

## Zen and the Art of Religious Prejudice Efforts to Reform a Tradition of Social Discrimination

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*Since the so-called Machida affair, the Sōtō Zen school has become embroiled in controversies over traditional institutional practices that foster prejudicial attitudes and social discrimination. In response to public denunciations by the Buraku Liberation League, the Sōtō school founded a Human Rights Division charged with eliminating discriminatory practices and reforming Sōtō's public image. Evidence of discriminatory language, necrologies, posthumous names, talismans, and ritual practices within Sōtō has been publicized and steps taken to eliminate them. This is the larger context within which Sōtō scholars, including advocates of "Critical Buddhism" (which has attracted wide attention outside of Japan) have sought to repudiate Buddhist teachings (such as "original awakening") that they identify as fostering social discrimination.*

The significance of continuing dialogue in this context was demonstrated in the manner in which the Buraku people's problem in Japan came to be rightly understood. In WCRP III a delegate from [Japan] completely denied the existence of discrimination against the Buraku people [i.e., outcastes], but with continuing study of the problem, the same delegate at WCRP IV frankly admitted the fact of [his] being in the camp of discriminating agents.

—*Proceedings of the Fourth World Conference on Religion and Peace*  
(TAYLOR and GEBHARDT 1986, p. 232).

STANDING BEFORE a large international audience in Nairobi, Kenya, at the Fourth World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1984, one

\* I would like to express my gratitude to the Northeast Council of the Association of Asian Studies, which provided financial support that enabled me to visit the Sōtō Administrative Headquarters in Tokyo, and to the staff of the Sōtō Central Division for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (*Jinken yōgo suishin honbu* 人権擁護推進本部, especially Yūgi Sōgen and Nakano Jūsai, who answered questions, explained recent developments, and provided me with copies of many essential sources.

delegate from Japan, Machida Muneo 町田宗夫, made a startling public confession. In a carefully arranged ritual, Machida acknowledged his guilt in covering up and thereby perpetuating social discrimination against Japanese outcaste groups. Five years earlier in Princeton, New Jersey, during the previous World Conference on Religion and Peace in 1979, Machida had convinced his fellow delegates in the Conference's Human Rights Commission to remove any mention of the plight of outcastes in Japan from the text of their final report.<sup>1</sup> At the earlier conference Machida had denied that discrimination against members of identifiable outcaste groups still occurred in Japan and said that any suggestion otherwise would insult Japan's national honor.<sup>2</sup> In Kenya, Machida not only apologized and reversed his earlier stand, he also insured that problems of social discrimination in Japan's established religions would occupy a prominent position in the world conference's agenda (TOMONAGA 1989, pp. 214-18; TAYLOR and GEBHARDT 1986, pp. v, 169-73, 207-12, 232).

Machida Muneo's dramatic about-face represents more than one man's change of heart. In 1979 Machida was the president of the Buddhist Federation of Japan and the secretary general of the Sōtō Zen school, the largest single Buddhist denomination in Japan. When news of his denials at Princeton were reported in Japan it produced a

<sup>1</sup> The final text of the findings of the WCRPIII Commission on Religion and Human Dignity, Responsibility, and Rights included the following passage: "We should all be deeply concerned with the plight of people such as the so-called untouchables. We ask all religious people of those societies where untouchability still lingers to look deep inside their own hearts and eradicate this evil practice" (HOMER 1980, p. 115). According to TOMONAGA Kenzō (1989, p. 214), the original text of this finding read as follows (my translation from the Japanese): "We should all be deeply concerned with the plight of people such as the Burakumin of Japan and the Untouchables of India." Only after Machida protested at least three times was the text revised to eliminate all direct and indirect reference to Japan. The full text of Machida's subsequent apology was published by the Sōtō School (MACHIDA 1984).

<sup>2</sup> According to reports in the Buddhist newspaper *Chūgai nippō* 中外日報 (11 October 1979) Machida first told the members of the commission: "In Japan today an 'outcaste problem' (*buraku mondai*) does not exist. As a Japanese I know this very well. There are some groups who use 'outcaste problem' or 'outcaste liberation' as a pretext to create uproars, but the actual situation within Japan is that no one encounters discrimination. The government does not engage in discrimination. No one else engages in discrimination. It is just that until a hundred years ago during the feudal period such discrimination existed to a certain extent, so that some biased emotions persist. But no one actually practices discrimination. Therefore, this passage must be removed. It is a matter of Japanese national honor" (reprinted in SOTOSHU SHUMUCHO, ed., 1982, pp. 2-3). Machida repeated these assertions in subsequent protests and insisted that not just mention of Japan but also all words associated with outcastes in Japan, such as *buraku* or *burakumin*, must be deleted. As noted by WAGATSUMA and DE VOS (1967, p. 374), "A major 'coping' technique of Japanese society in respect to the general problem of discrimination concerning this group is avoidance or tacit denial that any problem exists."

firestorm of protest among outcaste groups—the members of which are now commonly referred to by the euphemisms *buraku* 部落 or *burakumin* 部落民.<sup>3</sup> They clearly perceived that Machida's cover-up would not only help perpetuate the widespread but largely hidden social discrimination in Japanese society, but also would help legitimate similar attempts at denial by cloaking them in nationalist rhetoric. The chair of the Buraku Liberation League (Buraku Kaihō Dōmei 部落解放同盟), Matsui Hisayoshi 松井久吉, immediately wrote a protest letter demanding to know how Machida, as a religious person and representative of Japanese Buddhism, could deny the reality of outcaste discrimination in the name of protecting Japan's national honor. The Sōtō leadership was horrified at this new public relations problem. They issued public apologies, admitted the errors of Machida's actions, and insisted that the Sōtō school did not condone any form of social discrimination. Discriminatory practices ended, they claimed, with the Taishō period (1912–1926); incriminating statements found in Sōtō publications were dismissed as old information that was no longer used. In response the Buraku Liberation League organized a series of their trademark “Confess and Denounce” (*kakunin kyūdan* 確認糾弾) Assemblies.

Confess and Denounce Assemblies resemble public trials in which the perpetrators of incorrect actions are interrogated repeatedly, their defenses and explanations are *denounced*, concrete evidence of the harm caused by such action is presented, until eventually the subjects of interrogation are forced to publicly *confess* their own prejudices.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the next four years Machida and other Sōtō leaders were interrogated at five assemblies (two in 1981, two in 1982, and one in 1983). At these very public events (one of which occurred within the National Diet Building), the Sōtō leadership soon realized that simple apologies and denials of discriminatory practices only made a bad public relations problem worse. Confess and Denounce Assemblies

<sup>3</sup> After the Emancipation Edict of 1872 officially abolished the legal basis of outcaste status a wide variety of names have been used to designate outcasts and the ghettos into which they were segregated. All such terms have acquired negative social connotations. As noted by DE VOS and WAGATSUMA: “It is a mark of the covert nature of the Japanese outcaste problem that terms tend to become pejorative once they gain general usage” (1966b, p. 5). In earlier times the term *buraku* simply meant “village” or “hamlet.” After 1872 outcaste hamlets came to be known as *tokushu buraku* (special villages, i.e., ghettos) or *mikaihō buraku* (pre-liberation villages/ghettos), or simply *buraku*, while the residents of the ghettos and their descendants were called *burakumin* (citizens of the *buraku*). These are the terms that have gained general currency among Western scholars. See KOBAYASHI et al., 1991, pp. 277–82 s.v. “buraku.”

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the practice of Confess and Denounce Assemblies, see TOTTEN and WAGATSUMA 1966, p. 44.

immediately publicized the Sōtō school's deep and ongoing involvement in a wide variety of discriminatory practices. Liberation League spokesmen asserted that some Sōtō Zen temples in Japan kept necrologies (*kakochō* 過去帳) in which the ancestors of outcaste members of their congregations were clearly identified, sometimes by derogatory Buddhist titles that imply meanings such as "beasts" or "less than human." Indeed, Sōtō priests routinely allowed access to these memorial registers by private investigators, who perform background checks to insure that prospective marriage partners or company executives do not come from outcaste families. Liberation League members searched through the published writings of Sōtō Zen masters throughout history, pointing out discriminatory remarks directed against outcastes, women, the physically impaired, and foreigners. Secret ritual manuals published by the Sōtō Zen Headquarters as recently as 1973 were found to contain many expressions of caste prejudice, such as instructions on how Zen clerics can maintain ritual purity while dealing with outcastes (SŌTŌSHŪ SHŪMUCHŌ 1983, pp. 5-12, 563-65; SUGIMOTO 1982, pp. 1-23, 125-28). Each new assembly produced more negative publicity. Sōtō leaders were forced to acknowledge active and ongoing participation in discriminatory practices. Finally, at the fifth (and last) Confess and Denounce Assembly, which occurred at Sōtō Zen main headquarters in Tokyo, Machida read a statement in which he acknowledged his personal prejudices, admitted the injustice of heretofore accepted Sōtō practices, and pledged to dedicate the Sōtō school to the elimination of all forms of social discrimination (TOMONAGA 1989, pp. 214-18).

It was these Liberation League attacks on Sōtō Zen's tradition of institutional discrimination and Machida's pledge to end it that set the stage for his subsequent public performance in Kenya. Thus, Machida's confession and apology at the 1984 World Conference on Religion and Peace embodied far more than mere personal drama: it symbolized a turning point in ongoing efforts by the Sōtō Zen school to redefine its traditions and to find an appropriate religious role in modern Japan.

During the past century Sōtō Zen, like all Buddhist institutions in Japan, has witnessed tumultuous changes. Its population of clerics has changed from (at least officially) 100% celibate monks to more than 90% married priests who manage Zen temples as family business. Its Zen nuns, who formerly had no ecclesiastical status and no voice in matters of religious training, now function as fully certified Sōtō Zen masters, charged with the leadership of their own Zen monasteries. Wives, who were once taboo, now can become religious teachers who

sometimes assist their husband priests in the performance of Zen rituals, and, more often than not, play a role in local Sōtō Zen temple affairs more important than that of their husbands (KAWAHASHI 1995; READER 1985; UCHINO 1983). Land reforms ordered by the postwar Occupation authorities deprived Sōtō temples of 82% of their lands and of all the income those lands had generated. Demographic changes accompanying Japan's postwar industrial resurgence have further threatened Sōtō Zen's economic well-being. Today the vast majority of Sōtō Zen temples remain in the countryside, in small rural villages, but more than 70% of the Japanese population lives in large urban centers. Recent generations have literally left rural Zen temples behind as irrelevant to the needs of modern urban life (MORIOKA 1975, pp. 104–105).

The Sōtō Zen leadership remained largely passive in the face of these historic changes, merely reacting to events. For example, they stubbornly ignored the increasingly vocal demands of wives and nuns until the shortage of male clerics during the Second World War forced them to acknowledge the importance of women in Sōtō Zen religious life. Even in the postwar period they resisted any efforts to modernize traditional methods of Zen training, religious ideals, and ritual practices to better reflect new social realities. They continue to define Sōtō orthodoxy in terms of celibate monasticism (*shukke shugi* 出家主義) in spite of the fact that the school operates only thirty-one monasteries compared to nearly 15,000 temples, the vast majority of which function as the private homes of married priests and their wives and children. Although this summary oversimplifies both the nature of the criticisms and the complex interplay between Sōtō religious praxis (*zazen*) and Sōtō's broader social mission, in the eyes of many younger clerics and critics Sōtō Zen leadership has seemed hide-bound and conservative, trapped in a past that no longer exists and more concerned with maintaining their own positions of institutional power than addressing the religious realities of modern Japan.

Until now. Ironically, the public humiliation of Machida and his pledge to eliminate institutional prejudice presented reform-minded Sōtō Zen clerics with an opportunity to seize the initiative. As the anti-discrimination campaign gained momentum it discredited the older generation of Sōtō leaders who had allied themselves with prewar notions of social hierarchy and class privilege, while helping empower the younger generation of Sōtō Zen activists in their attempt to make the sect face current issues of social and political injustice. As a result of these developments in 1982 the Sōtō Zen administrative headquarters created a Central Division for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (Jinken Yōgo Suishin Honbu 人権擁護推進本部, here-

after cited as “Human Rights Division”), with its own publishing arm and the ability to convene its own academic conferences. Other groups, such as the one for Contemporary Sōtō Teachings (Gendai Kyōgaku Kenkyū Sentā), are also staffed with reform-minded, intellectual Sōtō Zen priests.

Riding the bandwagon of “ending discrimination,” younger Sōtō leaders in these two divisions and elsewhere have attempted not just to redefine the social policy agenda for Sōtō Zen Headquarters, but also to change the direction of academic research at Sōtō Zen educational institutions—most notably Komazawa University, one of Japan’s leading centers for the academic study of Buddhism. They have invited leading Buddhist scholars to academic conferences on social issues and published their findings in several new series of books, with series titles such as: “Religion and Discrimination” (*Shūkyō to sabetsu* 宗教と差別, 9 vols.), “Discrimination and Human Rights” (*Sabetsu to jinken* 差別と人権, 7 vols.), “Religion and Human Rights” (*Shūkyō to jinken* 宗教と人権, 3 vols.), and “[Sōtō] Doctrines and Discrimination” (*Kyōgaku to sabetsu* 教学と差別, 2 vols.).<sup>5</sup> Significantly, these reform efforts concern more than just social policy. The wave of self-criticism and self-examination prompted by the Machida affair has gone so far as to challenge many hallowed Buddhist traditions. Indeed, some Sōtō Zen scholars, advocating what they call “Critical Buddhism” (*hihan Bukkyō* 批判仏教), have begun questioning basic tenets of Japanese Buddhism. While calls for a new Critical Buddhism have prompted much interest among American scholars of East Asian Buddhism, little attention has been paid to the particular Sōtō context of social discrimination and current reform campaigns from which they arose.<sup>6</sup> Like most aspects of Japanese religious life there is more (and less) to Critical Buddhism than is readily apparent on the surface. The remainder of this article will attempt to correct this imbalance by

<sup>5</sup> To date the “Religion and Discrimination” series includes ARAI 1985; HAYASHI 1985; KOMORI 1985; SAKURAI 1987; SOTOSHU JINKEN YOGO SUISHIN HONBU 1988a, 1988b, 1993a; TAMAMURO 1985, 1986. The “Religion and Human Rights” series includes IGETA 1993; SOTOSHU JINKEN YOGO SUISHIN HONBU 1993b; TSUYUNO 1993. And the “[Sōtō] Doctrines and Discrimination” series includes KASUGA 1994 and ISHIKAWA 1995. Because all the titles in the “Discrimination and Human Rights” series are out of print I was unable to consult them.

<sup>6</sup> The American Academy of Religion 1993 Annual Meeting in Washington, D.C., included a panel sponsored by the Buddhism Section and Japanese Religions Group titled “Critical Buddhism (*hihan Bukkyō*): Issues and Responses to a New Methodological Movement.” Papers examining various doctrinal assertions of Critical Buddhism were presented by Steven Heine, Jamie Hubbard, Dan Lusthaus, and Nobuyoshi Yamabe, with responses by Paul Swanson and Matsumoto Shirō. Surprisingly, only the oral remarks of Swanson and Matsumoto explicitly raised the issue of social discrimination. For published assessments of Critical Buddhism, see GREGORY 1994, HEINE 1994, and SWANSON 1993.

examining first the historical evidence for discriminatory practices engaged in by Sōtō Zen temples, and then the recent efforts of the Sōtō Zen establishment to correct these abuses. In conclusion it will reexamine the role of Critical Buddhism within these larger issues and question the meaning of reform for modern Sōtō Zen.

*Social Discrimination in Sōtō Zen*

Since the Machida affair Sōtō spokesmen have insisted publicly that the types of social discrimination found in Sōtō rituals and temple practices are rooted in the medieval institutional regulations imposed by the Tokugawa regime, not in the religious attitudes, religious practices, or religious mission of Sōtō Zen itself. In other words, the legacy of governmental policies imposed on Sōtō temples from the outside are responsible for perpetuating the prejudice and abuses found inside Sōtō Zen today. This position is at least partially correct. From 1635 (when the *tera-uke* 寺請 system began) until 1871 (the year that legal enforcement of outcaste segregation officially ended), nearly all Buddhist temples, not just Sōtō, were legally obligated to function essentially as part of the police arm of the government in supervising local populations. Buddhist temples operated as the first-line troops charged with enforcing the government's absolute prohibition of Christianity and suppression of "heterodox" Buddhist sects. This system aligned the religious authority of Buddhist temples with many of the worst features of government oppression.

Under what we now refer to as the temple registration (*tera-uke*) system, local Buddhist temples recorded local censuses and kept the tax rolls.<sup>7</sup> The government required every villager to register with and support a local Buddhist temple, which in turn was required to register with and support a hierarchy of regional temples, which too were registered with and supported the government. The primary purpose of temple registration was to certify that no local families were Christians or members of Buddhist groups deemed subversive by the government. But Buddhist temples also certified the identity, genealogy, residence, occupation, property, and tax obligations of all village families. They recorded all births and enjoyed a virtual monopoly on funerals. Regulations required every local family to renew their registration at the same temple every year without fail. After around 1700, when this system became well established, members of any given family

<sup>7</sup> The information in these paragraphs is based on the research of TAMAMURO Fumio (1980; especially as summarized in TAMAMURO 1985 and 1986).

normally could not change temple affiliation, move to a different location, nor assume a new occupation. Temple registration played a major role in the implementation of the rigid class distinctions that were legally enforced by the Tokugawa regime. For these reasons, temple records often contain detailed information concerning the social status and occupation of local village families.

For the religious and economic life of local temples, necrologies (*kakochō*) were (and remain today) especially important. These death registries provide essential information for scheduling the series of Buddhist memorial services that must be performed over a period of years after a funeral. For many rural village temples these regularly scheduled memorial services provide the main source of income. According to Tokugawa-period regulations former Christians and their descendants down to the fifth generation (which, if this system had continued, would be alive today) could not be registered in the standard temple necrologies, but had to be recorded separately in a book known as “off the registry” (*chō hazure* 帳外れ; KOBAYASHI 1987, pp. 173–75; TAMAMURO 1985, pp. 38–40). In many cases the families of outcasts, criminals, homeless people, lepers, and the disabled were also recorded separately. In effect, temples could designate which families should be segregated by necrologies, and in so doing could determine which families should be subject to segregation in religious rituals and in the affairs of village life. Naturally, this power to designate social status gave rise to many abuses. Many temple schools (*terakoya* 寺子屋), for example, taught students basic literacy by having them copy out documents that, among other provisions, promised to punish any families that failed to donate to the local temple, that failed to observe all regularly scheduled memorial rites, or that dared to have a funeral performed at another temple. Significantly, the threatened punishments included not just notifying the authorities but also striking the family’s name from the standard necrology (TAMAMURO 1985, pp. 34–58).

Segregation of entries was not the only way that temple records reflected the rigid social distinctions of Tokugawa society. Even names *within* the standard necrologies did not enjoy equal status. It is important to note that temple necrologies usually record not just the family name of the deceased and the time of death but also a series of posthumous Buddhist titles. Japanese Buddhist funeral rites usually entail a prior Buddhist ordination (which can be conducted posthumously) during which the deceased receives an ordination name. In a necrology ordination names are usually prefixed by several types of honorary Buddhist titles and followed by a religious designation (such as master,

monk, nun, devotee, etc.). In general, the higher the social status of the deceased the more elaborate the titles and the more exalted the religious designations are. Conversely, the ordination names of people of lower social status might be recorded without any honorary titles and with lesser religious designations. Sometimes certain titles correspond to particular occupations or residential areas. Among similar names and titles, ones written with more complex Chinese graphs represent higher status (KOBAYASHI 1987, pp. 177–96; SŌTOSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1994b). Because of the complexities of the titles and the use of obscure Buddhist terminology the exact correlation between occupations, social status, and the entries in any given temple's necrology usually is clear only to the resident priests at that particular temple. Thus the Buddhist titles in necrologies often function almost as a secret social code, incomprehensible to the average Japanese.

Occasionally necrology entries are more explicitly discriminatory (for detailed lists of examples, see KOBAYASHI 1987, pp. 249–342). The simplest method is to indent entries for people of outcaste status. Or the Chinese graphs used to write the names might be written in an unusual fashion. Brush strokes were omitted (e.g., *shin* 新 for 新, *en* 圓 for 圓, *rei* 灵 for 靈) or extra strokes added (e.g., *mon* 門, 門, or 門 for 門). Lexical elements indicating “servant” or “leather” might be inserted into seemingly innocuous Chinese graphs (e.g., *mon* 問, *zen* 禪). Outcastes might simply be labeled as *sendara* 旃陀羅, the Japanese transliteration of the Sanskrit word *caṇḍāla*, which refers to those who are beneath any caste classification. More often the term *sendara* was abbreviated as *senda* (梅陀, 千陀, 千駄, 須陀) or simply indicated by use of homonymic graphs for the syllable *sen* (參, 善, 全). Unfortunately for the image of Zen temples, a favorite code word for *sen* was the graph used to write the *zen* of Zen Buddhism, in both standard (禪 or 禪) and variant forms (禪, 禪). Sometimes the religious designation plainly states “beast” (*chiku* 畜, 畜, 竹; occasionally abbreviated as *gen* 玄), “servant” (*boku* 僕, 卜, 僕), “leather worker” (*kaku* 革, 革), or other occupations associated with outcaste status. Similar derogatory code words were carved on family tombstones, leaving a permanent public record of the prior social status of those families.

When Sōtō leaders identify discriminatory practices remaining from Tokugawa government policies, they are referring to the sensitive family information contained in temple necrologies. The most widespread and persistent form of outcaste rejection in Japan continues to be the marriage taboo. It is routine for courtships to be blocked, proposed marriages called off, and accomplished marriages annulled

once outcaste status is discovered.<sup>8</sup> Because Japanese of outcaste status pose no special identifying physical characteristics, their family histories provide the only clues by which the families of their prospective marriage partners can judge social acceptability. Necrologies, naturally, are primary sources for the investigation of family histories and are therefore primary targets of the Buraku Liberation League. Before the Machida affair Japanese Buddhist temples of all persuasions openly cooperated with private investigators seeking information on hereditary family status. Continued Sōtō involvement in this practice was confirmed in 1984, just as Sōtō leaders thought the Machida affair resolved, when it was disclosed that a Sōtō temple in Hiroshima had aided the marriage of a parishioner by writing a letter in 1981 stating that her family were not outcastes even though they lived near a ghetto. This disclosure highlighted for all to see the ongoing role of Sōtō institutions in perpetuating social discrimination against people of outcaste background (TOMONAGA 1989, 3, pp. 221-22). The Buraku Liberation League organized seven new Confess and Denounce Assemblies to publicize the Sōtō School's failure to implement meaningful reform following the Machida affair (SŌTŌSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1994a, pp. 44-45).

Prompted by this and similar incidents, the Sōtō Human Rights Division regards the elimination of discriminatory necrologies as its number one priority. Over a ten-year period it sent three-man teams to conduct on-site investigations of the necrologies and tombstones at every single Sōtō temple in Japan. It has compiled a list of temples with outcaste parishioners, with discriminatory necrologies or tombstones, and with other problematic documents. It has offered to consult with the families named in these records to find acceptable replacement ordination names and titles that are free of discriminatory connotations. And it has provided new necrologies, new memorial tablets (*ihai* 位牌), and new tombstones at no charge to the local temples or parishioners. As of 1995 about half of the objectionable documents and tombstones have been replaced. Officials at the Human Rights Division assured me that the old records are not destroyed but preserved where only authorized historians can gain access to them. Moreover, the Human Rights Division has sent every temple labels with the word "Secret" (*etsuran kinshi* 閲覧禁止) in large graphs to paste on all necrologies, and has provided them with signs saying "No Status Investigations" (*mimoto chōsa okotowari* 身元調査おことわり) to post in entryways and offices (SŌTŌSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1994b).

<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the social factors behind the persistence of this taboo see DE VOS and WAGATSUMA 1966a; WAGATSUMA and DE VOS 1967.

Interestingly, the results of the temple survey published by the Human Rights Division contradict the findings reported in Buraku Liberation League sources. TOMONAGA Kenzō, the author of a recent survey of liberation issues (1989, p. 221) reports, for example, that as of January 1983 discriminatory necrologies had been identified in 5,649 Sōtō temples, 254 Tendai temples, 1,771 Jōdoshū temples, and 40 Kōyasan Shingonshū temples, while discriminatory tombstones had been found at 1,911 Sōtō temples, 10 Tendai temples, 231 Jōdoshū temples, and 102 Kōyasan Shingon temples. In short, Tomonaga claims that more discriminatory necrologies and tombstones are found at Sōtō temples than at temples of any other Buddhist denomination in Japan, even though most outcaste families are not affiliated with Sōtō. In contrast, the Human Rights Division reports that as of 1994 discriminatory necrologies and tombstones have been identified through on-site investigations at a total of only 235 Sōtō temples. Accurate statistics are impossible to find because of the understandable inclination of liberation spokesmen to repeat the highest published figures and of local temple clerics to conceal evidence, even from representatives of their own denomination's headquarters (KOBAYASHI 1987, p. 16).

While efforts to eliminate prejudicial necrologies represent a positive step, the Sōtō school's identification of discrimination with historical developments foreign to the school's basic religious message is problematic. First, Sōtō religious teachings cannot be so easily separated from their institutional homes, which not only promoted Sōtō teachings but also implemented Tokugawa-period policies. After all, the network of rural temples that constitute the economic backbone of modern Sōtō also are a Tokugawa-period legacy. Parishioners feel at least as much, if not more, loyalty to local temple traditions as to abstract Sōtō doctrines. The Sōtō school's attempts to disassociate itself from its history, if carried to its logical extremes, implies a rejection of its local temple base. A Liberation League spokesman pointed out this startling implication at yet another Confess and Denounce Assembly in June 1993. When a Sōtō representative argued that the Sōtō school regrets how the political pressures of past policies forced them to deviate from fundamental Buddhist teachings, the Liberation League spokesman asked: "Doesn't the process of repudiating the long historical development of Japanese Sōtō in the name of 'returning to original teaching' require the dissolution (*kaitai* 解体) of the entire Sōtō denomination?" (SŌTŌSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1993b, p. 18b).

Second, the Human Rights Division's identification of discrimina-

非人亡者之切紙  
 自家初世具難具衣裳刀共悉送捨其身乞食渡時了  
 強男尤方右腕縫液非人引動時子不持者後午切也  
 其後截刀身代相悉送時文曰因果業性靈除滅尽  
 未來際直加根祿此文書久詭恣又其出門楷下可  
 理其後或人間可引導此法可秘之癩痲病之夏從疾風  
 上不置居座敷不居蓋不吞平性如是又去引導大切也  
 蓋何黑色不致此符各而引導七日居座可敷其親  
 兄弟此符百日之間不可指供養平人代也四向無  
 下煙云沙元來不生不滅无父无母无兄弟此土自去不來轉  
 廻顛倒直斷絶

Figure 1. "Hinjin indō no kirikami"  
as found in a necrology from a Sōtō temple.

tion problems with the historical traditions of local temples has alienated many of the same rural priests whom they have tried to reach with their reform message. In anonymous conversations it is difficult to find Sōtō priests at small temples who have kind words for the reform activities of the Sōtō Headquarters or its Human Rights Division. They resent attempts by the centralized bureaucracy to dictate local policies. While no one would speak for the record, commonly

voiced complaints include: the Human Rights Division does not publicize what is good about Japanese Buddhism, but only criticizes the past; they treat common clerics as if they are the enemy; they try to force priests to repeat the same slogans and use the same politically correct vocabulary, not to solve the problems but just to satisfy their own appetite for power.<sup>9</sup> One priest even compared the clerics working in the Sōtō Headquarters to corporate “salary men” and

government tax collectors bereft of any religious vocation. In the course of these conversations, admittedly an unscientific sample, it became clear that many local priests regard temple necrologies as religious documents, not as social issues, and certainly not as items subject to review or criticism by outsiders. In their eyes necrologies are the private treasure of local temples, essential for performing the cycle of ancestral rites that directly address the religious needs of temple patrons.

Third, the history of social discrimination in Sōtō Zen, and in Japanese Buddhism as a whole, did not begin with Tokugawa government policies. If government policies alone set the pattern for subsequent forms of social discrimination, then one might reasonably expect to find similar types of discrimination nationwide wherever Sōtō temples exist in proximity to outcaste ghettos. Instead, wide variation seems to be the rule. Likewise, even before the 1635 implementation of the temple registration system Sōtō Zen teachers already had developed special funeral rituals for people of “non-human” (*hinin* 非人, i.e., outcaste) status as well as for victims of mental illness, leprosy, and other socially unaccepted diseases. Secret initiation documents, generally known as “Hinjin indō no kirikami” (the earliest known example of which is dated 1611; see figure 1), describe the



Figure 2. Special talisman for protection from deceased outcastes.

<sup>9</sup> Lest any of my colleagues within Japanese Sōtō attempt to identify these statements with shared acquaintances, let me state for the record that I heard each of these complaints from several different sources, usually from priests who reside in different prefectures and who do not know each other.

details of these rites.<sup>10</sup> Instead of being directed toward the salvation of the deceased, as in other Sōtō funeral procedures, these rites were designed to sever all karmic connections between the deceased and local people. Special talismans were attached to the corpse and to the entrance of his/her dwelling negating relations to parents, family, and other humans in all directions (see figure 2). In this way the deceased would be prevented from returning as a ghost to haunt those who were responsible for the discrimination. Such documents commonly state that the proper spiritual rites (*indō* 引導) will be conducted in the future only after the deceased attains true human status (ISHIKAWA 1984, pp. 153–58; HIROSE 1988, pp. 617–20). Procedures for such rituals were published by the Sōtō school as recently as 1973 (SUGIMOTO 1982, pp. 125–28).

The legalized social distinctions of the Tokugawa period derived at least in part from preexisting notions of social status, many of which were reinforced by Buddhist teachings in general and by Sōtō Zen teachings in particular. Social discrimination against slaves, lepers, criminals, strangers, residents of undesirable areas, etc., has a long history in Japan. While scholars no longer believe that the origins of outcaste groups can be explained solely in terms of religious impurity (such as that resulting from the violation of taboos on animal butchering), appeals to religious sentiments certainly served to rationalize preexisting prejudices.<sup>11</sup> Buddhist doctrines of karmic retribution, in particular, suggest that disadvantaged people deserve their miserable fates. Chapter 28 of the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example, warns that whoever slanders the scripture will be stricken with leprosy, or will be reborn blind or with harelips, flat noses, deformed limbs, body odor, impurities, and so forth, for many lives (Taishō edition 9.62a). Likewise, the *Great Perfection of Wisdom Treatise* states that karmic retribution for previous sins prevents victims of leprosy—who as a group have suffered some of the most severe social discrimination—from ever being cured (*Daichidoron* 大智度論, T 25.479a).

Sōtō documents and recorded sermons frequently cite similar karmic notions not only to justify existing social distinctions but also to assert that outcastes, the disabled, and other people deemed useless to society cannot possibly attain awakening. The blind cannot

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the variety and transmission of initiation documents in Sōtō Zen, see BODIFORD 1993, pp. 151–62.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent summary of current academic theories on the origins of outcaste groups with bibliographical citations see KOBAYASHI et al. 1991, pp. 282–87, s.v. “Buraku no kigensetsu.” For Western-language histories of outcastes, see NAGAHARA 1979; NINOMIYA 1933; PRICE 1966; and SABOURET 1983. Regarding Japanese notions of ritual impurity, see NAMIHIRA 1985.

read the scriptures; the deaf cannot listen to sermons; the mute cannot chant; cripples cannot sit in a proper meditation posture. And as explained in the last four lines of a verse commonly cited in published Sōtō sermons, known as the “Ten Fates Preached by the Buddha” (*Bussetsu jūrai* 佛說十來), all of these afflictions are the victim’s own fault:

Short lifespans come from butchering animals (*tanmei ji sesshō rai* 短命自殺生來).

Ugliness and sickness come from ritual impurities (*byōshin ji fujō rai* 病身自不淨來).

Poverty and desperation come from miserly thoughts (*hinkyū ji kendon rai* 貧窮自慳貪來).

Being crippled and blind come from violating the Buddhist precepts (*genmō ji hakai rai* 患盲自破戒來).

(SŌTŌSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1988a, p. 4)

During the late Tokugawa and Meiji periods the ideas expressed in this verse were well known even among uneducated Japanese. It was not a coincidence that Shimazaki Tōson (1872–1943) used the word *hakai* from the last line of this verse as the title of his pioneering novel—published with his own money in 1906—about the life of an outcaste who attempted to “pass” in ordinary society (SHIMAZAKI 1974).

Based on teachings such as the above, Japanese often interpreted the notion of karma in fatalistic terms linked to cultural taboos and notions of ritual pollution (NAMIHIRA 1985). The ritual impurity that Japanese associate with blood, especially menstrual blood, was merged with karmic notions to justify a wide variety of misogynic Zen rituals. Women were taught that menstrual blood pollutes the earth and offends the spirits. Because of this evil karma they are doomed to a special Buddhist Blood Hell, from which only Sōtō Zen monks can save them. Women must rely on the Sōtō Zen monks to provide them with a special talisman, a specially consecrated copy of the *Menstruation Hell Scripture* (*Ketsubonkyō* 血盆經, an apocrypha; see figure 3) to save them from this unpleasant fate (BODIFORD 1993, pp. 206–207; TAKEMI 1983).

These misogynic interpretations of karma, which are common to all forms of Japanese Buddhism, did not disappear with Japan’s modernization. To cite just one example, fear of karmic retribution has helped propel explosive growth in Buddhist pacification rites for aborted fetuses (*mizuko kuyō* 水子供養). Advertisements by Buddhist (and non-Buddhist) temples that perform *mizuko kuyō* services commonly emphasize the torments suffered by the aborted child in ways



Figure 3. Cover for the *Menstruation Hell Scripture* formerly distributed at Sōtō temples.

major goal (after the elimination of discriminatory necrologies). Its 1988 revision of the Sōtō ritual manual (i.e., the *Gyōji kihan* 行事規範) was only one example of its efforts toward this end. They ordered recalls of at least five other Sōtō publications, including one volume of the *Complete Sōtō Scriptures* (*Sōtōshū zensho* 曹洞宗全書), that were found to teach discriminatory doctrines. But the history of Sōtō discrimination was not denied or covered up. They issued new editions of the recalled texts with the original discriminatory passages left in place exactly as they were in the original. The new editions, however, contained new introductions with formal apologies for the pain caused by such doctrines and explanations of why these Sōtō doctrines violate what the Human Rights Division has identified as funda-

designed to exploit the guilty conscience of the mother. They explain that the aborted fetuses will eventually return to this world to seek vengeance on the mother who refused them birth, an unpleasant fate that can be avoided only by performing *mizuko kuyō* services under the direction of Buddhist priests (LAFLEUR 1992, pp. 160–76; WERBLOWSKY 1991, pp. 319–23). Until recently Buddhist clerics, whether Sōtō or not, have rarely questioned such misogynic interpretations of karma. They have appeared repeatedly in Zen sermons and Zen literature down to the present day. Instructions for *mizuko kuyō* rites appeared in the standard Sōtō Zen ritual manual until pressure from the Machida affair forced its revision in 1988 (SŌTŌSHŪ SHŪMUCHŌ KYŌGAKUBU 1988; also see SAKURAI 1987; and SŌTŌSHŪ SHŪMUCHŌ 1992, pp. 162–63). Distribution of the *Menstruation Hell Scripture* to women continued until the same year.

The Sōtō Human Rights Division regards the reform of contemporary Sōtō teachings as its second



Figure 4. Talisman to ward off  
“female pollution.”

mental Buddhist principles. Charms formerly issued by Sōtō temples to counter “female pollution” have been banned (see figure 4). Ritual prayers on behalf of aborted fetuses (*mizuko*), the ruler (i.e., *tennō* 天皇), and “the spirits of the glorious war heroes” (*eirei* 英靈) have been publicly repudiated. In 1993 the former Sōtō monk Uchiyama Gudō (1878–1911), who had been stripped of clerical status and executed for his anti-imperial propaganda, was officially rehabilitated (i.e., readmitted to clerical status). In 1992 the Sōtō Headquarters published an official acknowledgment of guilt for its role in supporting military conquest and an apology for the activities of Sōtō missionaries in occupied territories, especially Korea. Major Sōtō temples now perform annual memorial rites on behalf of the victims of Sōtō religious discrimination and Japanese military aggression (SŌTOSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1994a).

Of course the Sōtō Headquarters and the Human Rights Division lack any direct means to control the religious activities of individual Sōtō temples. Indeed, as mentioned above, their efforts to impose what is perceived at the local level as little more than artificial “political correctness” has resulted in widespread animosity among village clerics. Public statements that the Buraku Liberation League wields too much influence

are on the rise, as are anti-outcaste incidents at Sōtō institutions (e.g., defamatory graffiti at Komazawa University). At the same time, advocates of radical change express frustration at the Human Right Division's emphasis on words rather than actions. Critics within both Sōtō and the outcaste groups view many of the Sōtō statements on behalf of human rights as little more than cynical attempts to appease left-wing pressure groups without fundamentally altering the conservative power structure that dominates the Sōtō hierarchy. Leaders of the Human Rights Division freely acknowledge that they perceive their goal as the reform of Sōtō doctrines and clerical attitudes, not the alteration of long-standing economic and institutional arrangements. The inherent tensions between the social conservatism of Sōtō institutions and the reform of Sōtō social attitudes are not likely to disappear any time soon.

The Human Rights Division organizes two main forms of outreach directed toward local clerics. First, they sponsor regional seminars to which they invite local priests, Buraku Liberation League spokesmen, and Sōtō educators. These seminars provide forums for the frank airing of local concerns and differences. Second, they sponsor academic conferences to reexamine and reform the education and training of Sōtō Zen clerics. Leaders of the Human Rights Division believe that the attitudes of the younger generation of new priests will be easiest to change if they can modify the ways that fundamental Buddhist notions, such as the doctrine of karmic retribution, have been taught within the Sōtō Zen tradition. This reexamination of Buddhist doctrine has proceeded along two related but different lines of inquiry. The first approach is historical and social, focusing on the adaptation of Buddhist teachings to the ideological agendas of Japan's ruling class. The second approach is doctrinal and philological, focusing on the correct understanding of doctrines such as karma that emerged in Indic religion and developed in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese Buddhism. It is this second approach that has generated the most excitement and the most controversy.

#### *Human Rights and Critical Buddhism*

Since the Machida affair several Sōtō Buddhist scholars, principally HAKAMAYA Noriaki (1989, 1990, 1992) and MATSUMOTO Shirō (1989), have asked: Is there some fault in the traditional Japanese understanding of Buddhism that allowed Buddhist institutions to promote social discrimination? Is there some fault that allowed social discrimination to arise in the first place? Not surprisingly, these scholars have

answered in the affirmative. And they have not been shy in promoting their conclusions. In a series of books and articles published since the late 1980s they have argued that Japanese Buddhist thought is not true Buddhism. They have likewise denied the Buddhist label to traditional Japanese Zen. By this they are not denying Zen's historical unity with wider Buddhist traditions nor the fact that Zen proponents view themselves as Buddhists. The problem, as they see it, is that Zen has failed in its responsibility to clarify through critical investigation what is and what is not true Buddhism, glorifying instead such fuzzy notions as "direct intuition" (*chokkan* 直観), "no thought and no imagination" (*munen musō* 無念無想), "no mind" (*mushin* 無心), and "non-reliance on words" (*furyū monji* 不立文字). These Zen ideals have all functioned in the service of authoritarian ideologies by suppressing the possibility of objective critiques. The proponents of this "Zen is not Buddhism" interpretation have termed their scholarly enterprise "Critical Buddhism" (*hihan Bukkyō*).

While it was the hyperbole of Critical Buddhism that earned it its initial notoriety, its true significance lies in the fact that it represents the first time that Japanese Buddhist scholars have applied the same philological rigor normally reserved for Indian and Tibetan Buddhism to their own native Japanese Buddhist traditions. Until now, Japanese Buddhist scholars who chose to write about the Buddhism of their own country have limited themselves mainly to issues of institutional history or pious reiterations of their own sectarian doctrines. Those interested in the critical investigation of doctrinal issues have focused mainly on Indian Buddhism, where their findings are less likely to threaten the status quo. As IENAGA Saburō observed more than thirty years ago, the affiliation of Japanese Buddhist universities with sectarian authorities, places severe limitations, conscious or unconscious, on academic freedom (1965, pp. 30–31; see also YUASA 1982). Investigations of the validity of the teachings of Japanese Buddhism have been taboo, something not suitable for polite academic discussion.

Hakamaya and Matsumoto began their academic careers with research on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, then used the doctrinal concepts they had studied to critique Japanese Buddhism (for an excellent overview, see SWANSON 1993). Significantly, they have not limited their critiques to formal dogma, but have widened them to include Japanese class consciousness and social discrimination, the emperor system, the lack of open public debate in Japanese life, nativist theories of Japanese culture, Japanese attitudes toward nature, and the animistic basis of Shinto religious practices. In short, they

have used nonsectarian Buddhist theory to problematize the roles played by Japanese Buddhism across a wide spectrum of cultural phenomena. On first glance Critical Buddhism seems to have changed the rules of Japanese academic discourse.

On second glance, one must conclude that things are not always what they seem. Viewed within the context of the Sōtō legacy of social discrimination, Critical Buddhism assumes a different visage. Its academic assertions can be seen to shield Sōtō Zen from charges of promoting social oppression and portraying Dōgen (1200–1253), the revered founder of the school, as a friend of the oppressed. To understand how Critical Buddhism serves sectarian aims one must examine its interpretation of Dōgen and how this interpretation functions to defend the faith.

Advocates of Critical Buddhism (principally Hakamaya) argue that previous Sōtō understandings of Dōgen's teachings, especially those interpretations based on the seventy-five fascicle version of Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏, are wrong. Hakamaya portrays Dōgen as one of the very few Japanese Buddhists who actually understood the true principles of Buddhism and critiqued the kinds of false doctrines (such as *hongaku shisō*) that foster social discrimination. Dōgen's critiques appear primarily in his later (and, Hakamaya would say, more mature) works, such as an unfinished twelve-fascicle series of essays. Hakamaya argues that this twelve-fascicle series must be interpreted on its own terms as an independent work that supersedes Dōgen's earlier *Shōbōgenzō*. It is because subsequent Sōtō teachers ignored this work that they fell into the same errors as other Japanese Buddhists (see HEINE 1994).

It is only natural for members of a religious tradition to look to their spiritual roots for answers to current problems, so one can hardly fault the efforts of Sōtō scholars to find in Dōgen's teachings elements relevant to the issue of social discrimination. Even if he accomplished nothing else, Hakamaya certainly breathed new life into tradition-bound Dōgen studies. He generated a firestorm of reactions, opened new avenues of inquiry, and raised important new issues. But at the same time it is possible to question, as Peter GREGORY did in a different context, whether "Matsumoto's and Hakamaya's criticism is critical enough" (1994, p. 195). As Gregory points out, Critical Buddhism displays little critical awareness of its own historical context or of the ways that it serves sectarian ideology (p. 153). This point becomes very clear on reading transcripts of Confess and Denounce Assemblies organized by the Buraku Liberation League against Sōtō. League spokesmen attack not just individual acts of discrimination but also

basic Sōtō social attitudes, charging that the roots of later Sōtō institutional abuses must be traced back to Dōgen. In their view the Sōtō founder lacked the social vision of other contemporaneous Buddhist leaders: Hōnen (1133–1212), who preached to all classes of society, including outcastes; Shinran (1173–1263), who ministered to butchers; Nichiren (1222–1282), who referred to himself as a “son of a *sendara*”; Eison (1201–1290) and Nishō (1217–1303), who organized campaigns to help lepers and people of “nonhuman” (*hinin*) status. Liberation League spokesmen ask what Dōgen did for outcastes. Traditional Sōtō biographies of Dōgen always stress his relationships with aristocrats and upper-level warriors. Dōgen’s writings mention *sendara* (e.g., ŌKUBO, ed. 1969–1970, 2, p. 682), but only in the context of quotations from Buddhist scriptures; Dōgen lets it pass without comment. Dōgen never mentions preaching to outcastes, working to relieve their suffering, or denouncing the social discrimination they face. To make matters worse, in some published editions of Dōgen’s writings the term *sendara* is glossed with the pejorative Japanese word for outcastes, *eta* (which is now taboo in polite society). Liberation League spokesmen cite this evidence to suggest that from its beginning the entire social culture of Sōtō Zen rests on an acceptance of an oppressive structure of class privilege.

Immediately following the Machida affair Sōtō leaders lacked an effective response to this line of attack. Today they turn to the assertions of Critical Buddhism in an effort to frame the argument in more favorable terms. They will say, for example, that other Buddhist leaders may have had closer contact with lower-level social groups, but they failed to fundamentally critique the false doctrines that harmed outcastes. Dōgen might have lacked the opportunity or influence to help outcaste communities of his time, but he repudiated the kinds of false Buddhism that continue to harm outcastes today. Dōgen has not always been properly understood, but his true teachings support the social equality that outcastes seek (e.g., SŌTŌSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU 1993b, pp. 9–14).<sup>12</sup>

In this way Critical Buddhism joins the long history of Sōtō sectarian studies (*shūgaku* 宗学) in presenting an idealized image of Dōgen (or,

<sup>12</sup> It is not surprising that Hakamaya was one of the first Sōtō scholars sent by the headquarters to lecture at the Buraku Liberation League Research Center, where in 1985 he spoke about the origins of social discrimination in Japanese Buddhism (SŌTŌSHŪ JINKEN YŌGO SUISHIN HONBU, ed. 1994a, p. 44). It should be noted, however, that Hakamaya and Matsumoto cannot be held responsible for the ways that Sōtō leaders have used the interpretations of Critical Buddhism for sectarian purposes, many of which they no doubt disapprove. Recently it has been reported that Hakamaya renounced his Sōtō ordination because of friction over this and other issues.

better, Dōgen Zen) unconnected to Sōtō institutions or even to traditional Sōtō teachings about Dōgen. This idealized Dōgen stands outside of his own historical context and social setting, beyond criticism. Individual Sōtō teachers or individual Sōtō temples might be wrong, but the essence of Sōtō (i.e., Dōgen) is always right. Instead of providing “an agenda for the modern social reform of institutional Buddhism” (HEINE 1994, p. 68), Critical Buddhism provides a convenient shield for the forces of institutional conservatism. To the extent that its critiques of Japanese Buddhism and Japanese culture continue to serve this type of sectarian agenda, Critical Buddhism remains trapped in the Dōgen-centric mini-world of Sōtō sectarian studies. Unless Critical Buddhism can escape Dōgen’s ideological gravity it is doubtful if after the initial excitement it will have much lasting influence. That would be a major disappointment. For while the nature of Sōtō institutional reform involves many debatable issues, there is no doubt that the truly critical study of Japanese Buddhism by Japanese (and Western) scholars is sorely needed.

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