
Special Focus: Bad Buddhism

Japan's "Priests' Bars": "Bad Buddhism" or Hope for the Future?

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For a telling example of allegedly "Bad Buddhisms" in the contemporary world, one need look no further than urban Japan and its numerous "Priests' Bars" (*Bōzu bāzu*) that allow a heady interaction of Buddhism and alcohol. While listening, lecturing, and sometimes even mixing drinks, priests of various denominations are proprietors for a new type of *upāya* practice (or "skillful means") for disseminating the *dharma*. They have the opportunity to encourage their clientele towards solving personal problems and perhaps even awakening as they violate the fifth Buddhist precept which warns monks of the dangers of intoxication. The priests in charge of these bars are well aware of the prohibition against alcohol, and yet, given a variety of social problems facing Japanese workers and citizens, feel compelled to experiment in delivering the teachings of their traditions. Though "bad" from the perspective of Buddhist practitioners outside Japan (as well as that of traditional Buddhist studies), these bars remain a constructive means for moving Japanese Buddhism into the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Japan; alcohol; *upaya*; contemporary Buddhism; innovation; precepts

Opening orientations

It is early on a rainy evening in a neighborhood near Shinjuku, Tokyo. Amidst the venues clustered into a little side street, one can find the "*Bōzu bā*" (Priests' Bar) which has been welcoming patrons from its slightly shabby second floor location since 2001. Founded by Rev. Fujioka Yoshinobu, a True Pure Land priest, the bar and its helpers have caught the attention of salarymen, female employees, journalists, and other passersby (such as a scholar doing fieldwork) in packaging essential Buddhist teachings and delivering them effectively, with a friendly alcoholic drink on the side. As we have seen from the work of Richard Jaffe (2002), the combination of alcohol and the *dharma* has been one of the characteristic features of Japanese Buddhist practice since the Meiji period (1868-1912). In addition to clerical marriage and meat-eating (both allowed from 1872), the consumption of alcohol is a cultural norm in Japan that also extends to the priesthood. At the Tokyo bar, it is center stage both for how the business operates and the motives that move priests to participate.



Image 1. Tokyo Bōzu Bar, 2020. (Photo by the author.)

Put aside for a moment the question of how alcohol served by priests may qualify as an example of “bad Buddhism” (as outlined in the introduction to this special issue). Focus instead on the bar’s interior where one finds prominently displayed the two principle mandalas of Shingon Buddhism (“the womb” and “the diamond”) plus a household altar (*butsudan*) of the True Pure Land tradition. Surrounding these objects are bells large and small, hanging room dividers, a scroll of Buddhist injunctions for living a good life, Tibetan prayer flags and so on. With eight seats at the bar and around twenty in the room, it is an intimate location to bring people together in service of the *dharma* while enjoying a variety of provocatively named cocktails (more about them in a moment) which might lead to conversation or questions to which the attending priest can respond. If a person has come with a social or personal problem, this too is an opportunity to have a discussion that may be facilitated by alcoholic drinks.

The purpose of this paper is to normalize the relation between Buddhism and alcohol consumption as an acceptable practice within Japanese society. Although at odds with the guidelines said to be issued by the Buddha himself, serving alcohol is a useful, though somewhat risky, means of helping people realize the relevance of Buddhism in their lives, relationships, and in society at large. In a society where social, workplace, and cultural norms often constrict open dialogue between individuals, the chance to share a drink in a casual setting is usually welcomed. As noted by Charles Pomeroy, former head of the Foreign Correspondents Club and a Tokyo resident for 45 years, “Alcohol here plays the role of psychiatry in the West. I think the country would explode without it” (Louie 2019). At the *Bōzu Bar*, alcohol becomes a *dharma* tool that is offered in a sincere, forthright, and strategic means as “...a spoonful of alcoholic sugar to help the medicine of the *dharma* go down” (Thomas 2015). We see time and again how alcohol cracks the cultural code of reticence and endurance when it comes to communication, especially in cases related to personal problems. Quoting the Tokyo bar’s founder, Rev. Fujioka Yoshinobu, who has run the bar since he was 24 years

old, the place has a “low level boundary” (*shikii ga hikui basho*) where people can stop by easily to discuss their lives (Horie 2012).

My research methods for this study consisted of straightforward ethnographic approaches followed by a literature review. For the Tokyo and Nakano bars in Kantō, and the Kyoto and Osaka bars in the Kansai area, I entered the bar as if I were a regular patron, ordered a drink and looked around to examine the interior just as anyone would do. I took care to chat casually for a few minutes with whoever was sitting nearby. When I caught the attention of the priest working behind the counter for the second time after ordering, I explained my interest in conducting fieldwork for an academic paper I was writing and secured his permission. If he demurred and said he needed to contact the bar's supervisor, I requested that email address so I could state my intentions as clearly as possible. With approval, I felt confident I could talk to anyone inside or outside the bar.

Secondary literature on these bars in Japanese, English, and French is surprisingly scarce, despite the fact *Bōzu bāzu* have been around since 1992. The numerous bars in Japan (Tokyo, Chiba, Kyoto, Osaka, Yokohama, Nagoya, Hakata, Sendai, Sapporo) have not been studied in depth, save for a seminar paper titled “A Buddhist Boom” conducted in 2012 from Sacred Heart University under the direction of Prof. Horie Norichika (Horie 2012). A publication the following year had an account of a *Bōzu* bar visit (Nelson 2013) followed by fieldnotes from Jolyon Thomas (2015) and a batch of articles in the popular press (see Foster 2020, Okunaga 2019, Amelie 2018, Shimada 2017 as examples).¹ Themes of personal spirituality, events run by priests, or revisions of existing temple traditions are part of an ongoing movement to keep religion alive as the country's population drops and the younger generation seems disinclined to affiliate with temples and priests.

I will begin by defining our key terms: “*bōzu*” and “bar.” I will assume readers know what a “bar” is and attribute its meaning to a location serving alcoholic drinks in exchange for something of value, usually money. “*Bōzu*,” the term for a Buddhist priest, can be rendered in Japanese with an honorific prefix, the *hiragana* character for the sound “oh” or “Obōzu-sama.” The term goes back to the Heian period and may be derived from a Chinese designation for a person in charge of the housing part of a monastery.² According to Mark Blum, professor of Buddhist Studies at UC Berkeley, “...*bōzu* does not appear as a general term for monk until the Muromachi period (1392-1573), and even then there is only one *Nō* play given as a source. The widespread use of *bōzu* for Buddhist monks/priests really reflects Edo period (1603-1868) discourse, when it first shows up as a legal term.”³

Horie Norichika writes that when the honorific is not used—as in “*ano bōzu!*” (あの坊主・“that priest!”)—the term loses a sense of prestige (Horie 2012). “*Bōzu*” is a word commonly employed by priests themselves, thus when used *within* this group the word does not carry the honorific prefix, nor does it convey a disparaging note. The name simply evokes an occupational calling and thus renders “*bōzu* bar” as a kind of word play: a typical person might wonder about the missing prefix (“oh”) and so develops some curiosity about the establishment. What goes on in there?

¹ A short video is available here: <https://primer.com.ph/food/restaurant-type/bar-and-resto/japan-travel-vowz-bar-in-shinjuku-tokyo>

² Gogen yurai jiten, gogen-allguide.com/ho/bouzu.html, 2003.

³ Prof. Mark Blum, private correspondence, April 19, 2020.

A *bōzu* bar began in Osaka 1992 (more about this origin later), three years before the social trauma of Aum Shinrikyō's attacks on the Tokyo subway and populace. Following Aum, Shimazono Susumu labels this period as a time when the Japanese were suspicious of religious proselytization, such as Aum had demonstrated to a disastrous degree. By 2000, the Japanese media were pushing an anti-clerical theme of "spiritualization" that sought out "spiritual energy" in Buddhist statues, religious architecture, and a few older temples, but not from priests or rituals directly.

Since finding spiritual energy was the driving motivation, writer Eihara Hiroyuki began a career in 2000 as an author and TV commentator who directed people to "powerspots" (*pawāsupotto*) at shrines and temples, as well as locations in or nearby their precincts. Finding spiritual energy in the earth became the latest trend in contemporary Japanese religions and occurred at the same time as the 2011 earthquake and nuclear power disaster that helped to revive interest in a more mature Buddhism and its priests. Temples have been slowly gaining momentum to reach out and help someone who does *not* enter into their precincts, and so we see priest's bars, storefront temples, concerts, fashion shows, art galleries, and other activities designed to draw people together for the purpose of disseminating the *dharma*. Sometimes it even works long term, such as we find in the *bōzu* bars.

Doctrine and theory

For anyone considering seriously becoming a Buddhist, the question of whether or not to drink alcohol simply cannot be avoided. It has far-reaching consequences for individuals serious about the fifth of the five core precepts that define the lifestyle of a person who has made a spiritual commitment to Buddhism.⁴ If the fifth precept is followed strictly, it means a different way of relating to friends and colleagues over dinner or during a social moment. It also implies a person is serious about a religious teaching, and willing to make changes in their life to accommodate it. After reading about the injunctions of not killing, not stealing, no sexual misconduct, and no lying—all of which involve other people or animals—consuming intoxicating drinks (and drugs) is a personal choice, one that may or may not affect others (Fronsdahl 2015). It certainly affects the author of the deed in ways both known and unanticipated. Since Buddhism generally promotes a state of full awareness about the world and our place in it, it is the "unanticipated" aspect of drinking alcohol that sets off alarms to those reliant on following core teachings. To the Japanese however, an unexpected result of flaunting the prohibition may be the opening of a person's heart as they discuss items and issues that their work or social roles do not generally allow.

⁴ Finding a suitable translation of the fifth precept is a challenge. The original Pali reads, *Suramerayamajja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*, and is translated as: "I undertake the precept to **refrain** from **intoxicating drinks and drugs** which lead to **carelessness**" (Access to Insight, 2013, boldface added). An alternate translation states, "I undertake the training rule to **abstain** from **fermented and distilled intoxicants** which are the basis for **heedlessness**" (O'Brien 2019). By comparing the two versions, we see latitude in meaning and interpretation such as the difference between "refrain" and "abstain" as well as between "careless" and "heedless." Much more research into the actual languages (Pali, Sanskrit, Hindi, Chinese, Japanese, and English) is needed to resolve this issue. The Japanese here is *fuin jūkai*, or "do not drink."

The fifth precept teachings are fairly consistent throughout Buddhist-influenced societies of the world, and yet how they are taken seriously and implemented by individuals varies significantly according to long-standing sociocultural norms. For example, in Thailand, the fifth precept is understood literally by monks but not by laypeople, who value a drink in social and sometimes even ritual contexts outside the temple, as at a memorial service led by monks. In Tibet, drinking beer is common among both monks and lay practitioners, although it is a mild form and not known generally to cause intoxication (the way that *rakshi*--a fermented drink from Nepal or *chhaang*--a Tibetan drink of millet, rice, and barley does). East Asia is more lenient in adapting to this precept, especially in Japan, where most priests in all seven denominations of mainstream "temple Buddhism" (Tendai, Shingon, Rinzai Zen, Sōtō Zen, Pure Land, True Pure Land, Nichiren) have no qualms about having a drink (or three) with colleagues or constituents (Covell 2005).

If we take the adjective "bad" in its common and moralistic stance, it creates a binary opposition between what is considered "good" by monks and teachers for lay believers and practitioners. As the call for papers for this volume states, however, authors are to "take points of disconnection between Buddhism's imagining, materiality and sociality" as ways to rethink the anthropology of religion. Seeing alcohol in a *Bōzu bā* positions it as a part of contemporary Japanese Buddhism, not as a response to "social pressures" for "efficacy, influence, or popular acceptance" (Gould and McKay, 2019).

When we focus on the literal meaning of the translated words, the phrase "I undertake the precept to refrain from intoxicating drinks (and drugs) which lead to carelessness" (*Suramerayamajja pamadatthana veramani sikkhapadam samadiyami*) is clear in what is being advised (Access to Insight, 2013). And yet, especially in Japan, there remains sufficient ethical, social, and religious space to navigate the precept so it both fits one's cultural *habitus* and contemporary lifestyle. To put it boldly, the postwar years have gradually shifted the religious poles of Japan so that much greater freedom now exists in how one affiliates with a religious tradition or its teachings. Higher education, international travel, study abroad, greater flows of information and images, advanced technology, changing gender roles, and more have all had a meaningful and lasting impact about how one might choose to implement something as ancient as a precept. As in the relationship between a map and the actual terrain one encounters, so too should we think of precepts and contemporary society. They are rules for practice, not commandments from a deity, and as such can be incorporated gradually until the practice becomes a purposeful habit that helps to transform one's behavior and consciousness.

More relevant terms

Why does the fifth precept matter? For one thing, words like "carelessness" and "heedlessness" appear in translated versions of the precept, rendering the Pali term *appamāda* into the discourse of teachers and students, just as it was at the beginning of Buddhism. In fact, following the legends, one of the last words from the Buddha as he lay dying was *appamāda*, urging his monks to be full of care as they went about their practice.

Then the Blessed One addressed the monks,
 “Now, then, monks, I exhort you:
 All fabrications are subject to decay.
 Bring about completion by being heedful (*appamāda*).”
 Those were the Tathāgata’s last words (Vajira and Story, 1998).

The Buddha’s address indicates that the fifth precept is a matter of guiding one towards awakening but that, failing to “heed” its prescriptions, one accumulates *karma* that will eventually have consequences. In the contemporary period, *karma* is a culturally-moderated concept that appears in various ways throughout Buddhist worlds. With better education, critical reading, new technologies, travel and other influences, the message about the power of *karma* has moderated considerably during the past fifty years. For Thais, Tibetans, Chinese, Koreans, and some Japanese, anxiety about one’s rebirth still helps to moderate behavior in self-censoring ways.⁵ In the past, if a practitioner was strongly advised by a teacher to do a prostration-trip to Lhasa or practice one million recitations of a mantra in order to improve their *karmic* standing, it was usually done. Today, we find Buddhist teachings subject to the skepticism and reason of late modernity, where even the Dalai Lama gives precedence to scientific teachings:

I have often said that if science proves facts that conflict with Buddhist understanding, Buddhism must change accordingly. We should always adopt a view that accords with the facts. ... What science finds to be nonexistent we should all accept as nonexistent, but what science merely does not find is a completely different matter (Stanford School of Medicine, 2005).

If we look a little closer at the heritage of “intoxication” as yet another culturally mediated concept, Peter Harvey’s account of the precepts in Theravada Buddhism notes:

Drunkenness is described as ‘the delight of fools’, and in the *Sigālovāda Sutta*, the Buddha says that breaking the fifth precept leads to six dangers: present waste of money, increased quarrelling, liability to sickness, loss of good name, indecent exposure of one’s person, and weakening of one’s wisdom (*Dīgha Nikāya* III) (Harvey 77-78:2000).

Nāgārjuna, the great Brahmin philosopher of emptiness, lists thirty-five perils of drink (Lamotte 1947). Elsewhere, commentators on the early sutras explain that drink destroys one’s self-respect and fear of bad rebirths, or leads to delusion in this and future lives, insanity in one’s next life, or to a rebirth in a hell, as a frustrated ghost or a mad dog (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982).

Understanding the focus of Japan’s *Bōzu* Bars requires a survey of several interrelated topics. I have already explored the precepts, alcohol, and intoxication, so now move to the notion of *upāya*,

⁵ Pure Land Buddhisms in China, Korea, and Japan gave individuals much more flexibility in how to live a life based on faith in the Amida Buddha and his power to absolve infractions of the precepts by chanting *namu amida butsu*. While some teachers may say *karma* remains a force like gravity, others seem ready to reconcile *karma* to the dustbin of history. See Stephen Batchelor’s Chapter 4, “Eel Wriggling,” in his *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist* (2011).

or “skillful means.” The question of whether to drink alcohol or not is highly provocative, both for what it asks implicitly (“Can I violate one of the core Buddhist precepts?”) as well as for the navigation of rules of practice for many diverse Buddhisms in the contemporary world. It is complicated, culturally bound, and yet globally significant to the tradition and those who practice within it. In Japan, the very existence of a *Bōzu* Bar is transgressive within the context of Buddhisms worldwide, which perhaps also adds to its appeal for the common visitor.⁶

Key to the *Bōzu* Bars is the idea of navigating suffering to achieve a resolution of the pain it creates for the individual. Whether one is drowning in the depths of an illicit love affair or beset with aching bones from a lifetime spent at a desk, it is up to the Buddhist priest to find a way to communicate effectively. “I am a monk of the Jōdō Shinshū sect, and in its principles,” says Rev. Fujioka, “drinking alcohol is actually seen as something positive. Communication between beings is very important and we believe that drinking reasonable amounts of alcohol can help people to open their hearts” (Amelie, 2018). This is not a doctrine issued by the True Pure Land denomination but rather an implicit sense of understanding among its membership and priests. The term *upāya* indicates a strategy that connects a Buddhist teaching with the audience at hand. It may not be a strategy that aligns immediately with the precepts or other Buddhist teachings, yet it has a plan to bring to the listener a deeper understanding *if* they are able to hear the priest and put his words into action.

Like interpretations of the fifth precept, how Buddhist cultures worldwide interpret *upāya* is shaped by local politics, historic contingencies, and economies and thus may or may not resonate with the original teachings. Once again, when surveying the fifth precept, we are oriented towards the global nature of Buddhisms. As one essay puts it rather dramatically, the term “Buddhism” must “encompass so much diversity and contradiction that it breaks at the seams.” Authors Derris and Gummer (2007) go on to say that regional differences are so great, and the cultural history of Buddhist traditions so complex, that any attempt to create an all-encompassing definition will tend to “obscure rather than illuminate” these complexities.⁷

It makes far more sense to talk about Buddhisms, yet the plural form does not read easily, nor are substitute terms readily available. An awareness of diverse cultural, political, and personal approaches to Buddhisms not only contributes to an appreciation of how people shape religion to their own purposes, it also helps avoid reification. In a world dominated by consumer choice, “Buddhism” is less a brand-name religious label than it is a sprawling marketplace where a variety of tastes and styles are available for consideration as competing means to “liberation.” In short, the different manifestations of Buddhist traditions form a kaleidoscope of approaches and methods focused on the premise of “awakening” to the true nature of reality and the liberation from suffering.

⁶ This idea is due thanks to a suggestion from one of the special focus editors.

⁷ The authors Karen Derris and Natalie Gummer argue in 2007 that the prevailing categories of orientalism in the 19th and 20th centuries could not help but create a Buddhist religion following the model of Christianity. Based almost entirely on what were considered the “original teachings” of Pali texts and the notion of the Buddha as a kind of solitary and self-reliant hero, the religion called “Buddhism” gained a degree of consistency and structure it simply did not have. For more on this topic, see also McMahan 2008 or Sharf 1995.

Japan's Bōzu Bars⁸

Rev. Kiyoshi Fumihiko (Zuikōji temple, Osaka), who held the first workshop that explored and then founded the idea of the Bōzu Bar in 1991, told me in an interview that he believes a mutual and beneficial transformation occurs when, through direct experience, one's religious practice engages the world and all its challenges. Buddhism's emphasis on interdependence among all living creatures, and the responsibility this generates to address suffering wherever and whenever it arises, is one of the religion's core teachings that transcends sectarian and regional differences.

During an afternoon with this innovative priest, I learned Rev. Kiyoshi's path to his current position was anything but traditional.⁹ A rugby aficionado during his years at Kyoto University who considered religion unnecessary and priests to be "idiots and fools," he entered the Marubeni corporation upon graduation, one of Japan's top trading firms. When he later fell in love with a woman whose father was head priest at a temple, permission to marry was contingent upon his ordination as a priest. He did not have to give up his career and actually run a temple, only take a short course and obtain the requisite training.

Around this same time, during his work as an up-and-coming executive, an engineer from India asked him about his religious beliefs. When he replied with the standard "I have no religion" (*mushūkyō*), his Hindu colleague challenged him with additional questions about life and death that caused him to think deeply. The final straw was the destruction caused by the 1995 Hanshin earthquake, which not only collapsed his defenses about religion but also roused his conscience to abandon the cutthroat world of corporate capitalism, commit to the life of a priest, and, as additional motivation, win his beloved in the bargain.

Rev. Kiyoshi's temple is located deep in southwest Osaka, an old market town now swamped by the worst of post-war urban sprawl: small factories, public housing, freeways, and a typical hodge-podge of shabby apartments, hastily built houses, and nondescript condos. The tens of thousands of people displaced by the 1995 Hanshin earthquake convinced him there were people everywhere needing proper shelter, decent food, and a community of support.¹⁰ As the founder of the "Vowz/Bōzu Bar" (Priests' Bar) concept, Rev. Kiyoshi used his non-profit organizational knowledge and the 1998 NGO law to establish a small drinking establishment in the heart of Osaka's Shinsaibashi entertainment district. A traditional True Pure Land emphasis on the saving grace of Amida Buddha, and a generic Buddhist sense about *upāya*, helped to establish general guidelines for ethical and

⁸ Parts of the following discussion which have been adapted and edited for this part of the paper appeared earlier in *Experimental Buddhism* (Nelson 2013).

⁹ It is tempting to posit a direct correlation between the innovation and activism of priests and the ways in which their early career path diverged from the "straight-and-narrow." While there seems to be a general tendency for non-traditional backgrounds to lead to increased social commitment, there are also priests who have followed directly in the footsteps of their fathers and yet went on to form NPO organizations and the like. Generally speaking, it does seem to be the case that influences and experience outside temple life, rather than the teachings of a denomination or the example of its senior leaders, triggers the conscience of a priest and moves him or her to action.

¹⁰ Rev. Kiyoshi established an NPO to operate the Nakai Share House. With additional help from Bihara 21, the group home was finally established in 2005 for at-risk adults living in isolation as well as for those with mild physical and mental handicaps (see Dessi 2008, 195-196). For more on this topic, see Nelson 2013, 135.

religious behavior. In our conversation, Rev. Kiyoshi held that a precept is sometimes subject to suspension if it interferes with what he sees as compassionate action. *Upāya* means a Buddhist practitioner should devise a strategy for teaching the *buddhadharma* that does three things: first, it fits the situation at hand; next, it is comprehensible by one's audience whether they be fishermen or a ladies' group; and finally, it must lead to action in this world that reduces suffering and stimulates the desire to awaken.

A priest named Chikū, who wrote during a time of great change for Buddhism in the late and rapidly modernizing 1800s, said, "When we help those who are in the mud, we...too get muddy. If we stand on the shore, how are we to help one caught in the stream?" (Jaffe 2002, 42). Rev. Kiyoshi feels that he was justified in operating the Bōzu Bar because it was not trying to make money and because it provided a place of sanctuary and conversation. As stated on the bar's website, neighborhood temples used to be places open twenty-four hours a day where anyone could go and share their troubles (Shūkukenkai, n.d.). But as temples became more corporate from the 1970s onward due to the large revenue flows from the funeral and memorial ceremonies they offered, interactions with Buddhist priests turned into more contractual situations. This is not to say that all of Japan's 76,000 temples (Covell 2005) follow this pattern, but there are many cases where one finds a temple looking splendidly "Buddhist" and soon realizes it is all a kind of revenue-generating performance for funerals and memorials.



Image 2. Osaka bōzu bar, 2007. (Photo by the author.)

The *Bōzu* Bar and the priests working in these establishments want to subvert that function in today's world and have the bars serve as a place where people can meet as equals and talk freely. The original site was tucked away in a corner of the decrepit "Nine-Dragon Castle Building" with a small statue of a standing Amida Buddha over the counter and bar on the first floor. The single upstairs room was decorated with a reproduction of the Womb Mandala from the Shingon tradition, framed calligraphy of the *nembutsu* prayer central to both Pure Land and True Pure Land traditions, and a line of Tibetan prayer flags on the wall. Should a customer express curiosity about any of these items, a priest can then share information about Buddhist teachings.

Patrons of the Osaka *Bōzu* Bar need not suffer deprivation when they travel to Tokyo because affiliated bars began to operate in the Shinjuku and Nakano areas as early as 2000. According to a (now-defunct) blog written by a visitor to both Tokyo establishments, these are places where visitors are welcomed with a humorous sign saying the bar is a "place for people who want to be lectured by or who want to lecture a priest." Since many people suffer emotionally during the nighttime hours, these bars are considered by their managers as a place of refuge and support. According to Shaku Genkō, a Shinshū priest who managed the Nakano bar, "There was a time when people would go to their local temple for advice on all sorts of problems, not just spiritual matters. This bar is just the same, a place where people can come and talk freely" (McCurry 2008).

Early criticism of the Tokyo bar came not from Rev. Fujioka's or other priests' denominations but from neighboring establishments fearful of losing clientele. Rev. Fujioka knew the bar was not "irregular" as a business and, as he said in an interview with an online magazine, was following in the Zen tradition of *kissako* or "having a cup of tea" (Shimada 2017). To share a cup of "tea" requires opening yourself to the other person regardless of their status, class, and gender. He says that the critiques received were a good learning opportunity, one the priests acknowledged with gratitude, as they slowly established business practices and a clientele.

Over time, the bar created a viable business where people could come to experience Buddhism not in a funeral or memorial mode, as is highly common in Japan, but one that emphasizes life-as-it-is. In fact, according to Rev. Fujioka, the bar is better than a psychological clinic where one has to go in and wait to see a counselor. The bar provides instant satisfaction in serving a drink and a little something to eat, while priests listen to visitors and try to provide some advice to help the person find a solution to the problems at hand. Rev. Fujioka says, "we are looking for correct answers but also think people should know we priests are not employees of the bar but rather 'ways' to follow" (Shimada 2017). In other words, each priest is a "way" (*michi*) of discipline and learning that requires a long-term relationship such as one finds in any of Japan's cultural or martial arts (Fujioka 2016). *Aikidō* (martial art), *judō* (martial art), *kadō* (way of flowers), *kendō* (way of the sword), *iaidō* (way of drawing and using the sword) and others attest to this tradition.

Practices at the bar

The evening I visited the Tokyo bar in 2019 was revealing for its dedication to some semblance of Buddhist practice. The bar's head priest and "master" (for that evening) handed out a bilingual Japanese-English document that contained the Heart Sutra (*Hannya shingyō*) on one side and shorter

vows and prayers on the other. At nine p.m. sharp, his attendant hit a bell and the evening's ceremony was underway. Rev. Yamamoto Naoji stood in front of a *butsudan* that housed a small statue of the Amida Buddha. He wanted us to know how important it is to distinguish what is good and bad, as well as what is right and wrong in this world of suffering. *Mayoi* is a term he used to describe what's lost; *satori* is understanding *clearly* what is found and correct. He said we have to choose the things in life that do not cause suffering in order to have a future as individuals, communities, and a species.

For this evening's talk, he called the Heart Sutra "the main dish." He described it as elementary in what it proposes, compact in length and style, and produces great merit for everyone who chants or listens. The shorter introductions were called the "side dishes," or "appetizers" that whet our appetite for the truth. They are chanted in the following order:

1. Sutra-opening verse (*Kaikyō-ge*) • "The unsurpassed, profound, and wondrous dharma is rarely met, even in a hundred, thousand, million *kalpas*. Now we can see and hear it, accept and maintain it. May we unfold the meaning of the Tathagata's truth." *Mujō jinjin mimyōhō hyakusenmangō nansōgū gakon kenmon takujuji gangenyorai shinjitsugi.*
2. Repentance Verse (*Sange-ge*) • "All my past and harmful karma, born from beginningless greed, hate, and delusion, through body, speech and mind, I now fully avow." *Gashaku shozō shoakugō kaiyu mushi tonjinchi jūshingoi shisho shō issai gakon kaisange.*
3. Prayer for Merit Sharing (*Ekō-mon*) • "We hope this merit influences widely to mankind to attain Buddhism together." *Gan-nishikudoku fūgyū o issai gatō yo shujō kaigu jōbutsudō.* (All translations by Rev. Yamamoto)

We were then instructed in how to chant the *Heart Sutra*. I have seen videos and read reports from this bar of the assembled crowd more or less ignoring the priest in charge, but tonight's group was attentive and chanted along dutifully. Because the Heart Sutra is one of many chants for a True Pure Land priest to be offering in the context of the bar, I was surprised by its pacing and intonation, differently rendered from my familiarity with the chant in Sōtō Zen. But we got through it, the ceremony quickly ended, music was turned up, and the social life of the bar continued. Perhaps the people most affected were a German couple from Dresden, in Japan for the first time, who followed along closely and said to me afterward they were deeply moved by the Heart Sutra.

The names of drinks also provide a unique window into discussing Buddhism and, perhaps, assessing a patron's psychology in the drink they choose. Originally, when the bar in Osaka was about ten years old, the drink titles were:

- saihō jōdo* (the western paradise of Pure Land)
- bonnō = bōdai* (from the phrase *bonnō soku bōdai*, "earthly desires are enlightenment")
- shikiyoku zanmai* (devotion to sexual desire)
- aiyoku jigoku* (the "hell" of lust)

kurikuri bōzu (closely shaven head of a young priest)¹¹

I was told by the Nakano bar priest that each location names its drinks in accordance with the Buddhist denomination presiding over the property, which pays bills, insurance, salaries (for helpers, not the priests), product costs, and maintains the establishment's physical appearance. In most cases, these managers are Shinshū priests from the True Pure Land tradition, and yet they are accommodating to their colleagues from other denominations who may want to experience the life of a bar as a means for Buddhist teachings.

At the Tokyo Bōzu Bar, the drinks menu comes in a little book similar to those used for sutra chanting at a temple, with their pages glued together so that the book forms a continuous document. They've been handled and studied for nineteen years, and bear the signs of a well-used text: frayed, dirty, taped together, glued, and otherwise very used. The drinks and cocktail pages look like this:

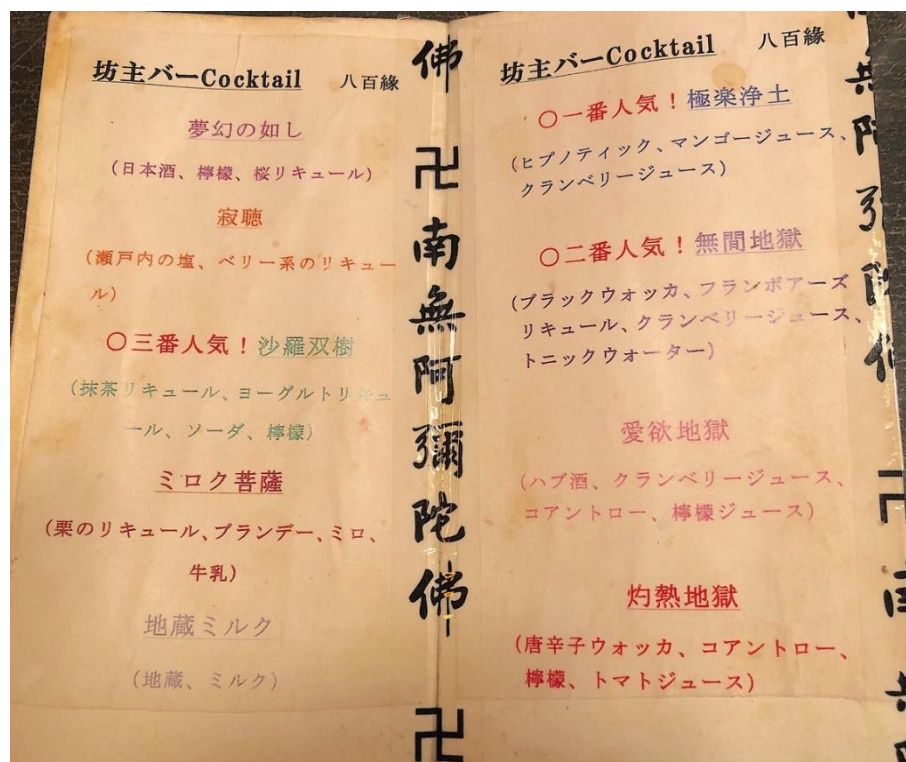


Figure 3. The drink menu from the Shinjuku Bōzu Bar. The inscribed centerfold says *namu Amida Butsu* (hail to Amida Buddha) and carries the symbol for temples in China, Korea, and Japan.¹² (Photo by the author.)

¹¹ While I experienced one of these drinks at the bar when Rev. Kiyoshi gave me a tour, I was not 'mindful' enough to document the menu. The early Bōzu Bar menu can be found at <http://syukubo.com/off/circle/off0011.html>. Accessed first on May 4, 2007 and again May 30, 2019.

¹² It should be noted that the menu is full of word play, or *kotoba asobi* in Japanese. On page two, one can see the characters used for visiting a shrine or temple, or *sanpai*, and yet the menu's meaning refers to the "charge" for telling fortunes and for those of love. In adding this item to the menu, it resonates strongly with how Buddhist priests and temples have functioned in Japanese societies over the centuries. See Otake 2001 and Thomas 2006 for more on *kotoba asobi* in Japanese society.

(Note: The following text in parentheses are comments and clarifications about the menu but do not appear there).

Bōyū no na ari (Things to forget from saké) attributed to Shinran from an "oral account"

"Please let us know if you'd like to speak (directly) with a priest" (Shinran is the founder of the True Pure Land denomination)

Bukkyō no shōchū (Buddhist types of *shōchū*, best described as a type of vodka)

Kūkai no michi (made from *shōchū* fermented with rice; Kūkai is the founder of Shingon Buddhism in Japan)

Ippen (made from *shōchū* fermented from wheat) started by Jisshū in the Kamakura period, led public to *gōkuraku jōdo* (Great Paradise) with *odori-nembutsu* (a type of singing and chanting popular among the Jisshū sect)

Emma (made from *shōchū* fermented from barley) another figure of *Jizō bosatsu* (a popular bodhisattva known for administering aid to aborted fetuses, travellers, and people locked in hell) who judges and, if you lie, will pull out your tongue

Hannya tō (slang for a person who drinks sake and becomes a wise sage; monks doing ascetic practices can drink a little to protect their health; *hannya* means wisdom; the term *hannyatō* also means "alcohol")

(Taneda) *Santōka* (poet from the Taishō period [1912-1926] who became a Sōtō Zen wanderer and author of haiku poems)

Hakuin Masamune (Edo period [1603-1868] monk who restarted Rinzai Zen)

Mugen no gotoshi • sake, lemon, cherry liqueur; (title alludes to "life as a dream")

Jakuchō • berryjuice and salt from Setouchi (named after a popular female writer, Setouchi Jakuchō, now a nun, aged 96)

Third most popular! *Sara sōju* • green tea and yogurt liqueurs, soda, lemon juice

Second most popular! *Miroku Bosatsu* • chestnut liqueur, brandy, milk (the name refers to the bodhisattva/Buddha of the future, who will appear when the current Buddha's teachings are no longer followed. Also known as Maitreya.)

Most popular! *Gokuraku jōdo* • 'hpnoti', mango, cranberry liqueurs; (the name refers to the Pure Land paradise in many types of Japanese Buddhism)

Mugen Jigoku • black Johnny Walker, flambeur liqueur, cranberry juice, tonic water (the next three drinks use the word for "hell"/*jigoku* to indicate torment, anguish, and pain. This first drink evokes the "hell of no respite")

Aiyoku Jigoku • *habu* liqueur, cranberry juice, Cointreau, lemon juice; (the torment of romantic love unfulfilled or one that has gone wrong in some way; a *habu* is the most poisonous snake in all Japan)

Shakunetsu Jigoku • red pepper, vodka, Cointreau, lemon juice, tomato juice (this is the “scorching heat” of desire)

Yakuyōshu (medicinal drinks)

habu shu • fermented from *habu* snakes in Okinawa

suppon shu • wine-based, turtle-derived medicine

shōsanbenshu • wine-based wolf, deer, seal’s penises (they provide ‘ichiban kikimasu!’ or ‘high impact’—for a nourishing tonic; one can assume that the activity at hand may very well be sex)

kōzanbudōshu • 25 kinds of medicinal herbs in the wine; easy to drink

(all menu translations by the author and Ms. Omura Miko)

Needless to say, this is a rather elaborate scheme for finding the combination of desire, anxiety, curiosity, and despair to establish a framework that ultimately encourages a person’s salvation. Any priest working behind the counter at the bar may respond to a patron’s comments about their life with little more than general and abstract remarks (“Oh really? Is that right? I see. Tell me more”). But they are quick to disperse their personal business cards, with full contact information, for someone who needs more than a cursory conversation in a bar. Many priests working with the general public have taken counseling training to better prepare them for the complexities of regular life, but many have not and make their decisions based on what might be called a subjective Buddhist ethic. In other words, if there is a way to respond to a concern with a relevant Buddhist teaching, then the psychological need to assist and provide guidance in that moment has been met.

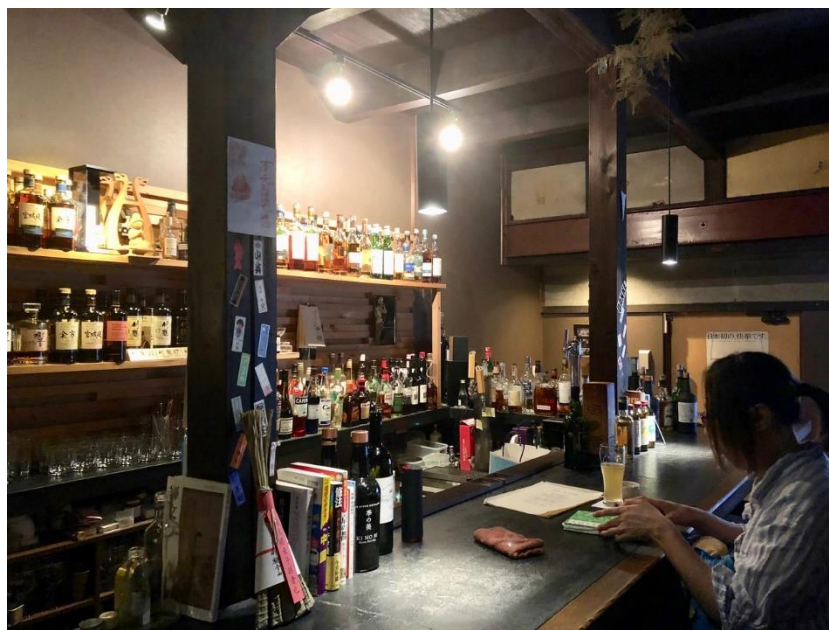


Image 4. Kyoto Bōzu Bar, 2020. (Photo by the author.)

In the Kyoto Bōzu Bar—a stylish and handsome establishment run by Rev. Haneda Takahide for the past ten years—his True Pure Land temple of Kōonji is too far removed from the hustle-and-bustle to attract new members. For safety purposes, the temple’s front gate remains open throughout the

day, but a casual walk-in visit is blocked by a waist-high gate. It is likely that his temple is one of many in Japan experiencing a drop in stable clientele (*danka*) thus necessitating a form of revenue—the *Bōzu Bar*—coming in from outside the confines of the traditional temple setting. Rev. Haneda is active in the progressive priest movement and knows many of the individuals discussed in my recent publication, *Experimental Buddhism: Innovation and Activism in Contemporary Japan* (2013). He also makes a mean curry rice that went perfectly with the Kyoto craft beer I ordered.

The idea of “experimentation” is appropriate to describe what is happening in the contemporary period as some local temple priests try to help people understand what a temple is, which Buddhist teachings are relevant to their lives, how the temple can be a force for social change and activism, and how some interaction with a temple is a positive development both for an individual’s life and society in general. Priests experimenting with their traditions are being pragmatic and rational, and they test their hypothesis for what works and what does not, given the particulars of their temple’s location and setting. While looking for both immediate and longer-term results, many are slowly reinventing their traditions in a gradual, more socially-responsive manner (see Nelson 2013; Porcu 2014; Ikeguchi 2014). Rev. Haneda, for example, links his work in the *Bōzu Bar* to his temple and sees no opposition between their different yet complementary missions.

“I asked myself: what is the role of a monk? What is the purpose of the temple? I did a lot of exploration, but nothing clicked. Something was still missing. But when I discovered bars, I realized that a bartender is very similar to a monk. You listen to people’s stories and take in their worries. So I got curious and decided to open a bar” (Uchida 2015).

He then presented a copy of a book titled *Let’s Go to the Temple! Prescriptions by Monks* (*Otera ikō! Bōzu ga eranda tera no shobōsen*) by Ikeguchi Ryūhō that he described as “...monks pursuing their spirituality through unusual activities” (Uchida 2015). During my visit, he provided for English-speaking visitors a one-page translation of a sermon on self-sufficiency and non-attachment (included in Appendix 1). I discovered later when looking at the bar’s website a gathering of thirty-one True Pure Land priests, each one coming on a different day of the month, in November 2019. Considered to be “stars” on the poster, they are all doing something unique and innovative for their temple communities. The fact that an event like this can be accommodated at the Kyoto *Bōzu Bar* speaks volumes about the social outreach and community building Rev. Haneda feels is vital to his work.

Conclusion

My first *Bōzu Bar* visit in 2007 just happened to coincide with a gathering of several Osaka-area priests, including Rev. Kiyoshi, Rev. Shaku Tesshū, and Rev. Akita Mutsuhiko,¹³ who wanted to show a scholar/priest from Hiroshima University how the bar works to connect social outreach with the

¹³ Rev. Akita is one of four priests given longer profiles in *Experimental Buddhism* (Nelson 2013). His work has been extensive to transform not only his home temple, Dairenji, but also provide “cool” ideas for the Pure Land tradition and other denominations. Rev. Shaku runs a group home in addition to his temple and is a widely published author and sought-after commentator.



Image 5. *Bōzu Meguri*, Kyoto Bar, 2019

dharma. As we discussed a variety of topics, drank whisky, and nibbled food sent from a patron in distant Niigata, I recalled historical precedents where a few visionary individuals meeting to share ideas and resources have changed society for the better. Examples from Japan alone would include the architects of the 1868 Meiji revolution, the founders of Japan's women's suffrage movement in the 1920s, post-war advocacy groups for nuclear non-proliferation, the environment, or basic human, minority, and consumer rights. All these movements started with conversation, camaraderie, and commitment.

Although strategies and solutions differ according to the personality and background of the priest as well as locally available resources, their approach is experimental, innovative, and actively engaged with the complex conditions of late modernity. They would all agree that a priest must move beyond serving a limited constituency as a ritual specialist conducting funerals and memorials. "We have the right combination of religious background, formal education, spiritual training, good locations, and administrative skills to help find solutions to many of these social problems," Rev. Akita remarked. "Who else has resources like this available for the purpose of helping others?" (Nelson 2013, 138-139).

In an early lecture at Zōjōji temple, the Tokyo headquarters of the Pure Land denomination, Prof. Ueda Noriyuki repeated one of the main themes he has stressed in his publications and many talks: Buddhism in Japan is at the end of its road because most priests neither recognize nor fully understand the sources of existential and spiritual suffering in today's society (Chūgai Nippō, 2006;

Ueda 2004). He says priests need to take on the suffering of this historical period (*jidai no kurushimi uketome*) as “genuine religious leaders” have always done and forge a new strategy and discourse so that Buddhist institutions can ultimately benefit society. In order to accomplish this goal, he believes priests will have to transform their perspectives and reaffirm their beliefs about the fundamentals of Buddhism.

In the general context of Buddhism in Japan, much of what Prof. Ueda says has credibility. Many priests are definitely engaging with the suffering of their clients in sympathetic ways, sometimes offering advice that helps to change lives for the better. But Ueda's emphasis on priests globalizing their perspectives about Buddhism seems slightly out-of-synch for both traditional temples and more innovative places like a *Bōzu Bar*. The tens of thousands of individuals who have come in contact with priests and their progressive programs (suicide prevention, interest groups, elder and youth care, public talks, fashion shows, and *Bōzu Bars* as well) provide evidence through their participation that some value is apparent. In Japanese Buddhism, the cultural value of sharing a drink may water down the fifth precept, but listening to another person, and opening one's heart to what they have to say, is compassion in action that is not at odds with a Buddhism for our time.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to express appreciation to two anonymous readers who offered suggestions, critiques, and ways to improve the paper generally. The final version is my own attempt to incorporate what they advised and yet keep the original spirit that motivated the research.

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Appendix 1

The following message was distributed to me by the proprietor of the Kyoto Bōzu Bar. The topic did not come up the evening I was present (May 30, 2019), but it holds a good Buddhist teaching and is thus included here.

