

In Search of Lost ‘Golden Words’: Kawaguchi Ekai’s Quest for Mahāyāna Buddhism

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‘Japanese Buddhism’, the Highest Stage of Buddhism

Before World War II, most of the Japanese Buddhists said, “Japanese Buddhism is the highest stage of Buddhism”. A present-day Buddhist Scholar *Sueki Fumihiko* (末木文美士) takes a critical attitude toward such a traditional discourse in ‘Japanese Buddhism’. He writes:

Japanese who believed in the *Kōkoku-shikan* (皇国史観, ethnocentric view of history focusing on Imperial Japan) often said ‘Buddhism’ was able to attain best maturity only in Japan. They explained this uniqueness via the term ‘Japanese Buddhism’. There was, so to speak, an auspicious harmony between ‘Japan’ and ‘Buddhism’¹⁾

A similar discourse on Japanese Buddhism can be found in *Ennin’s Nittō Guhō Junrei Kōki* (円仁『入唐求法巡礼行記』, *Ennin’s Diary*), which was a documentary work concerning the denouncement and the decline of Buddhism in eighth century China²⁾. However, many pre-modern Japanese Buddhists admired India as the fatherland of Buddhism and revered China as a Nation of Sūtras translated in *Kanbun* (漢文, Classical

Chinese). After the Meiji Restoration when Japanese monks could travel abroad, they saw corruption of Buddhism in these Holy Nations with their own eyes. Thus, they regarded themselves as guardians of Buddhism and emphasized the notion that Japan was the Nation possessed of the latest and highest Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Such a change of modern Japanese Buddhists' self-awareness might strike us as strange, because they emphasized not universality or globalism but the unique qualities or nationality of their Buddhist belief and practice. These narratives put forward by modern Japanese Buddhists were to function as apologetics on two sides, directed at domestic and foreign audiences. In the interior they faced political and economic persecutions which were known as *haibutsu kishaku* (廃仏毀釈, violent anti-Buddhist movements). On the other hand, they had to endure religious and scientific criticism from foreign Christian missionaries and western scholars of Buddhism, who advocated *daijō hibussetsu-ron* (大乘非仏説論, the argument that the Mahāyāna had not actually been taught by the Buddha). Because modern Japanese Buddhists faced these two frontal attacks, they had to put forward apologetics based on the premise that their own Buddhism was salutary to the State especially in terms of *kokumin dōtoku* (国民道徳, national morality) and a cultural heritage which had no equal in the world.

Kawaguchi Ekai (河口慧海, 1866–1945) started his quest for truth as one of the monks who defended and explained Japanese Mahāyāna Buddhism. Afterwards however, he converted to the other side and denounced 'Japanese Buddhism' as not being the Buddha's *konku* (金口, Golden Words). Of course, he did not turn apostate from Mahāyāna Buddhism. What he asserted was merely that the classical Chinese sūtras

upon which 'Japanese Buddhism' was based included mistranslations from Sanskrit sūtras. He was a seeker after the truth not of 'Japanese Buddhism' *per se* but of the heart of Mahāyāna Buddhism itself.

Through tracing the steps of his quest for faith, this paper will make clear the structure of his discourse on 'Japanese Buddhism'.

Tibet as a Hermit Nation: Kawaguchi's first Quest

Kawaguchi was born into the family of a craftsman in Sakai city (Osaka prefecture) and thus was under no compulsion to enter the Buddhist priesthood. What made him go forward on his quest to provide apologetics for 'Japanese Buddhism' was not a sense of obligation to his own family business but his *bodhicitta*). In a book on his travels written in Japanese, he explained the motive for his first travel to Tibet as follows:

The reason why I went to Tibet was to provide society with the sūtras of Buddhism made easy to read and accessible to the layman ... Though there is but one Sanskrit original, [versions of] sūtras in Chinese translation are many. ... Try as I might, without the original sūtras to work from I would never know which of the Chinese versions were right and which were wrong. Thus, I thought, my work depended upon obtaining the original texts.³⁾

The aim of his quest to Tibet was to correct mistranslations in Chinese sūtras and replace them with the true doctrines of Buddhism. He believed in the existence of the Buddha's preaching in the Sanskrit sūtras of Mahāyāna Buddhism. He longed for the great Dharma-store of Tibet.

When he reached the Tibetan capital Lhasa in 1900, five years had

elapsed since his departure from Japan. It was a great gratification to him that he could find many of the Sanskrit and Tibetan sūtras which he had thirsted after. But, sensitive to any transgression of the precepts, he was dejected at the sight of meat-eating and married Tibetan monks. After this visit to Tibet, he felt 'Japanese Buddhism' superior to 'Tibetan Buddhism'. After his return to Japan, he said, "although I searched hard for the admirable aspects (of Tibet) I had so wished to find, particularly fine things were not to be found".⁴⁾ The reason why he was not able to admire Tibet was not only the existence of degenerate priests but also the general uncleanness of an "uncivilized nation". He became to think that Tibet had to become civilized under the leadership of Japan, which was a civilized and superior Mahāyāna Buddhist nation. This idea was strengthened by degrees during his second trip to Tibet.

Tibet as a Developing Nation: Kawaguchi's second Quest

After the Russo-Japanese War (1904-05), Japanese people were proud that their own state had become one of the world Powers. Of course, Kawaguchi was no exception. His self-confidence led him to regard as superior to Tibetan sūtras the Chinese sūtras which he had formerly criticized as containing mistranslation.

Then again, the Tibetan texts were famous for being more accurate translations than the Chinese. Now I do not say that the Tibetan translations are superior to the Chinese. As literal translations, I think that they are superior; but, for their general meaning, the Chinese are far better than the Tibetan.⁵⁾

This paragraph is from *Three years in Tibet* (1909) which Kawaguchi wrote in Madras, in English, about his first journey to Tibet. Although this English version was based on the Japanese version which had been published in 1904, there were some points of difference between the two. In the English version, he expressed the opinion that Chinese sūtras, which he had criticized formerly, were superior to the Tibetan. This conversion was a result of his having found 'Japanese Buddhism', which was based on Chinese sūtras, to be superior to 'Tibetan Buddhism'.

Kawaguchi was proud of Japan as a civilized and powerful state. Throughout his second journey to Tibet, he showed off somewhat, putting himself over as a śramaṇa (wandering monk) of *Dai-Nippon-Teikoku* (大日本帝国, Great Empire of Japan). This was quite different from his first journey, during which he had to impersonate a Chinese in order to be permitted to enter into that hermit nation. During his second journey he behaved positively and distinctively as a Japanese person. For example, he went out of his way to bath in a hot spring and enjoyed it thoroughly. This surprised the Tibetans because they disliked the dryness of the skin caused by bathing. Although the evasion of baths on the Tibetan plateau might indeed be a reasonable course of action, bathing at altitude was a risk this traveler from a clean and civilized nation was prepared to take.

I heard that there was a hot spring at distance of a mile to the southeast of the village and went immediately to it with a follower of mine. (...) My follower was surprised by my bathing in such severe cold. After an hour when I had washed away all grime and tiredness, I had a feeling of having become Japanese ...⁶⁾

By thoroughly cleaning himself he could become a man of civilized Japan, which was a place quite different from “dirty” (不潔, *fuketsu*) and “semi-barbarous” (半野蛮, *han'yaban*) Tibet. He regarded himself as not only a seeker on quest of *konku* but also a missionary of civilization⁷. He believed in the harmony between faith and civilization in simplicity. Therefore, in 1903 when he passed a road paved by the English army, he admired it as a sign of the power of civilization and composed a Japanese poem (和歌, *Waka*).

Seeing the traces of civilization's power,
Started then to tread the Bodhisattva way⁸
(文明の力になれる跡見つゝ
菩薩の道をふみ初めにけり
Bunmei no chikara ni nareru ato mitsutsu
Bosatsu no michi o fumi some ni keru)

This priest who found the way of the Bodhisattva in civilization's power of imperialism aimed to establish “the true Buddhism” based on the highest Mahāyāna Buddhism of the civilized nation Japan. All throughout this second journey, he conducted himself as a śramaṇa of *Dai-Nippon-Teikoku*.

A Civilized Nation: the Highest Stage of Buddhism

After upwards of ten years Kawaguchi returned to Japan in 1915. Immediately after his homecoming, he took a non-scientific attitude toward the interpretation of and judgment between Tibetan and Chinese sūtras since he believed in the infallibility of ‘Japanese Buddhism’. When

he found inconsistency between two translations, without hesitation he chose the Chinese translation on which the highest form of Buddhism, 'Japanese Buddhism', was based.

Although the Chinese translation of the *Hokekyō* (法華經, Saddharmapundarika-sūtra) is composed of eight volumes and twenty-eight chapters, the Tibetan is composed of ten volumes and twenty-seven chapters (...). What is held most important in the *Hokekyō* are the ten essential qualities (十如是, *jū-nyoze*), but in the Tibetan sūtra there are but five essential qualities (五如是, *go-nyoze*). Without the ten essential qualities, the wondrous principle of *ichinen-sanzen-gi* (一念三千義, a chiliocosm in a single thought) based on the perfect interpenetration [of the three truths] could never have been. (...) In short, the Tibetan sūtra, lacking the means to generate the Tendai doctrine, is insufficient to manifest the force of the *Hokekyō*.⁹⁾

He believed at this stage in his life that 'Japanese Buddhism' was the highest and most developed Mahāyāna Buddhism. The reasons why he was driven so hard in putting forward the discourse of 'Japanese Buddhism' involved not only his self-awareness as a citizen of civilized modern Japan but also his ambition to occupy a honorable position in the academic and religious world of 'Japanese Buddhism'. Nevertheless, his belief came to an end before long. He became a renegade in 'Japanese Buddhism'.

The End of Kawaguchi's Quest

Kawaguchi, having worked hard to interpret Sanskrit and Tibetan

sūtras, found that the Tibetan texts were accurate translations from Sanskrit sūtras, which he regarded as the Buddha's *Konku*. This fact made him set a high value on Tibet, which he had previously looked down upon as an uncivilized nation.

Tibetan sūtras are superior to Chinese renderings; Tibet should be proud before the world to hold these matchless and unique translations (...). The Secret Nation Tibet, become the treasure house (宝蔵, *Hōzō*) of the world, has handed down the sūtras of this Buddhism to us complete. This is an immense blessing from the Tibetans; I feel we must give thanks to them for this exquisite virtue.¹⁰⁾

When Kawaguchi discovered the infallibility of the Tibetan sūtras and the fallibility of the Chinese sūtras, he cast off the Chinese sūtras without any difficulty, because they were not the true *konku* of the Buddha. At the end of his quest, he became aware that what he believed in was not 'Japanese Buddhism' and nationalist discourse but Mahāyāna Buddhism and its ability to save mankind. Thus, he concluded that 'Japanese Buddhism' was no Buddhism and chose the way of lay Buddhism in 1926. His action was a criticism directed toward the Japanese Buddhist clergy, who wanted to cling to the dogmas of their own sects and forgot the Buddha's *konku*.

I can conclude that there are no ten essential qualities (*jū-nyoze*) in the original Sanskrit sūtra according to the existing texts. Hence *ichinen-sanzen-gi* of the *Tendai* sect cannot be based on any original or Tibetan sūtra except the *Hokekyō* translated by *Kumarajū* (鳩摩

羅什, *Kumārajīva*).¹¹⁾

His criticism of the Chinese sūtras upon which all sects of ‘Japanese Buddhism’ were founded on grounds of mistranslation shook the foundations of those sects. This was a reason why he came to be purged from the official lineage of ‘Japanese Buddhism’.

At the starting point of Kawaguchi’s Buddhist studies there was the *bodhicitta*. Hence, he wanted to prove that Mahāyāna Buddhism was the Buddha’s actual preaching. Because he believed in the universality of the Mahāyāna, he had to conquer not only each sect but also nationalism within ‘Japanese Buddhism’ which was created by modern knowledge. His Buddhist study was not for academia but for his own faith.

It is ironic that Kawaguchi, who had desired to bring true Mahāyāna Buddhism to Japan, was purged from its Buddhist *milieu*. Here, in Kawaguchi’s difficulty to accomplish his *bodhicitta*, we may find one of the challenges of “believing” in modern Japan.

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Notes

- 1) Sueki (1996) pp. 11-12.
- 2) “Buddhism no longer exists in this land [China]. But Buddhism flows toward the east. So has it been said since ancient times. I [Chinese officer] hope that you will do your best to reach your homeland and propagate Buddhism there. Your disciple has been very fortunate to have seen you many times. Today we part,

and in this life we are not likely to meet again. When you have attained Buddhahood, I hope that you will not abandon your disciple.” [845, Sixth Moon, Ninth Day] (Ennin [847]. pp. 370-371.)

- 3) Kawaguchi (1904) vol. 1. p. 21.
- 4) Kawaguchi (1904) vol. 4. p. 19.
- 5) Kawaguchi (1909), Preface, p. vi.
- 6) Kawaguchi (1927), p. 251.
- 7) He acted upon his mission. He presented “a civilizing plan” titled *The Memoria: Peace and Glory* to the King of Nepal in 1905.
- 8) Kawaguchi (1927), p. 172.
- 9) Kawaguchi (1915), pp. 93-94.
- 10) Kawaguchi (1923), pp. 147-148.
- 11) Kawaguchi (1928), p. 3.

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