Refuge, Hope, and Healing  
Buddhist Temples in Tsunami Impacted Communities  

By Camille Mori

Buddhism has long been struggling in modern Japan, but with the recent disaster there seems to have been an increase of interest in the religion. Whether this is permanent, or just an immediate reaction to the shock of the devastation only time will tell. Over the past year, seeing images on the news the disaster seemed distant. The victims were confined to this concept of “Tohoku”, taking away the personal impact of the March 11th disaster. Driving through Miyagi prefecture, the eerie ghost towns of concrete foundations leave a reminder of the massive scale of the loss of life and community. To think that the tsunami was only one facet of this catastrophe is heart-stopping. With the disaster still fresh in their minds people are trickling back to these ghost towns, rebuilding, and reclaiming their communities. Even as people are mending their homes, there is still an ache for psychologically coming to terms with the devastation nature has brought upon them.

A Place of Refuge

Located atop a hill in Ishinomaki Dōgen-in Temple was spared from the tsunami. Several other temples and shrines in the tsunami impacted areas were also built on high ground, but Dōgen-in Temple was a special case. The sōtō sect temple was home to somewhere between 300 and 400 victims of the tsunami and while other temples and shrines sheltered victims for one to two months, Dōgen-in Temple kept their doors open for 5 months.

With so many people in the temple there was no privacy; people were packed into every corner of the temple to sleep. To keep everyone calm, the head monk created a strict daily schedule and required everyone to stick to a code of 8 rules, which included sharing even the smallest things, taking walks on nice days, and always remembering to thank and honor the gods and Buddha. As a result of stressing the importance of kindness, the refugees at Dōgen-in Temple grew to respect one another and enjoyed living in their new home, despite the hardships they all faced. According to the head priest, Hidemichi Onozaki, “when people came to visit Dōgen-in Temple, they couldn’t believe these were victims of a horrible disaster, they were too happy.”
Rev. Onozaki started every morning with religious prayer followed by the NHK radio exercise broadcast at 6:30. Then everyone would partake in various chores such as cleaning debris, or preparing food. Every day Rev. Onozaki held a meeting to discuss the distribution of labor and other matters at the temple. Dōgen-in Temple was able to use fire to make their meals, unlike the government sponsored shelter nearby where families shared crackers for their meals since open fires were restricted. There were memorial services held for those who had passed away or were missing. This gave the refugees a chance to remember their loved ones and be assured they are not lost and forgotten. As time moved on, people began to move out of the temple, to temporary housing, to their rebuilt homes, or to start a life in a new city. Approaching the temple now, the crowded shelter is only a memory. The temporary housing a little farther down the hill serves as a reminder that people are moving on, and reestablishing their lives.

A Symbol of Hope

Not all temples were fortunate enough to be spared from the unrelenting power of the tsunami. In Kesennuma city Jifuku-ji Temple was severely damaged, even though it is located 750 meters inland. The height of the tsunami is marked on the inside of the temple, and sits high above our heads. Yet with all the damage the temple still stood, unlike the houses surrounding it. As the tsunami subsided and the people saw the wreckage of their town, their spirits were uplifted when they saw the temple still standing.

As soon as he was able the head of Jifuku-ji Temple, Shuko Katayama, began repairs. Young monks came to volunteer from all over Japan, not only helping to remove debris, but they also created goods to sell and raise donations. As a result the temple developed a motto, “Never surrender, never run away, and never be discouraged”, which appears on T-
shirts, handkerchiefs, and other items sold at the temple. Rev. Katayama’s younger brother, who is a Jazz drummer in the U.S., even made a CD to raise funds and has agreed to take part in a memorial concert on March, 10th 2012.

Jifuku-ji Temple faces great challenges since more than half of the temple’s patrons have either died or moved away. While they hope that rebuilding and holding memorial ceremonies helps to breathe life into the city of Kesennuma, for now the temple must rely on outside donations and support to sustain their operations. Despite their loss of patrons, the temple successfully held memorial services and New Year’s celebrations that have gained much media coverage. Their bell tower was destroyed by the tsunami and the one ton bell was swept 30 meters inland. In attempts to bring some normalcy back to the community, the temple retrieved the bell with a crane, and suspended it to ring the bell for New Years. The image of the monk striking to bell has become a symbol of persistence for the city of Kesennuma.

**Healing Spiritual Wounds**

With almost 16,000 dead and another 3,320 missing, those left behind are finding it difficult to move on. As the dust settles, and people are returning to their former lives, this problem has become more obvious. Like many disaster impacted areas victims are facing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and depression. Since the government does not provide an outlet for people in this predicament, many have turned to temples or other religious organizations to heal their spiritual wounds.

With people claiming to see ghosts of the dead and missing, Tsudai-ji Temple and the United Christ Church in Miyagi prefecture have collaborated to set up a hotline for those troubled by the fate of their loved one’s souls. Other Buddhist temples have been involved in holding “tea cafes” that are aimed at providing a relaxed social setting for the refugees. Rev. Jin Hitoshi trains volunteers for psycho-spiritual relief work in Miyagi and Fukushima. These volunteers talk with victims and try to engage in casual conversation. At this stage there is more of an emphasis on keeping a social interaction with those who are struggling as opposed to talking about the disaster upfront. This healing process is bound to last for several years, since for most people their lives will never be the same.

With so many people turning to temples for psychological and spiritual healing, these temples will no doubt have a long lasting impact on the development of these communities following the tsunami. Partnership between the different Buddhist schools will be one of the biggest challenges as this next stage of relief work progresses.