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Buddhist Responses to the 3.11 Disasters in Japan

Tim Graf

Introduction

When I visited Ishinomaki nearly three years after the 11 March 2011 triple disasters—earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown—former residents of the city and parishioners of Saikōji, a local Jōdo (Pure Land) Buddhist temple, were still living in temporary housing. Saikōji also suffered tsunami damage. Large parts of the temple graveyard had been destroyed by bulldozers of the Japan Self-Defense Forces, who came to search for bodies in the debris. In an effort to help survivors cope with their trauma, vice-head priest Higuchi Shinshō encouraged his parishioners to clean the bones of their family ancestors from the salt of the seawater that flooded Saikōji. Fragments of bones were still piled on the ground when we met, next to a pot and a strainer. Most of the graves, however, had since been repaired. "They cannot rebuild their homes," Higuchi explained. "Many people from this neighborhood are too old to get bank loans. They don't want to burden their families. That's why they invest in their graves, as a final home and resting place" (Higuchi Shinshō, interview 17 January 2014).

I will begin by reviewing the impact of the 11 March 2011 triple disaster on Buddhism in the Tōhoku region through the lens of temples, family graves, household altars, and memorial tablets (*ihai*), which are the material objects that represent the bonds between the living and their ancestors. Based on these observations, I will present an on-the-ground view of Buddhist responses to the 3.11 disasters with a focus on Sōtō Zen and Jōdo (Pure Land) Buddhism, followed by a discussion of the participation of Buddhist specialists in multireligious programs for spiritual care that have contributed to a changing scope and perception of religion in the public sphere.[1]

M. R. Mullins et al. (eds.), *Disasters and Social Crisis in Contemporary Japan*

Buddhist responses to the 3.11 triple disasters have elicited notably favorable media coverage in Japan, especially when compared to the portrayals of Buddhism after the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake of 1995. Public skepticism concerning religion in Japan had prevailed ever since 1995, when members of Aum Shinrikyō committed a series of violent crimes, most notably the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway. Established temple Buddhism was also the focus of regular criticism due to its system of funerals and memorial services, which many Japanese had come to view as outdated and costly. Buddhist professionals have contributed to a reevaluation of the religion narrative in Japan by deemphasizing the role of sectarian affiliation in post-3.11 relief efforts and through collaborations with medical doctors and public institutions. Recent research on this topic acknowledges these efforts. However, relatively little has been introduced about the problems and borders of religion and relief within the context of post-3.11 activism. I will outline some of these issues to show what Buddhism in practice looks like within the context of individuals' lives and communities in their struggle to rebuild.

Bonds of the dead and the material culture of Buddhism in contemporary Japan

The loss of Buddhist material culture in the wake of the 3.11 disasters and the subsequent efforts to retrieve and repair these objects first of all suggests that some scholarly clarification and reassessment is needed with regard to the profound role of Buddhist objects and the beliefs and practices associated with them in coping with catastrophes. Strikingly, memorial tablets were among the first things that survivors were searching for in the debris, and many people continued to search for these objects even five months after the tsunami (Graf 2012). Memorial tablets were also among those objects that people chose to take with them at the moment of evacuation, along with family photos, medicine, cash, insurance certificates, and cell phones.[2]

People in Japan may visit a Shinto Shrine on the first few days of the New Year, they may favor Christian wedding ceremonies, and when asked, may still declare themselves to be "without religion." However, when it comes to dealing with death, Buddhism dominates. Most Japanese households are affiliated with one of the 70,000 to 75,000 temples, and the majority of the country's 200,000 priests derive their income from ritual participation in funerals, ancestor veneration rituals, and the maintenance of graves on temple grounds. Over 90 percent of