

Issues in Propagation of Shin Buddhism in the West

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The issue of propagation has become a major concern among Shin Buddhist people, because there has been considerable attrition and loss of membership in recent years. The membership stands at about 17,000 presently in Buddhist Churches of America and is down from about 22,000 or more when I first encountered it in 1986. In its heyday before the war, there were something like 100,000 members. Many of those members have passed away and represent the normal attrition of an aging group. However, the deceased members have not been replaced by new members to show growth of the teaching.

On the other hand, Buddhist movements introduced by itinerant teachers, such as the Tibetan, Zen, and Theravada teachers, show striking growth in Western societies. These teachers not only stress Buddhist practice -- mainly forms of meditation -- but they also advocate peace, environmental awareness, and stress human relations. They speak to issues that are of great interest to modern people.

The Dalai Lama is particularly famous as an advocate of peace. He has an attractive personality that presents simultaneously as warm, engaging, and practical. In our hurried society where business, commerce, and technology demand center stage, people may be drawn to compassionate and relatively non-doctrinal practices.

Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese activist monk, is not as well known but strongly advocates peace and a spiritual process called "Mindfulness," which is a style of meditation. Theravada meditation, a calming style of meditation called "Vipassana," has also become popular. It is known for its ability to calm the mind and reduce stress.

It should be noted that itinerant teachers are more independent. There is no central organization whose policies they must follow. Those whom they attract are willing to follow the teacher and do what he or she says. They find ways to appeal to the general society, inspiring followers with their own interest and enthusiasm.

Branches of Japanese traditional religion from the homeland are more obligated to maintain the policies of the central organization. In the case of Shin Buddhism, ordination can only take place in Japan, while other groups can ordain in the new country. Though there is said to be independence of the various jurisdictions, there are many ties that strengthen filial bonds rather than encourage fraternal relations. Among these are the dependence on clergy from Japan and monetary support for important projects such as the Center for World Jodo Shinshu Buddhism and the Pacific Buddhist Academy.

Many forms of Buddhism have taken root in the West: South Asian, Theravada, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and East Asian. They all appeal to Western people promising peace of mind or benefits of various kinds. According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, Buddhism has affected a very substantial number of people throughout American society. An article in the Buddhist magazine *Tricycle* summarizes his findings:

"... Even for the specialist in the field of American Buddhism, the numbers Wuthnow and Cadge came up with will prove surprising. Based on their survey conducted in 2002-2003, they found that one out of every seven Americans has had at least a fair level of contact with Buddhism, and that one out of eight Americans reported that Buddhism had influenced their religious life. Those are staggeringly high numbers. To put it in perspective, there are about four million Americans who actively identify as Buddhists. But if we ask how many Americans include Buddhist elements -- a little or a lot -- in their personal spiritual lives, the number appears to be about 12.5% of the

population: that's 26,125,000 adults. The number who say the Buddhist influence has been significant is almost the same: at 12%, that's 25,080,000. **Clearly Buddhism is exerting an influence far beyond the relatively small number of people who claim Buddhism as their primary religious identity.**" – Tricycle Blog, *Tricycle, The Buddhist Review*, Friday, September 24, 2004, "Measuring Buddhist Influence in America."

Consequently, in view of this extensive impact of Buddhism on contemporary society, we must examine the reasons for the decline of interest that the Japan-based sects have experienced. Originally, they accompanied the contract laborers who came to Hawaii, the US mainland and Canada in the 19th century. Why are they not benefiting from the current rise in Buddhist popularity?

I would initially like to point out that when Buddhism spread from India to China, it was first "Buddhism in China" but after some time, it became "Chinese Buddhism." That is, it adapted to the native life of the host country and became a Chinese religion. When Buddhism was introduced to Korea and then Japan and also to Tibet, it followed the same process, becoming a religion of the native people.

However, when Buddhism came to America, it came to the Japanese community already here. It was a religion for the Japanese people in America and it has essentially remained that way with limited effort to transform to a native religion for American people. It adapted for the sake of the succeeding generations who only spoke English and lacked a Japanese education. The Japanese second and third generations lost touch with Japanese language and culture and they desired something more Western, to fit their lives. Adaptations were made in having pews, pulpits, hymn books, English services on Sundays, Dharma schools, like Sunday schools, etc.

As the focus was within the Japanese community, there was no concerted effort to adapt Buddhism, i.e., Shin Buddhism, to the needs of the American people as a whole.

Consequently, Shin Buddhism has lost a century when it could have integrated itself into the host society, despite the discrimination and other problems of the community. Today, the gap is even more obvious as newer, more active groups show the way to integration of Buddhism in American life. Though Shin Buddhism has been in the West for a century, until recently it has been barely known in the general society or the academic realm. Even in those states where Shin Buddhists are more numerous, the religion is neither well known, nor, except for a few temples, being effectively shared with spiritual seekers.

Japan-based Buddhism must transform from a Japanese religion to an American religion. This process is beginning to some extent in the Buddhist Churches of America with the Lay Assistant Program, which will eventually supply native ministers and replace dependence on Japanese ministers from Japan to fill the continuing shortage of accredited ministers. Among 60 some ministers, there has been an increase of Japanese-American ministers, now reaching about 21, while Euro-American ministers have increased to about seven.

The increase in American-born ministers has been slow. Recently, the first Euro-American president of the national organization, Buddhist Churches of America, was elected and installed. The new Bishop Koshin Ogui is forward looking and creative. The establishment of the Center for World Jodo Shinshu should show some fruit as time goes on. The Institute of Buddhist Studies is associated with a Christian theological complex and is involved with Buddhist-Christian dialogue activity.

In Hawaii, we have begun the Pacific Buddhist Academy which will integrate Buddhism into education. The Buddhist Study Center on the University of Hawaii campus assists students

in learning about Buddhism and the Buddhist Study Center Press has published numerous books in English to assist understanding Shin Buddhism. The American Buddhist Study Center at the New York Buddhist Temple generates programs to offer Buddhism in that cosmopolitan community. There are more temples offering study classes and some urban temples have reached out more significantly to the larger community. Buddhist ministers are more likely than in previous years to be engaged in community efforts for peace and justice.

While there are scattered efforts to integrate Shin Buddhism into Western culture, we need an overall strategy for reaching into all areas of Western society. I am just one observer, but I have several suggestions that may be worthy of consideration and implementation.

First of all, we need a minister of propagation. We have a minister of Buddhist education, but that is a major task in itself. A minister of propagation with a background in the teaching and in sociology can develop a philosophy of propagation and pinpoint areas where new Shin communities can be initiated. The minister could work with a group of advisors to develop strategies and programs for sharing Shin Buddhism.

We might first begin with university communities which are generally more open and where students are seeking alternative spiritual teachings to guide and enhance their lives. Academic programs may provide opportunities to reach students as Shin ministers or Buddhist teachers generally are invited on campus to lecture and discuss Buddhism.

Second, efforts for propagation should not be located in traditional temples. Temples have been very important as the mainstay of the teaching and they have nurtured various generations. However, the membership of the temple forms its own community and is not yet equally welcoming of new members. The leaders do not easily share power in deciding temple activities. Some temples are not very interested in having members from outside the Japanese-American community. This situation can -- and most likely will -- change with time, generations and general circumstances. This potential paradigm shift can have a dramatic and positive effect on teaching and outreach, as well as on the general membership of the Shin Buddhist community on a global scale.

Efforts in propagation should not appear as simply attempts to increase a temple's membership. Rather, the new community forms its fellowship as new members share their experiences in becoming Buddhist.

We should go into new areas where no temples are present and, beginning from a house base or local school, develop a fresh program.

Third, there must be greater use of lay members to share the teaching with other lay people. A minister cannot reach a wide number of people by himself or herself. Lay people can be sensitive to the needs of friends and people in their community whom they can refer to the minister for counseling or explaining the teaching. Also, lay people are less suspicious of the motives of other lay people who approach them than they frequently are of ministers. Many religious groups train lay people to share their teachings and give effective witness to the meaning of the teaching for themselves.

Fourth, the many forms of media should be used to present the teachings to the wider community. Fundamentalist preachers who are anti-modern in many ways nevertheless employ all forms of media to propagate their views. One fundamentalist Christian teacher was quoted in a recent newspaper article as saying, "Truthfully, I am always looking for new ways to use media and technology to further God' s kingdom..." It is interesting that the more liberal and traditional groups shy away from the use of technology in sharing their teaching. I have seen this in America since my childhood when my mother listened to

Christian Gospel radio programs, then TV. At the present time, most of the TV preachers are the most conservative type and there seems to be no liberal representative in the media.

Fifth, there is power in the pen. Writing and distributing materials is a basic function. We should be producing more books and small tracts, which can be given away. Gradually, the teaching can permeate the society through free literature. We must encourage our people to write their experiences. We must produce more easily understood works in English, including scholarly works. Local bookstores have, at the most, one or two books on Shin, while there are many many titles of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism.

People must have access to the "Good News" of Amida's Saving Vows. They must, in some form 'hear,' in order to intone: *NamuAmidaButsu*. As we all know, *shinjin* arises from 'deep hearing' of The Sacred Name.

Sixth, we should open the doors to people with religious aspiration and understanding of Buddhism to facilitate the path to ministry and the effort of propagation. Ordination can be done in this country to promote a positive integration of Shin Buddhism into society. We must ask the question, why does a prospective minister have to go to a foreign country to be ordained in order to work in one's own country? In recent experience, the Soto sect ordained a woman trained in Hawaii in her home temple of which she is now the resident minister. The Jodo-shu has permitted the ordination of a minister in Hawaii who is now studying to become more capable in Jodo-shu tradition. To put it simply, we must make it easier for people who feel 'called' to serve.

Seventh, we do not promote sectarianism in our teaching. However, it is necessary to indicate why Shin is a meaningful alternative for one's spiritual life. This calls for clear exposition of the teaching and relating the teaching to current concerns of the people -- peace, justice, suffering, meaning for living, environmental issues, etc. The traditional terms must be translated, not merely linguistically, but philosophically into understandable and relevant religious concepts and principles for the Western mind.

Eighth, we must develop broad Shin scholarship in the Western context. There are very few committed Shin Buddhist scholars in the West. The Center for World Shin Buddhism is a beginning in the BCA which will benefit all areas of this nation and the West. IBS as the seminary has a great responsibility to nurture scholars and ministers. The Pacific Buddhist Academy in Hawaii is a step in the right direction.

I mentioned that we are not sectarian in our teaching. To propagate a faith requires firm conviction of the truth of that teaching for one's own life. Firm faith is needed. Yet, we should not view ourselves in competition with other faiths. Western religious freedom means that all kinds of teachings are available just as we say there are 84,000 teachings in Buddhism. This idea extends also to the many religions practiced by humanity.

Rather, propagation takes the viewpoint that we "share" the teaching and that we offer an honest appreciation and assessment of other spiritual paths. We can highlight the particular perspective of Shin Buddhism on religion and faith as well, without maligning other traditions or using them as straw men. If we present Shin Buddhism adequately, people will understand its alternative and decide for themselves to explore it.

Shin Buddhism is not a religion that threatens people with eternal damnation or *batchi*. Rather, it stresses the compassion of the Buddha and the fellowship of *dobo-dogyo*, truly equal associates that make up its community. It offers the basis of a society of mutual fellowship and sharing. It can be a vibrant community of peace and justice as well as a model for society.

I believe that a focused, well-planned program of sharing the teaching with the wider community will be a significant step in the integration of Shin Buddhism in American and Western society.

I would like to take up some points of emphasis in Shin teaching, which I believe could adapt it to Western religious character without weakening the insights of Shin teaching.

One concerns the human condition. In Shin it is recognized that everyone is a passion-ridden and spiritually deluded foolish being. We must make this meaningful in Western culture. It is not simply that some people are evil and some are good. Rather, it is the commonly accepted perspective on life that Shin critiques. In the United States, particularly, competition is highly valued. As a cultural focus, competition is a delusory perspective and gives rise to the quest for superiority, aggression on others, the belief that some people are winners and other losers. It gives rise to the delusion that I am a self-made person. Our individualism is unrestrained.

In contrast, the perspective of the Primal Vow that Amida is not enlightened unless all others are enlightened expresses the principle of interdependence and mutuality; the recognition that we depend on others to achieve what we do and they depend on us.

Against the background of the racial discrimination and bigotry of our society, the idea that all beings possess Buddha nature is very important to highlight the oneness of all beings. This oneness also extends to environmental issues because the Buddhist perspective includes all living beings and the realm of nature. Despite the unique abilities of human beings and their progress, they have no right to dominate and destroy the life of other beings, on which they also depend for their own life and well-being.

The bodhisattva principle and particularly the concept of the bodhisattva's return to this world is a very useful idea when we see it as the basis for the meaning of life. When we have attained *shinjin*, we recognize our obligations to humanity as a bodhisattva returned to this world to work for the salvation and benefit of all beings. We do not ask, "what is the meaning of my life?" Rather, we ask how we can be meaningful to others. As *shinjin* is rooted in the true mind of Amida Buddha and his aspiration to save and embrace all beings, so that mind works in us to give us a universal, non-discriminating view of life.

Shinran's teaching of *shinjin* is especially important. *Shinjin* is not simply a matter of belief in a number of ideas and doctrines intellectually. It is rather a discovery, deep within our hearts and minds, that we have encountered an essential truth for living. When the teaching is proclaimed in its depth, it awakens spiritual aspiration and hope within. I have encountered many people on the Internet whose discovery of Shin Buddhism and its acceptance as we are, to be a transforming and enlivening teaching. The realism of Shin Buddhism offers a powerful and relevant understanding of human nature and is very meaningful and attractive to contemporary people when they hear it.

Further, *shinjin* is a process. It is a means of spiritual growth and development. As Shinran passed through the three Vows in his process, so each person encountering the teaching and learning of the Vows undergoes his or her own process of growth. It is an educational process of deepening understanding of the teaching. It is the formation of strong conviction and commitment, so that, like Shinran, we can accept ridicule and rejection. Diamond-like faith is formed from the coal of common delusion.

Some teachers characterize *shinjin* in a way to distinguish it completely from Western views of faith. However, I believe it is impractical for communication and propagation to differentiate *shinjin* which we may translate as "true entrusting" or "endowed trust" so

totally from what is an essential human capacity. In speaking with foreign people we must find some degree of commonality in order to progress in communication.

Our problem is to discover connections between our universal human experience, which arise in varying spiritual contexts, and to build bridges, even though we must be mindful that there are distinctive and important differences signified by the concept of *shinjin* in Shin Buddhism. If we make the gap too wide between our Shin understanding of trust and universal human experience and understanding, how will we guide people from the universal experience of trust to the specific understanding in Shin Buddhism in interpreting their experience?

Shin Buddhism is an individual, personal matter; not a matter of family, tradition or community. All of Shinran's followers **chose** to follow him. This is important in the West where the individual is valued. No one will say they are religious because they follow their parents. It is personal responsibility for one's own destiny. The individual who will become mindful of his or her own debt to Amida's Vow is not the competitive, aggressive person who is found seeking self-power in this world of constant and bewildering change.

Another feature of Shin that needs to be shared and made clear is the idea of *genso* or the return of the bodhisattva to this world to work for the salvation of all beings. This is quite distinctive from Western views where the believer who passes on goes to heaven and has eternal joy without concern for those left behind. Unbelievers are consigned to eternal damnation in many groups, though more liberal groups would be closer to the Buddhist view that ultimately all will be saved. Whatever the mythology of hell in the Buddhist tradition, it is the result of karmic action, and is never eternal.

Shinran's teaching also critiques religion itself. There is no virtue in being religious in order to be just a good citizen. Being religious for Shinran is a "poisoned good." It leads to external display, moralistic self-righteousness, and formalism.

Shinran obviously was interested in social justice. He criticized the government for Honen's unjust persecution and exile together with his disciples, including Shinran. He quoted Shotoku Taishi who said when the rich go to court it is like throwing a stone into water, but when the poor go to court it is like throwing water into a stone. Shinran identified with the lowest levels of society to bring them the highest truth of Amida's compassion.

In this essay, my focus has largely been primarily on conditions and opportunities for propagation of the faith in the West. The situation in Japan will be quite different, yet the modern meaning and potential impact of Shin Buddhism is also applicable there, as well. I would hope that some points made here might also be useful in Japan.

The spirit and ideal of Shin Buddhism offers a world of equality, a life of meaning and a goal of peace. When its spirit is released into the world, the Vow will become a force to advance the life of all people. This is our mission; this is the meaning of propagation. Thank you!
NamuAmidaButsu.