

Subjectivities, Fish Stories, Toxic Beauties: Turning the Wheel *Beyond* “Buddhism?”

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“A problem cannot be solved by the consciousness that created it.”²

“This is like two plus two...equals fish!”³

OVERVIEW

Jōdoshinshū (JDSS, Shin Buddhism, Shin) has been a major Japanese tradition displaying certain structural similarities to “protestant” shifts in Christian Europe. Theoretically it should have long been of great global interest in an unprecedented world of spiritual search. But broad productive interaction with JDSS has been blocked from within, and criticism of JDSS has done nothing to produce the kinds of changes that would be necessary to open it up. It is time to admit that anything which is labeled Jōdoshinshū is, from the standpoint of global society, a dead end. Until this is faced, the “gift” perspective at the heart of Shinran’s teaching will not be liberated for fresh and creative possibilities.

1. The author expresses deep gratitude to Dr. Gordon Bermant for his careful editing and advice regarding this piece.

2. Attributed to Albert Einstein—see <http://icarus-falling.blogspot.ca/2009/06/einstein-enigma.html>. Retrieved February 10, 2017.

3. A line from the 2015 film *The Big Short* responding to the nihilistic chaos of the 2009 financial crisis. The phrase has become a meme with numerous other developments. See “2+2=fish” on Google, for example.

FROM JURA TO OHIO TO OMIYA: WHAT'S A NICE WHITE BOY LIKE
YOU DOING IN A RELIGION LIKE THIS?

Since the theme of this special issue is subjectivity I will put these reflections in an autobiographical frame. I have concluded that after four decades of deep encounter with Shin Buddhism, I have good reason to ask a rather crude question: Why is a nice white boy like me still involved with this religion? This article is best thought of as the transcript of the ongoing conversation I am still having with myself in a search for the answer to that question.

Fortunately or unfortunately, my family background and genealogy render me a thoroughly white European American.⁴ One of the lines of my descent, however, has perhaps had a relatively determinate influence on me. During the 1840s a cluster of Swiss Mennonites moved from the Jura Mountain region of present-day France and Switzerland to the northwest region of Ohio. Their migration was, it seems, primarily motivated by economic concerns (not unlike Japanese immigrants to the USA), but this group also had a special, marginalized religious status in European Christian history, for they were among the Anabaptists. Anabaptism was an “extremist” version of the Protestant Christianity of the Reformation (sometimes called the Radical Reformation) because its participants believed—and stubbornly lived out the belief—that incorporation into the Christian community should not be a matter of ritual practice for infants, but a matter of self-conscious reflection and acceptance at the adult stage of a person’s life. This view was quite political because it went against the authoritarian notions of a universal, automatic, and compulsory Christian society which was the norm for all other spheres of European society, both Catholic and Protestant, right up until the twentieth century. On account of their insistent eccentricity, Mennonites were subjected to various episodes of religious persecution in Europe.

Traditional Mennonites could be deeply serious about religion. Their views were conducive to a cultivated self-reflective inwardness, combined with expectations about simplicity and everyday moral

4. Unfortunately, because contemporary political discourse can teach us that “white” is an intelligible, unproblematic binary category for a unified, self-satisfied sector of the US population, and that “people of color” is an intelligible, unproblematic binary category for a unified, oppressed, and marginalized sector of the US population.

reliability and discipline. This went along with a theology emphasizing “grace,” according to which any capacities for Christ-like behavior, atonement, and redemption were more products of divine “gift” than consequences of effort by the prideful ego. Although these attitudes involve a decentering of the self, the pattern is smack in the middle, perhaps a sharpened version, of a more or less gradual shift to the relatively advanced *political* individuation or personal subjectivization usually regarded as characteristic of the European Reformation and modernity as a whole.⁵ In practice, Mennonite communities amounted to special quasi-ethnic groups, but I never had the sense that (racial) ethnicity per se was an important issue in comparison to the weight of their Christian religious “imaginary.”⁶ The use of the term “diaspora” in this context is revealing. Wikipedia has a whole article devoted to “Japanese Diaspora” (i.e., from the Ethnic Homeland). In Mennonitism, although its communities have spread all over the world, the word is hardly used. For the poor Mennonites and their God, every geographical place has been much the same spiritually.⁷

The Mennonite immigrants settled into a small-farm economy in the Midwest, where they were largely out of any power mainstream in American life. Many of these communities carry on today; I can imagine a scenario for myself there, involving a contented semi-rural lifestyle passed down over five or six generations combined with gradual assimilation into “English” American life. Yet already by the end of the nineteenth century in America, the earlier intensity of the original Anabaptist perspective was dissipating. My grandfather turned into a Methodist churchgoer, and thus my father too, especially in his youth. Strangely, as I knew my father, he had almost nothing to say in the way of indoctrination about Christianity. But I think now that many of the Mennonite-style personality traits were absorbed by him, and conveyed, perhaps unconsciously, to me as a child: the inwardness, the

5. These terms have many meanings, but here I merely want to point to an enhanced independence and equalization of the individual mind as the practical scene of consciousness.

6. This term, used by a variety of contemporary humanities thinkers (as a leading example, by Charles Taylor), refers to a creative symbolic system which generates and shapes a social world.

7. Available online, by the way, is an entire encyclopedia devoted to Mennonite traditions, the Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online (GAMEO), www.gameo.org.

self-reflectiveness, the simplicity, the everyday moral expectations. And I suspect too that this is a partial explanation for why my father, before he eventually became a California State water engineer, had a good deal of difficulty in finding any easy footing in the American economy, which tends to be dominated by a much different sensibility. This last struggle has been true for the son as well.

And this leads to discussion of how a plethora of realities, besides the USA economy, changed in the world between the 1840s and the early twenty-first century where we are now. In what follows I venture three generalizations about some major historical evolutions as I think they have affected me in my own quest.

THE MOVING SEA: CHANGES IN LATITUDE, CHANGES IN ATTITUDE

Goodbye God, but Hello Buddha?

Across Asia, many societies have been at least “salted” from ancient times by the presence of developed Buddhist ideas of relational knowledge and impermanence. European traditions, in contrast, under the hegemonic influence of Hellenic/Hellenistic philosophical ideas, and afterwards the fusion of these ideas with Near Eastern monotheism, have been foundationally oriented from the beginnings of recorded history up until sometime in the early modern period.⁸

However, around the time my (mentally) late-medieval paternal ancestors were beginning to drain the swamps of northeastern Ohio, a series of intellectual changes was beginning to take place in European civilization. A key tectonic shift was disaffection with Christianity (although combined with an almost ineradicable attachment to it and inability to get away from its characteristic intellectual polarizations). In addition there were many, many strands of a shift towards increasing complexity and diversification of thought, associated with literacy, science, and technology, and advancing psychological interiority. And from the Enlightenment era onwards, in various new ways thinkers began to grasp how experience is mediated through the brain and language. A litany of names and catchphrases could be dropped in here:

8. This applies to our friend Heraclitus too. See Robin Waterfield, translation and commentary, *The First Philosophers: The Presocratics and Sophists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Even this ancient thinker, in spite of his metaphor of the river into which we do not step twice, was probably ultimately in search of the same.

Locke, Hume, Kant, Humboldt, Thoreau, linguistic turn, Heidegger, post-theistic wholism, environmental interconnectedness, pragmatism, hermeneutics, deconstruction—the list could be expanded to dozens. A high altitude view of this process would show that on the onto-epistemic front, non-foundationalism and relationality as principles of knowledge began to be extensively discovered in European contexts, at least at the margins, since the early modern period.⁹ Yes, this discovery was far later than such ideas had emerged in Asia, but at this point in the twenty-first century one should perhaps avoid overplaying the uniqueness of the traditional (elite) Asian Buddhist orientations (which have been in their own ways full of inconsistencies and ambiguities).

Consequently there have now existed for several centuries in the (globalized) West abundant, if fragmented, resources inviting, or perhaps demanding, an understanding of human knowledge and the world in relational terms. For someone like me, then, a philosophically unproblematized monotheistic existential imaginary—an imaginary such as was possible for certain of my paternal rural ancestors circa 1800—had become impossible by the time I was born.

On the other hand, I would maintain that all those relational alternatives have so far not effectively added up to any widespread *coherent* imaginary for what we might think of as everyday existential purposes. Unlike for those old Mennonites, a person like me getting up in the morning faces an indeterminately large, disintegrated brew or mosaic or palimpsest of resources. This not quite the same set of

9. This is my own generalization from an array of sources over a long period of time, but in it I follow the lead of scholars like William S. Waldron who have been willing to examine and evaluate Buddhist traditions and relevant parts of Western traditions at the same time. Waldron has stated “there is a growing consensus in Western thought and science that we may understand ourselves and our world more deeply if we think in terms of *patterns of relationships* rather than of reified essences or entities—if we think, in short, in terms of dependent arising.” (William S. Waldron, “Buddhist Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Thinking about ‘Thoughts without a Thinker,’ ” *Eastern Buddhist* 34, no. 1 (2002): 1–52; quote from p. 2. As a very recent example of one version of a synthetic interactionist interpretation of the human situation see Daniel Dennett, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: Norton, 2017), which evaluates the ongoing interplay between cultural and physical evolution.

underlying problems affecting Christianity—of core believability—but a still troubling one, since unfortunately, as a wide array of contemporary thinkers recognizes, human societies may face major problems if the members do not have, as some relatively integrated or common basis or resort of consciousness, some kind of *shared* community “deep psychology” or existential language or spiritual reference (call it what you will). Christianity, which formerly had a profound (and today under-recognized) function in providing this “ground bass” orientation, has lost the power to do so over the past couple of centuries in the West. And it is a truism that political ideologies, for example liberalism, don’t have the necessary moral effects. Yet, as suggested, the relative “newcomer,” non-foundational thought/sensibility, as we have it at present, seems to be too scattered and discombobulated to work the effects that seem to be needed.

And it is another long story, but as elliptically noted above, historical Buddhist traditions too, from this perspective, were also rather fragmented. We do not have good evidence that today any of the “standard” available Buddhisms do the job overwhelmingly well either, in *any* country (well, maybe in Bhutan, when they’re not busy oppressing minorities?). Anyway, even from a contemporary *Asian* perspective what may be still wanting is a fresh mythos, a coherent imaginary, which consolidates and concentrates orientation and understanding.

Hello Unconscious Brain

A second evolution is increasing medical and scientific knowledge of the mind. I’m one who believes that “Western” cognitive psychology has gone considerably beyond anything in traditional Buddhism in explaining how the mind works; and most specially to be emphasized here is the rise of the awareness of the subconscious. Such awareness may to be more or less implicit in many old cultural traditions around the world, but the modern articulations which have foregrounded the issue originated in Europe, through processes which have been well studied by contemporary researchers.¹⁰ Most recently, over the past three or more decades, we enjoy an energized spate of cognitive science research into what is sometimes called the “new unconscious,” since it is much less concerned with Freudian (sexual) issues than with

10. One entry in this literature is Frank Tallis, *Hidden Minds: A History of the Unconscious* (New York: Skyhorse/Arcade Publishing, 2012).

the neurological reality that most brain activity is simply structurally not available to conscious awareness or control. This material is crucial to my argument but for reasons of space must be left to the background here.¹¹

What will be instead highlighted is that JDSS Buddhist tradition, in this perspective, might be seen as remarkable because—at least in the core claims of Shinran which make the tradition distinctive—it seems to have not only gone to implicit psychological depths of lived interiority/subjectivity which match, if not exceed, those in standard/conventional Buddhism.¹² Rather, and further—even if their expression is far more poetic than clinical, and hardly developed in the same analytical ways—its ideas seem to parallel what has been discovered in the new cognitive psychology of the unconscious: that we don't have conscious or intentional access to crucial transformations. In this respect Shinran's idea of "sensitivity of acceptance of gift" (*shinjin* 信心) is not only ahead of "standard" Buddhism (see discussion to follow), but even more so ahead of Protestant Christianity, where Christian notions of "faith" and the Biblical word and so on can have deep psychological ramifications, but as religious claims they are purely conceptually defined, because they rest on words of Biblical texts. Historians at least at present don't see that Protestant shifts in Europe might be associated with any emergent recognition of the subconscious in European history;¹³ in contrast Shinran's "gift" comes from some place which arguably is not only quite different in terms of its Buddhist theory of knowledge but cognitively deeper. Not really the weak "little sister" of "standard Buddhism" as commonly presented.

11. See David Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011) or Leonard Mlodinow, *Subliminal: How Your Unconscious Mind Rules Your Behavior* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012). These are only two of many popular books—including some bestsellers—aimed at general audiences on this subject, which also increasingly pops up in everyday journalism.

12. For a partial probe of the interiority/subjectivity question, see Galen Amstutz, "World Macrohistory and Shinran's Literacy," *Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*, 3rd ser., no. 11 (2009): 229–272.

13. See for example the magisterial survey by Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: Penguin, 2003). But it is quite an interesting although unconventional exercise to approach Augustinian vs. Pelagian debates in Christian history from the standpoint of the cognitive unconscious.

Greetings, Globalization

Finally to be noted are unprecedented global levels of commerce, imperialism, travel, immigration, and new cultural interactions. More than at any other time in human history, we seem to have unlimited flows of information, and even people, at our disposal. The contact and interaction of “the West” with Buddhisms from Asia has been a grand subset of these processes, a topic which has (like the others ventured here) been widely studied by contemporary historians.¹⁴

The presence of JDSS in North America directly combines a number of the globalization elements: immigration, travel, commerce, and imperialism. I would note in passing that at about the time my malnourished paternal grandfather was temporarily farmed out to the Irish widow Carnahan in rural Ohio (not all Mennonites were economically competent), the first Japanese were coming to Hawaii. So the Mennonites had approached North America from the east, and the Japanese from the west. As far as my personal history is concerned it was at a considerably later point, in the late 1970s, that such issues came into intersection. My wife and I had taught English in Japan for a year and then circled the world in our backpack travels; and upon returning to California I discovered, it seemed by accident, the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley. Undeterred by the eccentricities of the situation (including the loveable leaders of IBS at the time, Haruyoshi Kusada and Phillip Eidmann) I underwent an overwhelming discovery of a path. Apparently the (largely unconscious) “theological fit” to my background was profoundly close: as far as I remember, I *always* felt an intuition that Buddhism *must* involve a process of “gift”; nothing else ever made sense to me.

And yet.... Globalization, as an expression of modern economics and commerce and global imperial competition, has also tended to be accompanied by characteristic modern cultural conceptions of “the

14. As early as the 1980s journalist Rick Fields composed *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* (Boston: Shambhala, 1992 [3rd ed.]) and the topic has subsequently been extensively expanded by numerous academic researchers. Pioneering for the United States was Thomas Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism, 1844–1912: Victorian Culture and the Limits of Dissent* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); on Europe, see for example Roger-Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: the Philosophers and the Buddha* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Other” which are produced by modern cultural nationalism, by new forms of Orientalism/Occidentalism which impede flows of communication in new ways.¹⁵ Yes, Buddhism has to some extent offered in the past two centuries or so an alternative imaginary for European-based human populations which did not inherit it as did various Asian populations from ancient times. Yet at the same time the picture has been multifariously complicated, by, for example, tendencies for “Western” receptions to be selective (the American bias towards seeing it as an enhanced form of self-help, the European fascination with exoticism, the propensity outside Asia to underestimate Pure Land traditions), or the layerings, breakdowns, transitions, and instabilities in the multiple Asian traditions themselves.

WHAT KIND OF EXISTENTIAL IMAGINARY DO WE NEED AND WHY
COULD JDSS BE SEEN TO ADDRESS IT?

Going back then to the barstool question “what’s a nice boy like you doing in a place like this,” the answer is, the lad was (at least originally) “illuminated” into it, because circa 1980 when he stumbled across it, the seeking soul somehow intuited, across multiple dimensions that he could not even have articulated fully at the time, that nothing else on the global horizon seemed to really serve as was needed. JDSS somehow seemed to offer a language—an “imaginary” as some humanities writing may style it—an existential walkability—speaking to a number of different issues.

Mennonite-wise, it seemed to offer a kind of subjectivity and interiority, and a degree of modern-style empiricisms, which have been characteristic of and inherently “given” in modern European and Japanese civilizations.

Philosophy-wise, it offered (at least at its elite levels) paths which were essentially non-foundational, i.e., non-monotheistic (and, i.e., not *anti*-theistic/atheistic either); instead it maintained a relational onto-epistemology, of a kind associated with strands of Buddhism, but which could be seen too, at least potentially, as overlapping with more recent “Western” non-foundational theories of knowledge.

15. Not theological or philosophical, this term “Other” is applied in anthropological or political science discourse to refer to the creation of boundaries and representations particularly in the service of power and control.

Psychology-wise, intuitively it seemed to imply sophisticated aspects of *contemporary* cognitive psychology, i.e., the realm of the unconscious, a dynamic yet non-volitional side of experiential change, a hyper-complexity and indeterminism of the mind, all wrapped up in the notion of acceptance of gift and *hope*. (Indeed, what I didn't understand at the time was how extraordinarily close to certain types of new psychology this could be seen to be.)

Globalization-wise, it seemed to offer an example of how world resources in all kinds of humanities could be taken up and hybridized; it seemed a dimension of Buddhism (which represented a subset of that larger adaptive process) with serious potential. (Here, however, what I didn't understand at all at the time was how difficult it would be to keep distance from a historical Buddhist institution and its agendas of self-promotion, brand-naming practices, conventional language, and myth.)

Sociology-wise, it seemed to show that under at least some conditions, at least historically, whole networks or communities of people could be drawn onto a common wavelength, backed up by a particular sense of egalitarianism, of all "being in the same boat."

And then finally, *consolidation*-wise, overarching all: it seemed that this imaginary had a concentrative, synthesizing mythic capacity, a *catalytic* capability, which might bring so many necessary dimensions together. To rehearse keywords again: subjectivity and interiority; relational theory of knowledge; full psychological sophistication; critical appropriation of globalization; fitting notion of community; and consolidative mythic power.

So many positives! Thus it became my imagination-fueled project, evolved over several decades, that (as I saw it at first) JDSS, or (as I saw it later) a *version* of something like JDSS—when understood at minimum as a *precursor, model, or example*—could respond to the challenges. A nice list! But massive problems were embedded in my project—as I have learned over some too-often painful decades. Here, as briefly as I am able, is a candid account of some key problems as I have experienced them.

REVEREND-PROFESSOR AMSTUTZ?

After the initial encounter at IBS in 1980, becoming channeled into the ministerial route, I was sent to a certification school for Japanese in Kyoto (Chūōbukkyōgakuin) which was totally unsuitable for me as a

type of foreigner and almost caused my wife and child to leave me. Back in California after a short period of (intentional) under-preparation I was sent to Arizona as a BCA minister where I duly crashed and burned after a year. Determined to find out what was really going on with JDSS (especially to find out why something which made so much sense to me was so marginalized for most Americans), once more with substantial family hardship I applied to graduate school in religious studies and was fortunate enough to get into Princeton. There I discovered that almost no one in the entirety of American (or Western) higher education had (or has) any understanding of JDSS and that even in normal academia it has remained highly peripheral, which is quite contrasting with the situation in Japan. An especially bad idea was contemplating doing something creative or unconventional with it. After a try at professional academics I again duly crashed and burned. Lucky to be rescued by a job in university administration, I passed time until given an unusual chance to be a *yatoi* (foreign expert temp worker) professor at Nishi Honganji's Ryūkoku University at Ōmiya in Kyoto for a few years. This had the effect of dissolving any lingering personal *identification* with JDSS per se. In this irregular career I've been accorded various unusual privileges, enjoyed relationships with some of the nicest people in the world, and passed as well through the occasional gauntlet of atrocious events. All with gratitude of course.

THE INELUCTABLE MODALITY OF THE BUDDHA-BULL (WITH
APOLOGIES TO JAMES JOYCE AND ARISTOTLE)

In spite of its folk psychology of free will,¹⁶ popular American thinking on religion has also been aware of a subconscious for a long time.¹⁷ Such began with the theological interests of Emerson and other Transcendentalists, who held (albeit with mystical/aesthetic Puritan

16. In this connection, it has become well-established among historians that the mindfulness movement is full of continuities with American (and before that, ancient European) traditions of self-help and mind-cure which are at variance with traditional Buddhist ideas. See Richard K. Payne, "Mindfulness and the Moral Imperative for the Self to Improve the Self," in *Handbook of Mindfulness: Culture, Context and Social Engagement*, ed. Ronald E. Purser et al. (Switzerland: Springer International, 2016), 121–134.

17. This follows the analysis of Robert C. Fuller, *Americans and the Unconscious* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

roots and associated baggage) that it is through the subconscious that we are connected with higher spiritual realms. Later, leading psychologists including among others William James, I; Abraham Maslow; and Carl Rogers freshly connected the subconscious with religious or metaphysical aspects of human experience, seeing in this linkage a way of being modern and scientific but without being reductionist.

More than Europeans, Americans tended to see the unconscious as a mediator for harmony between the individual and higher spiritual powers of restoration and revitalization.¹⁸ This “unconscious,” circa 1900, went through a long eclipse due to behaviorism in the twentieth century but was well rediscovered in the 1960s by the humanistic psychology movement and other forces, even before the more recent work on the “new unconscious.”

However, the standard Buddhisms—at least as Westerners have apprehended them—have been weirdly disconnected from this record. As a historical phenomenon, Buddhism has its roots in what German thinker Karl Jaspers called the Axial Age of civilizational development, along with Confucianism, early Greek thought, and so on. To generalize, these traditions, however varied, tend to suppose the facticity of rational, i.e., consciously aware, knowledge of (and perhaps control of) the mind. Thus what have long typified presentations of Buddhism in the West are assumptions¹⁹ which cluster around rationality and/or conscious agency:

- the mind is mappable (and probably ideally so according to ancient Buddhist categories)

18. Especially it was James who provided a distinct path-breaking synthesis of psychology, religion, and the unconscious. In James, plenty of room was allowed for “extra-marginal” or unconscious dimensions of the mind in which receptivity or surrender were key. Surrender was famously explored in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902). The traveler-scholar James Bissett Pratt who wrote with unique perception in that era on Pure Land Buddhism came out of this this context.

19. And there are other issues, such as whether “Buddhism” is even an internally coherent historical categorization for an unambiguously identifiable body of “religious” material. Anthropology and history suggest not; rather, it is a network of family resemblances and imaginative lineages with wide geographical variation at least colored with some minimal mythic and psychological claims and pervasively bundled with folk religion.

- a rational/linguistic critique or deconstruction of foundationalism located at the linguistic/conceptual level, does essential work in loosening the mind
- the mind/behavior has to be positively re-structured in specific ways before it can be de-structured or “informationally loosened”
- the cognitive subconscious (especially in the contemporary neurobiological sense) does not have to be taken into prominent consideration
- through meditation, there can be an Archimedean power point of agency accessed *outside* the system of “attached” consciousness to observe it and “leverage” detachment from it.

From the perspective of the “new unconscious” mentioned above each one of these assumptions is debatable, yet swaths of this critical discussion seem to be missing at present.²⁰ The following paragraphs are brief examples of topics that need deeper consideration.

The idea of reductively mapping the mind in some fixed analytical fashion engages central, long-standing, but entirely unresolved controversies in current Western psychology about what “consciousness” even is. On the one hand, as Dr. Gordon Bermant has pointed out, large sectors of behavioral neuroscience are dedicated to the proposition that the mind is a kind of (naively) material neuronal meat machine with detailed behavioral correlates. On the other hand, others hold that the mind is a hyper-complex phenomenon in which subjective experiences of consciousness cannot be reduced to that extent (sometimes compared to cutting open a stomach to discover what the experience of eating a meal is like). Buddhist traditions, which historically

20. An oddity of research about the new unconscious is that (despite the fact that it has become quite well known and popular books have been best sellers) various interests have been ignoring it: conventional Buddhists in the USA (judging from a keyword search of various indices, and including *Tricycle* magazine, along with the well-publicized “Dalai Lama discourse” of happiness and emotional regulation); Pure Land Buddhists, including JDSS followers, operating in English (and guaranteed that these ideas are ignored in Japan); and people working in religious studies or religious thought generally in the USA (viz. ATLA index). On the other side, almost without exception, the cognitive scientists working on the unconscious have been able to ignore what Buddhists have to say.

were not systems closed to their contemporary intellectual environments, cannot get away from such problems any more than Western psychology can. Thus the notion that a millennium-old *abhidharma*-based system—which to my mind is an admirable but early form of cognitive psychology, created out of ancient Buddhist textual foundationalism, speculative monastic argument, and inconsistent bits of mediation—should be taken with sacred seriousness today is quite odd. And consequently what is hardly ever said about “normal” Buddhist imaginaries and psychologies, but needs to *be* said with frequency, is that they can be reductionist in their own way. Or what about some evolution of consciousness: have there really been no changes in at least some structures or patterns of human consciousness since 500 BCE? Or is it that if the cognitive unconscious did not exist in the same way for, or was not made explicit by, the Holy Buddha 2500 years ago, it can’t exist now? (What evidence is there that human experience could change!) Would the study of Buddhism (especially in academic circles) ever dare to devolve into antiquarianism?

If the mind is a hyper-complex system, Nāgārjunian “philosophy” is certainly a “deconstructive” aspect of formal discourse directed against certain *abhidharma*-type claims, but it’s all still about language and conceptualization and discourse, and thus not necessarily or always correlated with actual psychological/neuro-philosophical destructuring or dishabituating of the brain pathways especially if the crucial action in this respect occurs at unconscious levels.

Pro-structural and de-structural goals are both hopelessly interleaved under the umbrella of “Buddhism,” but they are unlike, perhaps cognitively fundamentally contrastive, in their neuro-philosophical nature. “Discipline” and structure can create performances of a mythic image of a Buddha, or monk—or meditator—however the *distinctive* transformation aimed at in Buddhism presumably involves a destructuring, not a “pro”-structuring, of the informational fields of consciousness. (From that perspective an open secret embedded in Shinran’s idea of the gift is that *jiriki* and *tariki* may actually be two *different* cognitive understandings of “enlightenment.”)

To the extent that traditional Buddhism recognized something like a cognitive unconscious, discussion circled around the complex and inconsistent language of *ālaya-vijñāna* (“storehouse consciousness”)

which has been notably studied by William S. Waldron.²¹ Waldron is one of the only scholars to point up the similarities between the old Buddhist insights (in at least some versions of *ālaya* theory) and the contemporary Western cognitive unconscious, and his work is well-known. However, there seems to have been almost no follow-up impact from the hints provided about those similarities.

The issues suggested above coalesce around the linked matters of agency and meditation. Historically mainstream (that means monastic-dominated) Buddhist traditions did not develop clear ways of talking about the ultimate agency of enlightenment,²² especially its ambiguity, which is reflected even in the primal myth of enlightenment under the Bo tree. Of course questions of agency are always mixed with claims regarding authority, and from the very beginning of the Western encounter, Western fascination, energized by quests for power and control vis-à-vis the mind, has strongly tended to accept standard claims. Westerners tended to obfuscate dissident questions of agency by labeling them pejoratively as “devotionalism.” But Asians themselves historically, over the long run of their experience, arguably have had a much more hesitant realistic view of how rare “enlightenment” could be (and how limited was the role that could be actually played by meditation in the lived traditions viewed holistically). This is the humility which is expressed in the Pure Land idea with its notion of long term deferral and “mere” hope (Westerners don’t seem to be into mere hope).

Western meditation researchers have dodged tackling disruptive questions about agency. The by far most publicized intersection of Buddhism and brain science originates almost entirely and narrowly with efforts to develop apologetics for meditation for Zen and later Tibetan Buddhism. And building upon claims of neuroplasticity, there

21. William S. Waldron, *The Buddhist Unconscious: The Ālaya-vijñāna in the Context of Indian Buddhist Thought* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003). See especially pp. xiii, 109–127.

22. See e.g., Maria Heim, *The Forerunner of All Things: Buddhaghosa on Mind, Intention, and Agency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). Zen is interesting for its studied ambiguity: it can seem to contain an (implicit?) awareness of a cognitive subconscious (seems bound up with the confusing “sudden” vs. “gradual” debate), but Zen too was historically identified with a structured claim that the target understanding could be leveraged by intentional routinized institutions and practices.

is even a school of Buddhist promotion in the literal mode of “You Can Change Your Brain!”²³ Against this background, relatively little writing on Buddhist meditation has adopted a skeptical attitude attending to agency. Owen Flanagan, oriented to analytic and phenomenological philosophy, is fully doubtful of claims about the effects of meditation, but his alternative approach is highly analytical/rational, and he is remarkably uninterested in the implications of the unconscious.²⁴ Robert Sharf has long pointed out inconsistencies regarding meditation viewed from within Buddhism itself; but he too is uninterested in the unconscious. Robert Rosenbaum is a longtime mindfulness practitioner who has run up against its limitations but does little more than flirt with the heavier cognitive implications. (Most practitioners who are unhappy with the state of mindfulness in the USA today point to commercialization, secularization, etc. but not flawed basic assumptions.)²⁵ But the usual meditation claims are at least some variance with the body of “new unconscious” research. How much can the conscious actually intervene in the unconscious? To take merely a single example, Eagleman stresses that adequate knowledge of the mind *cannot* come from introspection²⁶ (this is why insight meditation easily makes exaggerated claims, like a guru claiming that he can teach someone to see gamma rays with the naked eye). In any case, there is a lively argument in Western psychology about just how far “down” into the mind rational, top-down processing can extend, contending with newer evaluations of the unconscious/preconscious dimension—but Buddhists are barely if at all having this discussion.

It is interesting to apply a “systems theory” argument which perhaps parallels the kind of view taken by William Waldron in his discussion of “thoughts without a thinker”: in a true inter-relational “systems” system, a nonfoundational flow, where exactly would be the Archimedean point *outside the system*, which would be needed to observe and zap the faulty pieces of consciousness? Could there be

23. Rick Hanson, with Richard Mendius, *Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love & Wisdom* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009).

24. Owen Flanagan, *The Bodhisattva’s Brain: Buddhism Naturalized* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011); see pp. 17–20, 83–84.

25. For Sharf and Rosenbaum, see Robert Meikyo Rosenbaum and Barry Magid, eds., *What’s Wrong with Mindfulness (and What Isn’t): Zen Perspectives* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2016).

26. Eagleman, *Secret Lives of the Brain*, 199ff.

such a point? Systems theory precludes an observing agent that can reflexively view itself as a system-independent external observer. Do informational feedback loops self-annihilate? Can one have “meditation without a meditator?” Does the ice (in Shinran’s famous metaphor) melt itself?

Certainly Buddhist meditation apologists in the West have to be given enormous credit for hard work and success in popularization at the same time that they have been shaping perceptions of “Buddhism” in a certain biased direction. The consequence, however, is that what should have been a long-term wide ranging dialogue between brain science and *all kinds* of Buddhism²⁷ has been diverted into a narrower exercise of developing meditation apologetics despite limited evidence. Under these circumstances, when most Westerners encounter “gift” and “hope” notions in Buddhism—at least as blank doctrinal claims—they seem to find the combination of relational theory of knowledge bonded with primacy of the unconscious to be alien, weird, distasteful, or rejectable.²⁸ Yet doubts in the West about agency/meditation are scarcely absent. As Buddhism has developed, the lived pitfalls and misdirections of certain ideas of “meditation” have become present to more and more participants, as evidenced by a large body of literature and retreats about struggling with meditation (e.g., Rosenbaum on mindfulness); and further the perhaps increasing (re-)introduction of language about some kind of “grace” in spiritual experience.²⁹ What we cannot see happening at the moment, however, is any major breakthrough to linking these issues with either the extensively developed JDSS tradition or the new cognitive psychology. Yet I would suggest what we really need to know is how far can be pushed a chain of thinking in which three elements can be connected: the kind of awareness of

27. A kind of *full* integrative synthesis that has long been craved; e.g., Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, From Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012); see his closing chap. 32.

28. A personal anecdote: in 2013 I attended an annual conference for Unitarian Buddhists (the UUs *do* try to be inclusive) where I gave a presentation making some of the appealing (so I thought) arguments featured here. The number of UUs who had previously heard of Pure Land Buddhism? Zero. Follow-up contacts made to me after the meeting? Zilch.

29. Kathleen Dowling Singh, *The Grace in Living: Recognize It, Trust It, Abide in It* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2016).

an unconscious occurring at some points in classical Buddhism, which went at times under the label of the *ālaya*; the contemporary “cognitive unconscious” as studied in the most recent three or four decades in the “West”; and Shinran’s most subtle notion of *shinjin* transformation as “acceptance of a gift,” thus, i.e., transformation which might be understood as—or perhaps by neurological necessity must be understood as—an emergent property of the cognitive unconscious.

JDSS’S TOXIC BEAUTIES—JAPANESE OVERDETERMINATIONS VS. THE
98.3 PERCENT OF THE WORLD WHO ARE NON-JAPANESE “OTHER”

Yet, suppose one even agrees with the gist of the above: that JDSS is, in its core idea of “gift,” the most subtle, nonreductionist and protomodern of the Asian Buddhist traditions. How about the follow-up reality on the ground (at least outside of Japan)? The answer, unfortunately and perhaps counterintuitively, has been *So what?* The second problem is that while one can posit (or fantasize?) a universalized imaginary based on JDSS, in practice the total historical phenomenon called JDSS is a layered, gridlocked tangle.

In other publications the question has been tackled why JDSS is so poorly known to general world audiences outside of Japan.³⁰ I used to think—for decades in fact—that the problem was the hermeneutics: with better interpretation and presentation of JDSS outside of its (narrow) native context, barriers could be opened. Now though I want to move on finally to a stronger and more disagreeable position: it will *always be impossible* for JDSS to serve as any kind of general platform for the presentation of core insights about a Buddhist-like “gift” to any population resembling a significant modern global audience. Despite its theoretical possibilities as I have sketched them, when we come to JDSS as it really is, we find—for a raft of reasons quite apart from the hegemony of what I’ve punningly called the Buddha-bull—that it cannot generate the needed kind of alternative existential imaginary or “space.” As a historical and institutional phenomenon, JDSS is loaded with what can be termed overdeterminations³¹: even some Japanese

30. Galen Amstutz, “Kiyozawa in Concord: A Historian Looks Again at Shin Buddhism in America,” *Eastern Buddhist*, new ser., 41, no. 1 (2010): 101–150.

31. “Overdetermination” here is the generalized notion that a phenomenon has multiple simultaneous causal factors, multiple causes at once, and/or there are more such factors present than are necessary to cause the

scholars recognize that “JDSS” is a multi-stranded “umbrella” designation with numerous dimensions, especially in the past century and a half.³² Here I pick up just three issues.³³

Discourse Daze

Forbidding problems are intrinsic to the native doctrinal or discursive structure itself. Shinran’s thought grew out of a quite peculiar, idiomatic discursive and interpretive context within a particular set of Buddhist traditions. To squeeze his interpretation of “gift” out of the sources available to him—and which in his medieval Japanese context was a mono-linear path, since these sources originated with the Holy Buddha, and there were no intellectual alternatives such as there ought to be understood to exist now in the global twenty-first century—Shinran had to devise a strange, eccentric reading. Regardless of the profound message, the reading became idiosyncratic to JDSS and confusing to everyone else (this “everyone else” means the rest of Buddhists even in Japan, and thus Buddhists elsewhere in Asia, and thus the vast majority of non-Asians in modern times, including both Western Buddhists and academic scholars [some I could name at Ivy League universities]). Certainly from a certain objective viewpoint, Shinran’s powers of creative textualism are intriguing. Shinran’s texts were interpretively sophisticated, in that manner indicating a distinctive intellectual evolution and complexification. But that is perhaps a rather abstract historical commendation. Such a positive evaluation

effect. Or to borrow a metaphor from information theory, for the purposes of communicating the Buddhist-like “gift,” JDSS’s signal-to-noise ratio is adverse.

32. Ōmi Toshihiro 碧海寿広, *Kindai Bukkyō no naka no Shinshū: Chikazumi Jōkan to gudōshatachi* 近代仏教のなかの真宗：近角常観と求道者たち (Shinshū in Modern Japanese Buddhism: Chikazumi Jōkan and the Pathseekers) (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2014).

33. In addition to points touched upon elsewhere in this article: fragmentation of intellectual spheres in Japan; problematic nature of twentieth-century Japanese universities (public vs. sectarian divide); influence of Tsuji decadence thesis; heritage of *ōbō-buppō* domains which kept sectarian institutions centered in sociopolitical quietism; political struggle over the limits of influence of “religious” organizations in modern Japan which led to the definition of “religion” as “private belief” in the Meiji Constitution; cultic relationships with the Honganji heads (*monshu* or *hōssu*). And so on.

does not contradict the notion that—just as across other premodern European, Indian, Chinese, Islamic intellectual lives—the *specific contents* of old traditions (think e.g. medieval astrology), no matter how rich and dense in the past, might not be equally relevant to our needs today.³⁴

There is also a major cognitive paradox in the JDSS intellectual tradition (in common with much Mahāyāna Buddha-talk) in that intrinsically the “gift-like” psychological transformation with which Shinran is supposed to be concerned is presumably ultimately *trans*-linguistic and *trans*-discursive. So an off-center quality of Shin doctrinalism is apparent: if JDSS really participates in a Mahāyāna theory of knowledge, experientially the core issue of *shin* (acceptance of gift) cannot be “contained” in any form of language (even Shinran’s). Yet from the outside observer’s perspective, the Shin intellectual tradition seems obsessed with textual/linguistic discourse. Of course the historical reason for this is that Shinran still had to establish an intellectual position by reference to his immediate authoritative texts; and his successors have been necessarily engaged for many centuries in defending him textually and seeking control by the Honganji institutions via enshrining Shinran’s writings as legitimation documents for what manifests as sectarianism with a tremendous textual conservatism.

Consequently, to summarize both of the above points provocatively: from the perspective of the larger world, isn’t JDSS possibly stuck in a “zombie” project of textual legitimation?

Furthermore, it is essential to understanding the actual historical JDSS tradition to recognize that even Shinran’s own original statement was two-tiered in that his super subtle thoughts about profound unconscious transformation were combined with conventional Pure Land doctrine (i.e., there “exists” as the default or back up liberative possibility a “real” Pure Land constituted as a realm of karmic deferral for the majority of humans who did/do not experience now the full profundity of Amida’s gift). The fact is that the great majority of JDSS followers historically, at least into the early twentieth century, were

34. And although it is yet an additional question which also goes far beyond this text, JDSS’s own internal interpretive history, even within its own indigenous intellectual frame or parameters, regarding for example the *nenbutsu* or the existence of the Pure Land (e.g., in twentieth-century Ōtani thought) is far from perfectly univocal.

most concerned with that default “real” Pure Land, not Shinran’s most subtle *shinjin*. This conventional kind of “belief” aspect of JDSS could be more sophisticated than it might be given credit for: the whole context is Buddhist, there’s nothing monotheistic about it, and it was a vector in its own way of the characteristic subjectivity and interiority of JDSS tradition. That is, even where people in Shin retained an orientation primarily to the conventional idea of a karmic transit zone, they still picked up a lot of the interiority and austerity of Shinran’s ideas, which gave JDSS a different tone and coloration than other types of Japanese Buddhism. Still, however, JDSS lent itself to the uses of popular family religion, and above all its misleading false parallels to Christian ideas of “heaven” are a confusing turn-off, especially to Western outsiders.³⁵ In short, the Pure Land imaginary viewed through Shinran’s special language lens creates a mythos which to larger audiences can look internally incoherent, even possessing simultaneous psychologically incompatible aims. Yes, all this can be historically understood, but as a practical matter, this structure has proven to be impossible for communicating outside of the traditional JDSS world (and since the mid-twentieth century doubts are raised even there).

Honganji Haze

Sometimes the medium becomes the message. Everything about JDSS has to be understood with a political context in mind, for in the past two hundred years the Honganjis became, depending on how you count, probably the largest “heritage” pre-modern Buddhist tradition in Japan. This institutional network, plus the intrinsic subjectivity of JDSS’s thought world, had a somewhat protomodern quality; but this made it amenable from even before the Meiji Restoration to modern

35. Actually many things about Pure Land are confusing. Across Asian history Pure Land has been a multidimensional, polysemic, floaty signifier. Further, “comparative” treatments of Pure Land, and religious dialogism which is essentially Christian-based, have normally relied on “global” concepts of “religion” or “spirituality,” despite how these are increasingly discredited as universals since they are idiosyncratic products of European history. (As one recent entry in the growing literature on this question, see Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013]). False comparison helps explain why the issues involving “agency” in Buddhism can be so confused with theological concepts from monotheism.

institutionalism and Japanese nationalism.³⁶ In the early twentieth century—even as JDSS along with Japanese society in general borrowed all kinds of things from the West including Christian influences—the DNA of JDSS became inseparable from the DNA of modern Japanese identityism and culturism, which became entwined with its special sectarianism.³⁷ In the first half of the twentieth century, both institutionally and emotionally JDSS colluded with Japan’s East Asian imperial project which eventuated in the disasters of WWII. Postwar, the Honganjis eventually regretted and apologized for their stance. But motions toward self-examination and pacifism, and the other forms of political correctness to which contemporary JDSS in Japan is given, do not at all necessarily significantly modify the underlying DNA of deeply conservative Japanese Honganji institutional self-approbation, a DNA which is very hardy.³⁸

It can be painful to occasionally witness modern JDSS intellectuals struggle with these contradictions: one “rational” part of their mind insists that JDSS is a “universal” (i.e., trans-ethnic) teaching, but in their unconscious gut what they really feel is that it is a special ethnic property. I’ve grown to feel sorry for them. Almost.

Meanwhile Japan’s overall moods regarding “globalization” fluctuate, and once we get past the rhetoric, the fashions, and the catchwords,

36. For an expansion, see Galen Amstutz, “Subjectivity as a Double-edged Sword for the Non-Japanese Reception of Shinshu,” unpublished paper for International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies conference, Berkeley, CA, October 2015. Psychological modernity became inseparable from the construction of a twentieth-century nation-state, the implantation of that identity-seeking in individuals, and the generation of a Buddhist form of Japanese cultural nationalism. The linkage of such processes is paralleled in other twentieth-century societies. In the case of Buddhism the resulting “cultural ego” in the religious discourse can be seen, at least by non-Japanese, as self-contradictory at the deepest level. If you don’t like it, go see some Tibetans.

37. This can be thought of wryly as Shinran® *shinjin*® Honganji®, Shinshū®.

38. Another issue: twentieth-century JDSS has produced a good deal of literature in English, but it can be argued that almost all of this amounts to institutional face-building, a self-validating production of material which is essentially English writing for *Japanese* audiences and which has had amazingly little effect at large in the English-speaking world. Honganji institutions also allowed bad foreign-language translations/interpretations of their texts to dominate through most of the twentieth century.

outside observers (don't take it just from me) see a JDSS in Japan struggling with social change and actually becoming more inward-looking again.³⁹ Which means, for the world population outside, even more closed.

The Gray Light of Manzanar: JDSS's Unfortunate Accidental Middlemen

Finally: I personally find the position of Japanese Americans amidst all this to be as much or more challenging than the other problems around JDSS, for it evokes a deep emotional ambivalence between empathy and unease. The key difficulty is that it is not a contradiction that *nikkeis*, part of whose community mediated this form of Buddhism to North America, could be both victims of severe racialized conflicts in twentieth-century American history and independently and stubbornly ethnocentric at the same time.⁴⁰

The *nikkei* population has been interacting with the larger American society over the past 130 years since immigrants first started arriving in Hawaii. Their experience was distinctive and idiosyncratic and not murkily "Asian American." *Nikkeis* came to the USA as a stubborn, proud, honor-seeking group with a dominantly petit bourgeois, inward-turned, entrepreneurial socioeconomic orientation noted by observers already in the prewar period. Prewar Japanese America was a heavily *issei*-dominant society which had complex (if nonmilitary) interconnections with the mother country and a layered, complex split

39. See Jørn Borup, "Propagation, Accommodation and Negotiating Social Capital: Jōdo Shinshū Responses to Contemporary Crises," *Japanese Religions* 40, nos. 1&2 (2015): 85–107. The author notes the severe demographic challenge in Japan, how a Shinshū temple is just about as unknown to a new visitor named Tanaka in Tokyo as a new visitor named Warsowski in Chicago, how impacts of modernization result in widespread breakdown of earlier communities and rise of individualized spirituality, and how the leadership is sharply aware of the two tiers of interpretation but also quite conservative. See also Elisabetta Porcu, "Anniversaries, Founders, Slogans and Visual Media in Shin Buddhism," *Japanese Religions* 34, no. 1 (2009): 53–73.

40. For an extended treatment of points below, see Galen Amstutz, "Global Communication versus Ethno-Chauvinism: Framing Nikkei Pure Land Buddhism in North America," *Journal of Religion in Japan* 3 (2014): 141–176.

identity.⁴¹ The nihilistic martial law fiasco⁴² during WWII subjected *nikkeis* to a unique and peculiar trauma. There is unchallenged consensus that this was one of the most politically unjust and troubling events in USA history (leaving aside of course the four hundred year histories of African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanics) so unparalleled and bizarre that there has been a long running debate about what to even call it, with a recent survey settling on the neutral term “confinement.”⁴³

There is no question about the brutalities, which have been aired in an enormous literature imbued with rage, humiliation, grief, and resentment. The particularly focused question here is how WWII affected postwar possibilities for JDSS, especially as the event was interpreted after 1945. Almost immediately the martial law episode was reframed as an ethnic justice/civil rights question which focused on *nisei* (rather than as a situational national security bungle focused on *issei*); then, from the 1960s and 70s, this emphasis was reinforced by multiculturalism and ethnic identity politics among a relatively well-assimilated “model minority.” Advocacy was fueled by a Japanese American demand for psychological moral justification, for recompense for the deep emotional offense given by the episode. Among some factions of the *nikkei* world, a hyperactive sense of victimization wanted to insist on parallels between Jewish history in Europe (via the term “concentration camps,” a quite intentional semantic piggybacking) or Native American ethnic cleansing in the nineteenth century

41. Not unlike some other immigrant groups such as German Americans or Muslims who have gotten into national security traps, although the Japanese suffered far more.

42. The episode was all by itself highly overdetermined by entanglements with the Japanese empire; decades of racialized but localized power conflict with whites in California which Cary McWilliams called a “weird transpacific struggle”; the fact that 1941 caught the immigrants on the cusp of a transition from *issei* to *nisei* generations; how the legal violence of camp/relocation in terms of conventional USA law was already intensely debated at the time; how the *nikkei* population was relatively internally diverse and fractious on its own; and so on and on. But I have not been able to see a homogeneous supremacist white America uniformly out to “get” a homogeneous Japanese America. (As the saying goes, even victims don’t get to rewrite history.)

43. Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

(via the term “Trail of Tears,” again a quite intentional semantic piggybacking). Without denying the cruelty and injustice of the WWII experience, some of these rhetorical moves signaled a certain lack of historical perspective. Uncomfortable to me is how since the advent of multiculturalism in the 1980s, we find a recovery and use of the WWII fiasco to (re)construct and solidify an ethnic identity at a point several generations (seventy years) after the fact. How much is this a groping of a somewhat unanchored middle class?⁴⁴

I prefer to imagine other, or additional, kinds of responses to the martial law episode. I would prefer seeing *nikkeis* having become highly, publicly, conspicuously sympathetic to other entrepreneurial American minorities and immigrants, especially, for example, Latinos and Koreans, not to mention African Americans; having become acutely conscious of the illusory, artificial, constructed nature of “race” categories and having produced a substantial public relations literature promoting that position; having become distinctively interested in religious dialogue and pluralism projects and trans-ethnic philanthropy; and having become willing to let go of using the 1942–45 episode as an identity-builder. But I am far from being convinced that such open-minded progressivism is widely characteristic. Certainly among *nikkeis* in America there have always been voices like Natsu Taylor Saito⁴⁵ who is extraordinarily savvy about entrenched problems

44. Which has attracted international interest too: see Ingrid Gessner, who is highly approving, *From Sites of Memory to Cybersights: (Re)Framing Japanese American Experiences* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2007). But the whole memory project seems to be much more focused on remembering Our Victimization than on wimpy reconciliation or healing, which of course activates the whole inconcludable debate about the limits of “strategic essentialism.” Rev. Patti Nakai of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago, who is leading the most truly open-ended JDSS-based church in the USA known to me, has noted that the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles focuses entirely on the *nikkei* story, in contrast to, for example, the (Jewish) Illinois Holocaust Museum which has a whole floor devoted to showing various persecutions of peoples around the world from the late twentieth century to the present. Rev. Nakai has also confirmed that whereas *nikkeis* can be very progressive about liberal issues such as gender or sexual preference, they are far less interested in deconstructing racial identity.

45. E.g., Natsu Taylor Saito, *From Chinese Exclusion to Guantanamo Bay: Plenary Power and the Prerogative State* (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 2007).

of security state overreach by USA government and military. And certainly a percentage of left/liberal spokespersons for “the” (unitary?) Japanese American community/population is well aware of parallels between JA experience and current threats to Muslim Americans and other minorities. On the whole, however, it can be argued that WWII trauma produced far more closure than openness, and that afterwards JDSS Buddhism in the USA, as a relatively reactionary element of the *nikkei* population, has operated more to (continue to) reinforce ethnic boundary-imagination than to weaken or soften it, preserving instead a pattern of embedded ethnocentrism and political conservatism.⁴⁶

Again, this is not to question the outrage and suffering. Just this: a population of innocent people of great pride and sensitive dignity who have been specially victimized is not really a good kickoff place for open-ended interaction with a multi-ethnic, pluralistic general American population who merely happen to be interested in Buddhism. Whether or not my pained (racist? probably natural for someone with my background...) sort of reaction to this facet of ethnicity is exactly “fair and balanced,” the bottom line, the takeaway point, setting all questions of blame or sincerity aside, seems to be this. JDSS Buddhists’ experience—even though they have been Americans long acculturated in the USA, can pat themselves on the back for their success, and may enjoy a bit of gaslighting and just-so stories about JDSS’s alleged universalism—has inadvertently resulted in a population unsuitable for offering to any significant broader American citizenry anything which creatively solves the problem of a new “Buddhist-like” existential imaginary.

NOT IN MY LIFETIME

If the overall situation were to be summed up in one phrase, I suggest—as one white boy in a religion like this—that the phrase could

46. Anecdotal and unfair, but when I was briefly a minister in Arizona back in the 1980s I met some wonderful church members but also learned that the *fujinkai* does not like the Vietnamese refugees to use the temple kitchen because they leave it dirty: “We want our children to marry other Japanese-Americans” (from a *sansei* professional couple), “This is Goldwater country” (from a woman temple member, and not talking about only the white Arizonans), or “Amstutz is a communist” (accusation broached at a meeting where Amstutz was kicked out of the temple).

possibly be “big mess!” Or, borrowing the reaction of the character in *The Big Short*: two plus two...equals fish! Of course I only speak personally—maybe this scene is only toxically discouraging for me, and not for those other many *millions and millions* of non-Japanese around the world who have been attracted to this fascinating tradition over the past half century.... But I never expected that after almost forty years of interaction with JDSS I would end up with such a feeling of placelessness. My involvement has meant chunks of lifetime shot through with discomfort and disappointment, a recurring approach-avoidance tension, a suspension between loyalty and divorce like being married to an alcoholic spouse, a nervous entrapment in an attic with Jekyll and Hyde, or a nightmare dream under the sheets with an angel or an incubus I can’t tell which.

In the larger cultural setting, nothing has really changed about the historical challenges that encouraged my own illumination by Pure Land Buddhism in in the late 1970s. Relational thought grows, but monotheism in Christian and Islamic formats just keeps rising and rising back regardless of great shifts and ineluctable intellectual problems and pervasive modern subjectivity. Tribalism (which is not always easy to distinguish from justifiable forms of identity politics) thrives like Bermuda grass. At the moment this piece is being written, the USA is entering what some are calling the Age of Trump in which it is possible that nasty conflicts involving identity have been revitalized to an extraordinary degree (identity politics bites back?); it is hard to see how this can have any positive results whatsoever on opening up Buddhist-like vision as filtered thru JDSS per se.

And despite claims of Buddhist promotionalism, not much has changed about other Buddhisms either. No indication that, given the current state of those other “Buddhisms,” a more widespread or impactful non-foundational sensibility/rhetoric can really achieve anything startlingly newer than it has already managed in the last thirty or forty years.

We do not have—and I for one cannot imagine in any foreseeable future, given the hegemony of the monotheistic (and anti-monotheistic) resources which dominate now in the world and the weakness of the alternatives—an emergence of the kind of communal existential (i.e., common “religious”) imaginary or discourse that I think we need for a significantly wide human population.

Still, as suggested at the opening, JDSS in parts of Japanese history does adumbrate theoretical possibilities. Once in the *pre*-Meiji part of Japanese history it touched perhaps a whole third of the Japanese population. It is enticing to imagine at least in a past a kind of consolidative imaginary, an existential discourse, which could organize persons and communities around certain powerful and persuasive deep insights into knowledge and the mind focusing on the sensibility of “gift.” But it is overwhelmingly evident at this stage that JDSS is not the discourse we need, and cannot ever be the discourse we need.

What to do? The scholar Albert Hirschman famously summarized the institutional options for a dissident as Loyalty, Voice, and Exit. In my own experience, neither loyalty nor voice can lead anywhere in the JDSS world. So what is left is exit. But exit to what?

Are there potentialities of a “Buddhist-like” idea of gift and hope in a freed context? I’m not even sure what an alternative could or would be called. It was argued that conventional Buddhism is full of baggage as well as implicated in bogus psychology. “Pure Land” is impossible as a label. Should we even call a redeveloped imaginary “Buddhism?” Do we have to think up some atrocious new term like “unconscious relationism?” Inventively name an unfamiliar “space” of communication as a “relaspace,” an unknown, but expandable, buddhagiftzone? Given the discursive turmoil, I frequently wonder if we have to somehow get beyond *both* Śākyamuni and Shinran. But how do we move on in practice to an imaginary that does the job?

And even why, given the endless amount of resources already on the informational “market” of the early twenty-first century, would one be so sure that such a new relaspace would actually be a contribution of any note? Or, since an overall theme here is modern or proto-modern subjectivity, what if the nature of the self in America has actually already changed away from an older “protestant” interiority? What if future computer capitalism requires a submissive “team self” which is also totally obtuse about the *contingent* nature of the infoverse in which it labors? Or what if we are irrevocably committed to elite superstitions about radical “free will” as a way of blaming the victims of unequal socioeconomic orders?⁴⁷

47. When Buddhism has been refracted through the lenses of the two main poles of American psychology, the behaviorist vs. the imaginative/humanist, the dominant bend seems to be toward behaviorism. Is this perhaps because

The kind of community discourse that I suspect we need cannot be invented out of nowhere (and as I've indicated, JDSS as it exists today is "nowhere"). Per Tolstoy, such things are complex evolutionary products of broad shifts in mentality and expectation undergone by whole societies or civilizations. So, the more I've understood the total "ecology," I'm feeling less fiery as a nitpicker these days. Not that I feel that the situation with either Western Buddhism or JDSS has any fewer flaws or has become less objectionable. Rather, it is the recognition that nothing is going to change in my lifetime. Consequently I can't feel much responsibility for this situation.

And yet, and yet, as an imaginative projection, I can suggest what "doing something" with a Buddhist-like "acceptance of gift" would involve. It would incorporate a vast crew or community of hundreds or thousands of fresh media communicators, along the lines of what has happened with Zen, but instead foregrounding the ideas of gift and hope. These voices would adopt the core insight associated with Shinran, but then set Honganji institutionalization and indeed almost everything else that happens in Japan well into the background. The object would be to truly "naturalize" a Buddhist-like idea of gift in English and make it pervasively available and understandable. What we are talking about, of course, is a truly monumental, an Interstate Highway System level, task of discourse reconstruction.

My father didn't really have a clue about "Buddhism," but in 1941 he took some handwritten notes in pencil from a book entitled *The Right to Be Happy*: "Everything in the world moves, falls, combines like the patterns of the kaleidoscope. The momentary suspension of the pattern is what matters, not the intrinsic character of each little bit of colored glass."⁴⁸

escaping from any sense of "theistic" spirituality is even more of a concern than psychological realism about the unconscious? Or is it perhaps even more because the reception of Buddhism is unavoidably processed in terms of American Protestant incoherencies about the simultaneity of the spiritual unconscious and the Will? Often overlooked: assumptions about Will Power are intensely politicized, representing the interests of winners in human socio-economic competition who rationalize and justify outcomes via the myth of the self-made man.

48. Paraphrase (or quote) from book studied by him in August 1941, D. Russell, *The Right to Be Happy* (Garden City, 1927) (original pencil handwritten notes "reflection on life goals").

