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How does religion fight against natural disasters?: A Case of Japanese Buddhism

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Introduction

- Japanese people were surprised at the scenes of the *tsunami* on television on March 11, 2011.
- Many houses were destroyed and washed away and cars and trucks are floating on black water.
- People who were able to reach high ground were watching the water and cried in pain.
- Television also broadcasted the images of cities that were burning fiercely.

Introduction



- From <http://mainichi.jp/graph/select/archive/20110311higashinihondaishinsai/042.html>

Introduction



- From <http://ev.digital.asahi.com/special/20120311oneyearlater/>

Introduction



- From <http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/news/20110311-OYT1T00669.htm>

Introduction

- The 2011 Tohoku Earthquake was the most powerful earthquake ever recorded in Japan at a magnitude of 9.0.
- It caused 15,829 deaths, 3,724 missing, 5,943 injured and 118,816 houses totally destroyed.
- In terms of damage, this was the largest in Japan after World War II.

Introduction

- Japan has two major natural disasters, typhoons and earthquakes.
- On an average, there were 23 typhoons developed per year between 2001 and 2010. Among those, on an average, 11.3 typhoons approached to Japan and 2.8 typhoons actually landed on Japan each year.
- During the Showa period (1926-1989), six typhoons induced more than 1,000 casualties (death and missing).
- The Isewan Typhoon (Typhoon Vera) in 1959 was the deadliest typhoon in the Showa era. It resulted in 4,697 deaths, 401 missing, 38,921 injured, and 40,838 houses totally damaged.

Introduction

- In the Heisei period (1989-present), there were five typhoons that caused more than 40 deaths and missing.
- Among those, The Heisei 16 Typhoon 23rd was the worst one causing 95 deaths, 3 missing, 721 injured, and 907 houses totally damaged.

Introduction

- Although Japanese land area is only 0.25 percent of the area of the world, almost 10 percent of earthquakes happen in Japan. The Japanese Archipelago is on the Pacific Ring of Fire.
- Every year, Japan has 500-1000 perceptible earthquakes.
- Looking at the Japanese history between 1605 and 1995, there were about 35 large earthquakes of magnitude greater than 7.0.

Introduction

- In a very recent earthquake, the 2008 Iwate Earthquake there were 17 deaths, 6 missing, 426 injured, and 30 houses totally destroyed.
- The 2007 Chuetsu Offshore Earthquake in Niigata prefecture resulted in 15 deaths, 2,346 injured and 1,331 houses totally destroyed.
- The Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995 had 6,434 deaths, 3 missing, 43,792 injured, and 104,906 houses totally destroyed.

Introduction

- The two violent natural disasters of typhoons and earthquakes are still major threats to Japan.
- In the past, Japan also faced droughts and long-continued rains that gradually impoverished people and caused famine.
- These incidents were more frequent than earthquakes and thus were pressing issues in the past.
- In contemporary Japan, these are not very problematic anymore.

Introduction

- As shown, Japan is a natural disaster-prone country.
- Throughout history, Japanese people tried to overcome or manage the natural disasters.
- Buddhism as the main Japanese religion has faced the problem and tried to challenge them.

Introduction

- I explore two ways Japanese Buddhism has taken to face them.
- The first one is prayers that tried to suppress natural threat by the supernatural power of Buddhism in the past.
- The second one is volunteer activities by Buddhist monks today.
- After the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, some monks of traditional Buddhism actively participate in reconstruction assistance.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters in the Past – Prayers

- The importance of prayers to overcome natural disasters is observed most vividly between the late 6th century and late 13th century. The role of Buddhism can be divided into three stages in relation to social strata.
- From the 6th century to the late 8th century, Buddhism had a role to protect the nation by supporting the Imperial system.
- In Heian Period(794-1185), Buddhism mostly served the nobility.
- In Kamakura Period(1192-1333), Buddhism became a dynamic social institution that served for the masses.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- *Chingo Kotsuka* means “to protect the nation or make it tranquil by the reciting of Buddhist prayers such as the Lotus Sutra (法華經), the Golden Light Sutra (金光明經) and the Humane King Sutra (仁王經) and other Buddhist ceremonies”

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- The rulers of Yamato consolidated Japan into a single nation in the early 4th century and successive emperors fortified the system of government by importing continental knowledge from social system to culture.
- As part of the efforts, Buddhism was introduced to Japan from Korea probably in 538.
- Asuka (a part of Nara) where the Imperial Court was located became the first center of Buddhist culture in Japan.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- When we look at religion at this time, three religions (Taoism, *Jingi* (神祇) worship and Buddhism) coexisted although Taoism was the minor one without a religious order.
- In China, Buddhism had brought in some aspects of Taoism when the Buddhist scriptures were compiled.
- Thus, magical rites performed under Buddhism during the 7th and 8th centuries were originated in Taoism.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- Looking at *Jingi* worship, large scale ceremonies of *Jingi* worship as the Imperial court rituals were established and the ceremonies conducted by emperors became important matter of the nation.
- Emperors were the highest religious figures who performed rituals and its position was the basis of sovereignty.
- Emperors were regarded as the authority to perform rites to overcome the threat of nature especially they had a role of rainmaker during droughts.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- From the beginning stage of Japanese Buddhism, people conceived Buddhism as having miraculous power.
- Prayers based on *Jingi* worship had priority over prayers based on Buddhism to overcome the threat of nature. Buddhism had a supplementary role to bring about magical effects that would protect the nation.
- However, the position of these two religions changed over time as the *ritsuryo* (律令) legal system was gradually established and Buddhism which had a sophisticated system of teaching and written documents was thought to be more universal than *Jingi* worship.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- Empress Komyo (701-760) tried to save her husband, Emperor Shomu (701-756) by asking him to rely on Buddhism instead of *Jingi* worship.
- Shomu was doubtful about his position as the holder of worship because he was not able to overcome natural disasters by means of *Jingi* worship.
- Emperor Shomu and Empress Komyo were avid followers of Buddhism and established *kokubunji* (provincial temples) and *kokubunniji* (provincial convents) throughout Japan and giant Buddha in *Todai-ji* temple.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- Emperor Shomu



- From <http://www.minnipo.jp/chapter-2/>

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- Empress Komyo



光明皇后像

- From <http://www.rcakita-jc.ac.jp/department/index.html>

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- Kokubunji



The site of Bungo Kokubunji (Oita City)

- From <http://www.city.oita.oita.jp/www/contents/1311137887074/index.htm>
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Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- Kokubunniji



- Reconstructed Kazusa Kokubunniji (Chiba Prefecture)
- From http://www.city.ichihara.chiba.jp/320syougai/tenjikan/tenjikan_top.html

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

Todai-ji temple



From

<http://www.todaiji.or.jp/contents/function/01zyoyanokane.html>

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- A Giant Buddha In *Todai-ji* Temple



- From <http://narashikanko.or.jp/daibutu/daibutu01.html>

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- The Lotus Sutra, the Golden Light Sutra and the Humane King Sutra (*Ninno-kyo*) have been regarded as the three sutras of protecting the nation.
- *Ninno-e* (仁王会) started during Empress Saimei's time (reign 655-661). It is a Buddhist service held at the Imperial court to pray for protection from natural disasters and epidemics by reciting the Humane King Sutra.
- In *kokubunji*, the Golden Light Sutra was used as its main teaching and in *kokubunniji*, it was the Lotus Sutra.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- The Humane King Sutra states that “This sutra has immeasurable benefits. It is called the benefit of the protection of national land.”
- It simply expounds that by believing and reciting the Humane King Sutra, the king and people are protected.

Chingo Kotsuka (The Tranquil Nation by Prayers)

- The Humane King Sutra also states that:

When the land is in disorder, the devils definitely get out of control first. As devils are out of control, people will be out of control. Foreign bandits invade the country and peasants will die. The king, his subjects, crown princes, and hundreds of officials will quarrel. The heaven and earth are not in a normal state of affairs. Twenty eight constellations, sun and moon will be out of ordinary. Many insurgencies will take place. Great King! If there are calamities caused by fire, water and wind and all the difficulties, you should read and explicate this sutra.

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- In Heian Period, Japanese esoteric Buddhism flourished by the establishment of two sects, the Tendai sect of Buddhism and Shingon Buddhism.
- Tendai sect was formed by Saicho (767-822) at Mount Hiei.
- He participated in a Japanese mission to Tang-dynasty China in 804 and convinced that the Lotus Sutra was the best teaching of Buddhism, but he also brought some aspects of esoteric Buddhism.
- In Tendai School, Ennin and Enchin, Saicho's disciples, adopted esoteric Buddhism and it became the major doctrine of the school.

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- Shingon sect was formed by Kukai (774-835).
- He was a member of a Japanese mission to Tang-dynasty China with Saicho in 804 and learned esoteric Buddhism.
- He established two seminaries, one in Koyasan and the other in Kyoto. The latter is *To-ji* temple which was given to Kukai by Emperor Saga in 823 and became an important place for Japanese esoteric Buddhism.
- Due to the relationship, Shingon sect had a role of protecting the nation especially emperors.

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- Esoteric Buddhism is different from exoteric Buddhism because the power of Buddhism can be felt by secret incantations which are only transmitted by generation-to-generation instruction from master to disciple.
- Monks chose the types of Buddha depending on the characteristics of problems (such as sickness, a drought and warding off evil fortune) which were wished to be solved. Then they prayed according to the methods of secret incantations to overcome the problems.

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- Esoteric Buddhism of Shingon and Tendai sects was embraced by the Imperial Family and aristocrats as Buddhism that aimed at gaining spiritual and material benefits by performing incantations.
- In esoteric Buddhism, *Sokusaiho* (息災法) is one of four secret incantations that extinguish one's bad karma and avoid natural disasters, sickness, the turmoil of war and sudden deaths.

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- During Emperor Saga's reign (809-823), rainmaking by Buddhist prayers reappeared and it continued throughout the Heian period without interruption.
- Buddhist prayers to overcome drought were conducted by Soga Family in Yamato and Nara periods, but it was a supporting role to rainmaking by *Jingi* worship that had disappeared for 70 years until 809 when prayers for rain was performed in the Yoshino Mountains.
- Dynamism of Buddhism stimulated by Saicho and Kukai is one of the factors that Buddhist prayers resurfaced in rainmaking.

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- Saicho



- From <http://www.tendai.or.jp/rekishi/index.php>

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- Kukai



- From http://www.koyasan.or.jp/shingonshu/about/kobodaishi_koya/index.html

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- There were four types of Buddhist rainmaking in the Heian period.
- The first one was rainmaking conducted at various large temples within the vicinity of the capital or outside it. The Imperial Court asked the temples to perform it and monks recited sutras.
- The second type is rainmaking by reciting sutras at *Daigokuden* (an imperial audience hall). At *Daigokuden*, 100 monks chanted the Wisdom Sutras (般若經) for three days to bring about rain.

Japanese Esoteric Buddhism

- The third type was rainmaking at *Todai-ji* temple. Usually, more than 100 monks from seven large temples of Nara got together and recited the Wisdom Sutra or the Humane King Sutra.
- These three types of Buddhist rainmaking were conducted jointly by monks from different sect; reciting sutras was its method to bring about rain.
- The fourth type of Buddhist rainmaking was conducted exclusively by esoteric Buddhism of Shingon sect. As esoteric Buddhism, its method was secret incantations. The popularity of rainmaking by the Shingon sect during this time was due to the further development of esoteric Buddhism.

Nichiren Buddhism

- Kamakura period (1185-1333) is the time when Buddhism became a religion for all; monks such as Honen, Shinran, Dogen and Nichiren established new sects that were for all.
- Among those, Nichiren (1222-1282) was the notable figure who squarely confronted the misery of the people caused by natural disasters.
- As one of the new sects emerged in Kamakura, his idea was also different from Nara and Heian Buddhism. In Nara Buddhism, monks prayed to overcome natural disasters for emperors and in the Heian period; these were prayers for the Imperial Family and the aristocrats. For Nichiren, his main concern was the peace of the land and its people.

Nichiren Buddhism

- Nichiren was born in Awa (Chiba) in 1222 as a child of fisherman and at the age of twelve, went to study at *Seicho-ji* temple in Awa, a temple that belonged to the Tendai sect of Buddhism.
- He became a monk at the age of sixteen and studied in various temples in Kamakura, *Enryaku-ji* temple, Koyasan and other influential temples in Japan and at the age of 32 (1253), he established his own sect at *Seicho-ji* temple.

Nichiren Buddhism

Nichiren



From <http://www.myosenji.com/about/guide.html>

Nichiren Buddhism

- His teaching places the Lotus Sutra the highest status among Buddhist teachings. Reciting the Lotus Sutra and chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo were the practices.
- He moved to Kamakura, the capital city of the Kamakura shogunate government, to propagate his Buddhism around 1256. During this time, natural disasters drove Japanese land and its people into miserable conditions. Nichiren began to refer to the incidents repeatedly.

Nichiren Buddhism

- When Nichiren was in Kamakura, many natural disasters took place.
- Major natural disasters (earthquakes, windstorm, heavy rain, floods, drought, and cold-weather), epidemic and famine, calamities that affected people of all ranks. Every year, there were natural disasters.
- The major earthquake was Shoka Earthquake on August 23, 1257. It was a large scale earthquake with a magnitude of 7.0 which caused huge damage to temples and shrines in Kamakura.

Nichiren Buddhism

- *Azuma Kagami* (吾妻鏡), an official historical text of the Kamakura shogunate describes the earthquake as follows:

Around 7-9 pm, there was a large earthquake with a roar. There were no shrines and temples that escaped from damaging. Mountains crumbled, houses were destroyed, landfill collapsed and everywhere land had cracks and water gushed out. Near Nakagebabashi, the land was violently torn and blue flame was blowing off. Aftershocks continued afterwards.

Nichiren Buddhism

- Nichiren described the conditions of this period.
- He wrote:

In recent years, strange phenomena in the sky, natural calamities on earth, famines, and epidemics have occurred and spread over all the land of Japan. Oxen and horses lie dead at crossroads and the streets are filled with skeletons. A majority of the population has perished and everyone has been touched by grief.

Nichiren Buddhism

- Nichiren who believed in the power of the Lotus Sutra identified the cause of people's suffering induced by calamities in wrong teachings that spread throughout Japan.
- According to him, because people embraced Nembutsu (念仏) by abandoning the true teaching of Buddha (the Lotus Sutra), deities who protect people and land left this country.

Nichiren Buddhism

- He wrote what kind of society it will be when people embrace true teaching.
- He states:

When the people all chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the wind will no longer buffet the branches, and the rain will no longer break the clods of soil. The world will become as it was in the ages of Fu His and Shen Nung. In their present existence the people will be freed from misfortune and disasters and learn the art of living long. Realize that the time will come when the truth will be revealed that both the person and the Law are unaging and eternal. There cannot be the slightest doubt about the sutra's promise of "peace and security in their present existence."

Summary of Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters in the Past – Prayers

- As discussed, Buddhism in the past responded to natural disasters squarely and tried to overcome them by prayers, although the targeted beneficiary was different in each era.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- The secularization of Japanese Buddhism affected the way Buddhism tackles natural disasters.
- Secularization is a process of declining significance of religion in society.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- Wilson (2002) lists eight notable meanings of secularization:
- (1) political power seizes assets and facilities of religious organizations;
- (2) various activities and functions of society that were the responsibility of religion succumb to secular control;
- (3) people's time, energy and resources devoted to metempirical interests decrease;
- (4) various aspects of a religious system decline;

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- (5) religious injunctions that regulated people's action were replaced by instructions based on strictly technical standards;
- (6) unique religious consciousness (from a spell and rituals, magic and prayers to spiritually inspired ethical interests) is gradually replaced by empirical, rational and specific orientation;
- (7) mythological, poetic and aesthetic interpretations of nature and society were abandoned in favor of a description of facts;
- (8) strict distinctions were made between evaluative emotional orientation and cognitive and positive orientation.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- Here, I show you two events that facilitated the secularization of Japanese Buddhism; one in the Meiji era (1868-1912) and the other in the Edo period (1603-1868).

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- The formation of State Shinto as the ideological base for the Meiji government subdued Buddhism nationwide.
- When the Meiji government issued *Shinbutsu hanzenrei* (神仏判然令) (an order to separate the Kami and Buddhas) in 1868, *Haibutsu kishaku* (廃仏毀釈) (a movement to abolish Buddhism and destroy Shakamuni) took place in various part of the country.
- The New Buddhism emerged in response to *haibutsu kishaku* that aimed at Buddhism as modern religion that is rational and empirical and in accordance with a modernization policy of the government.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- As a part of disestablishing Buddhism, in 1872, the government promulgated a law that allows monks to eat meat and marry.
- Although there was resistance to clerical marriage in the beginning, it became the norm in Japanese Buddhism.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- In the process of solidifying power, one of the threats Tokugawa government faced was the spread of Christianity. In 1637 the Shimabara Rebellion broke out in Kyushu region of Japan. It was a peasant revolt consisting of mostly Catholics.
- In 1638 the Tokugawa government ordered all the Japanese to obtain certificates of temple registration, not just for *korobi* (転びキリシタン) *Kirishitan* (Japanese Catholics who abandon their Christian faith). A practice that started around 1614 as a verification of one's anti-Christian standing became a means of social control for all Japanese people. Japanese each of which had to belong to a particular temple.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- The temple registration was the basis for the formation of the *danka* (檀家) system which was firmly established by 1700.
- By this system, Buddhist temples were able to secure a stable membership and financial base. *Danka* were required to participate in funeral and memorial rites and to contribute to construction of temples and various anniversaries of the sects.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- In this process, many monks adopted vulgarized lifestyles in which fame, money and sexual behaviors of the laity were pursued.
- Buddhism which had no tradition of funeral rites originally became the institution that perform burial and memorial ceremonies and later began to be called funeral Buddhism disdainfully.

The Secularization of Japanese Buddhism

- Currently, there is a tendency that Japanese people regard religion as not very important.
- A 2005 international comparative survey indicates that 32 percent of the Japanese think religion is not very important in life and 40 percent think it is not important at all. Also, 58 percent of the Japanese do not have any religion at all.
- Through the secularization of Japanese Buddhism, not only was its vitality to engage in social problems lost but also the belief in the power of prayers to calm violent nature was forgotten.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- In present-day Japan, the role of Buddhism against natural disasters is not preventive one through prayers like in the past but reactive one.
- Japanese Buddhism sees volunteer works as their main role faced with natural disasters but their degree of participation is different between the traditional Japanese Buddhist community and new religions with the former less active and the latter very active.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Japanese Buddhism is divided into two groups, today.
- The traditional Japanese Buddhist community consists of 13 sects (Hosso-shu, Kegon-shu, Ritsu-shu, Tendai-shu, Shingon-shu, Yuzu Nembutsu-shu, Jodo-shu, Rinzai-shu, Jodo Shin-shu, Soto-shu, Nichiren-shu, Ji-shu and Obaku-shu), all of which were established before the Kamakura period except for Obaku-shu, which was established in 1661.
- New religions (Risho Kosei Kai, Soka Gakkai, Shinnyo-en and others) were established since 1800s, and some of which have adopted Japanese Buddhist doctrines.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Traditional Japanese Buddhism has been ridiculed as funeral Buddhism because of its minor role in society.
- Social contribution as a religious role in society has not been fully embraced by the traditional Japanese Buddhists.
- In contrast, new religious organizations have actively participated in solving social problems.
- For example, Shinnyo-en has four areas of social contribution: humanitarian assistance in conflict-ridden and disaster areas, educational supports in Sri Lanka, cultural preservation in Angkor Wat, and environmental protection activities in China.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- During the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake in 1995, these religious organizations mobilized their members to support the victims.
- Soka Gakkai was very active in relief works; they formed motorcycle teams that were able to transport emergency supplies while trucks and trains were incapable to do so as the infrastructure was damaged.
- They also provided their buildings as shelters not only to their members, but also for anyone who needed help while many traditional Buddhist temples closed their doors.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- In response to the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, Shinnyo-en established a permanent relief work section within the organization called Shinnyo-en Relief Volunteers (SeRV) which mobilized 11,330 volunteers for seven months.
- So far, it was deployed to 70 places in three foreign countries and various areas of Japan where earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and typhoons caused damage.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Shinnyo-en's food distribution to Hanshin-Awaji victims



From <http://relief-volunteers.jp/blog/>

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Soka Gakkai's motorcycle teams brought goods to a distribution center for Hanshin-Awaji victims.



From http://www.kansai-soka.jp/kansai_kakuchi/hyogo.html

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- In response to the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, new religions that have accumulated social contribution experiences mobilized their organizations quickly.
- They opened up their facilities to the victims, donated land for temporary housing, held counseling sessions, distributed food, collected contributions to the relief of the victims and cleaned up debris.
- Many of these tasks were carried out by members of these organizations as volunteers.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- For the traditional Japanese Buddhist community that has been not very active in social contributions including relief works, this natural disaster presents a challenge for its existence in society.
- Like a new religion, some monks participated in volunteer works for people in Tohoku, ranging from offering a shelter, providing foods, sorting out emergency supplies and removing debris to collecting contributions for the relief of earthquake victims.
- Yet, there are still conservative voices within the traditional Japanese Buddhist community such as “Why do we participate in volunteer works? Our duty is to pray.”

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Among volunteer works carried out by traditional Japanese Buddhist monks, a café is a unique support.
- A touring café, “Café de Monk (A Café by Monks)” began to move around shelters and temporary housings along the coastal area of Miyagi Prefecture.
- This is a café where people air their grievances. The café provides free cake, confectionery, coffee, tea and Japanese tea. The tables are decorated with flowers and jazz is being played in the background.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- This is operated by Taio Kaneda, the chief priest of *Tudai-ji* temple of Soto-sect in Miyagi Prefecture.
- He operates this café for two purposes. First, he wants to provide choices of foods, in this case, sweets because people have been eating mainly rations and emergency foods such as rice balls, canned foods, bread and instant noodles in a cup.
- Second, he wants to provide a breathing space to the victims because they live in a stark landscape which reminds them of the earthquake and tsunami.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Café de Monk



From <http://kokoropress.blogspot.jp/2012/02/2.html>

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Sutra-chanting is another volunteer work conducted by Buddhist monks and is closer to a traditional task of Buddhists than the café operation.
- Sutra-chanting practiced in the disaster area is different from a memorial service which is the main task of traditional Japanese Buddhism often called funeral Buddhism because in the latter, it is a ritualized service and an income generating activity of the monks.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Sutra-chanting in the disaster area grew out of the monks' genuine feeling for the deceased and the bereaved.
- Because of the large number of victims in Ishinomaki City (Miyagi Prefecture), cremation was not able to keep up with the demand. The city asked Self-Defense Force to have a temporary inhumation. Ishinomaki Buddhist Association decided to send 7-8 monks for sutra-chanting during inhumation.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Another example of sutra chanting is an offering of a funeral service by *Jifuku-ji* temple in Yamagata Prefecture that is 3-4 hours away by car from Ishinomaki City.
- Unlike the previous example, this service was established mainly for the surviving members of the deceased.
- When inhumation started in disaster areas, Zenkyo Uno, the chief priest of *Jifuku-ji* temple decided to hold a funeral service to the tsunami victims.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- He felt it is necessary to cremate the remains as soon as possible for the relief of the survivors.
- His participation in a spirit-consoling service for the dead in the 1993 southwest earthquake off Hokkaido that killed 230 people made him realize that it takes long time for the survivors to accept death of the family members that is suddenly forced upon them.
- Thus, he believes that monks' duty is not just to read sutras but to listen to the survivors' stories about their deceased family and ease their sufferings.

Japanese Buddhism's Response to Natural Disasters at the Present Time – Volunteer Activities

- Sutra-chanting in Iwate Prefecture



From <http://seiryozan.exblog.jp/15719656/>

Conclusion

- The 2011 Tohoku Earthquake will be a turning point for the Japanese Buddhist religious community in terms of how to respond to natural disasters and sudden deaths caused by them.
- In the past, this community believed in the power of prayers. Monks recited sutras or conducted secret incantations to pacify nature.

Conclusion

- However, in highly secularized contemporary Japan, people do not believe that natural disasters can be overcome by prayers.
- Instead, they participate in voluntary relief works such as offering shelters and foods.
- New religions which adopted some Buddhist doctrines have been very active in social contributions. In the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake, they were able to mobilize their organizations quickly because of their experiences in day-to-day social contribution activity.

Conclusion

- On the other hand, the traditional Japanese Buddhist community has not been active in social contribution, partly due to the *danka* system.
- However, ignorance to this large scale disaster is not possible as they were in the Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake.
- Thus, some monks have begun to participate in voluntary relief works. Among them, sutra chanting is a unique practice that is carried out for the survivors and the deceased.
- This voluntary work of sutra chanting may clarify the role of the traditional Japanese Buddhism in contemporary Japan.

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Thank you very much for listening!