

SHIFT THE POWER:

*Buddhist Temple Communities for
an Energy and Social Revolution*

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Cultivating a Buddhist Standpoint on Environmental and Social Justice

Like most Japanese priests in Japan, I was born in a temple and raised to succeed my father as abbot. However, instead of entering the Buddhist Studies Department of the university affiliated with my Jodo Pure Land denomination, I entered the Law and Political Science Department of Keio University. Growing up in the late 1960s and early 1970s, I was strongly influenced by the Japanese student political movement of the era; a movement that is for the most part dead today. Still, my ties to my family temple and my subsequent ordination as a priest, led me to search for the common points in my socio-political interests and my Buddhist path. Eventually, I made the connection between the student movement ideals for political peace with Buddhist values for peace and social justice, such as no poverty and no discrimination. I also eventually saw how environment was connected to peace, and how I could work for society as a priest.

In my 20s, I, and a group of other like-minded Buddhist priests, took several trips abroad to various regions of conflict, especially war torn Indo-China. It was at this time that I discovered how the Japanese economic prosperity of the 1970s and 80s was built on the back of the economic and environmental exploitation of South and Southeast Asia while piggy backing on the political exploitation of the United States in the Middle East.¹ These intimate encounters with the suffering of humanity led us to create AYUS, a Japanese Buddhist NGO focused on supporting small NGOs doing aid work in these areas. At this time, other Japanese Buddhist priests were developing similar concerns and a group of successful, overseas aid Buddhist NGOs sprouted up and continue their work today.² However, these initiatives were not enough to satisfy my political sensibilities for social justice.

Reflecting on the Buddha's Four Noble Truths, I went deeper into the

1 After World War II, the second rise of Japanese economic expansion in South and Southeast Asia is well documented. Following the model established by the United States with the World Bank and U.S. Aid, Japan used the Asian Development Bank and the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) to invest heavily in these regions and exploit natural resources for their industrial development. While attempting to develop energy independence through nuclear power, Japan has continued to rely on the status quo in the Middle East to import oil.

2 Watts, Jonathan S. A Brief Overview of Buddhist NGOs in Japan. *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 31 (2): 417–28, 2004.

nature of the suffering that I had encountered overseas. When Shakyamuni Buddha gained enlightenment, his first teaching was the Four Noble Truths, that is: first, get a solid grasp of the suffering (the problem); second, ascertain its causes and structure; third, form an image of the world to be aimed for; and fourth, act according to correct practices. From this, one gains a sense of the meaning of life in modern society as a citizen with responsibilities in the irreversible course of time. The suffering of the southern peoples and nature, from which we Japanese derive support for our lives even as we exploit it, has caused our community to think.

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The problem is structural in nature, so by changing the system and creating measures for improvement, we achieve results. The first thing is to fulfill our responsibilities to the people around us and to future generations. While other Buddhist priests in Japan may have also seen the structural nature of the second noble truth, almost all have been content in working on the first noble truth of immediate suffering through social welfare and aid work overseas. On the other hand, I decided to engage in my own community to end the complicity with this overseas exploitation rooted in Japanese consumeristic lifestyles. From the critical consciousness developed in understanding the global system of economic, environmental, and political exploitation from engaging in the second noble truth, our community naturally moved into the visionary work of the third noble truth.

For myself, I was able to draw heavily in this process on the teaching of the founder of my Jodo Pure Land denomination, Honen (1133-1212). Honen was the first of the generation of Buddhist reformers who brought Buddhist faith and practice down to the Japanese masses during what is known as the Kamakura Era. This was a time marked by political corruption and chaos as well as numerous natural calamities with the eventual creation

of a military state run by the historically famous Shoguns. Buddhism at that time had become heavily compromised with political authority while using mercenary soldier-priests (*sohei*) to secure its vested interests. Further, the Mahayana Buddhist teachings had become so highly developed and ornate by this time that they were inaccessible to Japan's largely agrarian society. Honen, as a highly accomplished scholar and practitioner, broke with this order by teaching that in this age of decline a committed devotional faith to Amida Buddha and the simple recitation of his name (*Namu Amida Butsu*) was equal to, if not better, than any of the complex practices of the monastic order. This was a radical message that empowered all, especially the poor and marginalized, to practice Buddhism. Yet it obviously had social implications by emboldening the people to find their own agency and take control of their own lives and communities. Honen's teaching's and legacy remind me of the work of Liberation Theology leaders in Latin America and the Philippines.³ For me, his legacy means creating a radically democratic society from the grassroots up, leading to a world without discrimination and exploitation, especially one without a military and nuclear presence.

From Anti-Nuclear Activism to Community-Based Production and Consumption

From my experiences of seeing suffering in Southeast Asia, I became increasingly concerned about their causal connections with our lifestyles in the highly consumerized "bubble economy" of Japan. So in 1993, I joined a group of Japanese religious leaders to form the *Interfaith Forum for the Review of National Nuclear Policy*. The Forum is comprised of religious professionals (Buddhist, Christian, and Shinto priests) from all parts of Japan working on anti-nuclear activities with 40 core representatives and over 800s members. Most of our members do not come from prestigious central positions in Japan's politically passive Buddhist denominations, but rather from the local communities that host nuclear power plants, like Fukushima, which are deeply affected by their daily existence. In April 1992, we convened our first national meeting in Kyoto to rethink the political

³ Machida, Soho. *Renegade Monk: Honen and Japanese Pure Land Buddhism*. Ioannis Mentzas, Trans (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1999).

background of Japan's nuclear policy. This was around the time that the Monju fast breeder reactor, named after the Buddhist bodhisattva Manjusri, was scheduled to achieve criticality. In response, the Forum created an October Action, gathering 70 individuals and over 300 endorsements, to meet in Tokyo and participate in "dialogue" and "protest" inquiries with government officials from the Agency of Natural Resources and Energy and the Agency of Science and Technology. After the earthquake, tsunami, and subsequent nuclear disasters of March 11, 2011, the Forum provided emergency evacuation housing in temples and churches for children and pregnant mothers in the areas around the Fukushima nuclear power plants. While the Forum is today still relatively small in numbers, it consists of some of the most important anti-nuclear religious activists in the nation, such as Rev. Tetsuen Nakajima, who has led community organizations to successfully stop the restart of reactors in his region since 2011.

For myself, based on Honen's teachings, I wanted to work on nurturing my temple community based on trusting relationships and self-reliance. In December 1997, Japan hosted the Third Session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP3), resulting in the well-known Kyoto Protocol. As a way of increasing awareness in my community about this important event, I helped establish the Edogawa Citizen's Network for Thinking about Global Warming (ECNG) in the summer of 1996. Our first project was to learn about global warming by engaging in the recovery of CFCs in our local ward of Edogawa, which was responsible for a high level of such emissions in the central Tokyo 23 ward area due to the concentration of car demolition businesses there. This project led into a deeper investigation of Japan's industrial grid and the generation of electricity.

Until the Fukushima nuclear crisis, the production of electrical power in Japan was monopolized by giant regional utilities in cooperation with the central government. A cluster of vested interests called the "nuclear village"⁴ have controlled this system for decades, creating multi-billion-dollar projects

4 The "nuclear village" consists of: entrenched government bureaucrats, politicians both local and national, utility companies like TEPCO which runs the Fukushima complex, construction companies that build the reactors and even profit off their accidents which they are contracted to clean up, and academics and media who receive various benefits for promoting nuclear energy.

at any cost and pushing local regions into an addictive cycle of economic subsidies in exchange for hosting reactors. ECNG thus made it a goal not only to reduce peak electricity demand and change policy in order to promote the spread of alternative forms of energy, but also to familiarize people with the concept of energy and get communities involved in initiatives. The first test of this was the establishment of the citizens' power plant using solar electrical generation.

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It was decided that the site for this "plant" would be my Juko-in temple, and this required a complete rebuilding of the 400-year old temple using eco-friendly concrete and wood building materials. Two sets of fifteen large solar panels with an output of 5.4kw were installed on the roof of the newly constructed temple in 1999. It was estimated that 3kw would be enough to meet the needs of my family of four, so the "plant" produced a little less than twice that at first. This initiative was an experiment not in creating an alternative form of large-scale electrical generation but, in keeping with my vision of an empowered democratic community, how an individual home could develop sustainable electrical independence.

The first big obstacle to this project was raising the 6 million yen (\$60,000) cost of installing the panels. Grants from government foundations and NGOs paid for around 2.7 million yen; Juko-in Temple funded another 1.5 million yen by prepaying 10 years worth of its electric bills; and the rest was paid with a loan from the newly established, local micro-credit Mirai (Future) Bank. The electricity generated is used only by Juko-in temple, due to laws that prevent the sale of surplus electricity directly to citizens—

another example of the collusion between the government and large electric companies to control the industry. So I ended up selling the surplus back to the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO), the same company that manages the Fukushima reactors. Using this method, it would have taken fifteen years or more to pay off the loan using the profits from this excess energy bought by TEPCO.

The citizens' power plant on the roof of Juko-in temple was an experiment not in creating an alternative form of large-scale electrical generation but, in keeping with my vision of an empowered democratic community, how an individual home could develop sustainable electrical independence.

To expedite this process and develop a more viable community development model, ECNG decided to issue Green Power Certificates. We developed these certificates as a way for people in the community and people we knew who were concerned about these issue to participate in this experiment in energy self-sufficiency. We canvassed people to buy as many certificates as they liked for 1,000 yen (\$10) per certificate at the price of 33 yen/kWh, a figure between the 22 yen/kWh price paid by Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) and the 55 yen/kWh price paid for natural energy in Germany.⁵ In return for the certificates they bought, we created a local currency called *Edogawatt* and provided three 10 unit *Edogawatt* bills for each certificate to use in exchange for baby-sitting,

5 In Europe and other places, there are regions that stipulate the obligation to buy natural energy—which does not put a cost burden on the future by harming the environment or creating radioactive waste—at a higher price than that of energy generated by normal means. This is known as a feed-in tariff (FIT) system. There are also green power systems, which designate power produced by consumers using clean generation methods and purchase it at higher prices.

carrying loads, translating, and other small jobs within the community. This provided an incentive for the creation of a mutual aid society within the community, and we would like to make this a tool for deepening interpersonal relationships and trust. In the end, by selling 200 certificates at 1,000 yen each, we reduced the time for return on investment to within nine years. With the loans having now been paid back, ECNG is making good profits on the surplus electricity it is still selling back to the main grid from the Juko-in Temple roof.

The fulcrum for this whole initiative was the Mirai “Future” Bank that ECNG established based on the micro credit banking systems first developed in Sri Lanka by the well-known Buddhist based Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement under A.T. Ariyaratne and made famous by the Grameen Bank and Nobel Peace Prize Winner Muhammad Yunus in Bangladesh. The bank provided an important amount of capital for installing the solar panels on the roof of Juko-in and for the subsequent power station of 3kw built in 2007 on the roof of an elderly home run by a local NGO on land owned by the temple. The bank also supported a consumer campaign to decrease the amount of electricity used through the purchase of more energy efficient, electrical appliances in the community. In the end, we discovered that if we made only a 700,000 yen (\$7,000) investment in updating community member’s electrical appliances, we could save 2,000 kWh more electricity than generated by the solar panels on the roof on Juko-in Temple that cost 6,000,000 yen (\$60,000) to install. In this way, through both generating our own electricity and saving on the electricity we do use, our temple has become a successful model for realizing the final vision of every home becoming totally energy self-sufficient—thereby empowering it to unplug from centralized electrical grids.

This initiative has fed into another “eco-temple” project at a second temple in Tokyo at which I serve as abbot. I have also completely rebuilt this temple recently using sustainably harvested domestic timber that is long-lasting and chemical free. In this way, we are trying to divest from the large Japanese companies, like Mitsubishi, engaged in destructive logging practices in Southeast Asia. These companies also build low-quality commercial housing filled with toxic chemicals that are causing a variety of health

problems for Japanese today. Another aspect of this project has been putting in a group of 14 individual apartments, built as an entirely cooperative and connected complex with the temple. The apartment owners were brought in at the beginning to help design the construction project, participating in the different stages of the planning and receiving the benefits of a developer in the ability to purchase at a cheaper price. We felt a community based on mutual trust more easily develops in this scenario rather than the usual one in which separate home owners don't know anything about those living next to them.

A crucial aspect of these two eco-temple initiatives is support for the development of local electrical generation through the use of solar, wind, and micro-hydroelectric. One of the great myths propagated by the Japanese industrial complex is that Japan has no natural resources and needs massive centralized electrical systems—especially nuclear power—to fuel its economy and well-being. While the Japanese government, like many other governments, has used the promise of nuclear power to distance itself from oil dependency and fulfill targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, nuclear power has been a means to reinforce a top down social order that ensures the profits of electric companies and their “associates”, exploits laborers in the plants, and robs communities in remote regions of their independence while endangering their future. Our vision of and practices towards a natural energy society would reverse the social hierarchy by decentralizing the production and consumption of energy and empowering localities and individuals to better determine their own futures.

A Global Energy and Social Revolution: An “Eco-Temple” in Every Community in the World

Moving from the local to global, I have been working since 2009 with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) to collaborate on such temple based ecological activities. With INEB's formation of the Interfaith Climate and Ecology network (ICE) in 2012, we have been slowly building an Eco Temple Community Development Project. This project has sought to: 1) share experiences, identify needs, and begin collaboration among core members to support the development of eco-temple communities; and 2)

from this shared knowledge, further develop and articulate an Eco-Temple Community Design Scheme, which can be a planning tool for our own and other eco-temple community initiatives. The Eco Temple Community Design is a holistic development process that involves much more than simply putting solar panels on the roofs of temples. It involves a comprehensive integration of: 1) ecological temple structure and energy system, 2) economic sustainability, 3) integration with surrounding environment, 4) engagement with community and other regional groups (civil society, business, government), and 5) development of spiritual values and teachings on environment, eco-dharma.

We know well about the numerous barriers to localized, clean energy development put up by vested business and political interests. There are also various barriers in the religious world to this work that mostly revolve around social complacency and political conservatism.

As a faith based network, INEB and ICE see one of their key contributions to social change as the reform and revival of our Buddhist and spiritual traditions, especially in this case, the community and the physical presence of a holistic and ecologically minded religious center/temple. Through the religious center/temple, we can contribute greatly to the critical need for education and practice in inner ecology, while connecting that to outer ecological activities such as community mobilization on environmental issues, right livelihood, and, foremost for this project, the establishment of a zero-waste, clean energy temple structure integrated into the local environment. From such a movement, religious communities can have a progressive role in and contribute to wider movements for ecological design and post-industrial societies, critical to the immediate global environmental crisis.

Of course, there are still numerous barriers to this work. We know well

about the numerous barriers to localized, clean energy development put up by vested business and political interests. There are also various barriers in the religious world to this work that mostly revolve around social complacency and political conservatism. The Japanese Buddhist world in which I live has shown little sustained interest in speaking out about the moral dilemmas of nuclear power or global climate change. While there is interest in “green values”, simple-minded religious campaigns for the environment are rarely holistically implemented and often times come off as a kind of “green-wash” to appear up to date with the times. Finally, the level of community involvement and mobilization involved in building my eco-temples is beyond the scope of engagement for most Buddhist priests in Japan. It has been heartening to see colleagues in less developed nations in South and Southeast Asia have greater capabilities in mobilizing their temple communities, while still lacking some basic technology to realize comprehensive eco-temple development. This is why we feel our new network has the potential for increasing the pace of this work through an exchange of best practices and in certain case actual technology exchange.

We feel our message should appeal to everyone in the world who sees the indivisible connection between inner ecology and outer ecology. As I have endeavored to engage and awaken people in my own small communities in Tokyo, I hope that others can try the same in their local religious or spiritual communities. I believe that if we can all transform the way our local communities produce and consume, we can transform the larger global forces that are destroying our planet.



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