



# Wings of Wisdom and Compassion: Lessons of Freedom from Japanese American Internment in WWII

by Duncan Ryūken Williams

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*BCBS graduate intern, Sarah Fleming, sat down with Duncan to discuss what the stories of Japanese American Buddhists who lived through World War II can teach us today about faith, freedom, and interfaith solidarity.*

**Sarah Fleming:** Before we get started, I just wanted to say congratulations—you’ve managed to write a book that is not only a phenomenal piece of scholarship but a page-turner! That’s certainly a rare feat.

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**Duncan Ryūken Williams:** Oh, thank you for saying that—yeah, I tried to write the book in a way that both sheds light on Buddhism as an often-missed aspect of the history of wartime Japanese American incarceration and highlights parts of the Japanese American experience which are often skipped over in our accounts of American Buddhism. For people who had never encountered Asian American history, I wanted the text to serve as an introductory text to the history of World War II Japanese mass incarceration, and for those who were more familiar with Japanese American community history but who had never considered it through the lens of Buddhism, I wanted to offer a sort of Buddhism 101. As I wrote each chapter, I tried to pick a Buddhist concept that would frame the storytelling—sometimes very overtly, sometimes a bit more subtly. It was an interesting process trying to figure out how to bridge different readerships and audiences.

**SF:** It seems like those two audiences come together even in the title, *American Sutra*. I'd love to hear more about your decision to call this volume *American Sutra*—what do you mean by “American,” what do you mean by “sutra,” and what happens when these two words are brought together?

**DRW:** From the time of their first immigration, 99% of Japanese Americans were Buddhist. And by the time December 1941 rolled around, the Japanese American community was the largest Buddhist group in America. Part of the argument I make in the book is that it wasn't just racial background that determined the ways the Japanese American community was treated in a way that, say, German Americans or Italian Americans were not. Most people just say it's about race. But the argument I make traces a longer history of exclusion based on the conjunction of race and religion.

The Japanese American experience—the Buddhist experience—came on the tail end of immigration exclusion, anti-alien land laws, anti-miscegenation laws, and other legal frameworks for exclusion. Yet Japanese Americans during World War II claimed that they could be both Buddhist and American. Despite what the government, society, and the media was telling them, they asserted that Buddhist and American identity were not mutually exclusive. This is where I got the idea for the title, *American Sutra*—I wanted to put these two words that may not normally appear together in conversation.

And I also wanted to explore what the concept of a sutra might look like in the context of this history. The book opens with a poem by a Buddhist priest named Nyogen Senzaki who lived in LA and led a vibrant multi-ethnic Buddhist community with Latinx, Caucasian, Japanese, and Japanese American members. On May 7, 1942, as he was about to be sent to the camps, Senzaki wrote a poem for his community called “Parting.” He begins with the line “Thus have I heard” and then immediately writes of the army’s order to evacuate all people of Japanese ancestry. With that first line—*evam me suttam* in the Pali—he’s trying to write a poem as if it were a sutra. And usually, in Buddhist classical texts, “Thus have I heard” is followed by an announcement of who gathered to hear the Buddha speak, and then the Dharma message begins. In his poem, he sets the scene by describing the military order. In this way, his lived experience—the lived experience of Japanese Americans being forcibly removed and put into concentration camps for an indefinite period—becomes a Dharma teaching. It becomes a sutra.

So that’s how the book begins. The book ends with discovery of another type of sutra at one of the concentration camps in Wyoming called Heart Mountain. After the war, different farmers were leasing the land, and one day, when somebody was digging near the cemetery, they accidentally cracked

open an oil drum. At first they were worried they had discovered a coffin, but instead out came a pile of small stones, each with a single Kanji character on it. For a long time, people didn't know what the collection of stones was. But through careful analysis, the stones were discovered to be a section of the Lotus Sutra painted carefully onto rock. This painting is believed to be the work of a Nichiren Buddhist priest, Reverend Nichikan Murakita, a master calligrapher who taught calligraphy to others while they were in camp.

In Japanese this practice of copying Buddhist scriptures is called *shakyo*, and in many schools of Buddhism, it is believed to generate merit. It has particular importance in relationship to *mappō*, or the degenerate age of the Dharma—a time when the Buddha's teachings have lost their power and the world is in a state of disarray with fires, plagues, wars, what have you. In medieval Japan it was common practice to bury sutras in the ground in sutra mounds, or *kyōzuka*, with the idea that they would be unearthed by the future Buddha in a time when it would again be possible to practice Buddhism. In a similar vein, these buried stones, these stones found in the concentration camp painted over with scripture, carry a prayer for a day when it would be possible to practice Buddhism in America. They carry a prayer for the future of Buddhism, and for the future of America.

These two sutras—the poem at the beginning, these rocks at the end—frame this book. They point to the ways that the Buddha's teaching is just words unless people embody it and endure with it, especially in times when the Dharma is difficult to practice. In the camps, people embodied this endurance through assertions that they could be both American and Buddhist and through prayers, like Murakita's, for a day when America would be a place where Buddhism could be freely practiced.

One question that runs through the heart of the book is the question of whether America is essentially a white Christian nation or a multi-ethnic nation of religious freedom. This, to me, is an enduring question of American life. From the founding and early days of the republic to the January 6 insurrection at the Capitol, we see this question again and again: What constitutes America? Who constitutes America? And what is the vision of America that needs to be protected?

So *American Sutra* is a book about Buddhism in American society and history, but also a book about America and what it means to be American from a Buddhist point of view. So that's why I titled it *American Sutra*.

**SF:** These questions of what it means to be American come to the fore in the second half of the title as well: *A Story of Faith and Freedom in the Second World War*. Especially in the context of the Capitol insurrection and the inauguration, I've been thinking a lot about the meaning of faith and freedom. We're witnessing competing narratives of American faith and freedom racing against each other, often violently, with the vision of America as a white Christian nation and the vision of America as a place of pluralistic religious freedom each laying claim to this notion of "freedom" to vastly different ends. What has working through these stories and letters and diaries of these Japanese American Buddhists taught you about the nature of freedom?

**DRW:** One of the most moving diaries that I had the opportunity to translate comes from a priest incarcerated in one of the high security camps run by the Department of Justice. At the time, Shinto priests and Buddhist priests (though not Japanese American Christian ministers) were seen by the FBI, the Office of Naval Intelligence, and Army G2—the three main intelligence agencies—as a particular threat to national security. Some were picked up even before the smoke had cleared at Pearl Harbor and immediately

placed in high security camps. In fact, the very first person picked up at 3:00pm on December 7th was Gikyō Kuchiba, a Buddhist priest serving the largest Buddhist temple in Honolulu. You might think they would pick up consular officials, but no, it was the Buddhist priests who were seen as the biggest danger.

One of the leaders arrested that day was Bishop Kyokujō Kubokawa, a senior Buddhist priest in the Jōdo tradition in Hawai'i. He was picked up directly from his temple—it was a Sunday, and they were still conducting services—and they didn't even let him go back to his house to grab a change of clothes or a toothbrush. The following April, he gave a Dharma talk during Hanamatsuri, or Flower Festival, which is the celebration of the Buddha's birthday. In his Dharma talk he used the image of the lotus flower blossoming out of muddy water. This is a classic symbol in Mahāyāna Buddhist texts. Typically, the lotus flower represents the Buddha's awakening. The muddy water is the Sahā world, or the world of difficulty and suffering and so on, and the Buddhist path is presented as a way of rising up above the mud to blossom beautifully into the lotus. But Kubokawa's Dharma message that day was that the birth of the Buddha within every person had to do less with disconnecting from or transcending the muddiness. Instead, he pointed to his robes—the same robes he had been wearing since being picked up four months prior—and he said, Look at my robes and how dirty they are. They are like the Sahā world, the dusty world, the world of mud. But out of the mud comes this beautiful lotus. The lotus needs the nutrients of the mud to actually blossom—a lotus cannot grow in sterile, pure water. He went on to say that this was the most important Buddha's birthday he had celebrated in his life. His message, I think, was about how you can find freedom when all your freedoms have been taken away, how you can develop a pathway to liberation in the very midst of confinement.

Another Buddhist priest, Reverend Seytsū Takahashi, was also placed in a high security camp. He often wrote in his diary about how the searchlights going through the barracks prevented him from being able to sleep. But then one day, he wrote about this traditional Buddhist practice called *kōmyō* meditation. In Japanese classical poetry, the moon can be used to represent the Buddha's awakening, and in *kōmyō* meditation, you visualize the Buddha's awakening by allowing the moon to traverse your consciousness and your mind. And so he started practicing that form of meditation, using the very searchlights that used to annoy him as his meditation aid, as his moon traversing the sky. In this way he was able to deepen his Buddhist practice and find freedom. And so this is what I found most compelling and moving in this work: these stories of people who are incarcerated in places where their freedoms have been taken away, and yet they find a way to find liberation. And I think these lessons carry over to today too, as we face different forces of constraint—how can we find freedom in constraint?

**SF:** What powerful responses to constraint—letting dusty robes become the mud necessary for the lotus's blooming; letting the searchlights become the moon. It seems like these, too, are a way of embodying the Buddha's teachings, carrying forth the "Thus have I heard" into daily life in all its messiness and constraint. Looking to the various conditions of constraint in our present moment, what would you say we can learn from the stories of Japanese American Buddhists who found freedom while living in confinement? How can we bring some of these lessons into our own daily living?

**DRW:** One classical image in the Japanese tradition that I often return to is that of the *tsuru*, or crane. For a crane to be able to take flight, to soar into the skies of freedom, it needs two wings. One wing is the wing of wisdom; the other is the wing of compassion.

Yesterday during his inauguration speech, President Joe Biden laid out the four main constraints we face today: the COVID-19 pandemic, the environmental crisis of climate change, the economic downturn, and racial injustice. We can think of these four things as the walls of the box that we're in right now. When we're inside a box, how do we get out? If we can't push through any of these walls, how do we break free?

For many in the concentration camps, when they felt they were living in a box, they learned to look up and find the sky. And that's something that Buddhism helps us to do: when we feel like there's no way out, when we feel like we're constrained on all sides, when we feel like we can't figure out how to break free through the normal channels, Buddhism can help us shift our perspective, even if only a little bit. And once we can see beyond the box, that can help us move towards freedom. This is the wing of wisdom that these stories offer us.

And then the other wing is compassion. Often just knowing that you're not alone, knowing that you're not the only one moving through grief and loss, can be liberatory. Sometimes this takes the form of one quick perspective shift as you come to see the other people struggling alongside you. And sometimes it's the quieter, slower shift of experiencing a deep solidarity over time. That's what I took away from these stories of Buddhists who found themselves in difficult circumstances and found the resilience to get through it. Sometimes they used wisdom; sometimes they use compassion; sometimes they combined the two together to fly.

**SF:** So even when you're in a box, you can look up and find beauty and wonder and wisdom, but you can also come to see the others in the box there with you. And that's how you can eventually fly.



**DRW:** Right—that’s your way to freedom.

**SF:** And speaking of *tsuru* and paths to freedom, you also serve as a Co-Chair of Tsuru for Solidarity, an organization of Japanese American activists working to end detention centers and support immigrant and refugee communities across the United States. What projects are you currently working on in that role?

**DRW:** For a bit of context, Tsuru for Solidarity was formed in 2019 by a number of World War II Japanese American camp survivors and their descendants who saw the detention policies on the Southern border and the Muslim travel ban as echoes of the racial and religious exclusion they had experienced during the war. When they saw the family separations at the border, many of them felt like history was repeating itself. They began to organize as a Japanese American community by folding *tsuru*, origami cranes, and placing them on the fence line of Border Patrol and ICE detention facilities just to let the people inside know that this time, somebody knows you’re here, and we’re going to raise our voices of concern. I wasn’t involved in the very beginning, but the first protest they held was in the South Texas Family Residential Center in Dilley, which is the largest of the three main so-called “family centers” in the country. At this protest, one of the cofounders of the movement had color-copied the cover of my book, *American Sutra*, folded cranes out of it, and put the cranes on the fence line. After she told me that, I felt like I have to get involved.

So I got involved. Soon after, there was a proposal to move 1400 children to a place called Fort Sill in Oklahoma, which was actually a former Japanese American internment camp that I had studied for the book. When I went to Fort Sill, they asked me to do a Buddhist ceremony. I put out a call to the American Buddhist community for *tsuru*, and many

responded—Japanese American temples, but also Vietnamese American temples, people belonging to Thich Nhat Hanh’s lineage, people belonging to Tibetan lineages, people of all different backgrounds all folding cranes. And because many of them are not Japanese American, some of the cranes look a little bit like dinosaurs or other creatures. But, you know, the heart was there. So we took the cranes to Fort Sill, and we joined together with young Latinx DREAMers, young folks who are undocumented. And so we had a group of Buddhist leaders, mainly priests from Japanese American tradition but also from other lineages, taking these cranes and working together with Tsuru for Solidarity organizers and Latinx DREAMers all coming into a coalition of people expressing concern. Ever since then, I’ve been involved with this group.

In addition to these issues around family separation and immigration, we’ve also been focused on the issue of reparation. Japanese Americans have one of the only large-scale racial reparations success stories—their campaign resulted in the 1988 Civil Liberties Act signed by Ronald Reagan that acknowledged the racial injustice of the US Government in rounding up all these Japanese American people and offered a letter of apology and financial remuneration of \$20,000 per person.

Last year’s heightening of awareness about the structural aspects and legacies of racial discrimination has pointed to the need for reparations for Black Americans. Right now, I’ve been working on building a Buddhist campaign for reparations. I’ve been directing a series at my university called the Black + Japanese American Reparations Series. We’re putting activists from the Japanese American Redress and Reparations Campaign in conversation with those who are involved in the Black reparations campaign today to exchange strategy, notes, and whatnot, but also to look deeper at the concept of reparations.

The word reparation is a theological one, and often the demand for reparations frames slavery as America's original sin, placing it in a Christian framework. As I talk about reparations with Buddhist friends, I'm trying to find a different way to think about it. And that's when I think of somebody like Reverend Tokunaga, a priest who served the San Jose Buddhist Temple right after the war. When the Japanese American Redress campaign was going on, he was the only immigrant, or issei, to get involved. A lot of issei insisted it was best not to talk about what had happened or bother the government, but he firmly believed in the need for reckoning. And so he was the only issei person to be on the lawsuit filed for redress and reparation.

At that time, he wrote an essay called "The Karma of a Nation." His idea was that karma is not just individual—it can be collective. And it's not just in one moment, but it can be, in fact, intergenerational, and when you don't deal with the negative karma of one moment, it seeds the next moment. This is how, over time, over generations, things that are undealt with can have imprints in later times. And so I've been trying to think about America's racial karma in that sense. How do we, as Buddhists today, attend to this karma in a wise way, in a compassionate way? And how do we form alliances with people who may come at it from a different theological or political point of view? To me, wrestling with these questions is an act of repair or reparation as well, whether or not one piece of legislation passes or not. Ta-Nehisi Coates once said, "Reparations shouldn't just be thought about as financial recompense for past injustices, but rather as a national reckoning that would lead to a spiritual renewal." That's how I've been trying to frame reparations as well.

**SF:** That focus on the language and framing of reparations is so fascinating too—it's almost an act of translation. What

kinds of imagery do you find yourself turning to in developing a uniquely Buddhist model of reparations?

**DRW:** Right now, I'm building a monument with all of the names of people of Japanese ancestry who experienced incarceration back in World War II. There are about 125,000 people. Nobody has actually ever made a complete, full, accurate, comprehensive list before, so I've been trying to do that for some time. And I had this idea of light-projecting all of the names to circulate in some kind of monument. The monument I had in mind is called *gorintō*, or five-tiered stupa, which is a kind of stupa classically used for commemoration, remembrance, and memorial. I'm thinking of making some of the tiers out of ceramic and pre-breaking the ceramic structure. We have a tradition in Japanese ways called *kintsugi*. *Kin* means gold, and *tsugi* comes from the verb which means to join, or to repair. When you break a teacup, you don't throw it away—you use a lacquer resin to join the pieces and then adorn it with gold dust or paint. In other words, instead of throwing the teacup away, you repair it; instead of hiding the break, you adorn it with dust to commemorate the history of that teacup. And so I'm thinking of building this monument where we have all the names of Japanese Americans and then finding a way for people to come to visit the monument and, through a ritual act, add one small dot of gold. If 125,000 people came and added dots of gold, the whole monument would, in a way, be healed. And then eventually, it wouldn't only be Japanese American names. I think of what Bryan Stevenson and the Equal Justice Initiative have done in Alabama with what is known colloquially as the Lynching Memorial, incorporating all the names of people who have experienced lynching around the world. I want to find ways to project names of members of different communities who've similarly experienced exclusion or racialized violence—to find ways to acknowledge these various pasts and develop communal rituals to begin to heal.

**SF:** And that picks up so well on the framework of racial karma: unlike a debt that can be definitively repaid, this karma has to be continually worked through collectively, one small dot of gold at a time. The act of repair is not only mending the cracks but making them more beautiful through communal ritual—through a constructive process of making do with what’s available.

**DRW:** Yes, making do with what’s available. That’s very powerful, too, because that’s also one of the main lessons of the camps. In my tradition, the Zen master Dōgen wrote this text called *Instructions to the Cook*, or *Tenzo Kyōkun*. His main message is don’t waste anything, know what you have in your kitchen, and cook the best meal possible for the trainee monks. If you’re cooking in a monastic setting, Dōgen writes, it’s not just about the sustenance of the physical bodies of others, but it’s also a spiritual practice in itself. And then it’s a kind of metaphor too—the kitchen is your own internal being; you have to figure out what ingredients you have. It’s easy to cook a wonderful meal if you have great ingredients, but a good Zen Buddhist monastery cook should be able to take not-so-good ingredients, maybe even rotting ingredients, and still make a meal supportive to other people’s nutrition as well as their life and practice. The question is, how do you take what you have, even if it’s not perfect, and work with it to make a good meal? So that’s another major lesson from how people lived and practiced back then.

**SF:** Yes, sometimes all you have is a carrot, so you use it to carve the baby Buddha for Hanamatsuri. This seems like a really valuable lesson for us right now as well as we continue to adapt and to use whatever ingredients that 2021 will bring us. You write a lot about the skillful adaptations that Japanese American Buddhist communities employed in response to the (often rotting) ingredients thrown their way during the war—

how do you see echoes of these adaptations in the landscape of American Buddhism today?

**DRW:** I think one of the most important features of American Buddhism is the great diversity of lineages. And this began in camp: if you've got one building that the War Relocation Authority gives to you and you've got Shingon Buddhists, Nichiren Buddhists, Zen Buddhists, and Pure Land Buddhists, and they don't agree on theology or doctrine or ritual practice, how do you share space? How do you work together while still respecting the distinctive natures of different lineages? Before the World War II camps, different Buddhist lineages in America could operate in their own kind of world. In the camps they were forced to rub up against each other. I live in Los Angeles, and I still see these different lineages rubbing up against each other. There's nowhere else where Cambodian Buddhists, Vietnamese Buddhists, Insight Meditation practitioners, and so many different groups of Tibetan Buddhists live and practice in such close proximity—it's like no other time in Buddhist history, and no other place. There's nowhere else where all these lineages are all at once there rubbing up against each other. And that's the wonder and beauty of American Buddhism.

There's a famous story of one Japanese Buddhist priest who was explaining what a sangha is. And he said that a sangha is like when you are at the monastery kitchen, and you have to create a meal for everybody. Let's say you have some potatoes. And, you know, potatoes have little things coming out of them, so you have to clean the potatoes. He says, you could clean each one by one, or you could put the potatoes in a bucket and start to just rub them up against each other. Yes, your hands will get a little cold, but the potatoes come out clean pretty quickly. They just have to rub up against each other. To me, that's American Buddhism—we have to rub up against each other. That's what creates the sangha. And that's

what creates our encounters with each other. You know, Buddhism is actually a very vast tradition—we have different rituals, different ways of practicing, different color robes, you know, different everything. But there are some things that we can agree on around alleviating suffering, around wisdom and compassion. So there are certain things we can agree on, but then we have to rub up against each other. And that is a beautiful process of creation and coming together. And so that, to me, is what the camps teach us about adaptation and encounter and working in a pluralistic world of different lineages, different ways of thinking, different ways of practicing, different ways of being.

**SF:** Right, they show us how we can rub up against one another—how we can learn to be together across difference. Learning from this model of community, what gives you hope for the future of American Buddhism and the future of America?

**DRW:** What brings me hope is that many different Buddhist people, many different people of other faith traditions and maybe of no faith tradition have been really coming together. It's the combinations of who people are and how they're living together. As someone who is half British and half Japanese, I always find hope in the families that are of multiple ethnic backgrounds, multiple religious backgrounds. I have students who are part Japanese American, part Pakistani; part Buddhist, part Muslim. That's where I think a lot of the hope and change is happening. It's often underneath the level of politics that people are getting together and learning to be together in ways that I find hopeful for the future of racial justice and the future of this country.

In Mahāyāna traditions, we have the Four Shigu Seigan, or the Four Bodhisattva Vows. The first one is “Sentient beings are innumerable, and yet I vow to liberate all.” It's a kind of daunting, impossible task, but the flip side of this

impossibility is that we can only liberate together. All of us—all sentient beings—we're all just in different forms of hurt and suffering. To me, the most important key of Buddhism is that we are not alone, that we are interconnected and interlinked. And once we feel that we are interconnected—not just think about it, but feel it—then it's a big relief.

I see so many hopeful signs of people noticing this interlinkedness. I feel like in these pandemic times, we've been forced to realize how interlinked we are. When we had been living too much in the hyperrealities of things, we kind of lost that. But now, if there's any silver lining of the pandemic, it's that we're coming to recognize our interlinkedness in deep and profound ways. We've had to confront death, we've had to confront our friends, family members passing away. We've had to confront each of the four constraints all around us. But somehow I feel like through all of this, we've felt something a little bit better than before. This is such a vague answer, I know, but it's just a feeling I have that we're coming through this together, we're rubbing up against each other, and we're recognizing how our liberation is interlinked.