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Kenneth Tanaka and American Buddhism

By Grace Laubach

Abstract: In fairly recent history Buddhism has spread west to the United States. In doing so, it has faced many changes and transformations as people from different backgrounds have begun practicing and spreading its practices. In this process, many of the traditional aspects of Buddhism have been lost or traded for more modern ones, which has in turn led to the exclusion of many Buddhists of color from many primarily white, American Buddhist spaces. In analyzing the works of Kenneth Tanaka, the importance of utilizing both modern and traditional aspects of Buddhism within American Buddhism become clear as he discusses how the two can intersect to further authenticity in practice. In relation to other works, Tanaka's findings can be used to conclude how when we allow modern and traditional aspects to intersect, a more authentic and inclusive experience can be had for all.

Keywords: American Buddhism, Kenneth Tanaka, Traditional and Modern Aspects, Authenticity, Inclusivity

As time goes on and humans continue to move and adapt to new situations and environments, everything is bound to transform in some way. We see it in technology, in medicine, and even in religion. Over time, Buddhism has spread throughout different countries and regions and has changed throughout the years. Since the 19th century, it has been traveling west to the United States and ever since the World Wars has transformed immensely in American society. Kenneth Tanaka has studied, taught, and practiced Buddhism in both Japan and the United States; therefore, his work provides an interesting perspective and understanding of what American Buddhism looks like. In its modernization and westernization, Buddhism has—specifically in many white sanghas—strayed further and further from traditional aspects and practices which have negatively impacted many Buddhists of color. Tanaka's work provides insight into how a lack of consideration for, and use of tradition can be exclusionary and inauthentic. When contextualized with the stories and experiences of Asian American Buddhists collected by Chenxing Han for her groundbreaking novel, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists*, the important relationship between the past and present become apparent.

Before further discussing his work, it is important to know who Kenneth Tanaka is and what his relationship and background with Buddhism looks like. Kenneth Tanaka was born in Japan and moved

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to the United States at the age of ten.¹ Since then, he has studied Buddhism all around the world, including the United States and Japan.² He has spent time as a monk in a Thai monastery, taught classes on Buddhism, and served as a Temple Minister.³ In his dedication to the study and practice of Buddhism, he has written many different articles and essays that provide insight into what American Buddhism is and the experiences of those who practice it.⁴

In his essay in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism*, Tanaka addresses how inaccurate and offensive Western characterizations of Pure Land Buddhism have made it more difficult for it to integrate into American culture. He also notes how “contemporary religious understandings are often neither as original nor authentic as the respective traditions would have us believe.”⁵ Specifically, he discusses the interpretation of the meaning of *jōgyō daihi*. The modern interpretation of the term is that it means “to recite the Name,” but Tanaka points out how vague this is. The term *Shinjin*, he introduces, was defined using a passive interpretation, meaning less specificity and detail, through a doctrinal argument in the late 1700s that then set the way for similar decisions.⁶ In detailing this history, he illustrates why many modern interpretations may not be the most accurate or holistic. In looking back at writings from the 1200s, Tanaka finds that *jōgyō daihi* is not merely “to recite the Name,” but to recite the name with others and for others.⁷ Further, he finds writings mentioning other “modes of exercising great compassion” within the term *jōgyō daihi*. Tanaka thus concludes that due to *jōgyō daihi* being “more spiritually-based and...more self-reflective,” it could be beneficial to contemporary ethics.⁸

Through this analysis, Tanaka breaks down the issue of allowing traditional and modern aspects to coexist when practicing American Buddhism. As time has gone on and Buddhism has spread west it has, in some cases, lost certain traditional aspects that may seem small, like a specific translation. In reality though, no matter how small, many times these aspects can help strengthen understanding and

¹ Kenneth Tanaka, “A Life Journey of a Buddhist Scholar: In Search of the Academic and the Spiritual on Both Sides of the Pacific,” H-Net Humanities and Social Sciences Online, January 20, 2019, <https://networks.h-net.org/node/6060/pages/3598290/tanaka-kenneth-k>.

² Tanaka, “A Life Journey of a Buddhist Scholar.”

³ Kenneth Tanaka, “A Life Journey of a Buddhist Scholar.”

⁴ Tanaka, “A Life Journey of a Buddhist Scholar.”

⁵ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “Concern for Others in Pure Land Soteriological and Ethical Considerations: A Case of *Jogyo daishi* in *Jodo Shinshu Buddhism*,” in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism: Challenges Facing jōdo-shinshū in the Contemporary World: Essays in Honor of Professor Alfred Bloom*, ed. Kenneth K. Tanaka and Eisho Nasu (Berkeley, CA: WisdomOcean Publications, 1998), 91.

⁶ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “Concern for Others in Pure Land Soteriological and Ethical Considerations,” 92.

⁷ Tanaka, 94.

⁸ Tanaka, 100.

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provide further and necessary insight. In using traditional works to make modern connections, he demonstrates how the two can intersect within modern American Buddhism. He also shows how traditional works, though old, can break down stereotypes and generalizations made against those who practice Buddhism. In explaining how *jōgyō daihi* is not necessarily passive and how it can be beneficial to contemporary ethics, he conveys how Buddhism differs from many of the Western stereotypes and generalizations that view Buddhism as “exotic” or “superstitious.” Through the analysis of *jōgyō daihi*, Tanaka shuts down negative Western characterizations and in turn illustrates how Buddhism holds value in various ways. In addition, he also demonstrates how when traditional and modern aspects intersect, different understandings and perspectives can be found which can allow for more inclusivity and authenticity.

Tanaka expands on some of the modern-day issues with American Buddhism in two blog posts, *A Vision of Shin Buddhism for Today* and *Incorrect Image and Shinshū Theology*. In both posts Tanaka discusses how Shin Buddhism specifically has lost some important traditional aspects in modern times as it has developed and moved throughout the world. He does not speak against modernization, but rather for a better blend of traditional and modern to include a variety of voices and experiences, while still honoring the original aspects of Shin Buddhism.

In *Incorrect Image and Shinshū Theology*, Tanaka discusses how Shin Buddhism’s image has become inaccurate in both Japan and the West. He states, “If Shinran were here with us, he would certainly be disheartened...”⁹ In order to better represent Shin Buddhism, Tanaka calls for the use of the term Shinshū Theology. He notes that some may see the word “theology” as something pertaining to God, but he responds by quoting theologian David Tracy and explaining that theology is an interpretation of any religion or religious tradition no matter if it is theistic or not. He then goes on to define the three features of Shinshū Theology. Firstly, it means “not being limited to traditional methods and perspectives.”¹⁰ In this feature, he means he does not want to exclude more modern aspects of Buddhism. While the portrayal of Shin Buddhism has strayed, he notes how including both traditional and modern aspects and perspectives can lead to “a greater diversity of approaches to the teachings.”¹¹ The second feature is a call for “an openness to a global perspective.”¹² This goes hand in hand with the first feature in that it points out the importance of diverse perspectives. The third feature of Shinshū

⁹ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “Incorrect Image and Shinshū Theology,” BCA, November 8, 2021, <https://www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.org/post/incorrect-image-and-shinsh%C5%AB-theology>.

¹⁰ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “Incorrect Image and Shinshū Theology.”

¹¹ Tanaka, “Incorrect Image and Shinshū Theology.”

¹² Tanaka, “Incorrect Image and Shinshū Theology.”

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Theology is “an emphasis on the needs and experiences of the aspirants or seekers.”¹³ He notes how through the third feature he hopes to emphasize “self-realization” so that the experience of seekers is not forgotten or ignored. Through Shinshū Theology, Tanaka is working to bridge the gap between traditional and modern Shin Buddhism so that diversity in perspective is included, while also honoring and including the traditional teachings and approaches.

Similar to his discussion in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism*, Tanaka discusses the issue of translation, specifically with Shinjin in his other blog post, *A Vision of Shin Buddhism for Today*. He notes how it is usually translated just as “true entrusting” when Shinjin actually has multiple meanings. He goes on to break down Shinjin into four parts: entrusting, joy, no doubt, and wisdom; and then notes how “Shinjin is not produced as a result of the seeker’s efforts,”¹⁴ but rather one receives it. Tanaka explains that the wisdom within Shinjin is endowed; and using Shinshū Theology, he emphasizes the importance of “how the seeker experiences what Amida endows.”¹⁵ He works to bridge the gap between traditional and modern Shin Buddhism by further discussing how one experiences the wisdom from Shinjin, while also wanting to focus on the details of the tradition, so that everyone can fully understand and participate. In his final section he asks for “true realization” to be further considered so as to better capture the full meaning of Shinjin, and also places emphasis on the seeker’s experience. Once again, Tanaka highlights how when we allow for traditional aspects to exist alongside modern perspectives and interpretations, further understanding can be found and in turn be more accessible and inclusive to all.

In Tanaka’s *The Individual in Relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism: An Examination of ‘Privatized Religion,’* privatized religion’s effect on Buddhist authenticity is examined and questioned. Tanaka begins by defining privatized religion as “the tendency to deemphasize the importance of religious institutions and the traditions they represent” and focus on personal fulfillment.¹⁶ Examining two different groups within the Buddhist community—old-line Asian American Buddhists and convert Buddhists whose main practice is meditation—Tanaka details who is practicing in these groups, as well as how and why they practice. The Southern Alameda County Buddhist Church in Union City, California holds both nonreligious and religious activities and holds services that Tanaka finds to have “a strong sense of community...[and] are characterized by strong communal and public features.”¹⁷

¹³ Tanaka, “Incorrect Image and Shinshū Theology.”

¹⁴ Kenneth Tanaka, “A Vision of Shin Buddhism for Today,” BCA, December 6, 2021, <https://www.buddhistchurchesofamerica.org/post/a-vision-of-shin-buddhism-for-today-1>.

¹⁵ Kenneth Tanaka, “A Vision of Shin Buddhism for Today.”

¹⁶ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “The Individual in Relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism: An examination of ‘Privatized Religion,’” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 27 (2007): 115-127, 116.

¹⁷ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “The Individual in Relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism,” 120.



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Many of these activities, he notes, take place at the temple as well. In the convert Buddhist communities, Tanaka finds from a study conducted in 1999 that the majority of the respondents were white and of various religions other than Buddhist.¹⁸ Further, many were attracted to Buddhism for personal spiritual fulfillment and valued meditation more than services, ceremonies, and social relations with other members of the group.¹⁹

Before fully discussing the question of whether or not privatized religion undermines Buddhist authenticity, Tanaka reveals the two characteristics of privatized religion: “the tendency to carry out practices at home rather than at religious centers,”²⁰ and “the importance of inner, subjective experience.”²¹ Within the second characteristic, he points out how personal experience is oftentimes highly valued within American Buddhist literature. He cites sources regarding the importance of personal experience rather than institutional allegiance but also notes how there are also critiques to be made against privatization. He also discusses how in the United States, there has been “loosened commitment to the sangha that usually supports and is an integral part of the tradition,”²² and that some have also decided to pick and choose what exactly they want to practice from Buddhism.

In concluding his paper, Tanaka provides no answer to whether or not the two characteristics of privatized religion undermine Buddhist authenticity. The two answers he leaves for his audience to decide upon are that “spiritual awakening is ultimately deeply personal”²³ and that “the community of sangha, indeed, constitutes one of the Triple Jewels...[and plays] a vital role in transmitting Buddhist authenticity throughout Buddhist history.”²⁴ He leaves his readers with the story of a village forced to choose either a monk or the Jōdo Shinshū priest as their spiritual leader by presenting them with a vat of boiling water and the ability to do whatever they want with it. The monk steps into the vat and is able to leave unharmed and the Jōdo Shinshū priest gets cold water and makes tubs cold enough for all of the villagers to use.²⁵ Tanaka does not say who the villagers choose, but he does reveal their concerns that the monk had done something extraordinary but left nothing for everyone if he had died. The Jōdo Shinshū priest, however, did not show any special abilities, but he did leave teachings that could live past his lifetime.

¹⁸ Tanaka, 121.

¹⁹ Tanaka, 122.

²⁰ Tanaka, 123.

²¹ Tanaka, 124.

²² Tanaka, 125.

²³ Kenneth K. Tanaka, “The Individual in Relation to the Sangha in American Buddhism,” 125.

²⁴ Tanaka, 125.

²⁵ Tanaka, 126.

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Ultimately, Tanaka concludes with this story to spark conversation. Many of the issues posed by predominantly white sanghas who practice American Buddhism are driven by individualistic tendencies that the United States prides itself on. Exclusion of Buddhists of color and rejection of traditional practices are, like Tanaka notes, common occurrences within white sanghas which reflect how privatized religion may undermine Buddhist authenticity. While Tanaka provides no certain conclusion, privatized religion is an interesting idea to consider when thinking of American Buddhism and specifically the effects of white sanghas on American Buddhism, as the majority of those practicing privatized Buddhism and its characteristics are white.

Many of the issues Tanaka discusses are part of the experiences of many American Buddhists, specifically Asian American Buddhists. Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* incorporates Asian American Buddhist stories and provides a platform for their voices to be heard. Han's book notes many issues with modern American Buddhism and the ways in which it lacks inclusivity. Much of the book focuses on Aaron Lee's blog "Angry Asian Buddhist" as a way to tell a full specific story while also including various other voices throughout to help support and further elaborate. Han ends her introductory section by introducing all of the voices and stories that are about to be told in a collective way that encapsulates the reason behind piecing everyone's stories together. She states, "The Asian American Buddhists featured in this book...embody the boundless possibilities for interconnection that glow at the heart of American Buddhism in all its dynamism and diversity."²⁶ Overall, the entirety of the book is spent discussing how Asian American Buddhists of all ages have been excluded by many white sanghas, defined by Western stereotypes, and oftentimes left out of Buddhist conversations. Han shares stories throughout and highlights the realities that many Asian American Buddhists live in: "Sometimes I wish there would be more explicit recognition of the collective experiences of second-generation Sri Lankan American Buddhists";²⁷ "I have definitely experienced feeling awkward at an only-English-speaking Buddhist event and more comfortable at an immigrant, Chinese-speaking Buddhist event";²⁸ and "please remember that we Asian Buddhists do exist..."²⁹ are all quotes included by Han from Asian American Buddhists. As Han addresses, Asian American Buddhists are oftentimes not recognized within American Buddhism, which directly correlates with how many, specifically white, American Buddhist sanghas operate. Inclusivity within sanghas comes down to not just how white members treat Buddhists of color, but also how they practice.

²⁶ Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021), 17.

²⁷ Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge*, 66.

²⁸ Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge*, 98.

²⁹ Han, 23.

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An example of one of these practices that white Americans have used to exclude Buddhists of color is mindfulness. Specifically, I am referring to the form of meditation that is “a practice in which we remember or recall that we are not separate, unchanging selves but are undivided from each other.”³⁰ In David Forbes’s *Mindfulness and Its Discontents: Education, Self, and Social Transformation*, the issue of mindfulness being redefined and utilized by primarily white people as a marketable tool for health, educational, and commercial purposes is analyzed and critiqued. Forbes introduces his book noting how “by encouraging people to look solely to themselves and to look within, in alignment with neoliberal values,”³¹ mindfulness’s more community-based aspects have been left behind for marketing purposes. In leaving behind the historical and traditional purpose, mindfulness is sold as a self-help tool by white Americans that overvalue an individualistic mindset. Jeff Wilson’s *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* notes how the process for marketing practices like mindfulness “necessitates a process of detachment from Asian and/or premodern belief systems and ethnic identities...”³² in order for white Americans to claim them as their own and then profit off of them. This way of marketing mindfulness strips away any form of identifying it as a practice created by people of color, which further adds to the exclusion of Buddhists of color that Han’s *Be the Refuge: Raising the Voices of Asian American Buddhists* makes note of.

In analyzing *Be the Refuge* alongside Tanaka’s work, one can see how inclusivity and authenticity relate. Tanaka’s essay in *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism* and his blog post, *A Vision of Shin Buddhism for Today*, both demonstrate ways in which modern interpretations can be better understood and defined when traditional background and history are allowed to intersect with it. In some of the stories Han details, feelings of being “reduced to Oriental monks [and] superstitious immigrants” are expressed.³³ Western stereotypes have affected American Buddhism in making the traditional aspects of Buddhism seem inferior to the more modern interpretations despite, as Tanaka shows, the importance that many traditional Buddhist works hold in not just the past but the present. In a way, both of Tanaka’s blog posts are almost like a response to some of the stories in *Be the Refuge*. He introduces new concepts and ideas that promote inclusivity while still maintaining traditional understandings and aspects, which is what some in Han’s book were calling and asking for more of. In allowing for ideas and works from all time periods to coexist, more experiences can be reflected in how sanghas operate

³⁰ David Forbes, *Mindfulness and Its Discontents: Education, Self, and Social Transformation* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2019), 4.

³¹ Forbes, *Mindfulness and Its Discontents*, 12.

³² Jeff Wilson, *Mindful America: The Mutual Transformation of Buddhist Meditation and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 62.

³³ Chenxing Han, *Be the Refuge*, 17.

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and hold services. Tanaka's discussion and question of whether privatized religion undermines Buddhist authenticity clearly connects with many of Han's included stories, when we think of how many Buddhists who attend temples and services are characterized and viewed in Western society. As Tanaka notes, going to services and temples is a long-held tradition in Buddhism that many Asian American Buddhists in *Be the Refuge* have experienced being looked down upon for. Again, Tanaka does not provide a clear answer, which may be because there is not one yet; or, it is possible that there simply is not just one clear answer. When contextualized with the stories from *Be the Refuge* and the perspectives of Forbes and Wilson, one of the answers he proposes does become more nuanced, though. When understood together, all of these works exemplify just how closely inclusivity and authenticity are related through the idea that privatized religion can make it harder for traditional and modern aspects to intersect, and in turn harder for Asian American Buddhists to practice without being excluded or judged.

American Buddhism, as a whole, is filled with so many different people, ideas, and practices; and over time, it will most likely continue to shift and change as society is constantly growing and adapting. Eventually, what is seen as modern now will become old, and adjustments will be made; but as seen with Tanaka's work in connection to Chenxing Han's *Be the Refuge*, the relationship between inclusivity and authenticity is extremely close. The works of the past may seem distant to the works of the present, but when viewed closer and with different perspectives, they can actually prove to be more in-tune with one another than at first glance. The same goes for the many aspects of life. If we want to move and grow with the world with respect and care, we must choose to not just hear, but to listen to and consider those of the past as well as the present.

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