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The Politics of Essence

Towards a History of the Public Study of Buddhism in 1880s Japan

This article examines the early institutionalization of Buddhist studies in Meiji Japan, focusing on the University of Tokyo's establishment of Buddhism as an academic discipline between the late 1870s and the 1880s. By centering on key figures such as the Sōtō Zen priest Hara Tanzan and the Shin Buddhist cleric Yoshitani Kakuju, it explores how the emerging discipline was shaped by both domestic imperatives, such as reasserting Mahayana Buddhism's legitimacy against Edo-period critiques, and new pressures from Western scholarship, which often dismissed Mahayana as a later development in Buddhist history. Beyond a purely academic pursuit, this public study of Buddhism served broader sociopolitical aims, including efforts to construct a unifying moral foundation for a modernizing nation. The article demonstrates how early Meiji Buddhist intellectuals navigated these multiple agendas, seeking to articulate an "essence" of Buddhism adaptable to evolving notions of religion and philosophy while simultaneously upholding the Mahayana tradition as both historically valid and ethically relevant.

KEYWORDS: Meiji Buddhism—Buddhist Studies—University of Tokyo—Hara Tanzan—Yoshitani Kakuju—Takashashi Gorō

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Today, Japan stands as a major hub for the academic study of Buddhism, hosting numerous sectarian universities. Many of these institutions boast well-resourced departments dedicated solely to the scholarly examination of Buddhist history and doctrine. A notable trend is the influx of Buddhists from other Asian countries to Japan; these individuals, often practitioners from childhood, seek to deepen their understanding of their religion within Japan's academic environment, despite having no specific interest in Japanese culture itself. Additionally, Western scholars specializing in Indian or Chinese Buddhism are motivated to learn Japanese in order to access Japan's legacy of secondary scholarship, illustrating the global interconnectedness of present-day Buddhist studies.

Although one could trace Japan's approach to the study of Buddhism back to the seventh or eighth centuries in a process of extensive historical exploration, the more direct journey to the current state of affairs begins in the 1870s. At that time, the flow of knowledge went a different direction: rather than foreign students coming to Japan to discover the "essence" of the Buddhist tradition, Japanese intellectuals traveled to Europe with the aim of deepening their understanding of the religion's fundamental principles. While the story of Shin priests Nanjō Bun'yū 南条文雄 (1849–1927) and Kasahara Kenju 笠原研寿 (1852–1883) leaving for England in 1876 with the ultimate goal of studying Sanskrit at the University of Oxford under Max Müller (1823–1900) is relatively well known (Stortini 2020), it is equally important to note that significant domestic developments were unfolding during the same period. In this sense, the year 1879 represents a foundational moment in the institutionalization of the academic study of Buddhism in modern Japan; it was at this time that Katō Hiroyuki 加藤弘之 (1836–1916), then president of the newly founded University of Tokyo appointed—in a decision arguably also shaped by global trends—the first-ever lecturer in the discipline. His decision to introduce a course on Buddhist texts, taught by Hara Tanzan 原 坦山 (1819–1892), highlights a deliberate move to incorporate Buddhism within the broader academic curriculum.

However, this early institutionalization of Buddhist studies was not merely an academic exercise; rather, it reflected a nuanced understanding of the religion's role in shaping national identity and was, as such, a response to broader social and political transformations in Meiji Japan. This initial public study of Buddhism was shaped by distinct yet intersecting demands; the first of these essentially represented a continuation of trends from the late Edo period, during

which the Buddhist clergy found themselves compelled to defend their teachings against criticisms that Mahayana was not originally preached by Śākyamuni. Given that this issue touched on the legitimacy of almost the entire East Asian Buddhist tradition, it had been a concern for Japanese priests from the outset. However, a deeper sense of crisis emerged among Buddhists after the late 1870s, when they discovered that prestigious Western scholars were making almost identical claims. The second demand was, as described below, related to how Buddhism could contribute to the improvement of social morality and, as an extension of this more individual enterprise, to the establishment of Japan as a "civilized nation."

This article, therefore, provides a detailed historical account of the early development of Buddhist studies in Japan as it took shape at the country's first modern institution of higher education. While drawing on previous research, it focuses in particular on how Hara Tanzan and his colleague, Yoshitani Kakuju 吉谷覚寿 (1843–1914), the two key figures of this initial period, navigated with varying degrees of success not only contemporary debates on the nature of Buddhism but also its relationship with social morality. Shaped in part by encounters with Christianity and Western scholarship, their efforts highlighted the tension between maintaining doctrinal authenticity and adapting to evolving concepts of nationhood and individual identity, ultimately laying the groundwork for a discipline that would profoundly influence the very understanding of the meaning and end of "religion" in modern Japan.

Buddhism in Modern Academia: Early Institutionalization

Several texts introducing the history of the academic study of Buddhism in modern Japan mention the 1879 appointment of Hara Tanzan at the University of Tokyo as one of the foundational moments of the discipline (Yoshida 1959, 8; Kashiwahara 1990, 81–82). Hara was invited directly by the famous Katō Hiroyuki, then university president, to lecture on "Buddhist texts" (*bussho* 仏書). At the time of this invitation, the University of Tokyo—established in April 1877 through the merger of Kaisei Gakkō 開成学校 and Tōkyō Igakkō 東京医学校, two of Japan's leading institutions of Western learning (*yōgaku* 洋学)—was still relatively new. Originally, the university was comprised of four schools: medicine, sciences, law, and letters. However, whereas the medical school was a continuation of the previous Tōkyō Igakkō, and the schools of science and law were mostly an extension of homonymous departments within the Kaisei Gakkō, the Faculty of Letters (*bungakubu* 文学部) was devised as an entirely new enterprise.

At this early stage, the Faculty of Letters was comprised of only two departments, namely the "first" (*daiichika* 第一科), which included the history, philosophy, and political science courses, and the "second" (*dainika* 第二科), including

disciplines on the study of Japanese and Chinese letters (*wakan bungaku* 和漢文学). Katō Hiroyuki explains the reason for creating this "second department" in a September 1877 document submitted to the Ministry of Education.

> The reason for now adding, to the Faculty of Letters, an entire department of Japanese and Chinese learning is that, under our current situation, such study has become almost like the sparse stars at dawn (*ryōryō shinsei no gotoku* 寥々晨星ノ如ク). If we do not immediately establish it within the university's subjects, it is possible we are unable to enduringly preserve [this knowledge]. Moreover, if those who call themselves the bachelors of Japan (*Nihon gakushi* 日本学士) are familiar only with English learning but are unclear about Japanese letters, they shall be unable to truly achieve the essence of cultural progress (*bun'un no seiei* 文運ノ精英). Since there is, however, concern that those who study only Japanese and Chinese letters might become narrow-minded, we will also have [students in this department] take English, Philosophy, and Western History. By doing so, we hope to cultivate useful human resources.
>
> (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 472–473, 686–687)

If almost a semester after the establishment of the department Katō still felt, as seen above, the need to continue justifying its existence to the Ministry of Education, we can reasonably surmise that there were at least some voices in opposition. Nevertheless, when the Faculty of Letters underwent restructuring about a two years later, it was not the second but the first department that was most affected. In a September 1879 memorandum, Katō explains that, since there were apparently close to no applicants for history but many interested in economics, the department name was changed from "History, Philosophy, and Political Philosophy" to "Philosophy, Political Philosophy, and Political Economy" (Tetsugaku, Seijigaku, Rizaigaku 哲学・政治学・理財学) (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 691).[1]

In this same document, Katō asserts that the history course's lack of popularity was essentially due to content. Since the department's main subject was "Western history" (*ōbei shigaku* 欧米史学), students only had the opportunity to learn about the past of distant and unfamiliar places; yet, he argued, they should also be learning about the histories of "Japan, China, and India"—that is, of "all nations of the Orient" (*tōyō kakkoku* 東洋各国). Nevertheless, since there was, according to Katō, no appropriate individual to cover that broad range of topics, the administration had no choice but to close the history course for the time being, privileging economics instead. The university did not, however, abolish all history-related disciplines; they continued to exist, albeit as elective subjects within the first department (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 691).

1. Katō provides the English translations of departments in Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku (1932).

Note that, in January 1877, only a few months before the university's establishment, the Meiji government also reorganized its Bureau of Historiography (Shūshikyoku 修史局), which was then responsible for drafting Japan's "official history" (*seishi* 正史) in traditional East Asian terms. Pompously renamed the Office of Historiography (Shūshikan 修史館) and placed directly under the control of the Great Council of State (Mehl 1998, 23–25), this institution employed people such as Shigeno Yasutsugu 重野安繹 (1827–1910), who about a decade later would play a central role in the creation of the University of Tokyo's Department of History (Satō 2022, 28). At this first stage, however, it is curious to see that individuals involved in this type of state-sponsored historical writing were not even considered as capable of teaching domestic history, which might also have been due to the association of the academic discipline of history with specific forms of Western learning.

In any case, Katō seems to have regarded this lack of education about the "Orient" as a serious issue, since he took the opportunity to introduce a new discipline on the topic. On occasion of this reform, the university introduced a class titled "Lectures on Buddhist Texts," which was placed outside both first and second departments and which could be attended by all students independent of which year they were in. As lecturer for this course, Katō invited Hara Tanzan, an individual then quite popular in the early Meiji Buddhist world. Originally educated at the famous bakufu-sponsored Shōheikō 昌平黌, Hara also received training in Chinese medicine and, later in life, became a Sōtō Zen priest. While Kimura Kiyotaka (2002, 15–20) has speculated that his invitation to lecture at the newly founded university had to do with his "scientific" perspective toward Buddhism, Furuta Shōkin (1942, 494) and Satō Atsushi (2017, 4) claim that his hiring was mostly due to him being recommended to Katō Hiroyuki by renowned Nishi Honganji priest Shimaji Mokurai 島地黙雷 (1838–1911).[2]

Besides famously lecturing on the *Dasheng qixinlun* 大乗起信論, Hara also taught the *Yuanjue jing* 円覚経 and, perhaps even more importantly, the *Fujiaobian* 輔教編. Written in the Northern Song period, this latter text proposed equivalence between Buddhist and Confucian values and was probably strategically chosen by Hara due to the educational background of his audience (Licha 2023, 134). Hara's classes proved popular: at this first stage, they were attended both by then already established intellectuals such as Nishimura Shigeki 西村茂樹 (1828–1902) and promising younger students such as Inoue Tetsujirō 井上哲次郎 (1856–1944).

Two years later, in September 1881, the Faculty of Letters underwent yet another reform, which proved quite significant to the teaching of Buddhism

2. Although Furuta does not provide the source for this information, Satō refers to Inoue Enryō's (1915, 2) recollections about Katō Hiroyuki.

(Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 696–697). The philosophy course broke away as a department of its own; political sciences and economics remained together as the second department while Japanese and Chinese letters now became the third. Although the teaching of philosophy was, up to that point, focused solely on Western ideas, this reform now established within the newly-created department had classes on "Indian and Chinese Philosophy," which became compulsory not only for students in the Philosophy Department, but also for those in the Department of Japanese and Chinese Letters (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 699, 701).

In this context, Hara's class was renamed "Indian Philosophy," ultimately becoming a "regular course" (*seika* 正科) within the faculty. This new status was not, however, the only change brought about by the reform. Around September 1881,[3] the university decided to hire a second lecturer to share duties. In contrast to the more Zen-focused Hara, the university invited Yoshitani Kakuju, a Higashi Honganji priest recommended to Katō Hiroyuki as someone who could teach Tendai studies.[4] And so he did; for the first five years at least, Yoshitani lectured on both Gyōnen's 凝然 (1240–1321) *Hasshū kōyō* 八宗綱要 and Chengwan's 諦觀 (d. 970) *Tiantai sijiao yi* 天台四教儀. Hara, on the other hand, continued focusing on the *Fujiaobian*, while including in his repertoire also the *Vimalakirti Sūtra*.[5]

A year later in September 1882, there was yet more fine tuning. The Chair of Philosophy was divided into "Eastern" and "Western," and the courses taught

3. Although institutional histories of the University of Tokyo record Yoshitani's hiring as occurring in 1882 (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1932, 717; Tōkyō Daigaku Hyakunenshi Henshū Iinkai 1986, 524, 539), evidence from contemporary media confirms that he was hired in 1881, coinciding with the subject's rebranding and regularization within the university curriculum. See the Zappō 雑報 section of MS 1218 (28 Sept. 1881, 3), which reports on Yoshitani's appointment. The same section in issues 1225 (12 Oct., 4), 1235 (2 Nov., 3), and 1236 (4 Nov., 3), provides information about this and other significant changes of the period concerning the discipline of Indian Philosophy.

4. Yoshitani was recommended to Katō Hiroyuki by a Higashi Honganji priest named Kondō Shūrin 近藤秀琳 (d.u.) from Nensokuji 念速寺 (Licha 2023, 141; Satō 2017, 4); note that this same Kondō was also responsible for recommending that Inoue Enryō 井上円了 (1858–1919) take the entrance examination for the University of Tokyo (Miura 2016, 713–714).

5. In several postwar retrospectives of the early days of Buddhist scholarship at the University of Tokyo, Hara Tanzan and Yoshitani Kakuju are described as having, from this point onwards, taught in alternate years (*kakunen de tantō* 隔年で担当) (Fujii 1982, 8; Sueki 2004, 87; Klautau 2012, 61). This assertion is, however, mistaken; it first appeared in a historical overview of the Faculty of Letters published during the early Showa period (Tōkyō Teikoku Daigaku 1942, 340) and was later reiterated in the authoritative volume commemorating the university's hundredth anniversary (Tōkyō Daigaku Hyakunenshi Henshū Iinkai 1986, 525). In fact, Yoshitani and Hara taught concurrently; this error likely stemmed from a misinterpretation of the fact that Hara, at least, taught the same texts every other year (Hara 1886a; TZ, 362–363). The more recent Satō (2023) was also fundamental in clarifying this long-standing misunderstanding.

by Hara and Yoshitani were naturally allocated to the former. In fact, after the 1881 reform, "Indian Philosophy" became predominant as the larger rubric to speak about the teaching of Buddhism; it was not until 1994 that the term *Bukkyō* was used again in an official manner in the department's title. HAYASHI Makoto (2002, 252–253) explains that the reason behind the choice of "Indian Philosophy" was twofold: first, it had to do with concerns about having a subject dedicated to a single "religion" in a state-sponsored institution; second, this was also connected with the reformulation of Buddhism and Confucianism as part of an "Eastern Philosophy" (*tōyō tetsugaku* 東洋哲学) on an equal basis with its "Western" counterpart.

From this year onward, Hara and Yoshitani both taught "Indian Philosophy," alternating texts every year. From 1883, the former abandoned the *Essays on Assisting the Teaching*—which students complained was too "easy" (HARA 1886a, 3; TZ, 362)—in favor of the *Awakening of Faith in Mahayana* (SATŌ 2023, 179), while Yoshitani continued with the *Essentials* and the *Outline* until finally changing in 1887 to a textbook he himself had prepared (SATŌ 2017, 5). Together, they educated an entire generation of Meiji scholars, including Judo founder Kanō Jigorō 嘉納治五郎 (1860–1938), legal scholar Ariga Nagao 有賀長雄 (1860–1921), and Buddhist intellectuals Inoue Enryō and Kiyozawa Manshi 清沢満之 (1863–1903).

Early Issues in Public Scholarship: Hara Tanzan and "Experience"

The type of Buddhism that both Hara and Yoshitani conveyed to their students was not unrelated to contemporary matters. Their very choice of texts can be regarded as evidence of that: Hara focused on the *Awakening* due to his emphasis on the importance of Buddhism as a form of psychological science fit for modern society; Yoshitani's choice of the *Essentials* was in turn part of a larger task of presenting Buddhism in a holistic manner vis-à-vis the purported systematic teachings of Christianity. That is, both Hara and Yoshitani, Buddhists from very different sectarian backgrounds, seemed preoccupied mostly with creating more comprehensive representations of their beliefs.

Although Hara and Yoshitani's efforts to justify Buddhism in light of contemporary priorities began before their tenure as public scholars, their interest in redefining Buddhism in relation to modern concepts such as "philosophy" and "religion" was arguably stimulated by their new positions. In this context, the issue of representing Buddhism in terms of "essence" was their common preoccupation, albeit manifested in very different ways. Hara, for instance, depicted Buddhism as a mind-centered intellectual system akin to what he perceived as modern science. While his perspective stood as somewhat unique in the context of his time, the challenges he encountered in grasping the essence of Buddhism

mirrored those of his contemporary fellow priests. For example, in his efforts to portray Śākyamuni's teachings as a somewhat physiological approach to conquering ignorance, Hara also grappled with the question of whether Buddhism, similar to Christianity, qualified as a "religion." As described in detail by recent scholarship, the very idea of "religion" was appropriated by the Japanese after the 1870s in the process of translating both legal and scholarly texts (Josephson 2012, 71–93; Hoshino 2012). While there existed early modern proto-terms to denote Christianity and Buddhism (Hayashi 2003; Josephson 2012, 22–70; Krämer 2015, 21–41), the introduction of new concepts compelled Japanese intellectuals to adopt a term that, due to the circumstances of its coinage, became closely linked with Protestant Christianity.

In this sense, Hara was categorical in emphasizing that Buddhism was superior to Christianity due to its being, ultimately, a system of scholarship (*gakumon* 学問) rather than a religion (*kyōhō* 教法). In an 1885 lecture, he asserted that while the goal of scholarship was gaining knowledge (*chi* 智) through evidence (*shō* 証), religion was, instead, limited to simply believing (*shin* 信). Although

figure 1. Hara Tanzan c. 1886. Reprinted from tz. https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/823362/1/3

he did admit that scholarship too required some level of faith, this was only as a first step to reach the final stage of absolute wisdom, which was itself beyond all belief in other-worldly deities (Hara 1885; TZ, 52). In insisting that learning and understanding supersede belief, and therefore painting his Buddhism as a doctrine focused on the attainment of wisdom, Hara found himself in agreement with contemporary Western depictions of the religion.[6] It is no surprise, then, that Hara became one of the earliest scholars to adopt, at least in part, the understanding of Buddhism proposed by the Theosophical Society. In a February 1887 lecture at one of the most prestigious academic spots at the time, he said as follows:

> With the separation of fields (*gakka bunritsu* 学科分立) that took place in later times, generally everyone came to present Buddhism as a religion rather than taking the experiential (*jikken* 実験) as its basis. However, Buddhism does not take as its aim blind belief in ghostly realms (*yūmyō kōbō* 幽冥荒茫) like the other religions. [Henry S.] Olcott states, "The word 'religion' is [most] inappropriate to apply to Buddhism…. *Buddhism… is a moral philosophy.*" I would quickly note that it is *appropriate to call [Buddhism] a* "*philosophy of the nature of the mind*" (*shinshō tetsugaku* 心性哲学)…. In any case, [Buddhism] is not something outside of the mind and body.
>
> Hara 1887, 105; TZ, 54–55; translated in Toda 2021, 157–158)

The above is, in effect, one of the first occasions on which we can find Hara using the term *shūkyō*, which he employs specifically to claim that Buddhism is *not* a religion. Part of the ideas presented here by Hara can be traced to Henry Steel Olcott (1832–1907), a native of New Jersey and first president of the Theosophical Society, who played an important role in the revival of Buddhism in Sri Lanka.[7] In his best-selling *Buddhist Catechism*, first published in 1881, Olcott claims that Buddhism is a "scientific" and "ethical" set of teachings, and therefore it should be classified as "philosophy" rather than "religion." Commissioned by Nishi Honganji's Akamatsu Renjō 赤松連城 (1841–1919) and translated by Imadate Tosui 今立吐酔 (1855–1931), the Japanese version of *Buddhist Catechism* was very well received by local intellectuals; as we can observe in Hara's text, this reception was not, however, uncritical. That is, although Hara concurred with Olcott that Buddhism fundamentally differed from Christianity, unlike the American's view, he saw it not as an ethical system, but rather as a form of therapy capable of harmonizing matter and spirit.

6. For a historical overview of this type of discourse, see Lopez (2008).

7. On Olcott, see Murphet (1972) and Prothero (1996). On his influence in Japan, see Yoshinaga (2021, 131–211).

For Hara, however, this original "experience" of Buddhism as put forward by Śākyamuni had been lost,[8] and the founder's ideas degenerated into a set of "preposterous and irrational teachings" (*kōtō mukei no mōhō* 荒唐無稽の妄法) (Hara 1886b, 72; TZ, 44). Hara's goal as a Buddhist scholar was, therefore, to recreate this perspective, which he considered crucial for the survival of Buddhism in a new era. For Hara, however, the key for reconstructing this original Buddhism did not lie in recovering lost ancient texts or summarizing their essence for contemporary lay audiences. Rather, it was centered on reclaiming the lost *experience* of Śākyamuni himself. In fact, regarding textual matters, Hara believed the exact opposite: he thought that the emphasis on the written word over the original practice was precisely what had led Buddhism into the contemporary dilemma it faced. Hara emphasized that it had been "due to unnecessary embellishment of these teachings [of Śākyamuni] by biographers and translators" that arose so "many different expressions" (*shuju no myōgi* 種々ノ名義), which caused Buddhism to "abruptly stray into nonsensical and fictitious theories" (*kōtan kakū no setsu* 謊誕架空の説). This was also why, he continued, "criticism such as that from the *Shutsujō gogo* 出定後語 is so difficult to avoid" (Hara 1886b, 72; TZ, 44).

Often translated into English as *Emerging from Meditation*, the text referred to here by Hara first appeared in 1745, authored by Tominaga Nakamoto 富永仲基 (1715–1746). From the late Edo period, Buddhists perceived it as one of the most severe critiques of their religion ever to surface in Japan, provoking clerical responses well into the Meiji years. In this text, Tominaga famously asserts that Mahayana, essentially the only form of Buddhism found in Japan, had not been expounded directly by Śākyamuni Buddha (*Daijō hibussetsu* 大乗非仏説), but was rather a much later development. Tominaga's work was particularly feared by late-Edo clergy precisely because it was grounded on what was then regarded as an impressive knowledge of Buddhist scripture (Klautau 2021, 182). During the early Meiji era, this perceived attack against Mahayana gained additional support from a new source of authority, one that Japanese Buddhists were reluctant to dismiss: European scholarship.

Early Western Buddhology is renowned for its critical view of Mahayana Buddhism. Notable scholars like Oxford professor Friedrich Max Müller (1823–1900) initially adopted a Śākyamuni-centric perspective on Buddhism, often regarding later developments—mostly associated with Mahayana—as corruptions or degenerations (Masuzawa 2005, 126; Krämer 2023, 167). Although Müller's views on Mahayana Buddhism evolved over time through increased interaction with East Asian scholars, his earlier perspectives continued to signifi-

8. For in-depth analyses of Hara's idea of "experience," see Yoshinaga (2006) and Licha (2021a).

cantly influence Japanese scholars during the early to mid-Meiji era (Krämer 2023, 165–187). This shift in viewpoint, however, was not mirrored by his colleague Monier Monier-Williams (1819–1899), who even after gaining a deeper understanding of Mahayana texts and practices, persisted in depicting these later manifestations of Buddhism as "a history not of development but of deterioration" (Masuzawa 2005, 128). In short, negative views such as these were somewhat common in European academia, and, as we shall explore later, Japanese Buddhists had become well acquainted with them by the early 1880s. From the mid-1880s onward, their influence significantly increased. A major contributor to this shift was the hin priest Nanjō Bun'yū, briefly mentioned in the introduction to this article, who after studying in England with scholars including Müller, returned to Japan to teach Sanskrit at the Imperial University in Tokyo. This move helped bridge Western academic perspectives and Japanese Buddhist scholarship, amplifying the dialogue between the two.

While Hara Tanzan agreed with the majority of his contemporary clergymen that Buddhism was in a state of decline and urgently needed revival, he appeared to show little interest in the debate over the validity of Mahayana teachings. Despite being significantly influenced by Western concepts, Hara believed that the revival of Buddhism was not about textual legitimization. Instead, he focused on reclaiming Śākyamuni's original "experience." However, it is important to note that, in this regard, he was somewhat of an outlier. Not only did his colleague, Yoshitani Kakuju, hold divergent views, but so did his successor, Murakami Senshō 村上専精 (1851–1929), whose perspectives could be considered more aligned with the mainstream of the time.

Yoshitani Kakuju and Nirvana

Many recent studies that delve into Japan's engagement with the Euro-American concept of "religion" strive to demonstrate the reconfiguration of Buddhism in response to this emerging discursive framework. For instance, in his monograph on the concept of *shūkyō*, Hoshino Seiji (2012, 45–70) considers the work of Takahashi Gorō 高橋吾良 (1856–1935), a Christian scholar who, influenced by Western scholarship, wrote works on comparative religion. On Buddhism, specifically, he published in 1880 *Butsudō shinron* 仏道新論, a text that would prove quite influential, receiving responses from several important Buddhist priests, including Yoshitani Kakuju, introduced above as one of the early lecturers in Buddhist studies at the University of Tokyo. According to Hoshino (2012, 57), Takahashi Gorō associated the "principle" (*ri* 理) of contemporary science with the notion of a creator god, leading him to the conclusion that scholarship and religion should, ultimately, be in accordance with each other. Although this harmony could be achieved by Christianity, that was not the case with Buddhism,

which was perceived by Takahashi as a "religion" with many unscientific characteristics.

In his analysis of the portrayal of the historical Buddha in modern Japan, Micah Auerback (2016, 171–180) provides a detailed examination of the impact of Takahashi's *Butsudō shinron* at the time. Certain elements of this 1880 publication exemplify precisely the kind of critique the nascent academic field of Buddhist studies aimed to address. For instance, as a recent convert to Protestantism, Takahashi agreed with many of his fellow Christians that a nation's idea of morality was informed by its "religion." Yet, when it came to Buddhism, Takahashi contended that its problematic "essence" rendered it unfit for such a purpose. Nonetheless, the question persisted of what exactly this "essence" was. After all, was it not the case that Mahayana, the sole variant of Buddhism existing in Meiji Japan, constituted a deviation from the historical Buddha's original teachings?

However, unlike many of his predecessors, Takahashi did not take the usual Christian route of asserting Mahayana as an illegitimate form of Buddhism. Quite the opposite: for the sake of argument he asserted, for instance, that although the Mahayana scriptures had indeed not been preached by Śākyamuni, neither had been those of the other "vehicles," adding that they all equally sprung from the Buddha's "mind" or "intent" (*kokoro* 意) (Auerback 2016, 172–173; Takahashi 1880, 12–13). That is, despite the centuries-long debate on the historicity of Mahayana going back, in the Japanese case, at least to Tominaga Nakamoto, it was useful for Takahashi, in the context of his critique, to depict Buddhism as one tradition with an ultimate single goal: the attainment of nirvana (Takahashi 1880, 46). However, how could a "religion" whose ideal was the complete extinction of the self-play the important social role of nation-building? Takahashi's argument was precisely that it was not.

At first sight, one could assume that Takahashi's relativization of the idea that Mahayana had not been preached by the historical Buddha would have at least partly pleased the Meiji Buddhist clergy.[9] Meiji Buddhists were, however, unwilling to accept either the idea, common in European circles at the time, of nirvana as the final goal of Buddhism, or Takahashi's somewhat audacious depiction of all vehicles as equal. In any case, the impact of Takahashi's work was astounding to say the least. After a privately printed the first edition in May 1880, *Butsudō shinron* soon sold out, leading to a second edition published in November of the same year—this time by Jūjiya 十字屋, a prominent Christian publishing

9. It is also interesting to note that his depiction of Mahayana not as the "Buddha's words" but as a manifestation of his "intent" predates by at least two decades the more famous theories of Murakami Senshō. For an English-language introduction to Murakami's arguments, see Ward (2021).

FIGURE 2: Yoshitani Kakuju, date of photograph unknown. Reprinted from YOSHITANI 1914. https://dl.ndl.go.jp/pid/907028/1/5

house of the time. Third, fourth, and fifth editions followed in 1882, 1883, and 1885 respectively, and the work also provoked responses, both direct and indirect, from the Buddhist clergy (AUERBACK 2016, 172–173). One of these indirect responses was by Yoshitani Kakuju, who in his early career as a public scholar seems to have dedicated himself precisely to countering this view of Buddhism as a religion of emptiness.[10]

From 1884, Yoshitani began publishing in installments one of his first works aimed at responding to the emerging challenge of developing a form of non-sectarian Buddhist scholarship suitable for teaching in public institutions to students from a wide array of backgrounds. *Bukkyō taishi* 仏教大旨—for which Yoshitani himself provided the English title *A Brief Account of Japanese Present*

10. While Yoshitani does not explicitly mention Takahashi in his writings, the character of his rebuttal strongly suggests he was responding to the latter's viewpoints. Indeed, this is a work we can say almost no Buddhist at the time was unfamiliar with: besides being republished almost annually between 1880 and 1885, it also received coverage in *Meikyō shinshi* (MS), arguably one of the era's most notable Buddhist periodicals, under the editorship of Ōuchi Seiran 大内青巒 (1845–1918). In 1880 alone, Takahashi's work was either announced or featured in MS 992 (8 June, p. 5), 1004 (4 July, p. 6–8), 1005 (6 July, p. 7–8), 1006 (8 July, p. 7–8), and 1007 (10 July, p. 7–8).

Buddhism—was first serialized in the pages of the journal *Ryōchikai* 令知会, edited by the eponymous association led by Shimaji Mokurai, before being published as a single volume in 1886.[11] In a clear response to contemporary debates on what, in the end, constituted the essence of Buddhism, Yoshitani begins his work as follows:

> The original doctrine of Śākyamuni (*shakushon ichidai no kyōhō* 釈尊一代の教法) is as infinite and boundless as the number of atoms. Nevertheless, if we were to categorize its varieties, we would then have such distinctions as Mahayana and Hinayana, exoteric and esoteric, expedient and true, partial and complete, noble and pure, sudden and gradual, and so on. However, in recent times the social climate has changed greatly; religious ideas have progressed and revealed lively energy, in the sense that we now have those who attempt to distinguish religions between right and wrong, true and false…. [In this context] there are those who criticize Buddhism outwardly, without knowing the truth of its teachings or even discussing the original meaning of its particular doctrines, and those who spill such deluded arguments are not few. Among these [types of criticism], the damage of the *daijō hibussetsu* itself is not recent, but now there are even those who will say that Buddhism's remarks are splendid and its truth deep, and although one does not find [in Buddhism] the teachings of creation (*zōkakyō* 造化教), it upholds the nirvana, that is, absolute emptiness, as its ultimate doctrine. I cannot, however, accept that, and I am not alone in being unable to do so: this is something unpleasing for society in general (*shakai ippan no tame ni yorokobu beki koto ni arazu* 社会一般ノ為ニ忻フヘキコトニ非ス). (Yoshitani 1886, 1–2)

Furthermore, Yoshitani also accuses not only "Westerners" but also people from "India and Ceylon" of not understanding the "deep principles" (*shinri* 深理) of Mahayana. Throughout this 1886 work, and in those that would follow, he asserted that it was not nirvana but "thusness" (*shinnyo* 真如) that was the most essential principle amidst the myriad Buddhist teachings. That is, Yoshitani explicitly recriminates certain groups for claiming Hinayana alone represented the Buddha's "true words" (*shinsetsu* 真説),[12] but also for blindly accepting Hinayana's "one-sided view of the emptiness principle" (*henshin no kūri* 偏真ノ空理) (Yoshitani 1886, 13, 36).

11. In terms of Buddhist media history, it is worth noting that the volume was published by Bussho Shuppankai 仏書出版会, a publishing house that, in the same year, also issued the aforementioned Japanese translation of H. S. Olcott's *Buddhist Catechism*, as well as an annotated edition of the famous Edo-period monk Jiun's 慈雲 (1718–1805) *Hito to naru michi* 人となる道 (Katsuragi 1886).

12. See Licha (2021b) for an analysis of the development of the category of "small vehicle" (*shojō* 小乗) in post-Restoration Japan.

Although nirvana had been a topic for debate in European academia, during the nineteenth century a majority view among scholars of Buddhism and much of their non-specialist audience was that it "*essentially*, entailed the annihilation of the individual" (Almond 1988, 102).[13] This perception of Buddhism's ultimate goal was initially brought to Japan indirectly via the efforts of Christian converts like Takahashi, and subsequently in a more direct fashion through the translation of contemporary European texts. For example, in 1886—the same year Yoshitani released his *Bukkyō taishi*—a work by Max Müller was translated into Japanese for the first time, focusing, perhaps unsurprisingly, precisely on the topic of the nature of the Buddhist *summum bonum*.

The *Nehangi* 涅槃義 was a translation by Nishi Honganji priest Katō Shōkaku 加藤正廓 (1852–1903) of Müller's "The Meaning of Nirvāṇa." The background story of this text is itself significant: it emerged from a debate triggered by one of Müller's earliest writings on Buddhism. As Hans Martin Krämer (2023, 165) points out, Müller, originally a scholar of Sanskrit studies whose work concentrated mainly on literature, published in 1857 his first text on the "philosophy" of Śākyamuni, a somewhat lengthy review essay of Stanislas Julien's *Voyages des pèlerins bouddhistes*. In this article, Müller proposes a more nuanced perspective on nirvana: while for the "Buddhist metaphysician" it would indeed mean something akin to the absolute nothing, for "the millions who embraced the doctrines of the Buddha," it took on "the bright colours of a Paradise," meaning, in much simpler terms "a relative deliverance from the miseries of human life" (Müller 1867, 250).

This review essay by Müller received, a few days later, a response from Francis Foster Barham (1808–1871), an English writer then known for developing Alism, a "divine system" which aimed at reconciling "all great truths" (Barham 1847). In "Buddha and His Critics," Barham disagrees with what he still saw as a nihilistic perspective, claiming that nirvana was in fact "deification, apotheosis, absorption of the soul into God, but not its annihilation" (Barham 1857, 8). This deserved yet another response by Müller where, while reaffirming the essential annihilationist philosophical view, he again asserts that, later in history when Buddhism became a more popular creed, followers deified the originally atheist founder, turning "the very Nothing into a paradise" (Müller 1867, 284).

This response, which originally appeared in an April 1857 issue of *The Times*, was subsequently expanded and included in the first volume of Müller's *Chips from a German Workshop*, under the title "The Meaning of Nirvāṇa" (1872, 279–290). It was this enlarged version that served as the base for the Japanese translation, which should be considered as a direct response to the debate stimulated by

13. In addition to the summary provided in Almond 1998 (102–110), for more comprehensive evaluations of the debates on nirvana during this era, see Welbon (1968) and Droit (2003).

the likes of Takahashi Gorō. That is, while Müller's response does reproduce the contemporary European idea that Buddhism, as a philosophy, upheld nirvana as a type of annihilation of the self, he did also mention that historically, as a religion, Buddhism came to hold a far more optimistic—and for Müller, one could argue, less sophisticated—idea thereof.

The introduction of this work to Japan revealed to local audiences that, even in Europe, the debate was ongoing and far more nuanced than Japanese Christians would have local audiences believe. Perhaps this was, in a way, a dispute to which the Japanese clergy could contribute. And Yoshitani did.

Yoshitani and His Disciples: Mahayana as a Social Religion

For Meiji Buddhists, the above debates on the essence of Buddhism went far beyond the limits of sectarian studies.[14] Note that in 1881, the same year Yoshitani was invited to teach at the University of Tokyo, the Japanese government issued the imperial edict for inaugurating a national assembly (*kokkai kaisetsu no mikotonori* 国会開設の詔). The process of constitutional drafting began around the same time, which also led several private associations to pen their own proposals (George 1984; Toriumi 1988, 164–184).

The constitution was ultimately promulgated in 1889, prepared by a group centered on Itō Hirobumi 伊藤博文 (1841–1909) and Inoue Kowashi 井上 毅 (1844–1895) and under influence of the Prussian system. As scholars such as Yamaguchi Teruomi (1999, 29–55) and Trent Maxey (2014, 163–185) demonstrate, debates on the role of religion in state formation were prevalent throughout the 1880s. In this context, Christians like Takahashi argued that their religion was best suited for a nation aspiring to join the "civilized world." Conversely, Buddhists like Yoshitani asserted the opposite: that Buddhism, not Christianity, was the most appropriate for that. As exemplified by Nishimura Shigeki's influential 1887 publication *Nihon dōtokuron* 日本道徳論, the concept of national development through cultivating a shared moral consciousness that extended from individual to society gained significant traction throughout the 1880s.[15] Thus, in an era focused on redefining Buddhism within a national context, one can imagine the challenges figures like Yoshitani faced with portrayals of their faith emphasizing ideals such as "annihilation of the self" and "pure emptiness."

Mid-Meiji Buddhists responded to this moral question in comparable ways. For instance Inoue Enryō, founder of the Tetsugakkan 哲学館 and perhaps one of the most successful Buddhist students of both Hara and Yoshitani at the University of Tokyo, claimed that Buddhism as it existed in late nineteenth-century

14. For more on Mahayana's social role, see Klautau (2014, 73–78).

15. Note that, in his understanding of religion, Nishimura was influenced by none other than Hara Tanzan. On this topic, see Ge (2013).

Japan was not only a philosophical religion, but also one with a potentially strong moral aspect. In a text published only a couple of months before Nishimura's *Nihon dōtokuron* in February 1887, Enryō asserts that Buddhism was indeed "a type of pure philosophy" (*isshu no junsei tetsugaku* 一種の純正哲学) that at the same time could teach plenty in terms of the "practical utility of moral religion" (*dōtoku shūkyō no jitsuyō* 道徳宗教の実用) (Inoue 1887, 40). Although while making such an argument, Enryō also attempts to push his agenda that contemporary Buddhism was far from its ideal form and therefore in need of urgent reformation (*kairyō* 改良). His responses to contemporary debates arose in most part from within the larger discursive context of the early public study of Buddhism (Hasegawa 2017).

Yoshitani, too, presented comparable views. As indicated in parts of his work highlighted in the previous section, we observe an initial inclination to contrast what he perceived as the more individualistic approach of Hinayana Buddhism with the social dimension inherent in his own Mahayana tradition. Or, alternatively, we could argue that his aim was not so much to emphasize the social dimension but rather to refute the antisocial implications associated with the annihilationist interpretation of Buddhist nirvana. His engagement with this topic ought to be understood within the broader social context outlined previously, and in works published in the mid to late 1880s, he would extend his argument even further. Yet, before delving deeper into these arguments, the examples of both Hara and Yoshitani should serve to reinforce the somewhat obvious argument put forth at the beginning of this article: namely, how the specific context of early Meiji Japan shaped not only the inclusion but also the early development of Buddhism as an academic discipline in the country's nascent universities. However, as the historical narrative above illustrates, this context was not solely defined by Japan's new position in the world or the influx of Christianity and "Western" ideas. Rather, it was also, to a significant extent, a continuation of concerns that had existed at least since the mid to late Edo period. While these preoccupations were indeed longstanding, their urgency was heightened not only by the influence of European scholarship but also by specific national imperatives that compelled Buddhists to articulate—more proactively than ever before—not only the social role but also the very essence of their religion. In other words, Meiji Buddhists such as Yoshitani skillfully navigated and synthesized these diverse influences, integrating them into their evolving formulations of the meaning and purpose of their beliefs.

This kind of comprehensive response to criticism is exemplified in an essay by Yoshitani (1884).[16] This piece appears to have achieved a degree of popularity,

16. The original 1884 text was later reprinted in an 1886 issue of the journal *Kyōgaku ronshū* 教学論集, again in 1888 in the same *Ryōchikai zasshi*, and finally included in Yoshitani (1890).

as it continued to be reprinted in various outlets over the next four years. Its contents were eventually incorporated into *Bukkyō sōron* 仏教総論, Yoshitani's far more elaborated doctrinal overview published in August 1890, around the same time he departed from his position at what was then the Imperial University. Additionally, it appears the original article was also presented as a public lecture, given its inclusion in contemporary anthologies featuring talks by notable Buddhist personalities (Sasada 1887, 99–106). In this text, Yoshitani acknowledges that the claim the Mahayana sutras were not spoken by Śākyamuni was not unfounded, nor, he notes, was it a novel assertion. However, he argues that the presence of Hinayana as the sole form of Buddhism in Southeast Asia should not be taken as evidence that it was the form closest to the "original" teachings of the historical Buddha (Yoshitani 1890, 78–80).

Be that as it may, Yoshitani opted for a different line of argumentation, steering away from the philological concerns of textual legitimacy. Drawing on the translated works of American educator Charles Northend (1814–1895), Yoshitani argued that if humans were, as many contemporary theories suggested, inherently social beings, then Hinayana's emphasis on "self-interest" (*jiri* 自利) was inadequate as a foundation for a healthy society. In contrast, the Mahayana teachings, which are grounded in "altruism" (*rita* 利他), could offer the essential principles for fostering "true societal benefit" (*shakai no jitsueki* 社会ノ実益). Yoshitani maintained that while the Buddha might not have directly articulated the Mahayana sutras, their teachings not only stemmed from Śākyamuni's original truth but also evolved in accordance with *human nature* itself. That is, he argued that Mahayana, by offering a foundation for the much-needed social order and contributing to the happiness of both individuals and the nation, effectively embodied the "true words of the Buddha" (*shinsei no bussetsu* 真正ノ仏説)—far more so than Hinayana (Yoshitani 1890, 80–82).

Yoshitani's rhetoric of a "social Mahayana" versus an "individualistic Hinayana" not only works as a response to contemporary nihilistic depictions of Buddhism—such as those put forward by Takahashi Gorō—but it also addresses the issue that, in terms of essence, Buddhism as it existed in Japan at the time was able to contribute to the nation's progress into "civilization." This line of reasoning seems to have influenced the following generation: Murakami Senshō, who was to become, from September 1890, Yoshitani's successor as lecturer of Indian Philosophy at the University of Tokyo, proposed similar arguments in his 1888 *Bukkyō dōtoku shinron*. In this text, Murakami provides a lengthy discussion of Buddhist ethics vis-à-vis Western philosophy. Although he used Hinayana and Mahayana as examples of what Western thinkers called, respectively, "selfish" (*jiaiteki* 自愛的) and "altruistic" (*taaiteki* 他愛的) moral principles, Murakami (1888, 66) claimed he preferred defining the two vehicles in terms of "inferior" (*katō* 下等) and "superior" (*kōtō* 高等) morals. Note that this was not, however,

the only occasion when his achievements appear to emulate those of Yoshitani. In January 1890, a few months before he was invited to lecture at the Imperial University, Murakami published what became his first best-seller, *Bukkyō ikkanron* 仏教一貫論, which represented an effort similar to that of Yoshitani in his 1886 *Bukkyō taishi*.

While Yoshitani's arguments for the legitimacy of Mahayana—viewed not as the Buddha's direct teachings but as a crucial historical development thereof—lacked the complexity found in the later works of his successor, they do precede Murakami's 1901 *Daijō bussetsuron hihan* 大乗仏説論批判 by well over a decade. In light of this, one could argue that the same concerns prevalent in the early days of Buddhist public scholarship continued to influence at least one subsequent generation, even though some of the newer responses significantly diverged from those offered by Hara or Yoshitani. Murakami, for instance, discovered over the course of the 1890s that simply uncovering Buddhism's inner "consistency" would not suffice; far beyond that, Buddhism needed to be actively unified not only in terms of doctrine, but also as practice. The way these issues were addressed during Murakami's era warrants a separate discussion. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the question of how Buddhism as it evolved in the Japanese archipelago aligns with the religion "as a whole" has not only influenced Murakami's generation but, to some extent, continues to engage a significant portion of Japanese Buddhist scholars even today.

Conclusion

What was, for these early scholars, the "essence" of Buddhism? While Hara Tanzan focused on redefining Buddhism through individual experience, Yoshitani engaged more directly with contemporary debates on society and morals. Yet, in both cases, their portrayals of Buddhism's ultimate goal were shaped by contemporary political concerns. In other words, the institutionalization of Buddhist studies at the University of Tokyo was, as one would expect, not merely an academic endeavor but also a reflection of broader intellectual movements toward modernization and the construction of a national identity that reconciled Japan's heritage with the expectations of the "civilized world."

The Meiji years were, therefore, an era defined by the complex interplay between traditional and modern perspectives on "Buddhism," as scholars like Hara and Yoshitani navigated both international and domestic criticisms (Isshiki 2019, 10–12), striving to articulate a version of their religion that was not only doctrinally sound but also socially relevant. In either case, as we briefly reflect on the contributions of these pioneering figures, we are reminded that, although we may not perceive it as such today, our own perspectives on what constitutes "Buddhism" are also shaped by ideologies that future generations will

inevitably scrutinize. Examining the early public study of Buddhism in Japan not only deepens our understanding of a specific moment in East Asian religious history but also prompts us to recognize ourselves as historical beings whose study of Buddhism influences how our ideals manifest in society.

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MS *Meikyō shinshi* 明教新誌. Meikyōsha, 1875–1901.

TZ *Tanzan Oshō zenshū* 坦山和尚全集. Ed. Akiyama Goan 秋山悟庵. Kōyūkan, 1909.

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