Buddhists like Han Yong-un [1879-1944] had been deeply involved in drafting the Declaration.

At the same time, it is reported that the Ōtani branch took advantage of the many Koreans who gathered for the March 1st [1919] market day in Wonsan City. The branch had a mission station there that set up a number of platforms from which they distributed propaganda leaflets, gave fiery speeches and led the thousands of assembled Koreans in repeated cheers for the long life [of the emperor of Japan] so as to prevent a violent outbreak. In June of the same year the Ōtani branch instructed its missionary staff that, as educators, they were to contribute to the great work of governing the country by convincing the people to exert themselves on behalf of the unification [of the two countries]. They considered the voices of those Koreans hoping for liberation and independence as no more than a "disturbance".

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It was also Ōtani branch prison chaplains attached to the Seodaemun prison [in Seoul] who attempted to make imprisoned Korean patriots see the error of their ways. Japan's colonial rule lasted for thirty-five years. In the postwar era, all of Ōtani's branch temples and regular temples disappeared. This makes us ask anew what was the meaning of proselytism on the Korean peninsula?

The adjacent panel featured a collage of photos relating to the branch's proselytism in Korea:



The caption beneath the photo in the top half of the panel read: “The main hall of the Keijō [today’s Seoul] branch temple”. The photo’s source was identified as: “April 10, 1911 issue of Honganji Shiyō (Honganji Sect Magazine).”

The caption beneath the photo on the lower left stated: “An imperial plaque at the Keijō branch temple [entitled]: ‘Daikan Amida Honganji’” [Amida Honganji Temple in the Empire of Korea].

The caption beneath the photo on the lower right stated: “Keijō branch temple”. The photo’s source was identified as: Fifty Years of Proselytizing in Korea, published in October 1927.

The explanatory material at the bottom of the panel stated:

The August 25, 1910 edition of the “Shūhō” (Sect News), No. 107, disclosed that in July 1910 the Korean Emperor [Sunjong] graciously bestowed an imperial plaque on the Keijō Branch Temple. “Keijō” is today’s Seoul. On July 12, 1910 an enshrinement of the plaque took place. From the Korean side, the emperor’s chamberlain, the minister of state for domestic affairs, seven court ladies, and more than ten high-ranking government officials took part. From the Japanese side, Deputy Resident-General Yamagata [Isaburō], translators and members of the Buddhist Women’s Association participated, making a total of more than three thousand attendees. This occurred only a month before the annexation of Korea [on August 22, 1910] and left a deep impression of friendship at the level of ordinary people.

Significantly, there is nothing on this final panel to indicate that the branch’s activities in Korea had been anything but honorable, either before or after the ‘annexation’ (*J. heigō*). In fact, by featuring Korea’s independent, precolonial name, i.e., “Empire of Korea”, on the plaque in the photo at the bottom left, one is left with the impression that the Ōtani branch respected Korea’s independence, territorial integrity and emperor. While that may have been true initially, it certainly was not the case by the time Japan ‘annexed’ Korea. Needless to say, the annexation, a euphemism for colonization, took place with the full concurrence of Higashi Honganji and, for that matter, all traditional Buddhist sects in Japan.

Conclusion

The reader will recall that a Buddhist cleric is guilty of having broken his *pārājika* vow of non-killing in the following circumstance: “Intentionally bringing about the death of a human being — whether by killing the person, arranging for an assassin to kill the person, **inciting the person to die, or describing the advantages of death**” (my emphasis). In light of these provisions, there can be no question that scholar-priest Ōsuga Shūdō, quoted above, broke this vow when he made such statements as “reciting the name of Amida Buddha makes it possible to march onto the battlefield, firm in the belief that death will bring rebirth in Paradise.” Furthermore, inasmuch as Ōsuga’s views were accepted by the entire Ōtani branch, the entire branch was equally guilty of the same breach. Not only that, but, as I have shown in other writings, the same can be said about the war-affirming stance of *all* traditional Japanese Buddhist sects.¹⁴

In light of the horrific nature of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, it is not surprising that the Japanese leadership of Higashi Honganji chose to focus on their citizenry as victims to express the deep tragedy of war. And it is also true that in his welcoming remarks, Bishop Tajima admitted his own sect’s responsibility in having supported Japanese aggression. Yet the question must be asked, what nation doesn’t focus on and lament the losses and hardships of their own citizenry, especially military, in war rather than those of the ‘enemy’? By focusing almost exclusively in this exhibition on Japan as war *victim*, there is at least an implicit devaluation/avoidance of Japan’s role as war *victimizer*. By focusing on *Japanese* as victims, there is a danger of turning far more numerous *non-Japanese* victims, especially in China, into little more than abstract numbers, if they are thought about at all. Hasn’t Japan’s postwar fixation on its own wartime victimization resulted in its inability to be reconciled, even now, with those nations it invaded and brutalized during WWII?

Additionally, the question must be asked, what is *Buddhist* about focusing almost exclusively on one’s own pain while giving little more than lip service to the pain of others, especially pain caused by one’s own government? Is it too much to characterize “peace exhibits” like this one as yet a further prolongation of Japan’s well known, and ongoing, proclivity to refuse to acknowledge fully the pain suffered by so-called “comfort women” (military sexual slaves) and forced labourers during the war?

¹⁴ See, for example, *Zen at War, Zen War Stories, and Zen Terror in Prewar Japan: Portrait of an Assassin*.

The argument can be made that in at least two panels, out of approximately twenty, Higashi Honganji did reveal the collaborative nature of their missionary activities in Korea with Japanese colonialism. However, given the far more ubiquitous nature of the doctrinal and spiritual support the branch gave to the Japanese military, is it sufficient to acknowledge to a postwar Japanese public that it was only the questionable nature of its missionary activities in one colony that was of concern? If Higashi Honganji, like Japanese Buddhists overall, find themselves, as evidenced by this exhibit, unable or unwilling to take the lead in honest self-reflection and atonement for their role as *victimizers*, who in Japanese society can be expected to fulfill this role? With notable exceptions, postwar Japanese political figures have shown an equal if not greater reluctance to confront the past.

And finally, perhaps the thorniest question of all is what is the *Buddhist* status of those traditional sects in Japan who were united as one in their support of Japanese totalitarianism at home and aggression abroad? True, many, but not all, of these sects have expressed regret/remorse for their *collective* actions in the postwar period, but this does not change the fact that, traditionally, Buddhist clerics who intentionally broke more and more of the *pārājikas* were declared to have been “defeated” and barred from the Sangha *for life*. In the face of the massive loss of life resulting from Japanese aggression abroad, are postwar expressions of regret and remorse by a number of traditional sects sufficient to restore the *Buddhist* affiliation of their sects?

If there is a ray of hope for war-affirming Buddhist sects in Japan, it is to be found in the *Brahmajāla Sūtra* (J. *Bonmō-kyō*) of the Mahāyāna tradition. Apocryphal though this sutra may be, it still offers the possibility of redemption. While not killing or encouraging others to kill is listed as one of the ten major precepts, and while those who intentionally break this precept are still labeled *pārājikas*, as Bernard Faure notes, “the culprit can now rehabilitate himself through his own repentance and through the merits of others.”¹⁵ Attractive as this possibility is, at least for Mahāyāna adherents, the question remains, have traditional Buddhist branches like Higashi Honganji genuinely repented their wartime conduct?

It is also attractive to think that, as in days long past, an outside power, e.g., political leaders, could intervene to ‘cleanse’ the Sangha as Emperor Ashoka is said to have done. However, in Japan’s case it was the Japanese government, with the emperor’s consent, that ensured all of Japan’s traditional Buddhist sects

¹⁵ Faure, *The Red Thread*, p. 92.

would wholeheartedly support Japanese aggression. Thus, even today, there is no force outside the collective Sangha in Japan that is in a position to intervene in Sangha affairs to address this issue.

While war responsibility is clearly a question for the Japanese Sangha as a whole, regardless of sect, it is clear that this not a problem restricted to the Japanese Sangha alone. For example, it is equally clear that many, albeit not all, senior leaders of the Sangha in Myanmar support the ongoing brutal ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in their country. The country's *de facto* political leader, Aung Sang Su Kyi, said to be a devout Buddhist, has made it abundantly clear that she will not intervene to stop the government's policies of ethnic cleansing, much less intervene to cleanse the Sangha in Myanmar of those leaders who support ongoing government brutality. In short, in the absence of any effective mechanism to cleanse an entire Sangha of breaking its *pārājika* vows in any Asian country, it must be said that this is a major problem in Buddhism that remains unresolved, if not unresolvable. In this respect, of course, it can be cogently argued that Buddhism is no different from any of the world's other major religions. For Buddhists, however, this can offer scant comfort.

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