

On Sasaki Gesshō's Categorization of Sūtras

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Introduction

Sasaki Gesshō (佐々木月樵, 1875–1926) was a Shin Buddhist Ōtani sect priest and scholar of Meiji and Taishō Japan who “especially focused on exploring the fundamental issues in doctrinal studies, while at the same time turning his eyes towards the world of thought, religion, and education of the time in general, striving for their innovation fit for the new age” (Yamada 1992,13),¹ according to Sasaki's former student and biographer Yamada Ryōken. Sasaki's interest was not limited to the Shin Buddhist scope; his research and writings ranged from the history of Mahāyāna Buddhism from Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250) to Vasubandhu (c. 400–480), study of the *Huayan Sūtra* (*Kegon-gyō*, 『華嚴經』)² from a new perspective, and clarifying and propagating the characteristic dimensions of Japanese Buddhism.³

This paper aims to shed light on the last of the above topics which has hitherto received little attention.⁴ We will examine his categorization of sūtras promulgated in Japan, with the aim, not of outlining Sasaki's historical analyses and depiction of Japanese Buddhism, but to identify his views on the core ideas of Buddhist faith that can be found behind his categorization. Although Yamada noted Sasaki's strong interest in doctrinal research, we shall see how Sasaki highlighted the characteristic of Japanese Buddhism that he saw as centered on the “person” (*hito*, 人) rather than the “teachings” (*hō*, 法). This view presented in Sasaki's discourses on Japanese Buddhism goes beyond his aim to describe the significance of the Buddhist tradition developed in Japan. It reveals how Sasaki, in a period in Japan when Buddhists faced the task of remaking Buddhism into a modern religion,⁵ tried to establish Buddhism as a religion squarely focused on faith and the actual religious experience, as opposed to intellectual interpretations of Buddhism based on philosophy, science, and academic studies which Sasaki observed as having become the norm of the era.⁶

1. Sasaki's academic orientation and his intent

Sasaki's orientation towards academic studies and his strength in the field is apparent from his

early activities as an innovative young priest and researcher. After graduating from the Ōtani sect's Shinshū University in Kyoto, Sasaki moved to Tokyo in 1901 to join Kiyozawa Manshi (清沢満之), an Ōtani sect priest, educator, and the leader of a new Buddhist movement known as "Spiritualism" (seishinshugi, 精神主義). Sasaki became a core member of the Kōkōdō (浩々洞), a religious group established by Kiyozawa and a handful of young Ōtani sect priests to propagate Buddhism to the masses primarily through the publication of a new magazine, *The Spiritual Realm* (*Seishinkai*, 『精神界』). Sasaki regularly contributed papers and articles to their magazine and became a major figure of the group. He was counted among "the Trio of Kōkōdō", alongside Tada Kanae (多田鼎, 1875–1937) and Akegarasu Haya (暁烏敏, 1877–1954), both youthful Ōtani sect priests at the time, living together in the Kōkōdō headquarters with Kiyozawa, Sasaki, and others, and eager to remake the Shin Buddhist faith into one that would resonate more with the spiritual needs of the people in a rapidly modernizing Japan. At the same time, Sasaki continued to pursue his academic studies on Shin Buddhist faith and Buddhism in general, enrolling in the advanced studies course of Shinshū University in 1901 when the university was moved from Kyoto and re-opened in Tokyo with Kiyozawa as the president. Sasaki completed his advanced studies at the university in 1906 and became a professor that same year at the age of 31. Sasaki eventually went on to become the president of the university (renamed Ōtani University in 1922) in 1924, two years prior to his death in 1926.⁷

Later, Akegarasu recalled that Kiyozawa instructed his disciples according to their dispositions and taught "the true world of learning to Sasaki Gesshō, that of virtue to Tada Kanae, and that of faith to me" (Nomoto 1974, 95). Akegarasu revealed that "Sasaki had been enthusiastic about Buddhist studies since junior high school. He always had an energetic ardor towards studying the history of Buddhist doctrines" (Akegarasu 1933, 64). However, there was more to Sasaki's intent in studying Buddhism than academic interest as Akegarasu also commented:

Sasaki's studies were not merely studies for studies' sake, but studies to establish his own religion.

People who were engaged in studies for studies' sake voiced discontent with Sasaki's research as being too subjective. But Sasaki's distinctive brilliance as a religious person lies in the very fact that researchers of mere academic studies find something wanting in his studies. (Akegarasu 1933, 66, 68)

Sasaki himself strongly argued in his *Religion of Actual Experience* (*Jikken no Shūkyō*, 『実験の宗教』), his first book which was published in 1903, that:

Buddhism is not a religion of academic studies; it is a religion of action. It is not a religion of academic research; it is a religion of faith. It is not a religion of doctrines; it is a religion of actual reception (*jikkan*, 実感). (*CW*, vol. 6, 7–8)

In verifying Akegarasu’s observation and Sasaki’s contention, extensive and voluminous studies by Sasaki on Shinran (親鸞) and Mahāyāna Buddhism are significant achievements which still await in-depth examination today.⁸ However, a look at another field of study by Sasaki that has hitherto received little attention will also be significant in clarifying Sasaki’s core views on Buddhism. Research on the history and characteristics of Japanese Buddhism which he conducted through studies on sūtras disseminated in Japan over the ages, including what he called “popular sūtras” (*minshū kyōten*, 民衆經典),⁹ are a case in point. Below are some of the major contributions by Sasaki in this field:

“Popular Sūtras and Aspects of Faith” (“Minshū-kyōten oyobi sono shinkō”, 「民衆經典及び其信仰」), originally published as “A Study on the Faith of the Japanese People” (“Nihon minzoku-shinkō no kenkyū”, 「日本民族信仰の研究」) 1915. (*CW*, vol. 4, 415–498)¹⁰

“A Study on Sūtras in Japanese Buddhism” (“Nihonbukkyō-kyōten no kenkyū”, 「日本仏教經典之研究」), 1916. (*CW*, vol. 4, 499–646)¹¹

“Shin Buddhism and Sūtras” (“Shinshū to kyōten”, 「真宗と經典」), 1918. (*CW*, vol. 4, 647–753)¹²

“State Sūtras and Aspects of Faith” (“Kokka-kyōten oyobi sono shinkō”, 「国家經典及び其信仰」), c. 1923. (*CW*, vol. 4, 327–414)¹³

“Buddhist Culture and Cultivation” (“Bukkyō bunka to kyōka”, 「仏教文化と教化」), 1923. (*CW*, vol. 5, 555–732)¹⁴

Taking the above works as objects of study, this paper will seek to offer a general view on Sasaki’s categorization of sūtras propagated in Japan, with an emphasis on popular sūtras. It will bring to light some of the characteristics of Sasaki’s categorization together with issues his categorization raises for further studies.

2. Sasaki’s categorization of sūtras in Japanese Buddhism

Sasaki’s categorization of the sūtras which he saw as having been influential in shaping the Buddhist tradition and culture in Japan forms the basic framework of his discussion of Japanese

Buddhism.¹⁵ On the significance of the diverse sūtras that were transmitted from India to East Asia, Sasaki remarks as follows in the paper “A Study on Sūtras in Japanese Buddhism”:

Since ancient times, they [sūtras] came into contact with the state and the people or with the national spirit (*kokuminteki seishin*, 国民的精神) of their respective countries and the ages; they developed in various ways in terms of doctrines and history of Buddhism in the three countries [India, China, Japan]...Therefore, the significance of each of the sūtras differs depending on how the nation (*kokumin*, 国民) assimilated the sūtras and how they accepted and worshipped them” (*CW*, vol. 4, 518).

Based on this view, Sasaki proposed three categories of sūtras: state sūtras (*kokka kyōten*, 国家經典)—revered by the rulers with the belief that the sūtras will offer protection over the state and the subjects; nation’s sūtras (*kokumin kyōten*, 国民經典)—which promote and become the religious basis of a sense of collective identity among the people of a country; and popular sūtras (*minshū kyōten*, 民衆經典)—widely revered by the common people.¹⁶ Although he conceded that “it is difficult to definitely categorize the sūtras themselves into fixed categories”, he believed that when we examine them mainly from “human and cultural aspects” (*jimbun*, 人文), organizing sūtras into the above three categories “is not unreasonable” (*CW*, vol. 4, 666).

Before we analyze his categorization further, a note on translation seems appropriate. Translating terms such as *kokka* (国家), *kokumin* (国民), *minshū* (民衆), *minzoku* (民族), etc. into English poses difficulties as both the Japanese terms and the English terms that may be used to translate them have varying ranges of connotation. As Sasaki uses the term *minshū* consistently to mean the common people, I translate *minshū* (民衆) used independently as “common people”, while I translate *minshū kyōten* (民衆經典) as “popular sūtras”, popular here meaning pertaining to the common people. Sasaki’s usage of the term “(*Nihon* or *waga*) *minzoku*” ([日本/我が]民族) seems to be based on regional and historical demarcation rather than racial or ethnic aspects that the term *minzoku* could imply, hence “the Japanese people” seems adequate rather than “the Japanese race”. What Sasaki actually meant by the terms *kokka* (国家), *kokumin* (国民), and *kokumin-seishin* (国民精神) may be open to discussion. *Kokka* in Sasaki’s usage may simply be understood as “state”, meaning the political structure and system dominating a certain territory and governed by a ruler or a ruling class. Sasaki’s usage of *kokumin* seems to imply a coherent, comprehensive group of people not only simply populating the region within the state—the islands of Japan—but having a common perception of themselves, i.e. a collective identity, as being “Japanese”.¹⁷ Thus I translate *kokumin* as “nation” in the sense as used in the term “nation state” rather than, for

example, “people” or “citizens” and I will use “national spirit” for *kokumin-seishin*, and translate *kokuminkyōten* as “nation’s sūtra” to mean sūtras revered by the nation. However, whether a coherent and pervasive awareness and spirit as a nation existed in Japan before the modern age, as Sasaki assumes, is an open issue.

Sasaki distinguished his taxonomy from the traditional categorization of sūtras (*kyōhan*, 教判 in Japanese, or *panjiao*, 判教 in Chinese) found in diverse forms in ancient Chinese and Japanese Buddhism. He noted that historically, especially in Chinese Buddhism, “anyone establishing a school aimed to categorize all the sūtras or the teachings found in them, placing a particular sūtra or its teaching that one revered at the top of the hierarchy”. This meant that they were categorized according to “the faith or knowledge and such of particular individuals” (*CW*, vol. 4, 328–329).¹⁸ In contrast, Sasaki saw that sūtras in Japan had been revered collectively and were “truly Japanese Buddhist sūtras; sūtras that have long been revered since the ancient days by us Japanese people”.¹⁹ Therefore, he contended that “they should not be categorized based simply on an individual’s faith” (*CW*, vol. 4, 329). Thus, the justification behind Sasaki’s categorization lies in its social, historical foundation, and not in his choice of a particular doctrinal position.

In the following sections, we will examine each of the three categories.

2-1. State Sūtras

Sasaki defines state sūtras (*kokka kyōten*, 国家經典) as those “transmitted to Japan and which always played significant roles at the center of the state”, listing the *Golden Light Sūtra* (*Konkōmyō-kyō*, 『金光明經』), the *Humane King Sūtra* (*Ninnō Hannyā-kyō*, 『仁王般若經』), and the *Lotus Sūtra* as representative state sūtras (*CW*, vol. 4, 665–666). Sasaki observes that “the most astonishing characteristic of any state sūtra is that they enumerate the practical benefits of adhering to them and reciting them” (*CW*, vol. 5, 615). Some of the benefits that Sasaki paraphrases from the *Golden Light Sūtra* are that the Four Heavenly Kings (*shitennō*, 四天王) will “safeguard the state and the king that reveres” this sūtra, “giving pleasure to sentient beings, eliminating malicious bandits and famine, fear and plagues” (*CW*, vol. 5, 615). He also cites from the *Humane King Sūtra* which assures that when “the land is faced with diverse calamities”, kings who propagate the *prajñāpāramitā* by [hosting] lectures for reading this sūtra will find “all living beings in comfort and kings will rejoice” (*CW*, vol. 5, 615).²⁰

As we can see, Sasaki saw state sūtras as having protective powers over the state, its rulers, and its subjects, with the main adherents and initiators of worshipping rituals of the sūtras being the state or the rulers. However, he makes interesting observations into the true nature of Buddhist teachings that, in his view, reverence towards state sūtras in Japan deviated from. In “State Sūtras

and Aspects of Faith”, he concludes his commentary on the *Golden Light Sūtra* with a chapter titled “Deva Worship” (“Tenbu sūhai”, 「天部崇拜」). He noted there that the various devas, or heavenly gods, including the Four Heavenly Kings depicted in this sūtra gave rise to a thriving trend of performing formal worshiping rituals (*kōshiki*, 講式) of deities such as Kisshō-ten (吉祥天, Skt. Śrī-mahādevī), Benzai-ten (弁財天, Skt. Sarasvatī), and Bishamon-ten (毘沙門天, Skt. Vaiśravaṇa) (*CW*, vol.4, 410–411). He saw such trends incorporating originally Indian indigenous gods into Buddhist practice as also having effected “the convergence of buddhas and diverse Japanese gods”, thus becoming the early source of the manifestation theory of Buddhist deities appearing as indigenous gods (*honjisuijaku*, 本地垂迹) (*CW*, vol.4, 411). He observed that “it is probably owing to the effect of the devas described in Buddhist sūtras that the god-worshipping people [of Japan] who equated government with performing god-worshipping ceremonies came to believe in Buddhism so quickly” (*CW*, vol.4, 413). However, Sasaki criticized the trends of worshipping the diverse devas, pointing out that it “later created numerous dubious shrines (*inshi*, 姪祠) and tended to throw a veil over the true spirit of Buddhism” and that “Buddhism is not a religion of incantation. Thus the fundamental significance of heavenly deities and gods which appeared in Buddhism must be that they safeguard the true law of Buddhism (*shōbō*, 正法) and its adherents” (*CW*, vol. 4, 413–414).

In his examination of state sūtras in the paper “Buddhist Culture and Cultivation”, Sasaki gave a similar critique on state sūtra worship centered on recitation and prayers to attain mundane objectives. Conceding that as long as they are state sūtras, the merits that are expected to accrue are inevitably of this world, he nevertheless criticized the cultural trends that they gave rise to:

Not only today, but as soon as they were transmitted to our country, our state sūtras spread various grotesque superstitious common beliefs (*iyōna shūkyōteki zokushin*, 異様な宗教的俗信) to our nation (*kokumin*, 国民) in general. That is, these sūtras were revered, or were recited, in order to gain worldly peace of mind, good health and longevity, etc., on the erroneous understanding that those who revere and recite them will naturally be protected by heavenly beings and gods. (*CW*, vol. 5, 618)

What then are the true teachings of the state sūtras and the proper way to uphold them?

The *Lotus Sūtra* may be an exception, but in other state sūtras, whether it may be the *Golden Light Sūtra* or the *Humane King Sūtra*, the teaching expounded is mostly that of the wisdom of the emptiness of everything (*hannya kai kū*, 般若皆空). (*CW*, vol. 5, 616)

What we need to keep in mind is that none of the state sūtras teach that they excursively protect the country (kuni, 国) or that various devas and buddhas would guard it....Therefore, in any of these sūtras, the foundation lies in that we, by our own inner volition, adhere to the true law of Buddhism (shōbō, 正法) and that by practicing the true law do we receive effective protection by the heavenly beings and good gods; our state sūtras are those sūtras that reveal this to us. (*CW*, vol. 5, 616–617)

Sasaki stresses that it is by virtue of those practitioners who take on the true teachings such as the wisdom of emptiness as one's own and act accordingly that the state or the people can expect the function of state sūtras to truly become apparent. We find here, Sasaki's emphasis on the significance of the basic teachings and actual practices in following the Buddhist path. We may see this as one of the defining characteristics of Sasaki's approach, not only towards state sūtras, but to sūtras and their teachings in general.

2-2. Nation's sūtras

Sasaki defines nation's sūtras (*kokumin-kyōten*, 国民經典) as those “that have promoted the self-awareness (*jikaku*, 自覚) of us Japanese people as a nation (*kokumin*, 国民), and also the sūtras that teach us the meaning of being a nation” (*CW*, vol. 4, 666). Sasaki comments that “even...state sūtras (*kokka-kyōten*, 国家經典), once they promote the self-awareness of the nation and also become a basis of our national spirit (*wagakokuminteki seishin*, 我國民的精神) become nation's sūtras while still being state sūtras” (*CW*, vol. 4, 329). As already noted, “nation” (*kokumin*, 国民) here means the people of a country sharing a common sense of identity. According to Sasaki, state sūtras which are, by Sasaki's definition, mainly revered by the rulers with the aim of gaining protection over the state and its people can also be seen as nation's sūtras if they effect the people to strengthen their collective self-awareness as a nation. Presumably, popular sūtras (*minshū-kyōten*) may, in some cases, also be seen as nation's sūtras in the same sense.²¹

Sasaki's idea of “self-awareness” or “one's realization” (*jikaku*, 自覚) as a nation needs clarification. Self-awareness in the passages cited earlier ultimately means “religious self-awareness” (*shūkyōteki jikaku*, 宗教的自覚), exemplified, in Sasaki's view, by the rise of a new movement of “religious self-awareness” in the Kamakura period (1185–1333). Sasaki writes in “Shinran and Nation's sūtras”:

If, as historians say, the religious self-awareness of us Japanese people truly as a nation is to be found in the Kamakura period, the sūtras on which the people who took part in the movement of this realization based themselves, and the sūtras which became the axis of our

national spirit in the following periods, can all be called our nation's sūtras regardless of which sūtras they may be. (*CW*, vol. 4, 666)

By this, one might expect Sasaki to count the *Lotus Sūtra* (basically a state sūtra in Sasaki's understanding), for example, among the nation's sūtras as it was the foundational sūtra for Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–1282) and also a key sūtra for Dōgen (道元, 1200–1253), both major players in the innovative religious movements of the Kamakura period. However, ultimately, Sasaki regards the establishment of Shin Buddhism by its patriarch Shinran as having developed the full potential of the nation's religion (*kokuminteki shūkyō*, 国民的宗教). Sasaki groups the traditional Japanese Tendai school and the newly-arisen Kamakura period Nichiren school (both based on the *Lotus Sūtra*) as being state-oriented religions (*kokkateki shūkyō*, 国家的宗教) (*CW*, vol. 4, 667).²² He contends that “the religious traditions of the Path of the Sages (*shōdōmon*, 聖道門), if they are not state-oriented, are largely popular [in character]. Even many of the religious traditions of the Pure Land teachings, if we examine them within the history of the three countries [India, China, and Japan], have been popular [in character]” (*CW*, vol. 4, 667). Then which are actually the core nation's sūtras?

In the paper “State Sūtras and Aspects of Faith”, Sasaki speaks of the “set of three sūtras” (*sambu-kyō*, 三部經) revered by the Shin Buddhist school as being the foremost nation's sūtras (*CW*, vol. 4, 330).²³ However, in “Shin Buddhist School and Sūtras”, he emphasizes the *Larger Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra* and also named the *Huayan Sūtra* and the *Nirvāṇa Sūtra*, both highly revered by Shinran, as nation's sūtras (*CW*, vol. 4, 668). Sasaki asserts that “what these sūtras expound are neither state-oriented (*kokkateki*, 国家的) nor popular (*minshūteki*, 民衆的) in character,...they obviously have historically been representative nation's sūtras” (*CW*, vol. 4, 668).

To get a somewhat clearer image of what Sasaki regarded as typical nation's sūtras, perhaps his description of “Japanese Buddhist sūtras” (*Nihon bukkō kyōten*, 日本仏教經典) found in the paper “A Study on Sūtras in Japanese Buddhism” can be helpful:²⁴

Even though many sūtras have been transmitted [to Japan] and are still extant, if they had no resonance whatsoever with our national spirit (*waga kokuminteki seishin*, 我國民的精神), no sūtra can have any significance as a Japanese Buddhist sūtra....In contrast, even if a sūtra is an apocryphon, or has already been destroyed and lost, once it has had life upon the state and the national spirit, and left some impression on the mind [of the Japanese people], I count it among Japanese Buddhist sūtras that will never be annihilated so long as the nation (*kokumin*, 國民) exists. A Japanese Buddhist sūtra always should at least have once been stored in the

bosom (*munagura*, 胸倉) of the Japanese, and rightly passed down by their hands of faith. (*CW*, vol. 4, 520)²⁵

Although we may conclude that nation's sūtras are those that at one time or another had resonance deep within with the heart of the nation, terms such as "national spirit" and "self-awareness as a nation" need clarification, all the more so when he posits Shinran and the Shin Buddhist faith as exemplifying them. It is noteworthy that according to the Editors' Notes in *CW*, vol. 4, Sasaki began to write this paper "A Study on Sūtras in Japanese Buddhism" in September, 1915 and tentatively completed it in April, 1916, after which he continued to revise the text. This includes the time that the Grand Enthronement Ceremony (*gotaiten*, 御大典) of the emperor (the later Taishō) took place (November, 1915), when the Ōtani sect effectively went out of its way to celebrate the occasion (Tanigama 2018A, 278).²⁶ Did Sasaki, who contributed as a priest to the sect's celebration of the enthronement and affirmation of the indebtedness of the sect to the imperial throne, have this in mind when he discussed "national spirit" and its realization? However, it is unlikely that Sasaki would have accepted a complete subordination of the Shin Buddhist faith under the authority of the state or the imperial throne, as he writes in his paper "Shinran and Nation's Sūtras" that "the religion of Shin Buddhism is not a teaching that regards [fulfilling] the common people's worldly desires or being slaves of the state as the utmost joy and honor" (*CW*, vol. 4, 668). Sasaki's position and views regarding the relationship between Buddhism and imperial rule and worship of the emperor are issues that need to be assessed closely. However, this will have to be left as a future task.²⁷

Let us move on to examine Sasaki's views on popular sūtras in the next section.

3. Popular sūtras²⁸

3-1. Sasaki's perspective towards popular sūtras

Sasaki defined "popular sūtras" (*minshū kyōten*, 民衆經典) as "sūtras that spread among the mundane people (*zokukan*, 俗間); those that the common people (*minshū*, 民衆), regarding good and bad omens and fortune and misfortune, respected entirely based on their own needs and in whose benefits they always believed" (*CW*, vol. 4, 666). He lists the *Sūtra on the Original Vow of the Medicine Buddha* (*Yakushi hongan-kyō*, 『薬師本願経』), *Avalokiteśvara Sūtra* (*Kannon-kyō*, 『観音経』), *Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī Sūtra* (*Kujaku myō'ō-kyō*, 『孔雀明王経』), and the *Sūtra on the Original Vow of Kṣitigarbha* (*Jizō hongan-kyō*, 『地藏本願経』) as "the foremost Japanese Buddhist sūtras worth the attention among popular sūtras" (*CW* vol. 4, 329).²⁹

In the paper "Popular Sūtras and Aspects of Faith", Sasaki begins by remarking on the Three

Jewels of Buddhism and asks which of the three has had the greatest significance in the religious faith of the people in the history of Buddhism in Japan.

In terms of “taking refuge in the Three Jewels”, “taking refuge in the Buddha” (*kiebutsu*, 帰依仏) and “taking refuge in the Sangha” (*kiesō*, 帰依僧) mean faiths that rely on the person (*enin*, 依人), while “taking refuge in the Law” (*kiehō*, 帰依法) means, needless to say, religions that rely on the law [i.e. Buddhist teachings] (*ehō*, 依法)...Our nation (*waga kokumin*, 我國民), even to this day, has constantly tended to value the “person” compared to the “law”. (*CW*, vol. 4, 420–421)

The conviction that doctrines do not occupy a central place in actual practices of faith among the people has been a fundamental thesis of Sasaki’s since his first book, *Religion of Actual Experience*, as we saw earlier. In regard to popular worship, he elaborated further with the following observation on the so-called Six Schools of the Southern Capital (*Nanto riku-shū* or *roku-shū*, 南都六宗), namely, Sanron (三論), Hossō (法相), Kusha (俱舍), Jōjitsu (成実), Ritsu (律), and Kegon (華嚴), traditionally regarded as formal fields of doctrinal study for all monks.³⁰

From the viewpoint of faith of the population at large, I really wonder how much impact these doctrines had on the public sentiment (*waga minshin*, 我民心)...Regardless of the age, I cannot but acknowledge how invariably weak the religions centered on official teachings, sects, or doctrines are in terms of the vivacity of religious lifeblood (*shūkyōteki seimei*, 宗教的生命).

Regarding faith, I believe that we, the Japanese people, have relied little on the “law” and being indifferent to distinction of sects, have each simply satisfied our religious sentiments through the buddhas and bodhisattvas to which one is most closely related. (*CW*, vol. 4, 488, 489)

Although Sasaki did not necessarily deny the significance of doctrinal studies, as Sasaki intensively pursued it himself, he argued that “when we examine Buddhism as an object of the faiths of the Japanese people (*minzoku shinkō*, 民族信仰), research on bodhisattvas in Buddhism are by far the more necessary” (*CW*, vol. 5, 668). That is what he actually does in his paper “Popular Sūtras and Aspects of Faith”, examining how major bodhisattvas such as Maitreya (Miroku, 弥勒), Avalokiteśvara (Kannon, 觀音), and Kṣitigarbha (Jizō, 地藏), plus (although not a bodhisattva) the Medicine Buddha (Yakushinyorai, 藥師如来, Skt. Bhaiṣajaguru) have been

popularly worshipped in Japan,.

3-2. Characteristics of Popular Worship

As I showed in my previous paper on Sasaki's examination of Kṣitigarbha worship (Itō 2021), Sasaki saw the popular worship of the above bodhisattvas and the Medicine Buddha as generally motivated by material and worldly needs. At the same time, he observed different needs that corresponded to the worship of different bodhisattvas. Let us reflect on these points in more detail.

Firstly, he saw popular sūtras and the modes of worship they create as basically worldly in nature, aimed at seeking practical benefits from divine beings. Regarding Maitreya worship since the ancient times in Japan, he observed that “the Japanese people were far from being able to understand the true essence of the pursuit of ultimate enlightenment which is the central idea of utmost necessity in Buddhism”; the people have worshiped them “like the magical jewel that produces whatever they pray and yearn for” (*CW*, vol. 4, 425–426).

Secondly, however, Sasaki acknowledged that the desires that made the people turn to deities of popular worship are basic components of human life, namely, yearning for life, fear of and the desire to avoid diseases and death. In “Popular Sūtras and Aspects of Faith”, Sasaki observes the connections between these fundamental human desires and beliefs in the power of the Medicine Buddha, Avalokiteśvara, and Kṣitigarbha:

The belief behind Medicine Buddha worship is based on [suffering from] diseases,... Avalokiteśvara has appeared [before the people] in thirty-three different forms based on the divine responsive power towards the yearnings for life that our nation (*waga kokumin*, 我国民) harbored. Finally, as for Kṣitigarbha [worship] it arose in connection with [the fear of] death. (*CW*, vol. 4, 468)

He points out that “life, disease, and death are the utmost actual reality of our life that people are constantly confronted with” and that we must not forget that “the main factors behind Shakyamuni's renunciation [of mundane life] are themselves the very factors behind the [popular] faith of the Japanese people” (*CW*, vol. 4, 468).

Thirdly, his focus on the theory of karmic retribution of wholesome and unwholesome deeds with which Kṣitigarbha worship is inseparably related is important as it establishes a strong connection between popular worship and a fundamental idea of Buddhism. Sasaki saw Kṣitigarbha as a bodhisattva firmly grounded in the mundane world: “his abode is the Six Realms of existence (*rikudō* or *rokudō*, 六道), where we the unwholesome ordinary people (*akunin bombu*, 惡人凡夫)

abide in” (*CW*, vol. 5, 560).³¹ This is a world where people are constantly assailed by fears towards karmic retribution.

Although this is the most primeval idea in Buddhism, Buddhism as a religion is strictly founded on this theory....Seeing that karmic retribution has no exceptions whatsoever, there is no one who does not harbor a sense of fear....Therefore, the Japanese nation, has from early on,...found two saviors in the teachings of Buddhism: one in the realm of [the Pure Land] *Sukhāvātī* (*gokurakukai*, 極樂界), and one in the very Six Realms of ours, the conviction in Amitābha worship and Kṣitigarbha worship. (*CW*, vol. 4, 461)

That Sasaki does not simply dismiss the worldly nature of popular worship is significant in that it becomes the basis on which Sasaki develops his own way to the ultimate teaching of Buddhism. For Sasaki, it is the teaching of salvation by the Amitābha Buddha and birth in the Pure Land, which he regarded as the surest way to escape the fundamental anxieties of life, disease, and death in a Buddha-less world.

Conclusion

In his discussion of Kṣitigarbha worship, Sasaki calls it the “vehicle of humans and heavenly beings” (*nindenjō*, 人天乘) in comparison with the “one vehicle” (*ichijō*, 一乘).

Kṣitigarbha worship as a vehicle of humans and heavenly beings, is not a religion of Pure Land, but a religion that has an important mission in this life, in the present, and here in this world.... when it comes to the one vehicle, the wholesome and the unwholesome, the good and the evil are ultimately interfused (*en'yū*, 円融) in various ways, and we see a constant transcending of good and evil in the religion of the supramundane (*shusse no shūkyō*, 出世の宗教). In Buddhism, it is only up to the level of the three vehicles (*sanjō*, 三乘) that the theory of the wholesome and unwholesome and the good and evil never wavers an inch, and where an unambiguous thought is maintained without the slightest hint of stagnation. (*CW*, vol. 5, 672)

This brings us back to Sasaki’s view of doctrines within Buddhism. In the above passage, we see Sasaki’s critical stance towards hastily jumping on board the “one vehicle” which seeks to transcend the distinction of good and evil and attain “ultimate interfusion”.

This is not to say, however, that Sasaki gave consent to the practical, worldly nature of

popular sūtras and forms of worship they produced and rejected the pursuit of ultimate wisdom taught by the Buddha. We have already seen how he criticized such trends which he also found in state sūtras. The confrontation with the realities of human desires must become a beacon that leads us to something beyond.

Kṣitigarbha is a bodhisattva who, while teaching us that Shakyamuni, the Buddha of this land has died, preaches that we all must seek teachings from either Maitreya or Amitābha. Here, Kṣitigarbha worship becomes a teaching of skillful means (*hōben*, 方便) towards either Maitreya or Amitābha worship. (*CW*, vol. 5, 673)

This is not merely a description of the historical development of Kṣitigarbha worship. In Sasaki's view, the gridlock in which we find ourselves as a result of serious confrontation with reality through "the vehicle of humans and heavenly beings" leads us to seek liberation in the teachings of the Pure Land. Sasaki found the same orientation in Shinran. Sasaki saw that Shinran, "while confirming his faith through sūtras that had traditionally been at the core of Japanese culture", namely, in Sasaki's categorization, state, nation's, and popular sūtras, also sharply criticized "the Japanese Buddhist sūtras that had, since Nara and Heian periods, cultivated the culture, namely, the society and the nation (*kokumin*, 国民) of our country" (*CW*, vol. 4, 743). Consequently, the Shin Buddhist faith "embraces [state and popular sūtras] but...gives them the position of tentative and superficial [teachings], then ultimately manifests the realm of the oneness of the tentative and the essential (*gonjitsu ichinyo*, 権実一如)", namely, the realm of the Pure Land (*CW*, vol. 4, 667).

Lastly, leaving the teaching of Shin Buddhist faith aside, what is the significance of Sasaki's categorization of sūtras and the characteristics he illustrates of each category? First, Sasaki appears to be urging us to find a renewed awareness of the significance of coming face to face with our anxieties and desires in this life. Secondly, this may lead us to a renewed awareness, too, that religion is not about lofty doctrinal ideals but about the lived experience by actual "persons" of the realities of life and the earnest efforts towards wisdom and liberation—an awareness which can only be gained upon the former renewed awareness.

Notes

- 1 English translations of Japanese texts are by the author throughout this paper.
- 2 When a particular sūtra is mentioned in the present paper, I give priority to a generally used English translation of the title (where not available, the Sanskrit title or the Chinese title in Roman transliteration) supplemented by Roman transliteration and Japanese following Sasaki's usage. Hence, the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Hokke-kyō*, 『法華經』), the *Huayan Sūtra* (*Kegon-gyō*, 『華嚴經』), for example.

- 3 For Sasaki's extensive study on the life and thoughts of Shinran (親鸞, 1173–1262), see *Biography of Shinran-shōnin* (*Shinran-shōnin Den*, 『親鸞聖人伝』, 1910) in *CW*, vol. 3 which was originally a series of articles in the magazine *The Spiritual Realm* (*Seishinkai*, 『精神界』). His studies on the Mādhyamika and Consciousness Only schools, the *Huayan Sūtra*, and his research on the history and characteristics of Japanese Buddhism can be found mainly in his writings in *CW*, vol. 4, with related works in vols. 1, 5, 6.
- 4 Although this paper attempts to clarify Sasaki's views on Japanese Buddhism and his core ideas on Buddhism in general, it is in no way exhaustive as he has left an overwhelming amount of works in which he touches upon issues of our present concern.
- 5 Yoshida Kyūchi saw that first, efforts were made by people such as Inoue Enryō (井上円了, 1858–1919), Murakami Senshō (村上專精, 1851–1929) and others at incorporating Western scientific views into Buddhism and adding philosophical sophistication, after which the trend turned towards emphasizing the inner spiritual life starting with Kiyozawa Manshi (清沢満之, 1863–1903) (Yoshida 1996, 10, 12). For more recent studies on the dynamic changes within modern Japanese Buddhism, see for example, Tamura 2005, Ōmi 2016, and Ōtani et al. eds. 2016.
- 6 Sasaki snapped at such trends of the time: “Buddhism is like vegetation that grows on the earth of faith. Therefore, it is not something to be harvested by the blades of academic studies....However, how dare people today kill the bird called religion holding a gun of science, hunt the animal called faith brandishing a sword of philosophy, and cook the living Buddha with a knife of critique?” (*Religion of Actual Experience* [*Jikken no Shūkyō*, 『実験の宗教』], 1903. *CW*, vol. 6, 3).
- 7 For a chronology of major developments in Sasaki's life and his publications, see Yamada 1993, 172–174 and 175–215.
- 8 Apart from studies on Sasaki in relation to Kiyozawa, “Spiritualism”, and Kōkōdō (for example, Yamamoto 2011, 143–149), studies focused on Sasaki's other writings have been far from abundant and much remain to be explored. Oda Akihiro, in his farewell lecture at Ōtani University, briefly commented on Sasaki's method of studies on the *Huayan Sūtra* (Oda 2020). See also Itō 2020 for Sasaki's interpretation of the *Huayan Sūtra* and Itō 2021 for Sasaki's views on Kṣitigarbha (jizō, 地藏) worship.
- 9 I take his term *minshū kyōten* (民衆經典) to mean sūtras revered by the common people, and translate it as “popular sūtras” (“popular” meaning “pertaining to the common people in general”). See section 2 for issues on translation.
- 10 This paper was originally published in the November 1915 issue (vol. 20, No. 11) of the magazine *Mujintō* (『無尽灯』) and later revised by Sasaki and given the new title, according to the Editors' Notes in *CW*, vol. 4. The revised version is included in *CW*. I have checked the revised version in *CW* against the original paper, and found no major changes to the purport of the paper: correction of typographical errors; a few isolated examples of formal expressions ending in “*desu/masu*” in Japanese changed to regular expressions ending in “*de aru*”; addition of a list of sources for further studies at the end of the chapter on Medicine Buddha worship, etc. Citations in the present paper are from *CW*.
- 11 According to the Editors' Notes in *CW*, vol.4, this is an unpublished paper completed in April, 1916 whose manuscript reveals multiple revisions by Sasaki, published for the first time in *CW*.
- 12 According to the above Editors' Notes, this work is a collection of articles mainly published as a series titled “Shinran and Sūtras” (“Shinran to kyōten”, 『親鸞と經典』) in the journal *Shinran Studies* (*Shinran Kenkyū*, 『親鸞研究』) from February, 1918 onwards, plus a few articles from other sources. The chapter titles in *CW* are the titles of the original papers. However, I have not been able to locate the original papers, hence the bibliographical information remains to be confirmed. Although the focus of these articles are on Shinran and the Shin Buddhist school, Sasaki's discussions on state sūtras, nation's sūtras, and popular sūtras are to be found, especially in the papers “Shinran and Nation's Sūtras” (『親鸞と国民經典』) and “Shin Buddhism and Popular Sūtras” (『真宗と民衆經典』) incorporated into “Shin Buddhism and Sūtras” in *CW*, vol. 4 as chapters 3 and 12. Another focus of the series is the connection between Shinran's thought and the *Huayan Sūtra*, an important topic that I hope to explore in future studies.
- 13 According to the same Editors' Notes as above, this is an untitled, unpublished paper edited between 1923–24 and published for the first time in *CW* under the present title given by the editors.
- 14 According to the Editors' Notes in *CW*, vol.5, this is a collection of articles Sasaki contributed to the Buddhist newspaper *Kyoto Chūgai Nippō* (京都中外日報), the magazine *Mujintō*, etc. between 1919–1923, which Sasaki rewrote with additions and gave the present title.
- 15 Although Sasaki did not explicitly define Japanese Buddhism, from his writings, we can understand it to mean Buddhism transmitted to and developed in Japan. He does, however, state in “Popular Sūtras and Aspects of Faith” that “Our Buddhism arose from the imperial rescript to develop the Three Jewels (*sambō*, 三宝) issued [in 594] by Emperor Suiko (推古天皇)” and also emphasized the role of her regent, Prince Shōtoku (Shōtoku taishi, 聖徳太子) as the “pioneer” of Japanese learning and religion (*CW*, vol. 4, 416) who laid the foundation

of Japanese Buddhism.

- 16 A more detailed definition of each category will be given in the sections discussing each category.
- 17 Sasaki states that “if, as historians say, the true religious awareness as a nation (*kokumin* 国民) can be found in the Kamakura period,...any sūtra which subsequently became the axis of our national spirit (*waga kokumin seishin* 我國民精神) can all be called our nation’s sūtra (*waga kokumin kyōten* 我が國民經典)” (*CW*, vol. 4, 329–330).
- 18 For example, Fazang (法藏, 643–712), a patriarch of the Chinese Huayan school (*kegonshū*, Ch. *huayan zong*, 華嚴宗), devised the categorization of the Five Teachings (*gokyō*, Ch. *wujiao*, 五教判) in which he defined the teaching of the sūtra of his reverence, the *Huayan Sūtra*, as the “perfect teaching” (*engyō*, Ch. *yuanjiao*, 円教) (T35, No. 1733, 115c06). Sasaki also indirectly mentions the categorizations by Zhiyi (智顛, 538–597) and Kūkai (空海, 774–835) (*CW*, vol. 4, 328).
- 19 In this context, the term “Japanese Buddhist sūtras” (*Nihonbukkyō kyōten*, 日本仏教經典) simply means sūtras widely received and revered in Japan as his definition shows. For its implication in relation to Sasaki’s categorization, see note 24.
- 20 Sasaki’s paraphrase of the *Golden Light Sūtra* is from 「若有人王、恭敬供養此金光明最勝經典、汝等應當勤加守護令得安隱。」「悉能令彼除怖畏」「能除衆苦怨賊飢饉及諸疾疫。」(『金光明最勝王經』, T16, No. 665, 427b26–27, 437b16, 427c03); his citation of the *Humane King Sūtra* is from 「其國土中有七災難、一切國王爲是難故、講讀般若波羅蜜…萬姓安樂帝王歡喜。」(『佛說仁王般若波羅蜜經』, T8, No. 245, 382b28–383c01).
- 21 For example, Sasaki lists the *Medicine Buddha Sūtra* (*Yakushi-kyō*, 『藥師經』), the *Maitreya Sūtras* (*Miroku-kyō*, 『弥勒經』), and *Avalokiteśvara Sūtras* (*Kannon-kyō*, 『觀音經』), mainly discussed by Sasaki as popular sutras, as nation’s sūtras (*CW*, vol. 5, 614).
- 22 In contrast, Sasaki characterizes the Shingon school as found in contemporary Japan of his time as popular (*min-shūteki*, 民衆的). He does, however, acknowledge that Nichiren established a religion of self-awareness (*CW*, vol. 4, 493).
- 23 The three are: *Larger Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra* (*Muryōju-kyō*, 『無量壽經』), *Smaller Sukhāvāṭīvyūha Sūtra* (*Amida-kyō*, 『阿彌陀經』), and *Sūtra on the Contemplation of Amitāyus* (*Kanmuryōju-kyō*, 『觀無量壽經』).
- 24 Sasaki’s concept of “Japanese Buddhist sūtras” (*Nihonbukkyō kyōten*, 日本仏教經典) in his paper has a wider meaning than nation’s sūtras and also accommodates state sūtras. Sasaki paraphrases “Japanese Buddhist sūtras” as “sūtras of the state and its nation” (*kokka to sono kokumin no kyōten*, 国家とその國民の經典) (*CW*, vol. 4, 520). However, the latter part of the cited passage seems to aptly describe nation’s sūtras.
- 25 In his paper, Sasaki goes on to discuss what he calls the “set of three sūtras of the prince [Shōtoku]” (*taishi sambu-kyō*, 太子三部經), namely, the *Lotus Sūtra*, the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* (*Yūima-gyō*, 『維摩經』), and the *Śrīmālādevī-Sīmhanāda Sūtra* (*Shōman-gyō*, 『勝鬘經』) which Prince Shōtoku revered and wrote treatises of. As Sasaki saw Prince Shōtoku as the “pioneer” who laid the foundation for the propagation and development of Buddhism in Japan, (see note 15), Sasaki’s esteem towards the three sūtras as exemplary “Japanese Buddhist sūtras” is understandable.
- 26 Tanigama Chihiro reveals in his 2018 unpublished master’s thesis that in the pamphlet *The Grand Enthronement Ceremony and Shin Buddhism* (*Gotaiten to Shinshū*, 『御大典と真宗』, ed. Numa Hōryō, 沼法量. Bukkyōgak-kai, 仏教学会. 1914), compiled and published by the Ōtani sect in 1914 in anticipation of the ceremony, Sasaki is the author of a section titled “Buddhism and the state” in which he emphasized the indebtedness of the Shin Buddhist school to the imperial throne. Tanigama further notes that the conventional truth of the Shin Buddhists’ Twofold Truth theory (*shinzoku nitai setsu*, 真俗二諦説), meaning reverence towards the emperor, is emphasized by Sasaki. Sasaki also writes in the pamphlet that during the era of Empress Suiko and Prince Shōtoku, “the religion of the nation (*kokuminteki shūkyō*, 國民的宗教, i.e. Buddhism) became at the same time the religion upheld by the state (*kokkateki shūkyō*, 國家的宗教) itself, establishing a theocracy” where Buddhism deepened its ties with the state (Tanigama 2018B, 55–58, cited from the above pamphlet p. 51). I express my gratitude to Tanigama Chihiro for forwarding me this information. Note that I translate *kokuminteki shūkyō* and *kokkateki shūkyō* above differently from the previous mention as I find slight differences in meaning of the same terms here.
- 27 Kondō Shuntarō has briefly touched upon Sasaki’s view of the imperial throne around the time of the emperor Meiji’s death (Kondō 2011, 176–177). For discussions from various perspectives on Shin Buddhism and imperial rule, nationalist ideologies, and wartime doctrines, see Nakajima 2017 and papers in Section I of Kondō Shuntarō and Nawa Tatsunori eds. 2020.
- 28 I briefly examined Sasaki’s views on popular sūtras focusing on Kṣitigarbha (*jizō*, 地藏) worship in a short paper in Japanese (Itō 2021). This section builds and expands on this.
- 29 The list is from Sasaki’s paper “State Sūtras and Aspects of Faith”. The *Mahāmāyūrī-vidyārājñī Sūtra* has generally been related to esoteric rites for the protection of the state since the Nara period and would fall into the category of state sūtras. However, Sasaki only mentions this name as an example of popular sūtras and does not elaborate on the characteristics of its teaching. In “Shinran and Nation’s Sūtras”, he lists the same sūtras but ex-

cludes the *Mahāmāyūrī Sūtra*.

- 30 The six correspond to schools and texts of Mādhyamika, Consciousness Only, *Abhidharmakośa*, *Satyasiddhiśāstra*, vinaya, and Huayan respectively.
- 31 This passage is from Sasaki’s paper, “Buddhist Culture and Cultivation”.

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[Abbreviation]

CW: *Complete Works of Sasaki Gesshō* (*Sasaki Gesshō Zenshū* 『佐々木月樵全集』), vols.1–6, Kokusho Kankōkai 国書刊行会. The *CW* series was originally published by Sasaki Gesshō Zenshū Kankōkai (佐々木月樵全集刊行会) between 1927–29, republished by Kokusho Kankōkai (国書刊行会) in 1973, and published again by Ushio Shobō (うしお書房) between 1999–2002 (vols. 1–4). The most accessible Kokusho Kankōkai version is used in this paper.

T: *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō*, Daizō Shuppan (『大正新脩大藏經』、大藏出版).

(Texts from the *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* in this paper are from the SAT Daizōkyō Database, ver. 2015, with punctuation marks revised and edited where needed by the present author. <http://21dzk.l.u-tokyo.ac.jp/SAT/>)

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Keywords

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(佐々木月樵、浄土真宗、国家経典、国民経典、民衆経典)

日本語論題

「佐々木月樵の経典分類論」