

# The Past and Present of Theravada Buddhism in Japan

Avery Morrow, 2008

For Japanese people looking for a religious philosophy that better matches their needs than existing traditions, one recent movement seems to question the categories of native and foreign, as well as old and new. This is Theravada Buddhism, a South Asian branch of Buddhism which had little interfaith communication with Chinese and Japanese Buddhists until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Several groups have attempted to start a Theravada community in Japan since World War II, but their aims have varied widely. Additionally, the Japan Theravada Buddhist Association (日本テーラワーダ仏教協会 *Nihon Tērāwāda Bukkyō Kyōkai*) in particular has taken on unprecedented momentum. The JTBA was established in 1994, and progress at first was slow, but today it claims well over a thousand members. What does this organization mean for the future of Theravada Buddhism in Japan?

## Theravada in prewar Japan

Before the Meiji period there was little understanding of Theravada Buddhism in Japan, even among scholars. It is sometimes suggested that two of the Six Schools of Nara were Theravadin, but actually these schools were non-Theravadin Chinese approaches to Buddhism which happened to use the Pali Abhidhamma and Vinaya texts.<sup>1</sup> During the medieval period, Theravada was often misunderstood as simply a “wrong dharma” and one of the twelve vows of Yakushi Nyorai was to lead all “Hinayanists” to Mahayana.<sup>2</sup> The Tipiṭaka was not published in Japan until 1669, centuries after the formative Kamakura period. This publication was done by True Pure Land priests.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Alicia and Daigan Matsunaga. *Foundation of Japanese Buddhism*. Los Angeles/Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1974. v. 1, p. 28, on the origin of Kusha Shū: “The Sarvāstivāda school...separated from the Sthaviravāda [proto-Theravada] tradition.” v. 1, p. 49, on Ritsu Shū: a “Chinese sect”

2 *Yakushi Kyō* (薬師経), vow 4 of the Twelve Vows

3 Joseph Mitsuo Kitagawa. *On Understanding Japanese Religion*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987. p.

There was an extended inquiry into Theravada by Japanese Buddhist reformers during the Meiji period, but it ended up having more of an impact on the United States than on Japan. The famous Zen teacher Sōen Shaku (釈宗演) made an often overlooked trip to Sri Lanka from the years 1887 to 1890. During his studies there, he was ordained as a Theravada monk with the name Pannaketu. His disciple Kōnen Shaku (釈興然 1849–1924) also went to Sri Lanka and received the Buddhist name Gunaratana. Kōnen was more interested than Sōen in bringing Theravada to Japan, and he founded the *Shakuson Shōfu Kai* (釈尊正風会), or “Shakyamuni True Way Society”, in Japan.<sup>4</sup> Kōnen and Sōen both met the Sri Lankan Maha Bodhi Society founder Anagarika Dhammapala in 1893; Dhammapala also visited Japan in 1889, 1902, and 1913.<sup>5</sup>

The *Shakuson Shōfu Kai* imported five Theravada monks from Sri Lanka,<sup>6</sup> but it did not take root in Japan, nor Dhammapala's visits did not have much of a lasting effect. Satō Tetsuro of the current Japan Theravada Buddhism Association theorizes that Meiji period Japanese were firmly attached to their own traditions and there was a prejudice against “Hinayana Buddhism.”<sup>7</sup> In a time of nationalist fervor and great faith in the dominance of the Japanese empire, strongly supported by Buddhist orthodoxy, it is not surprising that a society of foreign Buddhism did not last very long.<sup>8</sup> Rather, Sōen Shaku and Kōnen Shaku are best known for their work teaching Zen in the United States, and for their mutual friend D.T. Suzuki, who was instructed in Zen by Sōen and in Pali by Kōnen, and who went on to teach in America and author one of the most influential

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4 Jørn Borup. "Zen and the Art of Inverting Orientalism: religious studies and genealogical networks." In Peter Antes, Armin Geertz, and Randi Warne (eds.) *New Approaches to the Study of Religion*. Berlin: Verlag de Gruyter, 2004. vol. 1, pp.451–487.

5 Ibid.; Mahinda Deegalle. *Popularizing Buddhism: Preaching as Performance in Sri Lanka*. New York: SUNY Press, 2006. p. 203, n. 7; Kazushige Yamakawa. 「アナガーリカ・ダルマパーラと日本：第一回・第二回の訪日について」 *Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies* 14 (2000). pp. 43–52.

6 Keiki Higashimoto. 「釈尊正風会のひとびと」 (“On the Buddhist Monks of the *Shakuson Shōfu Kai*”). 『駒沢大学仏教学部研究紀要』 March 1982.

7 Tetsuro Satō. 「テーラワーダ比丘になった明治人、釈興然のこと」 *Paṭipadā*, May 2001. Tokyo: Japan Theravada Buddhist Association.

8 For a snapshot of religious thinking of the period see Brian Victoria, *Zen At War*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

works about Zen in English.

## World Peace Pagoda

Several Theravada Buddhist monasteries have been founded in Japan as the result of international cooperation. These efforts are described glowingly in the Theravada nations who send their emissary monks, but they seem to have attracted little popular notice in Japan. The future prospects of these monasteries are very closely linked to whether they will be able to replace outgoing monks with new trainees, and where their funding is coming from. Usually, in situations such as this, the community cannot provide the monastery with monks; they must be imported from the South Asian participant,<sup>9</sup> relegating Japan to a non-participant “host nation” status. The question of the funding, as we will see, is slightly more complicated.

The first major example of this sort of monastery in Japan is the Burmese pagoda built after the Sixth Buddhist Council in 1954–6. The Shingon monastery Hōsenji (宝仙寺) in Tokyo sent a mission of twelve young Japanese students to study Theravada Buddhism at the beginning of the council. They arrived in May 1955 and were admitted as novice monks. One boy, given the Buddhist name Visuddhasaya, was especially interested in Theravada and founded what was referred to by the Burmese as the Japan Buddha Sāsana Society in Moji city in Fukuoka (門司市), now part of the industrial city of Kitakyūshū (北九州市).<sup>10</sup> The name in Japanese seems to have been *Nihon Shakuson Shōbō Kai* (日本釈尊正法会), which literally translates to “Japan Shakyamuni True Dharma Society”; it was founded on August 9, 1956 according to Sodo Mori.<sup>11</sup> There appears to be no relation to the *Shōfu Kai* of the Meiji period.

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9 Paul D. Numrich. *Americanization in immigrant Theravada Buddhist temples*. Diss. Northwest University, 1992. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Dissertation Services, 1993. pp. 234–235.

10 U Ko Lay (International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University, Rangoon). “The Myanmar Contribution to the Spread of the Theravada Buddhism Throughout the World”. 1998.  
<<http://www.triplegem.plus.com/kolay01a.htm>>

11 Sodo Mori. 「世界平和パゴダ(ミャンマー僧院)の現状と展望：異文化交流の一事例」 *Journal of Pali and Buddhist Studies* 5 (1992). pp. 35–53.

The Japan Buddha Sāsana Society, which was already dormant in 1992,<sup>12</sup> does not exist today,<sup>13</sup> and I was unable to find any references to it in academic publications or newspaper archives except for Mori's history based on unpublished sources. According to U Khe Min Da Sayadaw<sup>14</sup> who now lives at the Peace Pagoda and whom I interviewed on November 27, 2008, “Visuddhasaya” (Shinya Uchida<sup>15</sup>) absconded with the money from the organization and retired from monastic life, but Da Sayadaw seemed to be quite cynical of Japanese Buddhists in general. The monks at the JTBA did not know anything about it themselves but said they had heard the same thing from Da Sayadaw. In terms of making a lasting impression on Japanese Buddhism it cannot said to have been much of a success, since its activities seem to have never been recorded. However, it has left some mysterious clues behind. A 40-volume set of the Sixth Council Tipiṭaka in Burmese script in the Ōmiya campus of Ryukoku University is inscribed from the “Union of Burma Buddha Sāsana Council” to the Japan Buddha Sāsana Society.<sup>16</sup> An abandoned facade in Arashiyama in Kyoto has the Japanese name of the society over the entrance, and had visitors as recently as the early 1990s.<sup>17</sup> The JTBA monks said this was meant to be a second Theravada temple after the Peace Pagoda, but had no knowledge of it beyond that, and Da Sayadaw answered my questions about it with stubborn silence. It seems this society gained some official recognition, and at least one branch, before petering out, but it never had any serious interest from the Japanese people.

According to the version of events recorded in Burma, the Japanese volunteers and sponsors agreed to acquire land and build a monastery in exchange for Burma providing the

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12 Ibid., p. 50.

13 After returning from Japan, an address for it in northern Kyoto popped up on Google, annoyingly enough. But the address appears to be someone's house.

14 Sayadaw is a Burmese suffix indicating the head monk of a monastery, lit. “venerable teacher.”

15 Burma Dept. of Information and Broadcasting. *Burma*. v. 8, no. 2 (1958). p. 47.

16 Call numbers 203/CHA/1 through 203/CHA/40; registry 20700042125 through 20700042513. Note that while the library catalog reports these as being published in 1991, the Burmese numerals on the covers have more reasonable publication dates of 1955-56. This does suggest a possible donation date for the set.

17 This facade, reading *Nihon Shakuson Shoubou Kai*, is located 50 meters to the north of the gates of Nison-in. See appendix A.



monks and the funds for a pagoda. The same history says that the monastery was completed in 1957, and the World Peace Pagoda (世界平和パゴダ *Sekai Heiwa Pagoda*) celebrated its completion on November 30, 1961.<sup>18</sup> According to several Japanese sources, though, this celebration occurred in September 9, 1958.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the pagoda was an international collaboration, constructed with funds from the Union of Burma as well as volunteers from the Japan Buddha Sāsana Society and the Japan Burma Friendship Association (日本ビルマ文化協会 *Nihon Biruma Bunka Kyōkai*). It includes a monument to the Japanese World War II military casualties in Burma in addition to the monastery, and Moji's veterans of the Burmese front were actively involved with its construction, especially one Ichihara (now deceased) mentioned by both Da Sayadaw and Mori as the principal moving force behind the pagoda's construction.<sup>20</sup> Today, according to Da Sayadaw, the Peace Pagoda's main appeal to Japanese visitors and Mojikou residents is this war memorial (the pagoda proper), which sits a hundred meters above the monastery at the top of a hill and is objectively in far better condition.

Since October 1974, the pagoda has been managed by the 宗教法人世界平和パゴダ “World Peace Pagoda Religious Corporation”.<sup>21</sup> In order to perform the semimonthly *uposatha* and remain a *sangha*, it is necessary for three monks to live at the pagoda. As is the case at American Theravada monasteries, the *sangha* currently exists by the grace of the Burmese, who send replacements whenever a monk retires or dies.<sup>22</sup> Since the military coup in Burma almost fifty years ago, Da Sayadaw said, the pagoda has had no government assistance; in fact, he claimed the military has no interest in international affairs at all. But new monks continue to be supplied by the Burmese national *sangha*, which operates independently of the government. While he refused to make any predictions about the future, it is reasonable to say that the *sangha*

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<sup>18</sup> Lay 1998.

<sup>19</sup> Mori 1992, p.40. Confirmed by newspaper accounts sourced below.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 37–40.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 47–48.

can be maintained in its current situation, although its sources for food and electricity are not so clear.

The current activities of the Peace Pagoda, besides day-to-day maintenance of the war memorial and the Burmese-style monastery, include charity work in Japan and abroad.<sup>23</sup> However, there has been no explicitly religious work. Da Sayadaw asserted that the Japanese interest in Buddhism does not extend to anything beyond funerals and memorial services, and said that the monastery has never received a single Japanese visitor interested in studying Theravada. This alleged lack of religious dialogue is perhaps exemplified by the hand-drawn images of the eight temptations of the Buddha inside the war memorial which have been covered over with old war photos. On the day I visited, a Japanese woman was preparing food for the three monks. Da Sayadaw called this woman a friend with no religious interest, which was such a sensible explanation that I unfortunately neglected to confirm this with her. In any case, Mori confirms that support for the monastery comes on an individual and not an organized basis, which puts it constantly on the edge of severe financial difficulty. For example, I noticed that an entry fee of 100 yen was charged to enter the war memorial and pagoda proper with a booth set up to man the entrance, but Theravada monks cannot handle money and no other Japanese volunteers were present on that day, so instead a cash box was left at the closed booth and the goodwill of visitors was relied upon. Da Sayadaw said the monastery was once donated a car by the city, which they were permitted to drive according to the Burmese *vinaya*, but they were unable to use it due to need to pay for gas. Ideally a local group of ethnic supporters would supply the monks with money-handling and transportation, and occasionally increase their ranks with initiates. Unfortunately, few Burmese live in Japan, and those who do are quite far from the Pagoda, in Tokyo or the Kansai region.<sup>24</sup> While expatriate Burmese occasionally come to the pagoda for

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23 Ayuko Ōtani 大谷鮎子, 「世界平和パゴダ 慈悲心呼び起こす塔」 読売新聞西部夕刊 *Yomiuri Shinbun*, Western evening edition. 26 November 2005. p.3.

24 Mori 1992, p. 49.

religious reasons, necessary day-to-day volunteers cannot be provided in that way. It appears that right now the monastery survives on a shoestring budget from donations and pagoda entrance fees. From what I saw on my visit, it clearly cannot afford to renovate its own premises, which are decrepit, and the diet of the monks leans towards asceticism. In recent times, though, the people of Moji have taken some initiative to remedy this.<sup>25</sup>

## Japan Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre

The Japan Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre, Lankaji (日本・スリランカ仏教センター蘭華寺 *Nihon – Suri Ranka Bukkyō Sentā Rankaji*), was founded as the result of a collaboration between Sri Lankan monk Banagala Upatissa and Japanese philanthropist Takiko Yoshida (吉田多輝子).<sup>26</sup> Yoshida was widely known in Sri Lanka for her work in building nursery schools for the poor (the Yoshida Free Nursery Institute). In 1984, an official Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre was founded in Kushinara, Sri Lanka, with her sponsorship, and the Ven. Upatissa was appointed “High Priest for Japan.”<sup>27</sup> In 1989 the Japanese branch was founded in Sawara city in Chiba (佐原市), now part of Katori (香取市). Unlike the World Peace Pagoda, the Centre was built without any sort of government donations; as a result, it is not as impressive as it could be, resembling more of a working-class apartment than a traditional Buddhist temple.<sup>28</sup> In Sri Lanka, Yoshida received acclaim for her work in international cooperation in the Sri Lankan press,<sup>29</sup> and a commemorative stamp was printed in her honor,<sup>30</sup> but she remains completely unknown in Japan.<sup>31</sup>

25 「パゴダ施設補修へ慈善フェス あす門司、ミャンマー人留学生ら参加」 朝日新聞福岡朝刊 *Asahi Shinbun*, Fukuoka morning edition, 7 November 2007, p. 30.

26 Sodo Mori. 「日本スリランカ仏教センター(蘭華寺)」 (“The Japan Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre : A Theravada Temple in Japan”). *Transactions of the Institute for Cultural Studies, Aichigakuin University* 9 (1994). pp.1–18.

27 Ibid., p.3.

28 Ibid., p. 15. See photo on page 11.

29 Sri Lanka *Divayina*, 24 May 1991. Quoted in H. L. Seneviratne, *The Work of Kings*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. p. 216. Note that the *Divayina* claims that the Centre was formally opened by J.R. Jayawardene, implying government sponsorship, but the incorrect date (1984) for this ceremony leads me to believe the author confused the opening ceremony of the Japanese branch with the Sri Lankan branch.

30 See image at <<http://avery.morrow.name/studies/takiko-yoshida>>

31 There are no mentions of her in the *Asahi Shinbun* or *Yomiuri Shinbun* from 1984 to the present, and her name in

The center is currently managed by the Japan Sri Lanka Cooperative Society (日本スリランカ同心会 *Nihon Suri Ranka Dōshin Kai*), which is not yet a registered religious organization.<sup>32</sup> This society had 85 members and was printing 220 copies of its newsletter monthly in 1996.<sup>33</sup> The center also functions as the Japanese branch of Anagarika Dhammapala's Maha Bodhi Society, which coordinates on the importation of monks. They preach sermons for the Japanese, teach English to their supporters, perform services for Sri Lankans in Japan, and carry out the Buddhist ceremonies typical for Theravada monks.<sup>34</sup> On September 17, the birthday of Dhammapala, they hold a “great enlightenment festival” (大菩提祭 *Daibodai Matsuri*) in his memory.<sup>35</sup> Sodo Mori notes that in general, the activities of the Centre are quite similar to the World Peace Pagoda, with the exception of the English lessons which he considers a clever addition.<sup>36</sup> The Sri Lankan *vinaya* rules for the monks at the Centre require lay supporters to handle their money and drive them from place to place, which can create great difficulties for both monks and laity.<sup>37</sup> Unlike the Peace Pagoda, though, the Centre is purposefully accessible from Kanto, where between 2,000 and 3,000 expatriates live.<sup>38</sup>

## Theravada in new religious movements

Two religious movements in Japan, one native and one immigrant, both aim to promote their form of Theravada. The Dhammakaya Foundation, a Thai organization, has six centers in Japan<sup>39</sup> and was noted by the JTBA monks as an organization they were familiar with. It seems to cater primarily to Thai immigrants in Japan as much of its Japan website is in Thai only, although

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kanji receives no relevant Google hits.

32 Mori 1994, pp. 4, 15.

33 Mori Sodo. 「日本スリランカ仏教センター(蘭華寺)〔続〕」 (A Sequel to "The Japan Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre"). *Transactions of the Institute for Cultural Studies, Aichigakuin University* 11 (1996). p. 5. (This is an updated version of the same essay.)

34 Self-introduction in *Nihon Suri Ranka Dōshin Kai Kaihō* 11, as quoted in Mori 1994, p. 6.

35 Mori 1994, p. 6.

36 Ibid., p. 13–14.

37 Ibid., p. 15; for the American perspective see Numrich 1993, pp. 245–248.

38 Ibid., p. 15.

39 “DHAMMAKAYA FOUNDATION :: Worldwide Centres”

<<http://www.dhammakaya.or.th/centremain.php#Japan>> Accessed December 1, 2008.

the Tokyo branch has created a short Japanese section with a video.<sup>40</sup>

Agon Shu, a new religious movement based on Japanese Shingon, deserves a mention although it has based its teachings on Chinese texts. The Āgama Sutras used in Agon Shu are neither Mahayana or Theravada, but likely derive from the same Indian schools which split from Theravada and provided the basis for several of the six schools of Nara.<sup>41</sup> While Agon Shu prominently continues the Shingon *goma* ceremony which is not found in Theravada, it also rejects the “Mahayana Sutras” which it believes were not the Buddha's words.<sup>42</sup>

## Lay groups prior to the JTBA

S.N. Goenka, a Theravada teacher famous for popularizing *vipassana* meditation in India and the West, has set up two lay centers in Japan: one in Kyoto Prefecture, and one in Chiba Prefecture. Both these centers exist almost entirely for the purpose of ten-day retreats led by audio tapes of Goenka in English and are funded by retreat participants.<sup>43</sup> These centers are certainly successful in their own right but have not reached the popularity of the Sumanasara's association,<sup>44</sup> nor do they have the distinction of being founded and run by a local group of monks.

A small society in Tokyo called the Japan Theravāda Buddha Sāsana Bhāvanā Group (上座仏教修道会 *Jōza Bukkyō Shūdōkai*) claims to have been founded in 1989. It does not appear to have any relationship to the old Japan Buddha Sāsana Society, but it has established its own

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40 「宗教法人 タイ国タンマガーイ寺院」 <<http://www.dimcjp.org/page1.htm>> Accessed December 1, 2008.

41 c.f. Chizen Akanuma, *Comparative Catalogue of the Chinese Āgamas and Pali Nikāyas*. Nagoya: Otani University, 1959.

42 “Three Reasons for Founding Agon Shu.” <[http://www.agon.org/us/about/b\\_01\\_02.html](http://www.agon.org/us/about/b_01_02.html)> Accessed December 1, 2008.

43 「日本ヴィパッサナー協会」 <<http://www.jp.dhamma.org>> Accessed December 1, 2008.

44 No scholarly studies have been done on this subject, but note, for example, that a Google search for 「ゴエンカ」 (Goenka) returns only 4,190 results, while 「スマナサーラ」 (Sumanasara) returns roughly 62,500, and Sumanasara has a page on the Japanese Wikipedia while the internationally renowned Goenka does not. However, it is also worth noting that the Goenka threads on the Japanese Internet forum 2channel have over 9,000 posts total as of November 2008, while the Sumanasara threads have only 6,500 or so.

international links by bringing over a Burmese monk named Nyanuttara.<sup>45</sup> It focuses on practicing *vipassana* meditation on a regular schedule, much like an average American meditation center,<sup>46</sup> but it does not seem to have birthed any companions in other Japanese cities. The monks at the JTBA, including Sumanasara, have never heard of this organization despite its close location.

## Japan Theravada Buddhist Association

The Japan Theravada Buddhist Association, founded in 1994, is the youngest Theravada Buddhist association in Japan, but as mentioned above, it is also the most successful by most standards. It is centered in Tokyo at Gotami Vihara, which houses several Japanese monks who were initiated in South Asian countries; other member temples house immigrant Theravada monks. According to the Japanese monk Kosalla whom I interviewed on November 20, 2008, it has attracted 1,500 members, and distributes 2,000 copies of its magazine *Paṭipadā* monthly. While this pales in comparison to modern Japanese Mahayana organizations such as Sōka Gakkai<sup>47</sup> or Reiyūkai<sup>48</sup>, and Kosalla dismissed his own group as small and unpopular, it marks the JTBA as a phenomenon not seen before in any Japanese Theravada organization. This growth is attributed within the society to its founder Alubomulle Sumanasara, who has written several books about Buddhism every year since 1998, and whom I interviewed on the same day as Kosalla.

Sumanasara came to Japan in roughly 1984 on a scholarship to study Japanese Buddhism. He did not like the theology of Mahayana, which he felt presented dogma that could not be confirmed by an independent observer, and began teaching Theravada shortly after he arrived. As

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45 「上座仏教修道会」 <<http://www.jyouzaBukkyō.jp/03biku.htm>> Accessed December 1, 2008.

46 「上座仏教修道会」 <<http://www.jyouzaBukkyō.jp/>> Accessed December 1, 2008.

47 Souka Gakkai reported well over 16 million members in the 1978 edition of the *Shūkyō Nenkan* (宗教年間), an official census published by the Japanese governmental bureau Sōmushō Tōkeikyoku (総務省統計局).

48 Nearly 3 million members (ibid.)

far as he knew he was the only Theravada teacher in Japan at the time.

It appears that the JTBA has consciously remarketed Theravada Buddhism by emphasizing its unknown quality rather than its age. Theravada has had a Sino-Japanese name for some centuries, *Jōzabu Bukkyō* (上座部仏教). Previous Japanese Theravada movements referred to themselves as *Jōzabu Bukkyō*, which is about as appealing as calling an imported church “Orthodox Christian.” The vaguely familiar *kanji* may suggest something that is old, obscure, and the business of foreigners.<sup>49</sup> The JBTA, though, introduced the loanword *Tērawāda* (テーラワード) to become the *Nihon Tērawāda Bukkyō Kyōkai*, which is akin to the “American Enremenkimi Christian Organization.”<sup>50</sup> The loanword may suggest something new, exotic, and unexplored. (The word “Buddhism” was added to the name in 1999, probably because “Theravada” alone was a little too exotic.)<sup>51</sup> When I asked Sumanasara about the choice of name, he did not acknowledge any “rebranding” on such a conscious level but instead explained his distaste of the suffix *bu* (部) which, in his mind, falsely dismisses Theravada as just another “sect.”

On the other hand, the JTBA reaches out to immigrants in a way American organizations often do not.<sup>52</sup> One of the “member temples” of the JTBA is the International Buddhist Center Shōzanji (国際仏教センター正山寺), located near the Zen temple Unryūji (雲龍寺) which contains a large pagoda that sticks out like a sore thumb in the Tokyo suburb of Hachioji (八王子). According to the Sri Lankan immigrants who now live there, Shōzanji was founded about 30 years ago and shares a relationship with Unryūji. The details of this relationship were lost to me, partly because they spoke no English,<sup>53</sup> and partly because they did not know the whole story.

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49 c.f. Frank E. Daulton, "Loanwords in the Media". 龍谷大学国際センター研究年報 12 (2003), pp. 59–72.

"Although loanwords used for special effect do have Japanese equivalents, there is often a difference in the connotative meaning ... There are occasions when loanwords are used because the native equivalent sounds too direct, or when the implied meaning of a word can have negative evaluations."

50 *Enremenkimi* being the native Egyptian word for Coptic Christianity.

51 Joyo Matsubayashi. 「ピース・ライフ 櫻乃華」 (“Peace Life”). Tokyo: Bungeisha, 2004. pp.25–27.

52 Numrich 1993, pp. 341–361

53 I interviewed them in Japanese on November 19 and November 20, 2008. The head of the temple promised to find details for me but did not return my e-mail in time for this essay.

Lay meditation at Shouzanji began six years ago, although I could not confirm whether this had to do with JTBA guidance. In any case, it is now listed in *Paṭipadā* as a member temple which hosts meditation sessions, even though all the monks there are first-generation Sri Lankan immigrants. There are two other member temples, and ten local JTBA affiliates, listed in *Paṭipadā* which I did not inquire into.

Naoko Takashi (高橋尚子) did an in-depth study of JBTA members in 2004 and 2005, which was published in abbreviated form in 2006.<sup>54</sup> According to her English summary of the study, “many young people [at the JTBA] have tried physical activities like sports, oriental medicine, vegetarianism, and meditation. On the [other hand], old group have interested in traditional Japanese Buddhism directly for their questions and worries[,] only to find themselves not satisfied as a result and [therefore] involved [themselves] in the simple and clear Buddhism in Buddha's original teaching.”<sup>55</sup>

## Comparisons with Japanese traditions and Mahayana

There has not yet been any attempt among Theravada organizations in Japan to open a line of communication with the various Mahayana sects, or any mutually beneficial exchange. Da Sayadaw and Sumanasara both had strong reservations about Mahayana that precluded any sort of outreach. When I asked Sumanasara about Dōgen, the founder of Sōtō Zen who had similar complaints to Sumanasara about sectarianism, he told me that he had a high respect for Dōgen, and theorized that he could have become a Buddha had he access to the proper teachings (the Tipiṭaka). He then referred to the Mahayana texts Dōgen had access to as confusing, singling out the Lotus Sutra in particular as “trash” that discouraged rational inquiry by proclaiming itself to

54 Naoko Takashi. 「日本におけるテーラワーダ仏教実践者の回心プロセスと死生観」 (“Theravada Buddhist Movement in Japan”). *Construction of Life and Death Studies* 7 (2006), p. 487 (58)–482 (85). English summary on p. 279 (288). This is a version of Takashi's 2004 Kyoto University undergraduate thesis (e-mail from Akira Fujimoto, 17 October 2008), which I obtained a 2005 edition of in manuscript form from the JTBA (entitled 日本におけるテーラワーダ仏教宗践者の回心プロセスと世界観—ライフヒストリーを利用して—). She is not to be confused with the marathon runner also named 高橋尚子.

55 Ibid., p. 279 (288).



be perfect truth and calling its critics inferior practitioners.<sup>56</sup> I related Sumanasara's judgment of Dougen to Da Sayadaw, who responded with thoughtful silence. Da Sayadaw seemed to be unfamiliar with the history or founders of Japanese Buddhism, but was vindictive of its current state, calling its priests “undertakers” who “drink alcohol and go after women,” and rejecting them as “not monks.”

The JTBA specifically has attracted the notice of several Japanese Mahayana priests, none of whom express parallel disapproval. The Jodō Shinshū nun Jōyō Matsubayashi (松林淨蓉) wrote a brief piece on it, noting her surprise upon seeing a diverse and seamless mixture of Japanese, Sri Lankans, and others from around the world at the Vesak festival. Matsubayashi was pleased with the popularity of the organization but did not compare it to Japan's Mahayana traditions; she seems to have been satisfied that the JTBA was spreading some good kind of religion.<sup>57</sup> The JTBA also counts among its central members a young Shingon priest, who sits with the Japanese Theravada monks both organizationally on its board as well as physically, the day I visited, on the restricted-access fourth floor of the Gotami Vihara.

According to Sumanasara, members generally maintain the tradition of honoring their ancestors with Mahayana Buddhist ceremonies and no alternative to a Mahayana Buddhist funeral has been developed. There is a distinction between personal concerns about mortality addressed by Takashi's study and religious traditions, which appear to be dictated more by Japanese society and less by membership in the JTBA. Members are skeptical people; even though reincarnation is a tenet of Theravada, many have reservations about it because they cannot witness it for themselves. Their interest in Theravada stems not from a conversion experience or promise of heavenly benefits, but from a desire to improve their lives in a practical way.<sup>58</sup> As Takashi writes in her English summary, “Almost all interviewees share one common character in

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<sup>56</sup> See, for example, chapter 2 of the Lotus Sutra (妙法蓮華經), verses 36–40.

<sup>57</sup> Matsubayashi 2004, pp. 25–27.

<sup>58</sup> Takashi 2006, p. 484 (83).

their background. They tend to prefer to resolve problems by their own as [in] Zen and prefer to logical and rational explanations.”<sup>59</sup> This parallels the exoteric aspect of Theravada appreciated by American converts, described by one as “bare-bones, beefy Buddhism”.<sup>60</sup>

However, there is an undeniable religious aspect of the JTBA which Takashi neglects to mention. When I talked with its Japanese volunteers, after asking me about the meditation I do in America, they asked me what kind of prayers or chanting I am used to, showing me a JTBA “prayer book” in Pali and Japanese to demonstrate. This was a major surprise to me. Convert Theravada Buddhists in America do not typically chant or memorize sutras as devout South Asian Buddhists are apt to do.<sup>61</sup> In this aspect the JTBA clearly differs from the well-defined secular patterns of American convert Theravada. When I asked Sumanasara about this, he first denied the chants were prayers,<sup>62</sup> pointing instead to their ability to aid memorization and arouse mindfulness, and noted that the Japanese members were studying Pali and memorizing sutras. He then said that the Japanese “feel lost” unless they have some special religious practice that demonstrates their respect for the teachings they believe, asking me to reconsider my definition of “religion” with regards to Japanese culture. “Even Japan needs a little culture,” he summarized. This seems to reflect Takashi’s conclusion about a Japanese spiritual need which is found in organizations like the JTBA: “Now in Japan the traditional religions including Buddhism are less and less influential, while people’s spiritual concern is getting more and more acute.”<sup>63</sup>

The JTBA has also made some concessions to the way Japanese people typically experience Buddhism outside of memorial services. For example, the current issue of *Paṭipadā*

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 279 (288).

<sup>60</sup> Numrich 1993, pp. 457–8.

<sup>61</sup> Wendy Cadge. *Heartwood: The First Generation of Theravada Buddhism in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005. pp.155, 194.

<sup>62</sup> While this conflicted with the term the members used, they were not fluent in English and may have said “prayer” by accident.

<sup>63</sup> Takashi 2006, p. 279 (288).

contains a photograph depicting Sumanasara offering rice to a Buddha image in Japanese style.<sup>64</sup> Gotami Vihara also conducts a *hanamatsuri* festival in addition to its Vesak celebrations. *Hanamatsuri*, traditionally held on April 8<sup>th</sup>, is a Japanese festival which celebrates both the Buddha's birth and the blossoming of the cherry trees. Today, *hanamatsuri* has fallen by the wayside in favor of altogether more secular cherry blossom viewing (花見 *hanami*). At the JTBA, though, the doors stay open on April 8<sup>th</sup> and visitors are invited to pour water over a Buddha image in a ritual that Sumanasara admitted does not make much sense to him. The ritual is meant to entice visitors to stay for chanting, meditation, and a dhamma talk by Sumanasara.

## Comparisons with new religious movements

In the United States, Theravada Buddhism is itself frequently referred to as a “new religion” despite its advanced age.<sup>65</sup> The JTBA, though, makes its differences from Japan's famous and sometimes notorious new religious movements quite explicit. Along with a lack of evangelism and a preference for rational inquiry, the JTBA shares the disdain for new religions which is quite common in Japan. Sumanasara said that new religions were “all the same” and bring “nothing new” to his existing understanding of the world, and criticized Happy Science founder Ryūhō Ōkawa in particular as a charlatan. He related a conversation with a follower of Happy Science, which he started by responding pleasantly to her questions about his books. Finally, though, he unleashed his characteristic fire: “Why don't you ask that idiot to change Japan's streams into oil?”

While no JTBA members denied to me that Theravada was the one and only “true teaching of Buddha,” Japanese Theravada practitioners, according to Takashi's study, were not likely to tout the benefits of *vipassana* to their family and friends. Many of them were familiar with the proselytizing practices of new religions and did not want to turn themselves into “those

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<sup>64</sup> *Paṭipadā* 15.8 (December 2008), p. 75.

<sup>65</sup> Numrich 1993, pp. 31–32.

people.”<sup>66</sup> Sumanasara confirmed that there was no evangelism program at the JTBA and he solicits only philosophical discussion, not pressured conversion or supernatural appeals like those employed by many Japanese new religions.

However, JTBA shares some characteristics with new religious movements, and Sumanasara shares some similarities with his arch-enemy Ryūhō Ōkawa. Although he insists he is an ordinary monk who has no interest in running the organizational aspects of the JTBA, he clearly dictates the way the organization is run and is responsible for its teachings. Each issue of their *Paṭipadā* magazine contains a feature article written by him; in the issue being mailed out on the day I arrived he wrote one of the other major articles as well and most of the news articles featured pictures of him. Like Ōkawa, he has written several books every year since 1998, and a sizable majority of the books put out by Samga, the JTBA's publishing arm, bear his name.<sup>67</sup> Bhikku Muthukeliyawe Indarathana of Shōzanji echoed a sentiment I heard from many JTBA members when he wrote to me in glowing terms: “Ven sumanasara is highest significant theravada buddhist monk in japan. ... ven sumanasara is the formost monk who promotes the theravada buddhism in japan.”<sup>68</sup>

The JTBA seems to suffer from a void of Theravada teachers willing to come to Japan where the listening audience is small and expectatons high. Sumansara says he lets any monk take his place to give dhamma talks, and apparently guest speakers do come, but it is easy to understand why few monks are willing to take time away from an abbot of Sumansara's wisdom and temperament. As a result, his opinions dominate the popular understanding of Theravada and his books are the most notable best-sellers on the subject, although since the turn of the century, many new translations of books by Thich Nhat Hanh and the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama have also been issued.

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<sup>66</sup> Takashi 2006, p. 492 (75).

<sup>67</sup> 「サンガ(samgha) 商品」 <<http://www.samgha.co.jp/products/index.html>> Accessed December 1, 2008.

<sup>68</sup> E-mail from Muthukeliyawe Indarathana, November 20, 2008.

For the most part, Sumanasara's position as a charismatic leader does not seem to have much of an effect on the substance of his teaching. He told me that he aims to teach an exoteric, non-supernatural, and accurate Buddha-dhamma that is directly applicable to the everyday needs of Japanese people. His books have titles such as 『「やさしい」って、どういうこと?』 (“What Is 'Kindness'?”), 『ブッダ—大人になる道』 (“Buddha: The Road to Adulthood”), and 『なぜ、悩む!』 (“Why Worry?”). I asked him if his teaching varies in any way from South Asian Theravada, and he said that he has developed new interpretations more relevant to Japan, but that these are still the correct dhamma and he would be willing to defend his interpretations if necessary. Unfortunately, none of his books have been translated into English, so I was unable to examine his methodology myself, nor could I find any published criticism of his work.

## **Conclusion**

The three early attempts at bringing Theravada Buddhism to Japan might as well have attempted to bring it to the Sahara Desert. The social functions of Buddhism in South Asia and Japan are so different that the World Peace Pagoda has two separate buildings used by the immigrant monks and Japanese visitors. Both the Burmese pagoda and the Sri Lanka center have a difficult time connecting with everyday Japanese experience due to their imposition of an alien culture on their surroundings. The emergence of the JTBA and similar groups, though, demonstrates that Theravada has potential for growth in Japan on its own terms. The differences between American and Japanese converts demonstrate that this must be treated as a Japanese phenomenon and not an exact parallel to Western Buddhism. To succeed as a native religion, Japanese Theravada must continue to blaze its own path through the simultaneous challenges of historical Mahayana traditions and modern, secular Japanese culture.

## Appendix A: Sasana Society Facade in Arashiyama



宗教法人 日本釈尊正法会



Kyoto Department of Waterworks (京都市上下水道局) registration number 467 69900

Osaka Gas registration number 家番号 00-490-29-2200

Behind the facade is an empty lot. The shop owner across the street reported that the building was last visited by its owners in the 1990s.



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