THE NEW BUSINESS OF BUDDHISM

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This paper examines the recent phenomenon of Japanese Buddhist organizations engaging in economic ventures such as restaurant businesses. Although most people in Japan still practice some religious activities, their level of engagement has declined, and Japan's population is shrinking. As a result, traditional Buddhist temples face an existential crisis. This article shows how this crisis has forced those institutions to turn to new economic strategies. While these businesses have been fairly unsuccessful economically, they have helped the organizations invent new ways to engage with people, exposing them to the principles of Buddhism and nurturing a new generation of patrons.

Keywords: religion, Buddhism, Buddhist restaurants, Otera Café, Japan

Introduction

Buddhism in Japan is in a state of flux, and it has been so for some time. The evidence is easily findable online: you can do a "Buddhist temple stay", experience a "dating event at a Buddhist temple", practice "yoga at a Buddhist temple", and so on. These are all new business ventures that temples have established alongside their traditional religious and ceremonial activities. Why are they doing this? Because unless they do, they may cease to exist, as demographic and cultural forces line up against them.

This article will focus on a new type of restaurant business that some Buddhist temples have lately started, describing them as a typical instance of the ways these organizations attempt to break out of a cycle driven by evolving religious practices and a declining population. This study first sketches the background of this phenomenon in the context of Buddhism's history in Japan, and provides some current data based on observational

research in four Buddhist-owned cafés and bars in several locations. Then, it analyses the observations to find common things that all four businesses share. Finally it discusses the benefits for Buddhism of doing business from financial and sociological points of view.

The Ambivalent Nature of Religion in Japan

From the standpoint of Western definitions of religion, Japanese people in general can be considered fairly non-religious. Most do not regularly attend religious services, nor do they explicitly strive to align daily behaviour with moral precepts deriving from a religious doctrine or belief system. Nonetheless, the great majority of Japanese engage in cultural practices connected with their traditional religions of Shinto and Buddhism. Taken as a whole, those practices encompass a combination of sacred and secular motivations. They typically visit Shinto shrines and/or Buddhist temples on New Year's Day, and may also do so frequently or sporadically during the rest of the year. In addition, they mark major life events such as birth and marriage with Shinto, and death with Buddhist rituals, and a sizable minority of Japanese households report having a Buddhist or Shinto shrine or altar in their homes. At the same time, Christian holidays such as Christmas have made inroads as non-religious occasions to celebrate relationships and mark the cycle of the seasons. At Christmas, many Japanese exchange presents with loved ones. The same is increasingly true of Halloween, a pre-Christian European religious festival honouring the souls of the dead that is now thoroughly commercialized in Japan and linked with the visual signifiers of autumn and harvest-time.

In short, "religious" activity in Japan is a syncretic mix of the sacred and profane, and religious institutions manifest this by existing both as spiritual conduits and as economic entities. In their capacity as economic entities, they have to make themselves relevant to the times they live in. As I will show in a brief historical sketch, that may have been easier for Buddhism in pre-modern times. It is becoming increasingly hard for them today.

Religion and the Politico-Economic Order across Japanese History

As I alluded, in order to achieve their spiritual goals, religions need purely material support systems for their existence. Whatever else they are,

they are economic entities. In Japan, Buddhist organizations have gone through several stages of economic evolution, with each stage being a function of the nation's changing politico-economic system.

1. Pre-modern Period

Buddhism, of course, is not native to Japan. It originated in India and was introduced to Japan in the sixth century AD by Korean and Chinese monks. There, it came in contact with the traditional Japanese animistic belief system that has its origins in prehistory and is today called Shinto. From that time until today, Shinto and Buddhism have coexisted, with much mutual interpenetration, which is not of concern to us in the present study. Suffice it to say that in its early days Buddhism was quickly taken up by the Japanese elite, and thus enjoyed official patronage that guaranteed its ability to thrive alongside Shinto. During the thousand-year span that stretched from the beginning of the Heian period in the late eighth century to the Meiji Restoration in the 1860s, one or more Buddhist sects always managed to find favour with the imperial court, feudal governments, shogunates, or the warrior class. Its material survival was not in question.

2. Period of Shinto Ascendancy

Shintoism always had one political advantage that Buddhism could not counteract: one of the chief Shinto deities, Amaterasu omikami, is considered the founder of Japan and a direct ancestor of the Japanese imperial family. Thus, compared to Buddhism, Shintoism was more "closely associated with notions of Japanese identity and Nationalism" (Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler, 2011:10). This made it ripe for appropriation and political exploitation, starting in the Meiji period, as the Emperor was elevated to the status of national symbol, and Japan began to assert itself as a unified nation-state on the world stage. For a brief time immediately following the Restoration, Buddhism was even abolished by government decree. The decree was quickly lifted, but Buddhist priests were then encouraged to marry and began treating their temples as, in essence, small businesses that they could pass on to their male heirs. The period of Buddhism's guaranteed material existence was over and Buddhist temples had to fend for themselves. For many, conducting funeral ceremonies and memorial services became a principal source of income. This unfortunately

pigeonholed Buddhism in many people's minds as a religion associated with death, and that has continued until the present day. This is also the period during which local temples began experimenting with other forms of income-generation beyond charging fees for ceremonies.

State-protected Shinto, meanwhile, continued to provide ideological support to the political system throughout the time of Japan's imperial expansion. In 1940, the government enacted legislation to support and control religious institutions (Shimada, 2012:25-26), because it was worried that temples and shrines might pose an obstacle to controlling the public. There was precedent for this in earlier periods of Japanese history, when Buddhist temples occasionally became power-centres that struggled with the ruling warrior clans. While the government implemented the law, it continued using Shintoism to organize the population around its political objectives.

3. Postwar Period

The political marginalization of Buddhism came to an end after World War II. Today, all religions in Japan are legally independent of the state, as prescribed in the Constitution adopted in 1947. Emancipation from political control did not resolve Buddhism's material and economic problems, but as long as the Japanese economy and population kept growing, a potential crisis could be averted. But underlying problems remained:

- Local temples' continued dependence on income from things like funeral and memorial services.
- How to be relevant to the expectations of an increasingly market-driven society, while maintaining doctrinal purity and a connection with perceived ultimate truth that is the basis for any religion's appeal.

One solution to this problem involved an entirely new "business model" for Buddhism. Several new sects became prominent during this period, such as Sōkagakkai and Rissyōkōseikai, which both began as offshoots of the traditional Nichiren sect, but evolved in very different ways. They took a mass-market approach, remaking Buddhist doctrine to the point where virtually anyone could be assured of reaching the spiritual goal through a set of practices that didn't interfere with everyday life. These entities also

quite aggressively proselytized, attempting to draw members away from other sects by asserting that their dogma was superior to their competitors. Success in attracting adherents meant a steady inflow of money with which to expand, setting in motion a self-propelled cycle of growth.

Meanwhile, traditional Buddhist temples were less attuned to the changing expectations of the religious marketplace and struggled to find ways to survive. In a context where the large mass-market religions were pulling in adherents by the millions, the position of these traditional temples was like that of small neighbourhood stores in the age of Amazon and big-box retailers.

The Emergence of Buddhist Small Business

In the 1990s, one of the new-style sects committed an atrocity that had the unintended effect of providing traditional Buddhist organizations with a dose of renewed legitimacy. The sect was Aum Shinrikyo, founded in 1987. It advanced an apocalyptic philosophy that predicted the end of the world was soon coming, and grew rapidly in Japan and other countries. In 1993, Aum built a plant in Yamanashi prefecture to make the nerve gas, sarin, and later used this to attack the public twice: once in Matsumoto city and once on the Tokyo subway system. The attacks killed thirteen people and injured thousands more, some of whom still suffer the effects of the nerve poison. Before the Aum Affair, Japanese people in general had felt it was anyone's right to enjoy religious freedom without government control or oversight. This consensus changed drastically after the incident. Japanese society began to view religious institutions as potentially dangerous in certain contexts (Reader, 2001), especially those considered deviant or outside the mainstream and which were labelled cults by the media and the public (Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler, 2011:14). By creating a public image of a renegade organization in total opposition to everything normally associated with religion, the Aum Affair gave traditional Buddhist sects a chance to represent themselves as deserving the respect and support of the Japanese public.

Although traditional Buddhist sects got a chance to gain popularity and support from the public because of the Aum Affair, the number of patrons and followers has been decreasing for decades. According to the Religious Yearbook, edited and published by the Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan (2016:34), there are currently about 77,000 Buddhist corporations in Japan. However, the sheer number conceals the fact that many of them are

precarious or unviable, because religious sects do not want to reveal that the number of their temples is decreasing. Actually, the 1996, 2006, and 2016 editions of the Yearbook, for example, show that the number of Buddhist corporations in the country has been decreasing from 77,777 to 77,754 and further to 77,223. But, as a matter of fact, about 20,000 Buddhist temples out of those 77,000 have no priest (The Syūkan Tōyō Keizai Editorial Staff, 2015:48), which means that they do not provide any Buddhist services, and therefore do not really function as temples (Mizuki, 2016; Ukai, 2015; Hashimoto, 2014).

Forty or fifty years ago, it was common for grandparents or parents to take children to the temple where their family graveyard was located during the equinoctial season, or for the anniversary of a family member's death. This is much less common today, driven by interlocking demographic factors: the decline of multi-generation households, the decreasing birth rate, and the steady migration of young people from rural and remote areas to big cities in search of work and other opportunities. Those young ones include many priestly sons who do not follow the hereditary system and prefer to move to big cities. These factors are present to such an extent that depopulation is a serious problem in many small towns, and many Buddhist temples are facing absolute discontinuation. If they are to survive, they must find new sources of support and shift their operations to where the population is. Buddhist cafés and restaurants are one response.

Observations of Buddhist Restaurant Businesses

The observations were conducted at three Buddhist cafés and a Buddhist bar during early August to late September, 2017. The reports of the observation describe the details of how Buddhist organizations run their businesses and what they offer their customers.

1. Zen Café

The Zen Café event was held at a small French restaurant on the second floor of a small building in Mejiro, Toshima-ward, Central Tokyo. The place was close to the train station, thus ensuring a fair amount of potential pedestrian traffic. According to the brochure of the Zen Café, the host organization is the Myoshinji School of the Rinzai Sect founded in China and introduced to Japan around the twelfth century. The Rinzai sect is a so-called Zen Sect because it emphasizes seated meditation practice

(*zazen*) as opposed to chanting or rituals. It has its headquarters in Japan's largest Zen temple in Kyoto.

In the event, there were two Buddhist priests, one was the lecturer and the other was in charge of taking pictures for their Website. There were five customers, four women and one man.

Regarding menu and costs, for around ¥1000, participants could choose a soft drink from the menu that included black tea, Oolong tea, coffee and orange juice. At the time of the observations, the fee was being waived if participants agreed to let their photos be used on the Website.

After a self-introduction, the priest in charge started talking about what people need to do to carry out Zen meditation. He said that people who participate in collective Zen meditation sessions often say that they can experience "emptiness" during the meditation, but he always doubts this because it is not so easy to experience that emptiness. He then conveyed the three most basic and important ideas for Zen meditation: straighten your body, observe your breath, and put your thoughts out of your mind for a while. It's very essential to focus on the breath while accepting all things around you as they are. Following these instructions, all the participants began to meditate; this took about ten minutes. After that, the lecturer invited questions. One woman asked how to meditate for a long time without any physical pain because she felt some pain during the session. She asked whether she could meditate longer if she got used to it. He suggested that she use a sitting position that involved three points: your bottom and both knees. Another woman said that her family belonged to the Rinzai sect. Though they asked a number of questions, there were no serious confessions or talks. The event lasted for about one hour. At the end, the lecturer and the priest in charge of taking photos asked all the participants to come to the Zen Café event again.

2. Otera Cafés (Temple Cafés)

The Zen Café described above was a meditation event provided by a Zen Buddhist school. On the other hand, Otera Cafés (otera = "temple" in Japanese), where the second and third observations were conducted, appear to be ordinary coffee shops, like thousands of others all over Japan. One is in Kamakura in Kanagawa prefecture, south of Tokyo and the other is in Daikanyama, Shibuya-ward, Tokyo. Both cafés belong to the Jō-doshin sect and are easily found on the Internet. The Jōdoshin sect promotes the simple dogma of their founder, Shinran: Chanting "Namu

amida butsu" (Total reliance upon the compassion of Amida Buddha) is the only way to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land, a paradise where humans can go after death. The Jōdoshin sect is the biggest in Japan in terms of the number of temples and number of followers (Ogawa, 2017; Shimada, 2012). Because the core practice of the Jōdoshin sect is chanting "Namu Amida Butsu" to show wholehearted reliance upon Amida Buddha, the two Otera Cafés do not provide any meditation opportunities. That is an essential difference compared to the Zen Café, where people are invited to actually perform Buddhist meditation practice, while at the Otera Cafés, the intention is only to familiarize people with its brand of Buddhism.

1) Kamakura Otera Café

The café is located in Kamakura, one of the most popular tourist destinations in Japan. It is close to the Kamakura station and is along Wakamiya-Oji, a main street of the town. Pedestrians walking down the street can find the sign of the café, on which there is a drawing of the face of Buddha. Although its colours are orange and white, the sign is not loud, but not quiet either. People might realize there is something different compared with ordinary coffee shops because of the drawing on the sign and the name. Kamakura is renowned for its many temples and shrines, so it is not unusual to see something there related to Buddhism and Shintoism. However, the combination of "Otera" with "Café" is definitely unfamiliar enough to serve as an attention-getter. The café is on a second floor reached by a flight of stairs, so the elderly and those with small children may not want to visit. However, once they reach the second floor, they can easily find it. From the outside, it looks like a normal coffee shop except for the Buddhist altar fittings at the entrance.

According to the Website of the Kamakura Otera Café, the host organization of the café was run by a temple, Joeiji in the nearby city of Yokosuka, which belongs to the Otani School of the Jōdoshin sect. Joeiji was originally located in Kamakura. It was said that it was built there to console the soul of Minamoto-no Noriyori whose elder brother, Minamoto-no Yoritomo, was the founder of the Kamakura dynasty in the twelfth century. Later, in the succeeding Muromachi era, the temple was banished to Yokosuka by a rival family. One of the reasons the Joeiji temple opened a café in Kamakura was to return the temple to its rightful and original location.

Only one woman was working at the time of the observation. She said she was the elder sister of the priest of the Joeiji. There were initially no

customers during my visit, but two women came in later during the observation.

Regarding menu and costs, there were 19 kinds of soft drinks costing about ¥550 on average. Alcoholic beverages include two kinds of beer and wine. A limited food menu includes spaghetti and fried rice, with items costing about ¥750. Sweets cost about ¥800 with a soft drink.

Inside the Otera Café, there is a Golden Buddha statue on an altar, along with textbooks of Buddhist scriptures. There are some pictures of temples belonging to the sect, and some calligraphic works on the wall. I expected there would be incense in the café since this is a common feature of Buddhist temples, but there was none. For a set price, customers can try copying a sutra (a Buddhist aphorism written in Sanskrit) while enjoying tea or coffee.

Significantly, the Otera Café website explains that the café has "two sides": it is a normal coffee shop and a Buddhist temple at the same time, so people can do both activities at once. There was no priest and no preaching or promotion took place, as there had been at the Zen café event.

2) Daikanyama Otera Café

The café is located near Daikanyama station on Tokyu-Toyoko Line in central Tokyo. It is on the first floor of a building along a busy street called the Komazawa-dori. The host organization is Ikutasan Shingyoji, which belongs to the Honganji school of the Jōdoshin sect. Shingyoji is located in Kawasaki, Kanagawa prefecture, midway between Tokyo and Yokohama. The temple is quite large, and has five priests. It is thus possible for the temple to have at least one priest stay at the café and talk to customers.

Regarding the staff, there were a waitress, a waiter, and a cook. Also there was a Buddhist priest. There were only two customers at first. Later, three more came in.

Regarding menu and costs, a Japanese vegetarian set meal costs a little over ¥1,000. A pancake with vegetables costs ¥1,600. There are some sweets at around ¥700. Non-alcoholic beverages are about ¥700 and alcoholic ones are about ¥1,000.

Daikanyama Otera Café was clearly identifiable as a Buddhist coffee shop because of the rainbow-decorated cloth outside that is a typical symbol of Buddhism. In addition, a statue of Amida Nyorai (The Buddha of Infinite Light) is visible through the glass door. There are eleven tables,

seating about 30 people. The café provides a meal and beverage service from 11am to 9pm. Sometimes it holds events such as a "bar night" and afternoon tea chats.

A unique point of the Daikanyama Otera Café is that there is always at least one Buddhist priest present, and customers can talk to the priest of the day as long as they make an appointment beforehand and pay a fee of ¥1000 per hour for those who are a "membership supporter", or ¥1500 per hour for others. According to the priest of the day to whom I spoke, about 90 per cent of the customers who wanted to talk to the priest were women, some with fairly serious problems.

I asked the priest of the day what motivated the temple to open a coffee shop. He explained that operating a café and talking to people in that setting perfectly satisfied the doctrinal preaching of the sect's founder. He said that the Jōdoshin sect has always been devoted to the needs of ordinary people ever since it was established by the monk Shinran in the twelfth century. Shinran and his master, Honen, preached that God's grace was available to lay people, not just priests and monks. Shinran also emphasized that even the wicked can be saved from evil and achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. The priest told me that many people, especially young ones, nowadays seem to think that temples are special places separated from their everyday lives. It may be very difficult for them to go inside and talk with a priest, although temples always welcome everyone, and that should be one of the functions of temples. In such a situation, a café seems to be a perfect setting for helping people, especially the young, gain exposure to Buddhism.

3. Nisō Bar (the Bar of Nuns)

The bar is located in Koenji, Suginami-ward, Tokyo. It was a little far from the station and is quite small, on the second floor in an older building. It was more difficult to find than the other places observed. The host organization is the Otani School of the Jōdoshin sect. The staff at that time was a woman who was identifiable as a *zaike*, a non-ordained lay priest, and by the Buddhist training outfit that she wore. There were two male customers.

Regarding menu and costs, there were alcoholic beverages such as beer, wine, whiskey, Japanese sake, and interesting original cocktails with names related to Buddhism. A glass of beer costs ¥700 and a glass of Japanese sake costs ¥500 to ¥700. The most expensive beverages are the

original cocktails that cost between ¥900 and ¥1100.

Inside, the bar was quite dark and had a mysterious atmosphere. There was a counter with seating for six or seven people and two small tables. The interior appurtenances were a mixture of Buddhist items and things one would find in an ordinary bar. The Buddhist items included copies of Buddhist scriptures, books, statues, paintings, pictures, etc. A big, wall-mounted TV was turned on, and the customers were watching it. I gradually realized that the gentle sound of a sutra was being played through speakers in the wall. On the counter, there were two books of Buddhist scripture translated by Hajime Nakamura, one of Japan's outstanding scholars of Buddhism. On the wall beside the counter, a shelf was filled with many books on Buddhism and philosophical topics.

According to the female worker, most customers were men. The two customers there at that time were men and they seemed to enjoy just drinking, nothing else. She also said that occasionally women who had worries or troubles come in to make a confession.

The purpose of the bar, according to the *zaike*, is to offer anyone access to Buddhism and help them get used to it. She told me about another Buddhist bar in the nearby neighbourhood of Nakano, and a Christian bar in Yotsuya, in downtown Tokyo. The Buddhist bar in Nakano is operated by an ordained Buddhist priest who knows a lot about not only religion, but also philosophy, including Western ones. She expressed deep interest in the original scriptures of Buddhism and seemed to want to engage me in discussion about those original scriptures and philosophy. It struck me that this kind of "religious bar" might be similar to the salon culture of Paris in the late nineteenth century, where writers and artists would gather to discuss philosophy, exchange thoughts and ideas, etc. If so, then the real target audience for this nun's bar may be the intelligentsia rather than ordinary people.

The *zaike* also pointed out that temples are no longer a place for local people to get together and strengthen social bonds. In the past, each temple was supported by patrons who were usually its neighbours. They sustained the temple financially, and the temple in turn was responsible for the people's religious needs at the time of funerals and memorial services. But lately people have moved away, settling far from their hometowns. Besides, people nowadays are not religious enough to care about supporting temples in an ongoing way. They may pay the temple to conduct a funeral or memorial service but they don't financially support it otherwise. Temples have gradually lost their patrons year by year and are facing serious problems. From this point of view, a Buddhist bar is one

way to make money and also try to draw their patrons back to them, she said.

Analysis

All four Buddhist businesses have these things in common: they take a soft and casual approach to familiarizing the public about Buddhism; they are as conveniently located as possible, and they are not very profitable.

The Approach: A Soft Sell

All four businesses offered beverages and food, and that is presented as the main service. Listening to preachers or studying Buddhist philosophy is of secondary importance. Clearly they try not to force people to learn Buddhism. Instead, they hope customers will "feel" Buddhism and enjoy being exposed to it.

Location: Convenience is Key

All four businesses are fairly well situated, relatively easy to access from nearby train stations and located in busy, lively areas. The expectation is that the location will drive customer traffic, and that as a result the business will serve a PR function, improving the relationship between Buddhism and the general population.

Profitability: Something is Missing

None of the businesses is very profitable, and their business models are precarious. If the only goal of these enterprises is to help financially sustain a Buddhist temple, they must be considered a failure. Zen Café, for example, earns ¥1,000 per participant. Out of that revenue, two Buddhist preachers have to be paid and they have to pay a rental fee to the restaurant where the event takes place. The restaurant is quite small and very few people can attend. Overall, it is clear that the business does not make a profit.

As another example, Daikanyama Otera Café needs at least four employees per day: a cook, two service staff members, and a priest. The café has a strong selling point that there is always at least one Buddhist

priest there. The priest must always be ready to talk to customers, so he cannot do anything else to earn money. It means the café must supply the priest's entire salary. In my interview with him, the priest hinted that the café had been not very profitable since it was opened four years ago. In an interview published in Toyōkeizai Online in 2015, the chief priest of Shingyoji also implied the same thing, as missionary work cannot make much money (Shimada, 2015). All four of the Buddhist restaurants I visited seem to be not so profitable. Nevertheless, they persist in trying this new business model.

Benefits of a Buddhist Business: Some Things Are More Important Than Money

Owing to deep financial problems and being less popular than ever before, traditional Buddhist temples have reached out for new economic strategies. As I mentioned earlier, the crisis is more serious in provincial cities, rural and remote areas than in urban areas. And yet, the Zen Café, Otera Cafés, and the Nisō Bar that I observed are all in the Kanto area, which comprises metropolitan Tokyo and neighbouring big cities. However, the religious corporations that own and run the businesses are based in provincial towns. The businesses have followed the rural-to-urban migratory flow in search of adherents and support. But if they are not profitable, why do they continue to operate? There are two possible answers, and both are probably relevant.

1. Financial Benefits without Profits

Buddhist priests have engaged in sideline financial activities for a long time, in fact ever since the Meiji Restoration deprived them of the steady patronage of the ruling classes. Common sideline activities today include running a kindergarten, school teaching, writing for magazines, and book publishing. One Buddhist priest was even found working at a petrol station (Mizuki, 2016:52-55). The financial benefit of these side activities is amplified by the tax-exempt status that religious income has enjoyed in Japan since 1951. That privilege may be taken away if abused. Aum Shinrikyo, for example, had its tax-exempt status removed, but only after it was found to be using its income to buy military weapons, explosives and nerve-gas ingredients. Short of something like that, priestly income will always be worth more than ordinary people's income. Buddhist

activities such as conducting funerals, giving a Buddhist name to a dead person, conducting memorial rituals for the dead, ceremonially marking the spring and fall equinoxes, and the sale of lucky charms, talismans and fortune slips, all generate untaxable revenue.

However, Buddhist restaurant businesses and similar activities are in an ambiguous zone. According to current accounting practices, if a profitable business operated by a religious corporation is not "unique" and thus can compete on an equal footing with non-tax-exempt businesses, the money from that activity is taxable. This is where creative interpretation of the rules comes into play, as it always does when the subject is taxation. The Kamakura Otera Café that I described earlier makes a point of saying clearly that it is not just a coffee shop but simultaneously a Buddhist temple. This provides the unique element to differentiate it from its ordinary competition and relieve it of tax liability. I was not able to question the proprietors about their tax strategy, and in fact they might not have one, but by positioning themselves the way they do, some or all revenue from the coffee shop may be tax-exempt.

2. Social Benefits

The second benefit to running a Buddhist restaurant is a social one, and its goal is to create a modern-day replacement for the social embeddedness that Buddhism enjoyed in the past. There used to be many opportunities for Buddhism to make itself felt in the course of daily routines and leave its imprint on social life. At such times a Buddhist priest from the family temple would conduct religious rites. Temple income flowed naturally from all those activities. Nowadays, the number of people who follow traditional customs is decreasing, and the decrease is exacerbated in rural areas by the steady migration of people to big cities and the decline in the birth-rate. People now have fewer opportunities to come into contact with Buddhist events that formerly defined the yearly cycle and helped shape social and cultural identities.

This doesn't mean that people are losing interest in religion, but their mode of engagement is changing. A survey in 2013 by NHK, Japan's state-supported TV network, found that the number of people who attend religious study and ceremonies, or conduct religious rituals in daily life has gradually decreased since the 1970s (NHK, 2013:15). However, the number of people visiting family graves, praying at shrines and temples for good luck, and buying lucky charms and talismans has increased

during the same period. How to explain this? People often make a point of visiting a family grave when they return to their hometown on vacation; a monetary offering is usually part of the visit. They also stop at Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines to pray for good luck and to buy charms, fortunes and talismans. However, they engage in those latter activities in many different places on their travels, not exclusively in their traditional family temple. In other words, as populations became more mobile, some religious practices have become disconnected from their traditional locations and are now a set of activities that people can enjoy anytime and anyplace—like Starbucks. This is why Buddhist income from things like funerals, dependent on a particular family staying in a particular place, has declined, while income from things like amulets and talismans has remained steady. Baffelli, Reader, and Staemmler (2011:12) note this in their analysis of religious activity in Japan:

> Despite this apparent decline in affiliation and belonging, however, participation in culturally-related practices at religious institutions—such as visiting shrines to pray at New Year, acquiring amulets and so on—appears not to have suffered a similar downturn.

To meet the demand for anytime-anywhere religious consumption, the restaurant business seems like a good option. Temples have chosen not to wait for people to come to them, but are instead reaching out to meet people in the towns and cities where they are concentrated. From the customer's point of view, cafés and bars are a convenient place to become familiar with the principles of Buddhism and get a feel for what it offers. People are still seeking peace of mind, perhaps even more so than in the past. In order to meet people's needs today, Buddhist cafés and bars put the emphasis on providing customers with a moment of tranquility while they enjoy the comfort of food and a beverage.

Conclusion

The number of Buddhist-operated businesses in Japan, such as restaurants and cafés, appears to be increasing. The phenomenon is a response to the financial crisis caused by decreasing temple patronage and a general decline in the popularity of traditional religious ceremonies. It is also consistent with a longstanding tradition of Buddhist priests engaging in non-religious money-making activities. In a world where free-market

ideology seems to have become accepted as a law of nature, and literally anything can be productized and marketed, some Buddhist temples have opted to reshape their product to make it an "easy sell" and thereby hopefully survive.

Lurking in the background of this situation are the big Buddhist organizations that were invented in the post-war period and have chosen a Walmart-style strategy of mass-appeal and mass-marketing as their business model. They have achieved enormous success both financially and in terms of numbers of adherents, and have drained off some of the resources that might have otherwise gone to traditional Buddhist temples. The traditional temples thus have little choice but to offer an "artisanal" alternative to the mass product. Consistent with the artisanal spirit, the payoff is not totally financial, and in fact the places studied for this article don't seem to make much money. That does not dissuade the Buddhist devotees who operate and work in such businesses. They find that under current economic and demographic circumstances, their business fulfils the goals of Buddhism better than traditional temples can, by reaching out to people where they are, providing an inviting and comfortable setting where Buddhist principles can be explored at leisure. With luck, some of the younger customers who frequent these businesses will become a new generation of patrons who help propel the temples into the future on a more reliable financial footing.

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