

INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF ENGAGED BUDDHISTS (INEB)
ACTIVITY REPORT

on

2012 INEB Executive Meeting and International Forum

The Wisdom of Interbeing & The Art of Happiness

An International Engaged Buddhist Vision for Post 3/11 Japan

November 6-10, 2012

Supported by: Niwano Peace Foundation, Kodo Kyodan Temple and JNEB



Fukushima 3/11 has become a watershed; the moment when it became very apparent that the sacrifices of modern industrial development had outpaced the benefits. While Japan became the first Asian nation to achieve a high level of modern development, it accomplished this feat by dismantling its intimate rural communities and ancient cultural traditions for alienated urban life based on workaholism, consumerism, and the endless drive for growth and success. Its rich natural environment has been slowly compromised in this process with the present specter of nationwide nuclear contamination endangering life itself. For a country that has a rich Buddhist history of over 1,400 years, it seems the Buddhist values of sufficiency and harmony with others and with nature have no role in contemporary Japan, nor it seems do Buddhist priests and Buddhist temples. As Japan has been the leading nation within Asia of the promise of modern development, is its situation the fate that the rest of Asia and the Buddhist world must follow? And how about the West

that is already experiencing the same dislocations of Japan?

It was against this backdrop that INEB held its annual Executive and Advisory Committee Meeting hosted by the Kodo Kyodan Buddhist Fellowship under the leadership of Rev. Shojun Masazumi Okano (INEB Advisory Board) in Yokohama Japan from November 8-9, 2012. The two-day meeting was sandwiched by 3 two-day study tours to better understand Japanese society and Japanese Buddhism beforehand and a daylong symposium and networking event open to the general public afterwards. While INEB Japan was a founding member of the network in 1989, INEB has rebuilt itself in Japan since the death of INEB Japan's two main founders into a new network called JNEB (Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists). JNEB and Kodo Kyodan thus welcomed 24 INEB board members from all parts of Asia for a week packed full of events, meetings, and encounters.

Study Tour 1: Nuclear Power and Local Communities in Fukushima

After an overnight at the downtown Tokyo temple of JNEB member and tour leader Rev. Hidehito Okochi, who recently rebuilt the temple with affordable chemical-free apartment units, a third of the INEB delegation headed into Fukushima. The group was supported by Prof. Hisashi Nakamura (INEB Advisory Board and an expert in development economics), Rev. Daiki Nakashita (a Buddhist chaplain who has worked with the dying, homeless, and those traumatized by disasters), Ms. Yuki Kitano (a volunteer for the Interfaith Forum for the Review of National Nuclear Policy), and JNEB team members Rev. Kobo Inoue and Rev. Naoyuki Ogi.

In two vans, the group travelled along the north-east corridor from Tokyo to Sukagawa city, Nihonmatsu city, and Fukushima city – all some 60 kms from the nuclear facility with common radiation readings of around .2 microsieverts/hour. We then turned south-east down towards the 20 km restricted area. This southeast corridor is the area with the highest levels of radiation since the largest explosion from the nuclear plants on March 15th was pushed in this direction by wind, rain, and weather patterns. In this way, the abandoned town of Iita-te, some 40 kms from the plants, has much higher radiation readings from .3 to .7 microsieverts/hr than the still inhabited northern part of Minami-Soma, some 25 kms from the plants, which has levels between .15 and .25 microsieverts/hour (.03 is considered normal; Tokyo is on average .045).

Wherever the group travelled, we learned of the heartache and trauma of both those who have remained and those who have evacuated. Especially for those who have stayed in these areas, we learned first hand that by denying the danger to those outside of the 20-30 kms radius, the Japanese government does not provide information on radiation levels and food security to enable these communities to avoid unnecessary dangers caused by higher than normal radiation levels that persist. This includes the difficulty concerned parents have of finding a doctor or medical facility to conduct thyroid examinations in Fukushima, which national and prefectural medical authorities are suppressing. Finally, the group was overwhelmingly moved by the courage of these local people, especially a number of Buddhist priests, to courageously remain in the area to try to educate their people on the

nuclear issue and the way forward to rebuilding their lives. From this experience, the group helped the INEB board to draft and adopt its official statement on nuclear energy ([see next article](#)).

Study Tour 2: Suffering and Illness in Post Industrial Society: The Pathology of Contemporary Japanese Society

With the economic downturn of the Japanese economy in the early-mid 1990s, Japan began to exhibit the kinds of post-modern, post-industrial social problems of the United States and Europe. This vicious cycle of unskillful social and economic development has led to social breakdown in Japan, which is having a deep effect on human relationships and a marked increase in various forms of psychological trauma and disease seen through the abandonment of the elderly; bullying and psychological hazing in many social sectors; the dropping out of youth from social involvement; and suicide. For thirteen straight years (1998-2011), since the full onset of the Japanese economic recession, Japan has exceeded 30,000 suicides per year. As conductors of funerals, Buddhist priests often come into direct contact with families who have suffered from the suicide of a loved one. An increasing number of priests are beginning to get involved in preventative psycho-spiritual care for both the suicidal and the bereaved while reviving the traditional role of the Buddhist priest as a counselor and supporter – a role that has been largely lost in urban, modern Japan.

This study “tour” offered an intimate interaction with two prominent priests working in this field, Rev. Jotetsu Nemoto and Rev. Fujio Soin, both from the Rinzai Zen sect. They have been working individually and also collectively with the Association of Buddhist Priests Grappling with the Suicide Problem. They were assisted by Rev. Okano, Rev. Yukan Ogawa (also a member of the Association), and Ms. Chisa Yamashita (of the Zenseikyo Foundation & Buddhist Council for Youth and Social Welfare).

Over two days, they learned about the work of Revs. Fujio and Nemoto, which often involves emergency phone counseling late at night. The group also spent time sharing personal images of death and suicide, and what role Buddhism can play in directly confronting this issue. On the final afternoon, the group went to the ancient capital of Kamakura with its many Buddhist temples and engaged in some traditional Japanese zazen meditation at the 800 year old root temple of Rev. Fujio, Kencho-ji. The experiences of this group along with others in INEB are inspiring plans to create an international network for Buddhist chaplaincy and counseling for the traumatized, suicidal, and dying.

Study Tour 3: The Current State of Japanese Buddhism and Its New Movements

The theme of the previous INEB Conference in Bodhgaya, India was “The Future of Buddhism.” For Buddhist Asia, Japan in many ways shows what the future of Buddhism as well as the future of these Asian societies might come to look like. Since Japan’s push toward modernization and “westernization” in the mid 1800s, Japanese Buddhism has been struggling to adapt. Its unprecedented step in Buddhist Asia of allowing its monks to abandon the monastic *vinaya* along with the development of massive modern lay

denominations has been a revolutionary step fraught with problems but also filled with potentials. Today, Japanese Buddhism faces the major challenge of its marginalization in a highly secular, post modern society. Mirroring the economic downturn and development of gaps between rich and poor in mainstream society, the traditional system of temples is in crisis, and the Buddhist world is struggling to create a meaningful social role for itself in 21st century Japan. The trends and challenges in Japanese Buddhism offer important lessons to other Sanghas in Buddhist Asia as their societies are following similar paths of economic and social development.

This tour was led by two young members of JNEB, Rev. Yuzuki Matsushita (a Shingon Vajrayana sect priest who helps to run a virtual on-line temple called Higan-ji geared toward attracting young people to Buddhism) and Rev. Jin Sakai (a Jodo Pure Land sect priest working with the Japan Buddhist Federation). Rev. Yoshiharu Tomatsu (former Secretary General of the Japan Buddhist Federation) also supported the group. On the first day of the study tour, the group visited temples and Buddhist activities outside of Tokyo, such as Ippo-An, a small dharma center located in the ancient Buddhist capital of Kamakura. Ippo-an is run by Ven. Sudhammacara (Rev. Ippo), a Japanese Soto Zen priest who ordained in Burma for 5 years and is also close with Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. He teaches meditation and an ecumenical “One Dharma” Buddhism to Japanese looking for Buddhist practice that is more practical and relevant to their daily lives. In the afternoon, they visited Joshin-ji temple (a Jodo Pure Land sect) in Hiratsuka City. The abott, Rev. Kennichi Yoshida, has been rebuilding his small rural temple community by providing more affordable grave sites, creating a grief care support group as well as a group of priests involved in counseling work, and acting as a local parole officer for criminal youth.

On the second day, the looked at temples in urban Tokyo, such as Komyo-ji, a small temple that has opened various areas on the grounds as an “open café” for any one to come relax and enjoy quiet, slow time. The group also visited Myo-oh-in temple (Shingon Vajrayana) and met with Rev. Shunsui Ichihashi, a fully ordained female priest who is the daughter of the abbot and married to a fully ordained male priest, and their young son born 2 years ago. Their temple and relationship represents what the future of Asian Buddhism could look like with fully ordained female priests and male priests working for their sangha and society. At the end of the day, the group gathered at Rev. Tomatsu’s temple, Shinko-in, situated right under the Tokyo Tower to learn about the deeper structural problems of Japanese Buddhism and its relationship with the government and public organizations.



Board Meeting and Public Symposium

The whole group then reconvened at Kodo Kyodan temple for two days of meetings on INEB affairs, which were highlighted by discussions about the next INEB general conference in Malaysia on Buddhist-Muslim Dialogue and the adoption of official declarations on the conflicts going on in Myanmar and Bangladesh between Buddhist and Muslims and the problem of nuclear energy as highlighted in the recent study tour.

The week's events culminated in an entire day of public interactions on November 10th at the Kodo Kyodan Temple. In the morning, INEB board members met with 25 Japanese engaged Buddhists from the JNEB network to discuss in small groups issues of common concern such as: 1) Buddhist economics & INEB's Right Livelihood Fund, 2) environment & INEB's project on global climate change, 3) peace & human rights especially in Myanmar, 4) Buddhist chaplaincy and counseling for the suicidal, traumatized, and dying, 5) gender and INEB's project on Buddhist Education for Social Transformation, 6) Buddhist revival and renewal activities, and 7) Youth Development & INEB's Young Bodhisattva Program.

The afternoon was devoted to a public symposium on the theme of the program of the entire week, *The Wisdom of Interbeing & The Art of Happiness*. After Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa's keynote speech on the topic, we were fortunate to have 4 special speakers and commentators both long familiar and new to the network. A new friend, Ven. Huimin Bhikshu, spoke on the Wisdom of Interbeing and the long held Japanese value of mutual bonds (*kizuna*), which is being revived in the wake of the 3/11 disasters. Old friend, Phra Phaisan Visalo spoke on the Art of Happiness which comes from not acquiring but rather giving away. Rev. Mari Sengoku, also new to the network, spoke on her experiences as a Buddhist chaplain in America and Hawaii and the power of Buddhist based Naikan therapy

for the many people in Japan with relational disorders. Rev. Yoshiharu Tomatsu, another long time INEB participant, reviewed the work of Japanese Buddhists to confront the challenges of the 3/11 disasters, including the nuclear issue, and challenged Buddhists to resolve issues of ethnic conflict like those in Bangladesh and Myanmar.



Conclusion

As both a main organizer within Japan and a long time INEB member, I got to experience both sides of this event. Once again the most enjoyable, precious, and meaningful aspect of this week was the sharing of *kalyanamitra* – spiritual friendship. This term has almost become a cliché in INEB, yet it is truly the fabric of who we are and how we interact in both sharing our joys and our sufferings. The two days through Fukushima were filled with intense listening and bearing witness to the suffering of the people there, while sharing laughter and friendship during the long van rides through Northeast Japan. The Executive and Advisory Meetings were filled with serious discussion on a wide variety of important social issues. But the evenings were filled with silliness especially in our common dormitory rooms where participants shared feelings, stories, songs, and laughter. As an organizer, I worried that INEB often doesn't provide comfortable enough accommodation, like private bedrooms. Yet sharing such common space at our meetings takes the inspiring experience of working on social issues together to another level of creating deeper interpersonal bonds amongst our members. In this way, I feel the week of events in Japan was another successful chapter in the INEB story and very consistent with what INEB aspires to be. We now hand the torch to our *kalyanamitra* in Malaysia and greatly look forward to the next general conference there in October 2013!