

THE REFORMATION OF THE SHIN BUDDHIST SANGHA

By Kenko Futaba

Man's Personal Problem

The most urgent problem of the Shin Buddhist Sangha (Kyodan) lies in the two questions: What meaning does religion have for man? What significance does the Sangha have for society? There is a tendency, however, to conceive of the Sangha in generalities and ask only theoretical questions such as: What is the Sangha? What must the Sangha do in the future?

Everywhere we hear people advocating the "reformation of the Sangha." It seems to me, however, that the substance of their discussion revolves around such questions as the feudalistic structure of the Sangha, funerals as its main activity, the difference in consciousness between the laity and the priests. Moreover, demonstration of the Sangha or giving people greater freedom of expression is a matter of social dimension and no different from any social issue.

For us the problem is not what to do with Sangha. The solution must start with the reconsideration of the fundamental standpoint of Buddhism, that is, how to develop meaningful human relationship in its proper historical perspective. Only then will the Sangha be meaningful to man. Thus the primary question is what to do with man himself—that is, what to do with me. Then we may proceed to examine the next question: How are we going to change society according to the teaching of Jodo Shinshu? Only when we can answer this question with clarity will we be able to reform the Sangha. When the Sangha is divorced from its historic perspective, we notice only the superficial problems and we do not deal with them in depth but merely find an easy way out by concerning ourselves with such problems as how to maintain the Sangha.

We must remember that the basic teaching of Buddhism is to actualize the universal essence of man, wherein all men are identified in a spirit of Oneness. When this actualization takes place man discovers a new direction in life and a society founded upon religious principles is born anew. Thus the Sangha emerges from its obsolete shell and adopts a fresh meaning for its existence.

The Loss of the Historic Meaning of Jodo Shinshu

The original teaching of Buddhism is to negate our ego-centricity and practice the truth of egolessness and

Translator's Note:

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I am pleased to send you my humble translation. I have tried to follow the text faithfully but if I have misrepresented the writer's opinion in any way, it is wholly unintentional and I express my sincere apologies.—Kenryu T. Tsuji

Jodo Shinshu, in particular, teaches us to overturn the self-contriving in us and commit our whole being to the universal guiding power to Amida Buddha. Thus a society of human beings, interrelated spiritually to each other in the teaching of Jodo Shinshu, is created and for the first time the Shin Buddhist Sangha takes on a historic significance by exerting its efforts towards the actualization of the universal essence of man and the formation of a true religious organization. Unless we are fully aware of this fact no matter how much we try to reform the Sangha, it will only be an "ego trip" for Sangha. At least, insofar as the present trend of the Shin Buddhist Sangha is concerned, it seems to be involved only in the maintenance of the temples and the retention of the membership. Such conditions inspire neither the deep urge on the part of the membership to commit themselves wholly to the Teaching nor the compelling drive to make Jodo Shinshu a viable social force. About a hundred years ago the government advocated the "abolishment of the Buddha" and instituted Shinto as the national religion.

Along with the abolishment of Buddhism, the Japanese government took the stand that the Shinto religion alone was sufficient for Japan and completely ignored the Buddhist Sangha. Naturally, the Buddhists strongly opposed the government on the grounds that religious freedom was abrogated. However, the main thrust of the opposition by both the priests and the temple was directed primarily towards the freedom to preach and spread the Dharma. The opposition should have stressed the most basic issue, that of the freedom of worship which was an inalienable right of man and the pillar for the other freedoms. The universal nature of this issue was completely ignored. The main interest of the Sangha was merely to fight for the freedom to preach within the framework of the Japanese society.

Under these circumstances, the Shin Buddhists could not muster the inner energy to build a society founded on a respect for the religious freedom of the human spirit. Worse still, they became subservient to the law of the land and unquestioningly accepted the social mores of their time. We must note here, too, that the Shin Buddhist faith itself was estranged from the problems of everyday existence and embraced by the populace solely as a faith in the after-life. In other words it lacked the historic purpose—to establish the unique dignity of the human person. As a result the Sangha was quite satisfied to operate within the circle of political control. Thus, as the Japanese society became more materialistic and power hungry and more unaware of religious values, the Shin Buddhist Sangha also conformed to this social pattern and blindly aligned itself with the system, thereby losing its touch with reality. This action was tantamount to suicide.

Servility to Politics—the Loss of the Spirit of Shin Buddhism

Nations are moved by self-interest and a struggle for power. So long as the Shin Buddhist Sangha accepts the prevailing national system without question, the unique nature of Jodo Shinshu—its universal spirit and the sense of a world mission—is absolutely dead.

In 1875 the Japanese government proclaimed the freedom of worship which guaranteed the priests the right to preach. Almost out of gratitude they wholly supported the government policy and went so far as to cooperate with the political system. Moreover, they urged the people to obey the government out of a sense of duty.

For the government this collaboration was indeed freedom of worship and, as a matter of fact, this concept was wholly supported by the priesthood. Thus the government was able to enforce its own brand of freedom of worship thanks to the subservience of the Shin Buddhist Sangha.

During this period a politician named Tomomi Iwakura observed the sterling character of the Christian missionaries—their diligence, selflessness, mission of mercy, social concern—and sent a letter to the Hongwanji. It said that in spite of the great potential of the Shin Buddhist Sangha, it was actually corrupt in comparison with the irreproachable conduct of the Christians.

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The Hongwanji immediately acted in response to this letter and sent out a general decree entitled "Regulations Concerning Priestly Department." In order to raise the image of the priests it prohibited them from growing their hair long and wearing ordinary street clothes.

Through such superficial action the Hongwanji tried to prove that the priests were "loyal citizens" who were willing to uphold the social mores. It did not clarify the more basic issue—what is Jodo Shinshu; what is the significance of the Shin Buddhist Sangha?

Against this historic background any action today to reform the Sangha will end up only in juggling the organizational set up. To date we have followed this historic pattern and have chiefly concerned ourselves with the financial maintenance of the Sangha and finding security for our livelihood.

We are now at a critical period in history when we must thoroughly understand the above situation. We must honestly grapple with the questions—what does it mean to have faith in Amida Buddha; how does it affect us as human beings; what bearing will our faith have on society? These are the relevant questions we must ponder.

The Sangha Safeguards the Dignity of Man

We must now carefully examine the following question. What is the difference between the traditional Japanese society and the society that is to be created by Buddhism? First of all, we must understand that the

folk religion forms the basis of the Japanese society and the political force that governs the society is married to this ethnic religion.

The chief characteristic of this social system is the sanctification of political power; the rulers are divine and the subjects are profane. This has been the traditional social structure of Japan. Thus, from ancient times all men were never considered equal—there was a basic differentiation between the ruler and the ruled.

Buddhism, on the other hand, from its very beginning maintained the separation of church and state, and proclaimed the dignity, freedom and equality of all men. Throughout history it has inspired men to strive for the realization of these goals.

The great question that looms before us now is whether the present Shin Buddhist Sangha is consistent with these noble ideals. As a world religion Buddhism possesses the universal nature to create a new world.

The Downfall of Shinshu—Its Historic Background

When we review the above historic process, we can clearly understand the transition of the Shin Buddhist Sangha. It is most apparent that there exists a gap between the teaching and the community of followers during the time of Shinran Shonin and today's teaching and Sangha. In the early days of Shinshu the Sangha was organized around the person of Shinran Shonin and the followers, who were transformed by the Nembutsu faith, experienced a new life and all the followers were dedicated

to the spread of the teaching.

However, as the Sangha became more systematized with the passage of time, a clear demarcation appeared, separating the priests and the followers. Whereas the early Sangha was joined together by the common act of faith in the Nembutsu, the later institution was bound together by a system and soon became degenerate by identifying itself with the folk religion. Finally the Sangha lost even the last vestige of religious meaning and came to survive only on its past tradition. This in brief is the historic course we have taken. Fundamentally, it was the loss of faith and interpersonal relationship in the Sangha.

Once again we must review the Buddhist Sangha established by Shinran Shonin. We must not forget that it was a new Sangha in which people were bound together by the act of faith in a universal religion in spite of the fact that they lived amidst the historic tradition of folk religion and the impersonal nature of Japanese society.

The prime task before us now is to build a society founded on a religion that has real meaning for man—for me.

What is deeply desired is not the maintenance of the Sangha just for the sake of maintenance, but a Shin Buddhist Sangha that will become the cornerstone of a society that will truly benefit all men.

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