

RELIGION AND ETHICS AT ODDS

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Religion and Ethics at Odds

A Buddhist Counter-Position

SUEKI FUMIHIKO

Translated by
Anton Luis Sevilla



CHISOKUDŌ

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Translator's Introduction

Prof. Sueki Fumihiko is a towering figure in Buddhist studies in Japan. I first met him in 2010, as I was applying to take doctoral studies at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies in Kyoto. With a slight frame, a warm smile, and a gentle laugh—I would slowly learn that he laughs a whole lot—we talked about my plans to do research on Buddhist ethics. Little did I know that four years after, I would spend the last year of my doctorate translating his Buddhist critique of ethics.

Allow me to briefly introduce Prof. Sueki. He was born in Yamanashi Prefecture in 1949. He earned his undergraduate degree in Indian philosophy (Buddhism) from the University of Tokyo, studying under many of the big names in Buddhist studies, including Nakamura Hajime (author of *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples*). He eventually earned his Ph.D. from the same university with a dissertation on Buddhist thought in the early Heian period. From 1995 to 2009, he was the professor of the prestigious Chair of Japanese Buddhist History in the same university.

During the 1990s, he focused on philological works, publishing books on early Japanese Buddhism, *The Blue Cliff Record* (a well-known book of Zen kōan), Kamakura Buddhism, Nichiren, etc. Until today, his books remain important texts for any aspiring Buddhist scholar in Japan.

With the opening of the twenty-first century, having laid this foundation in Buddhist studies, he turned to the task of understanding Japanese modernity vis-à-vis Buddhist tradition. He published a three-volume series on “Modern Japanese Thought: A Reconsideration.” During this back and forth between the history of thought and

Buddhist studies, glimmers of a completely novel perspective to philosophy began to appear in his thought.

Halfway through the first decade of the twenty-first century, he was ready to take on philosophy and contemporary issues head-on. The first of these explicitly philosophical books was this book, *Religion and Ethics at Odds*. It was first entitled *Buddhism vs. Ethics* when it was published in 2006. The book remains in print, and has been re-published as *Anti-Buddhology: Buddhism vs. Ethics* in 2013—a testament to its continued importance. Since the publication of this book, Prof. Sueki has continued to develop his philosophy, publishing books like *The Other, the Dead, the I* (2007) and *Philosophy Live: A Perspective from Japan* (2012), the latter soon to be available in English translation. (Prof. Sueki gives a detailed first-person account of the development of his thought in the addendum of this book. He also gives an extensive listing of his books and the role they play in this new philosophy.)

In 2009, he moved to the Nichibunken in Kyoto. I would meet him shortly after, and would study with him until his retirement in 2015. He is chair of the Japanese Association for Comparative Philosophy (originally started by Nakamura Hajime) and continues to develop his philosophy of the other / dead, adding yearly to his long list (almost 30 self-authored, and more co-authored, edited, and translated volumes) of publications. He is truly a giant in this field.

ETHICS AND TRANS-ETHICS

As one can see above, this book shows the beginnings of Prof. Sueki's philosophical thought—a philosophy built on a firm foundation of rigorous philology of Buddhist texts and careful scrutiny of the intellectual history of Japan. However, the value of the publication of this work in English is not merely academic, nor merely for those interested in Japanese studies. There are two main issues—contemporary, global, *human* issues—that I think this book addresses:

First, this book addresses the *limits* of ethics. Second, this book focuses on the problem of the other / dead.

Let us begin with the first issue. This is probably the first thing that gets people scratching their heads about this book. Why does Prof. Sueki keep criticizing ethics? As a specialist in ethics, this question was particularly confounding for me.

One cultural issue here is the gap between “ethics” in English and *rinri* in Japanese. “Ethics” has a very broad range of connotations: It refers to moral principles (good vs. evil) held by an individual, or by a group. It can be time-bound or timeless. It can be particular or universal. Thus the phrase “ethical people” can refer to those who abide by the rules, or the opposite—those who criticize social rules as erroneous conventions. For example, if we take moral education as the trumpet of ethics, the famed psychologist and ethicist Lawrence Kohlberg includes pre-conventional (egoist), conventional (group-based), and post-conventional (critical) morality in the definition of morality, and sets the post-conventional stage as the most developed form of morality.

The Japanese *rinri* is a completely different story. *Rinri*, more than anything, refers to the moral principles of a group—particular, time-bound principles. Thus agitators and social critics do *not* generally fit within this category. And moral education in Japan has much more conventional undertones than Kohlberg—especially in light of Japanese wartime moral education (*shūshin*), which tended to subjugate individuals to the totality. And so while criticizing ethics is shocking in English, criticizing *rinri* in Japanese is, while shocking, somewhat understandable in a post-war context.

However, Prof. Sueki’s critique of *rinri* goes beyond the critique of conventional morality. He is not merely a social critic advocating for post-conventional morality and social re-construction. In this book, the word “ethics” accrues the meaning of “rules or principles that govern human relations.” Ethics is the *order* between people *as orderable*. This definition applies to conventional morality, but it also applies to rational post-conventional morality (like Jürgen Habermas’ discourse

ethics). Ethics refers to the ground we can stand on—be it reason or feeling or identity or rights—from which we can say, “this, for sure, is good.”

Against this, Prof. Sueki introduces the term “trans-ethics” (*chō-rinri*). This is not merely about going beyond conventions and creating new conventions. It is about recognizing that no matter how much we expand the realm of order, this sure footing of ethics is *finite*—it has boundaries, and beyond it, there is no certainty about good and evil.

Recently, with issues in political ethics, environmental ethics, bioethics, information ethics, and ethics in education, there has been a resurgence in interest in Buddhist ethics. Different ideas in Buddhism—and their resonance with fields like psychology and neuroscience—have been found to be helpful guides in our attempt to build better lives—better relationships with ourselves, each other, and our world. However, perhaps we can take Prof. Sueki’s point as a pointed question: Is this all there is to Buddhism? Is Buddhism merely about being good, and having sure footing in that goodness? (This applies not just to Buddhism but to religion/spirituality in general.)

Perhaps, in our necessary attempt to redirect our lives toward the good, we have become too attached to the idea of ethics, seeing it as limitless. This book does not seek to belittle ethics—this world has both too little and too much ethics. Rather than belittle ethics, perhaps this book only seeks to put ethics in its place.

THE OTHER/DEAD

Why is it that we need to go beyond the ethical? Prof. Sueki’s key argument is that each and every one of us has to deal with this trans-ethical realm because we are in relation with the *other*. Relating with one who cannot be reduced to the orders of comprehension, we are forced into a world where reason and order no longer hold sway. This is the second issue he raises: the importance of the idea of the other/dead.

In the English-speaking world, Buddhism and postmodernity always had a sort of affinity for each other. The realization of the limits of reason and the rational subject seems to resonate with the Buddhist focus on no-self, particularly on the Zen Buddhist idea of truth “not depending on words and letters” that crossed over to the West through Buddhist ambassadors like D. T. Suzuki and Izutsu Toshihiko.

However, as any Zen Buddhist “fan” realizes when visiting Japan, actual Japanese Buddhism is a whole different animal from the philosophical mysticism we read about in philosophy books. Here in Japan, there is a much greater concern for funerals than there is for Zen meditation, and more ceremonies for the repose of souls than there are expressions of “no-self.” Furthermore, postmodernity, particularly poststructuralists like Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, focus on the notion of the otherness (alterity) of the other—an idea that seems weak both in Japanese traditional thought and in the practice of Buddhism.

In light of this, what Prof. Sueki presents in this book is none other than a re-encounter between Japanese Buddhism and the postmodern idea of the other. But unlike the intellectual/philosophical Buddhism of the ambassadors of Buddhism in the 60s, his Buddhism is a Buddhism of the everyday person. It focuses on the real representative of Japanese Buddhism—the much denigrated “funeral Buddhism”—with its confusing mix of Buddhist, Shintoist, and even western modernist ideas.

What Prof. Sueki derives from this funeral Buddhism, however, is a unique approach to the face of the other. While including both postmodern and even psychoanalytic approaches to alterity, he focuses on the real, undeniable experience of *loss*. Experiencing the loss of a loved one means experiencing a relationship that is real, but that is no longer within the orders of reason and brute existence. And it is this experience that brings us beyond the world of ethics, into the world of the trans-ethical.

I entrust the development of these ideas to the rest of this book. Here, allow me to merely repeat my assertion: This book is not merely an academic engagement of Japanese Buddhism. By engaging the problem of the limits of ethics and the problem of the other/dead, it gives us a new philosophy, a novel approach as we wrestle with the new problems of this truly postmodern age.

This world needs ethics. This world needs us to recognize the people we are connected to. But at the same time, the world needs more than just ethics. And there is more to relationships than recognition. It is difficult to walk the narrow path between attachment to and rejection of ethics. I hope this translation might offer insights to those who are trying to walk this path, in various parts of the globe.

Anton Luis Sevilla

September 2016

Preface to the English Edition

In this book, I take the standpoint of Japanese Buddhism and examine issues specific to Japan, like funeral Buddhism and the bombing of Hiroshima, as philosophical problems. This book therefore considers the problems of philosophy, ethics, and religion from an angle completely different from prior thought in America and Europe. I have been conducting philological research on Japanese Buddhism for many years now, and I wanted to test out how useful these unique ideas might be for addressing contemporary issues.

Given this, I am not very confident about how universalizable my ideas are. However, considering how occidental thought has hit an impasse of sorts, I wonder if it might be useful to consider various radically different approaches like the one I present. In *Intimacy or Integrity: Philosophy and Cultural Difference* (2002), Thomas Kasulis argues that Japanese thought is more intimacy-oriented than integrity-oriented. In this vein, one could say that my book tries to develop the notion of intimacy further. In particular, the problem of the dead in part two has yet to be sufficiently discussed—even in Japan—and my book was one of the first to take this up philosophically.

At first, the Japanese version of this book was published serially in a magazine for Buddhist monks entitled *The Prosperity of Temples*. This source material was completely reworked and republished by Chikuma Shobō as a paperback, *Buddhism vs. Ethics*. (See the afterword for details.) In 2013, an expanded edition was published with the title *Anti-Buddhology: Buddhism vs. Ethics*. This edition was to be the basis for the present English translation. The appendix of this book was added in 2013, and is not merely an appendix but a summary

of the development of my thought from 2006 to 2013. I would much appreciate it if you gave it a look.

I asked Anton Luis Sevilla, who was in the process of writing his dissertation, to translate this book, with the support of JSPS Kakenhi Grant 24520096. The Japanese version of this book was not an academic piece but something like a free essay written in conversational Japanese. Anton quite skillfully translated this into easygoing English prose. We printed 100 copies and gave it to anyone interested, and it was quite well-received. It caught the eye of James Heisig and Morisato Takeshi of the Nanzan Institute of Religion and Culture, and I am very pleased that they have agreed to publish it through Chisokudō's new format. I fervently hope that this book inspires new discussions and debates in the fields of philosophy, ethics, and religion.

Sueki Fumihiko 末本文美士

September 2016

Why I Dislike Ethics

Now I have to think about ethics for the next 30 chapters. How do I even begin? In the first place, am I even qualified to talk about ethics? To be honest, I have a real distaste for ethics, morality, or anything of the sort. Even now, when I hear those words, it makes me feel a little ill. Come to think of it, we had a subject called “Ethics and Society” back when I was in high school. I never took it seriously, and I do not recall ever listening to it attentively. Well, I was also at an age when I was overflowing with cheekiness.

It would be wonderful if children could be raised up well just through moral education. But if one wants to know what happens when children buy into moral education completely, prewar Japanese society gives a ready example. Unfortunately, there are quite a few “adults” who would love to have a repeat of that.

Because of this, ethics and morals have been my enemies. And because I have been vocal about this on various occasions, people frown upon me and refuse to keep my company. When I spoke about this at a research conference, there was a person who harshly countered, “Then how do *you* think about social responsibility?” But does it suffice to take carrying out our “social responsibilities” as our final *telos*? To put it bluntly, is that any different from the repulsive wartime phrase “extinguishing the self in public service” (*messhi hōkō*) or the notion of the “company’s man” that was in vogue during the period of Japan’s rapid economic growth?

When I was young, I had not really thought this through. But nevertheless, I decided to specialize not in ethics but in religion. Religion exists in a tensional relationship with ethics. While ethical religion is possible, that would be no more than one facet of religion. And to say

the least, it is in the part irreducible to ethics where the true problem of religion lies. But it is difficult to even define “religion.” I will touch on that a bit more, later on.

THE DOMAIN OF RELIGION

In some ways, the world of religion is a peculiar one. It includes things like religious sensitivities and experiences, which are not shared by all human beings. There are parts of this world that those who grasp it do, and those who do not, do not. Despite that, the problem that religion presents has a universal meaning, which transcends the question of whether or not an individual has these religious sensitivities or experiences. Of course, this could be said of other fields and is not a problem peculiar to religion. For instance, science has this generally accepted idea, or *tatema*, that in theory anyone can understand science. But by no means does that imply that anyone can make scientific discoveries—that would require special talent.

Some might say that if the existence of the domain of religion depended on religious sensitivities and experiences, then it would just be a matter of saying (for those who have religious sensitivities) that there is a domain called “the religious,” and nothing more. “Modernity” has constantly belittled religion. People thought of religion as a mere superstition of sorts, thinking that it would someday wither away with the progress of science. They thought that the world would more likely be at peace if religion ceased to exist. However, is that how things really are? Today, the limits of both science and ethics have been completely exposed. Now, what then?

I do not intend to fixate on the word “religion.” If one feels uncomfortable with this word, there is no need to use it at all. All I wish to say is that there are problems that cannot be explained away by ethics, science, politics, economics, or law. Perhaps the true problems of humanity lie at the very point where we deviate from that domain of rationality. Objectively speaking, until now, it is what we call “religion”

that has most deeply involved itself with these kinds of problems. And so when dealing with such problems that are irreducible to ethics and science, I do not think it is a bad idea to make use of religion.

However, I have no plans on preaching or sharing my religious experiences. Rather, I would like to theoretically clarify the domain that religion investigates, and do so in accordance with language. Perhaps such an undertaking would be closest to the field we call “philosophy” (*tetsugaku*). Please allow me to refer to it as such.

BUDDHISM AS A METHODOLOGY

The field I have been involved in as a researcher is not religion in general, nor philosophy, but rather the study of a particular religion—Buddhism. The scope of my knowledge and powers of thinking is quite narrow. Why did I end up with Buddhism? I am afraid I lack a particularly profound reason for that. As an ordinary Japanese person, I simply had more moments where I felt affinity to Buddhism, rather than to Christianity or Islam.

At university, as I wrestled with philosophy, something struck me as quite odd. All the discussions were about the west, and when speaking about religion, people always seemed to presuppose Christianity as a model. Not only that, people spoke of Christianity as if it possessed some sort of “universality.” To be honest, that did not quite fit with my sensibilities, and I began to doubt if I could keep learning a “philosophy” like that.

If I am to learn philosophy, might it not be better if I take Buddhism, which is nearest to me, as my point of departure, and think about the problem of my own way of life from there? In my youth, I agonized over this quite a lot, eventually deciding to go into Buddhist studies. Back then, it was thought strange for a good young lad, like me, to study Buddhism (given that I was not born to a temple family), and I was treated like an oddity. Well there is truth in that, for sure.

The academic field that does research on Buddhism is referred to as “Buddhist studies.” In this field, for the most part, one does not deal directly with contemporary problems. Rather, one patiently immerses oneself in the study of classical texts. One has to have a knack for things like these. For a person like me, who was completely sick of dealing with the people around and the savage realities of the present, there was no better world possible. I was absorbed in that world for 30 years.

After 30 years, I came to and looked around me—and became anxious once again. The world of the classics used to be the place where I could be most at peace, but I began to realize that this feeling could not last. No matter how hard I might try to cover it up, I live in the present, and there is no real way to escape from that. The idea of a comfort zone where one can be okay all by oneself is a myth, nothing more. Also, Buddhism does not exist merely in the literature of the past, but rather, functions in the present. If so, there is really no way to escape from the problems of the contemporary world. If we call such a standpoint from which one studies Buddhism “contemporary Buddhist studies,” then perhaps it is necessary for us to establish such a field against the conventional field of “classical Buddhist studies.”

Because of this, what unfolds in this book is, in a way, an attempt at contemporary Buddhist studies. However, I do not intend to be particularly caught up with Buddhism. Buddhism is a handhold, a means and not an end in itself. I call this “Buddhism as a methodology.”

It would be a waste to overlook that which remains of the deep way of thinking left for me by the ancestors of Japan. Moreover, the tradition accumulated by my ancestors lies in the depths of Japanese culture and continues to shape the way Japanese people think. Would an elucidation of Buddhist thinking not be simultaneously an elucidation of my own depths? Why should I imitate the philosophy of the west, when it is alien and ill-fitting for me? The founding spirit of western philosophy is “Know thyself.” Ironically, it is quite the opposite of what philosophers do these days (especially in Japan).

This book does not presuppose that Buddhism is correct or anything of the sort. I assure you, there are many elements in Buddhism that ought to be criticized. I have no intention to develop an apologetics. In this book, I shall take up various problems that ethics and morality are no longer able to deal with, and think about them from the standpoint of someone who has studied Buddhism. In the process, I shall simultaneously criticize tradition and disassemble (or deconstruct) it.

Previously, some philosophers went off saying that if the west is no good, well, there is the “east.” They argued for the “overcoming of western modernity,” and they put the profundity of eastern philosophy in its place, singing the latter’s praises. Of all things, it is that “wonderful” but dangerous glorification of Japan and the east that should be thoroughly criticized. I argue that there is no other way to build a philosophy that can stand on its own feet than by coming to terms with oneself in a critical way.

In this book, I would like to lay the foundations for my argument in Part One (Chapters 1 to 9) by reflecting on the history of Buddhist thought and taking up the problems in the relationship between Buddhism and ethics. I think I can get some foothold through this, in order to proceed more surely. Then, I will argue with a greater sense of generality. In Part Two (Chapters 10 to 20), the argument will revolve around the problem of the “other”¹ that transcends the ethical world (the latter I refer to as the domain of *human beings* or *ningen*). And in Part Three (Chapters 21 to 30) I will raise the issue of whether we can open a new way of thinking by considering our relationship with the dead (who can rightfully be considered as the most other of others).

1. [The word “other” has a somewhat Levinasian tone. As such, it is generally kept in the singular and not attached to articles (“an other” instead of “another”). However, we will not adhere to the post-structural intricacies of differentiating “other” and “Other,” and will simply keep it in lower case.]

In the very place that transcends ethics lie problems that we truly need to contend with. We can call this domain the *trans-ethical*.² I do not know how many people will be willing to accept my farfetched ideas. But today, it is no longer possible to glorify life, as a living being, while ignoring the dead. What I hope to suggest is not a foolish optimism, nor a reckless pessimism, but for us to descend into the very depths of ourselves, and from there ascertain if something might come to life.

2. [*Chō-rinri* is one of the key words of this book. *Chō* indicates going beyond: “trans” or “super.” It shall be translated as “trans-ethical” or “trans-ethics.”]