

The talk given at 87th London Eza, titled 'To Build an Everlasting Temple'

'To Build an Everlasting Temple'

An appreciation of the Essay 'How Faith Inspired the Save the Bell Movement' by the Shogyoji Archives Committee.

Before beginning my talk on this essay I would first like to take a few moments to pay tribute to Mr. Masao Hirakubo one of the founders of this annual meeting for peace and reconciliation.

Emperor Hirohito declared at the conclusion of his speech in which he announced Japan's acceptance of the allied forces demand for the end of hostilities that:

'We have resolved to pave the way for a grand peace for all the generations to come by enduring what cannot be endured and suffering what cannot be suffered'

On reading these words several days ago with this meeting in mind, I was powerfully reminded of how deeply the life of Mr Masao Hirakubo embodied these profound sentiments. Though he had endured great suffering, both during the war and no doubt afterwards, Mr. Hirakubo, and others like the late Mr. Philip Daniel, were each able to find true inner peace through their work for reconciliation with war veterans they had once fought in the past so bitterly against.

Following Mr Hirakubo's death in March last year, I initially found it hard to imagine how in the future we could continue to hold this annual meeting for peace and reconciliation, but I realise now that this meeting, and the task of continuing it, is his great gift to us.

This year has seen the publication of two important English essays connected to Shogyoji Temple that both go to the very heart of the subjects of: 'inner peace', 'world peace' and the relationship between them. The first is 'D.T. Suzuki and the Question of War' by Reverend Kemmyo Taira Sato which has recently been published by the Eastern Buddhist Society. The second is the essay "How Faith Inspired the Save the Bell Movement" compiled by the Shogyoji Archives Committee that has been translated into English and published in the book "Buddhist Roles in Peacemaking" edited by Chanju Mon and Ronald Green. It is the latter I will be discussing in my talk this afternoon by way of a brief overview of its contents, coupled with some personal reflections on some of its themes which I found to be of particular relevance to our annual ceremony to pray for world peace and reconciliation.

'How Faith Inspired the Save the Bell Movement' was originally written by two of the senior priests of Shogyoji Temple, Reverend Kojun Shinohara and Reverend Eshu Seno, under the editorial supervision of the Venerable Chimyo Takehara, the Head Priest of the temple. The English translation that has now been published in the book 'Buddhist Roles in Peacemaking' was completed by Mr Wayne Yokohama in collaboration with Reverend Kemmyo Taira Sato. The translation was also greatly benefited by an extensive critical editing by Mrs Dilly Suzuma, a longstanding friend and supporter of Three Wheels.

After reading the essay I became immediately confident that its translation into English will prove to be an invaluable resource, both to western Dharma-friends of Three Wheels, and to those who wish to learn more about a living tradition of Shin Buddhist teaching. Through the text we can encounter some of the most significant parts of the Dharma teachings imparted by the Venerable Daigyoin, that continue to be transmitted by Shogyoji and its branches such as Three Wheels today. It also fills in many of the important historical details of Daigyoin-sama's life that are crucial to understanding the relevance of his teaching, both to the efforts for peace that he began during the Second World War and for those who are building similar movements today. I was particularly fascinated to read about the background of Daigyoin-sama's life and his awakening of faith. For the first time I began to appreciate why Daigyoin-sama is such a towering figure in the history of Shogyoji Temple. I shall be discussing his life in a little more detail in a moment.

Looking firstly at its overall content, the central part of the essay is the episode which its title is based on namely the 'Petition to save the Temple Bell' which the authors describe as 'the most potent symbol of how our Master, the Venerable Daigyoin set about putting into practice his Prayer for World Peace'. Other major subjects covered in the text are: Venerable Daigyoin's awakening to faith; the deep respect he accorded to the 6th Century Japanese Prince Shotoku Taishi; the movement to oppose the 1929 Religious Organisations Bill; the Taya house system of Shogyoji; and the development of Shokai, a special form of Shin Buddhist retreat established by Daigyoin-sama which has recently been revived and is now held twice yearly here at Three Wheels.

Having little previous knowledge of Japan's national treasures, the essay also made me become aware of the reason why Shogyoji has continued to preserve and promote traditional Japanese Gagaku music as a form of religious service to the Buddha. Previously I had always regarded Gagaku music as being a purely cultural phenomenon having had no idea of its inconceivable depths of expression and the great gift this form of music is to humanity. I felt very sorry to have been harbouring such a deep ignorance for so long despite having made the acquaintance of many expert Gagaku musicians within the Shogyoji temple samgha.

The essay concludes with a discussion of how some of the core tenets of Shin Buddhist teaching, such as: 'Awareness of one's past karma as 'good'; 'Responding gratefully to the kindness shown us by the Buddha-dharma'; and 'Realising the state of selflessness in real terms'; found expression in both the temple's corporate activities and the lives of those who participate in the faith-movement of the temple. If you have been attending any of the activities held at Three Wheels, such as Buddhist Meetings (Eza's) or Shokai retreats, then I am sure you will find a great deal of valuable information from the essay's treatment of those topics. Now I would like to turn to the essay's presentation of the life of the Venerable Daigyoin and his 'philosophy of peace'.

Daigyoin is the posthumous name of the Venerable Reion Takehara (24/12/1876 - 12/11/1951), the thirteenth Head Priest of Shogyoji, a Jodo Shinshu Temple located in Fukuoka prefecture, Japan. Shogyoji was originally founded over four hundred years ago by the Dharma Master Ryoen Takehara. Dharma Master Ryoen was originally a samurai who fought for the Aso clan; who were at that time the rulers of a district of Kyushu. Escaping the horrors of war and his clan's defeat by the Shimazu family, Ryoen fled further into northern Kyushu where he eventually encountered the twelfth Head Priest of the Honganji, who later accepted his request to be ordained as a priest. It is not hard to appreciate from this episode how the very origin of Shogyoji lay in the sincere desire of its founder to establish a place of peace within a country torn apart by conflict. Daigyoin-sama would have been acutely aware of this historical background as he contemplated the twentieth century wartime situation Japan found herself in.

It was in April 1907 that the Venerable Daigyoin, following an acute struggle with various conflicting circumstances in his life, attained faith in Amida Buddha. This awakening was settled for him on reading the following passage from the Larger Sutra of Eternal Life:

'There are sentient beings who, having encountered this Light [of Amida Buddha], find that their three defilements have simply vanished and their bodies and minds have now become soft and supple. They dance for joy as they discover to their intense surprise that a warm heart has been awakened within them. When those caught up in the suffering of the three mires behold this radiant Light, they will all of them recover from their misery and never have to

endure such anguish again. After their lives come to an end, all of them will don the cloak of liberation.”

The essay then goes on to describe how for Venerable Daigyoin this passage from the Larger Sutra “perfectly expressed the brilliant expanse of living faith that now cradled him, body and soul, in her ocean-like embrace”. Daigyoin-sama’s awakening of faith in Amida Buddha and the events which surrounded it is, I believe, vital to our understanding of his subsequent peacemaking activities and the deep convictions which lay behind them. These activities, which are recounted in detail in the essay, clearly illustrate the oneness of Venerable Daigyoin’s faith experience or ‘Inner Peace’ with his efforts to try and bring about peace in this world. The authors of the essay express this relationship and its relevance to our own lives in the following memorable passage:

“Thus, it is not until each and everyone of us achieves Inner Peace or tranquility of being, known in Buddhism as Nirvana, that we can hope to be released from the vexing forms of karmic suffering that torment us at every turn. When every individual attains for themselves, a state of Inner Peace, it will be reflected in the peace of the State, the peace of the people, and ultimately in the peace of the World; other than that there can be no real way to achieve World Peace. That is why his Holiness the Dalai Lama has constantly been referring to Inner Peace as the wellspring of World Peace. Such a state of inner tranquility has been clearly exemplified by numerous Buddhist figures, as well as by countless leading individuals and their likeminded followers. What we ourselves should be thinking about today is finding the way for each of us to achieve that state of peace within, or Inner Peace, that leads to World Peace.”

The message imparted in this passage clearly expresses the task we are faced with in the uncertain world we live in today; and is in the forefront of our minds as we gather each year for this special ceremony to pray for peace and reconciliation. From the perspective of my own background in Christianity and Buddhism, small though my knowledge is, and having had the great fortune to have met people of faith from different religions or nationalities; it has become more and more apparent to me that Inner Peace is a living principle that can be realised by anyone no matter what their creed may be.

Through the essay’s overview of the life of the Venerable Daigyoin we can begin to see how the inner world of his faith-experience became the means by which he strived to find a way to solve the serious problems that abounded in the outer world of social and political upheaval in which he lived. A striking illustration of this can be seen in the way in which the Venerable Daigyoin established his principle of opposing the 1929 Religious Organisation Bill, a political legislation which sought to place all of the religious denominations in Japan under state control. In an essay Venerable Daigyoin described the aim of the opposition movement as:

“One that is beyond the dichotomy of ‘I agree’ or ‘I oppose’; what is called for is an opposition so absolute that it utterly annihilates such a bill, an opposition grounded in the absolute conviction of Other Power faith.”

The Opposition towards the bill which the Venerable Daigyoin organised was indeed so absolute, grounded as it was in his Pure Faith in Amida Buddha, that the idea was completely abandoned by its sponsors. In my mind what is even more notable about the episode, however, was the Venerable Daigyoin’s conviction that the movement he joined to resist the imposition of a bill designed to stifle freedom of conscience and religion, was a reflection of what he described as his own “ferocious inner struggle against a host of demons in my mind”.

Central to the Venerable Daigyoin’s recognition that the achievement of peace in the outside world was only possible through the individual’s cultivation of Inner Peace, was his reverence for the 6th century Buddhist Prince Shotoku Taishi (573 - 621 C.E.).

Prince Shotoku was not only a great Buddhist scholar and devotee but also one of Japan’s most enlightened rulers. He was the author of the first Japanese state constitution known as the ‘Seventeen Article

Constitution’ which begins by stating “We shall value harmony above all else” and “We shall hold the Three Treasures [Buddha, Dharma and Samgha] in the highest respect”. These were not empty ideals to Prince Shotoku who applied these dictums thoroughly to the way he lived in life. Whilst embroiled in a struggle for imperial power which was likely to cost him his own life, Prince Shotoku in the words of the authors of this essay “sat in meditation, internalising the conflict as his own problem and seeking a resolution through inner religious struggle.”

Seeing the karmic connection between his own individual reality and the world war which was ravaging the world with fires of destruction, Venerable Daigyoin every morning and evening revered the statue of Prince Shotoku and aspired to follow his example to first attain Inner Peace in order to solve the problems of society. The essay then goes on to relate Daigyoin-sama’s description of the source of the Inner Peace he became awakened to:

Inner Peace can only be found in the world of Awakening, the Buddha world. Recognising this, the Venerable Daigyoin tells us that the source of Inner Peace is “What we build within ourselves, and what we build with ourselves is an eternal, unchanging, and everlasting temple where peace can at last prevail.”

This brings me to a profound religious conviction of the Venerable Daigyoin related in this essay which has made an indelible impression on my mind. Since the tragedy that was the atomic bombing of Japan, opinion in this country and over the world has been sharply divided on its perceived rights and wrongs. Nearly everybody I have spoken to on this topic has a strong opinion on whether it was a necessary act that curtailed what would have been a long drawn out conflict or an unnecessary and extreme use of force by America that had other motives such as showing the Soviet Union the strength of their nuclear arsenal.

Daigyoin-sama’s own introspection on this tragedy went far beyond all relative opinions based on historical and political interpretations of events. His response to what was the greatest act of force and destruction that this world has seen was to take all responsibility for the nuclear holocaust upon himself and himself alone. He stated: "Alas, that holocaust is what has been caused by my own state of ignorance". Through in the words of the authors, this “uncompromising confession”, Daigyoin-sama revealed in characteristically striking terms, that such terrifying events as the nuclear holocaust unleashed upon Japan, had their root in “our own inborn karma that caused such a war”. For my part I feel utterly humbled by his way of thinking. It shows a depth of spiritual insight that only very rarely blossoms in this world.

To conclude this talk I would like to make a further quotation from the Venerable Daigyoin that perfectly sums up his philosophy of peace. It is a message that Shogyoji Temple has been continuously imparting to succeeding generations in order for us to receive and appreciate its timeless significance today:

“Once we recognise that the cause of that terrible war lies squarely within ourselves, our mission, then, as we go out to celebrate the end of the war, is to make sure that we never have to engage in such struggle again. Our temple, the Shogyoji, recognises the cause of the holocaust wreaked by the atomic bombings [of Hiroshima and Nagasaki] as being deeply embedded in our own human karma, and our great mission in life is one and the same: to never let another such holocaust happen ever again, and to produce, instead, a world of ultimate bliss on this earthly plane.”

Andrew Webb

