

Shin Buddhism: The Contemporary Situation

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November 1997

We are living in a very competitive religious environment, confronted by a variety of forms of spirituality that appeal to the young and old in our society. There is a great deal of searching going on. We must also recognize that the term Honpa Hongwanji Mission did not mean mission as it has been used in western religion. Rather than bringing the teaching to a new people, its main purpose was to assist Japanese immigrants who brought Shin Buddhism as their traditional faith or those Japanese who, having no clear affiliation, joined the temple for sociality and support in their hard life on the plantations and towns of Hawaii. As long as there has been a strong, coherent Japanese community, the temples have been secure in their role. There was no need to reach out to a larger community, though there were some efforts at that by Bishop Yemyo Imamura.

Further, there was no necessity to reconsider the role of the temples in the broader social context. The war, however, disrupted the life of the temples with the removal of ministers and closure of temples and on the mainland the total incarceration of Japanese-Americans. After the war temple life had to be reestablished. It is now some 50 years since that time and the situation of Japanese-Americans and Buddhism has significantly changed in the society. It is a time for reflection and a search for new and creative approaches to meet the many issues and concerns, not simply of our members, but of our whole community.

There is the well-known slogan: Think globally; act locally. That is a good statement of the way we need to deal with our problems. Shin Buddhism is a universal faith, but in America, for historical and social reasons, it has been obstructed by an ethnic character and emphasis that defeats Buddhism. While the ethnic connection was important in the past, the mobility and integration of Japanese-Americans in American society has reduced the significance of this ethnic background. Those Japanese-Americans who have become successful in American society have for the most part not used their skills and understanding of society for the benefit of the temple. The temples function largely today as they have 50 or 100 years ago. Recently, Mrs. Kimi Yonemura Hisatsune, a leading lay woman and writer, has written: "Yet, our temples operate as if Jodo Shinshu is basically a Japanese religion, and some followers of Shinran Shonin even believe that it is vitally important or necessary to maintain or transmit the Japanese character of the Shin tradition" (*Hisatsune*, 1993, 20/2 p. 4).

Using the best talents of lay people and ministers, we must recapture the universal vision and perspective of Shin Buddhism and apply it to our reflections on future plans and policies. There are no easy answers to our problems. I have no pat solutions. However, I hope I can raise some issues that will encourage our efforts to discover new possibilities and enable the teaching to progress in this society. As I outline the problems which I see, I hope that I will not appear simply to be critical either of the institution, the ministers or the members. It is in the spirit of dobo dogyo that I want to make this presentation.

Our situation is one of good news, bad news. The bad news is that despite appearances, Shin Buddhism is in a crisis whether in Hawaii or on the mainland in BCA. The good news is that a crisis is a wake up call. Things can and are changing. While conditions in Hawaii are better than in BCA, we cannot be complacent.

What is the Crisis?

At the outset, let me state that there is a spiritual crisis in America itself. Traditional churches no longer fulfill the spiritual aspirations of many of their members. Churches of

various denominations face problems similar to those we encounter in Shin Buddhism with declining membership, reduced finances and fewer ministers.

The churches which are growing are generally of the more conservative or fundamentalist variety. They emphasize literal interpretation of the Bible, simple theology, hellfire and brimstone, as well as exalting nationalism and capitalism. They have a cultural advantage since Christianity has been the main religion of the culture and the Bible is very widely disseminated and influential in literature and thought. Consequently, these conservative movements have linked themselves with the political forces seeking control of the country, claiming to be representative of the culture as traditional values.

There is a crisis for religious freedom and ultimately democracy represented in the vehemence of the anti-abortion movement (though one may not accept abortion), efforts to enforce prayer in schools, to secure school vouchers and to teach creationism, as well as opposition to the many facets of gender identification. Book censorship in school libraries often has a religious background. Fundamentalism which is authoritarian in character in many forms is a worldwide problem.

Despite the fact that other religious communities may have difficulties similar to ours, they are more significant for us because we are a small group within the larger mass. Any loss or limitation affects us more quickly and severely reduces our potentiality for growth and development. Our crisis is both institutional and ideological or doctrinal. The institutional crisis is evident in the attrition of members but more so in the lack of growth in strongly committed members. There is also the increase in temples unable to support a full time minister, requiring consolidation. Some temples cannot pay their dues with resulting decrease in the funding necessary for new projects such as the position of Assistant Director for the Buddhist Study Center. There have been difficulties in attracting young people to become ministers. While Hawaii has been more successful than BCA, the shrinking number of self-supporting temples becomes a vicious circle. Without fresh input from better education and energies, the sangha cannot grow or develop new approaches to problems.

If we look over the development of ethnic religious bodies, it is clear that after a century of presence, a tradition, which continues to rely on foreign clergy and to send new ministers abroad to study, has not fully adapted to the host culture. This is a source of many of our problems, because valuable time is lost in the process of acculturating foreign clergy, many of whom may only be temporary. Indigenization is essential for every aspect of a movement. This should be understood as a cultural process and not a criticism of the quality of the clergy. Charles Prebish in his volume "American Buddhism," dealing with BCA, notes the ambivalence of members in opening up to the wider community. He comments: "As the issei (first generation) members of the congregation die, Buddhist Churches of America cannot seem to decide whether to follow the general wishes of the nisei members (second generation) and Americanize more fully, or honor the wishes of the clergy (and many young members) and reassert their Japanese heritage" (Prebish 1979, p. 67). He also asserts: "Consequently, the national organization finds itself in the curious predicament of having been present on American soil longer than any other Buddhist group and having acculturated the least" (Prebish 1979, p. 68).

Hawaii is not altogether different in this issue. In this regard a distinction made by Prof. Kakue Miyaji is helpful. He differentiates between *monto* and *shinja*. *Monto* refers to those members who for ethnic, family or cultural reasons affiliate with the temple, while *shinja* are those with committed, personal faith in Shin Buddhism, the *anjin-ketsuj*" which Rennyo constantly exhorts in his followers. While we cannot and should not judge fellow members, it is important to recognize the complexity of motivations that bring people to the temple in our formation of policies and strategies.

An aspect of the decline in members is the loss of young people. I remember some years ago a study was made by Rev. Yoshiaki Fujitani on participation in the Dharma schools. In

about the 1950s there were some 6,000 students. In the 1970s, perhaps 2,000. On the occasion of our centennial, I overheard a minister describing the situation to Japanese visitors. He noted that there were 800 students island-wide. The Japanese were impressed, but they did not know the context. We can point to bright spots, but the overall picture is not promising. Young people tend to leave church in teenage at the point when they become more independent of their parents whom they associate with the church. We may not see them in the temple again until middle age. They all don't come back.

We must consider strategies of temple growth and membership in the light of current religious conditions. Over ten years ago a creative, comprehensive and courageous sociological study of Honganji was made. Nothing was ever done to analyze and use those results for planning temple and sangha life. Without adequate understanding of the historical and social influences on our temples and being responsive to the interests and desires of the members, as well as their needs, we cannot grow. The doctrinal problem relates to the meaning and relevance of Shin Buddhism in modern society. Evidence for the doctrinal crisis can be found in the fact that Shin Buddhism is often interpreted from a Zen standpoint, clearly reflecting the influences of Dr. D.T. Suzuki who was very successful in promoting Zen. His interpretation of Shin accommodated it to Zen. Rather than focusing on Shinran, he emphasized the myokonin Saichi as representative of Shin piety.

Dr. Galen Amstutz characterizes Dr. Suzuki as an ethnic nationalist who attempted to stress the special uniqueness of the Japanese over against the west in line with the Nihonjinron perspective that emphasizes the essential uniqueness of the Japanese people. This tendency was strong in Japanese scholarship before the war and is still promoted in various ways. For Suzuki, Zen was the pre-eminent expression of this uniqueness, though it also appears in Shin Buddhism in the myokonin. Consequently, some Shin teachers combine Zen and Shin, using meditation as the point of attraction. Also there are those who employ psychotherapy or Jungian psychology to interpret Shin Buddhism to make it meaningful.

The tendency of these approaches is to render Shin a more emotional or sentimental expression of Buddhism focused only on our personal evils and limitations and the interior life. There is a bent toward blaming the victim. Further, considerable stress is placed on the experience of oneness with the Buddha through nembutsu, interpreted as equivalent to Zen satori. Shin experience is depicted as representative of the Japanese spirit in accord with the principle of non-dualism. Amstutz notes that: The myokonin -- its anti-intellectualism, simplification, romanticization of the rural, apoliticality, and assumption that what is really of interest in Shin is the essential Japaneseness of humble people -- was the rhetorical tack that Suzuki also took in his small book entitled "Shin Buddhism" (Amstutz, July 1997, p. 77).

Suzuki failed to show that Shin Buddhism was deeply involved with the modern changes in Japan from the Meiji period, politically, intellectually and spiritually, seeking to find its place in modernization. Given this background, we can understand why Shin Buddhism has been seen as a passive quietism, beyond political and social concerns. However, a basic principle of Shin Buddhism is the dobo-dogyo ideal of equality of all which has social and political implications.

We cannot escape Shinran's critical perspective on society and the religious institutions of his day, expressed in the "Shozomatsuwasan." He was not simply a pious, sentimental, religious teacher. His thought laid the basis for the later uprisings, "ikki ikki," in which traders, merchants, and farmers and others struggled for economic and political power. Presenting Shin without taking into account its historical and social implications does not give a full account of Shin spirituality.

I must mention here the anti-intellectual trend in Shin Buddhism which is reinforced by the anti-intellectual character of American society. Teachers of Shin often stress the subjective, personal appropriation of Shin. Shin faith (shinjin) and the practice of Nembutsu yield

happiness, peace of mind and gratefulness. The anti-intellectual trend results from the widespread notion that doctrine, ideas, reason play little part in religious life in comparison to intuition and feeling. Dr. Suzuki makes such a point from the standpoint of Zen. Taoism declared that the Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao.

While it is clear that words and doctrines are limited in expressing reality, they are all necessary to interpret our experiences. There is no experience that does not have an intellectual frame of reference. Whatever we experience must be brought into the context of our thought in order to be evaluated and critiqued. Otherwise there is only blind faith and subjection to the most impressive leader. If this anti-intellectualism and devaluation of ideas and doctrine are the proper understanding of Buddhism, why are there so many books written by Zen masters and the religious scholars of Japan through the centuries? Shinran and Rennyo did not write simply for the sake of writing.

They wanted to convey something through their writings for later generations. It is a rule of thumb from my own experience in both Christianity and Buddhism that efforts to disarm followers of their rational ability by devaluing the intellect is a sign of authoritarian religion. A follower is deprived of the ability to question. Consequently, because of such attitudes, a major problem in contemporary Shin Buddhism, particularly in the west, is the lack of a core of intellectual members whose study and questioning assist in upgrading the understanding of Shin Buddhism.

Shin Buddhism itself has a long scholarly tradition and a viable system of thought. Further, we have the highest level of educated and professional people, but very few if any are versed sufficiently in philosophy and Buddhism to engage in serious discussion of doctrinal issues. Everyone need not be a scholar, but the sangha must develop its intellectual resources in order to participate in the religious dialogue in society.

In addition to the intellectual problem, but related to it, is the otherworldly emphasis in Shin Buddhism which focuses on going to the Pure Land, resulting from Rennyo's experience and his doctrinal stress on *oso* or going to the Pure Land. While these aspects important for Shin Buddhism, they are not the whole story of the meaning of Shin in modern society. Shin orthodoxy has been strongly influenced by the principle of *shinzoku-nitai*, or double truth theory. The concept roots in Nagarjuna's thought, but has been given a social application in separating religious and secular concerns. It corresponds to the Christian idea of rendering unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and unto God what belongs to God. There is a dualism of human concerns. As a result of this understanding Shin Buddhism became subordinate to the state and social ethic was supplied by Confucianism. Birth in the Pure Land was the central spiritual concern.

The ethics of Confucianism are essentially hierarchical, authoritarian and prudential. They emphasize getting along in the world with the minimum of difficulty. Essentially they promote acceptance of the social order as it is without criticizing injustice or oppression. Shin Buddhism was concerned for life in this world and Shinran was quite aware of the imbalance of power in the society when he quoted Prince Shotoku's poem: "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." On the occasion of his exile, he denounced the government for its injustice from the Emperor down. Shinran can be classed what we call in western parlance "prophetic ethic" or what Tillich called the "Protestant principle" because Shinran critiques the social order from the higher standard of Buddhist wisdom and compassion. Because of its inwardness and other-worldly orientation,

Shin Buddhism is assumed by many to lack a social ethic. The most stringent criticism is applied by Hee Sung Keel in his presentation of Shinran's teaching in "Understanding Shinran: A Dialogical Approach." He points to an area which we need to study more deeply. Where Shin Buddhism has been participant in social matters in modern Japan it was often in collusion with the government. However, since the war new efforts have been made to show

the social relevance of Shin Buddhism by opposing Yasukuni Shrine, the change in the constitution to make possible the re-arming of Japan, opposition to nuclear weapons and discrimination of the burakumin. However, there is need to develop a buddhology of social action and participation, rooting it in Buddhist and Shin tradition.

Hopeful Prospects

We have pointed out some areas that require our concerted attention for the future of the Honganji. While it may appear negative, there are signs of hope. There are specific things we might do to improve conditions which may be taken up among the ministers and members. Rather, here I would simply call attention to the wider context of Shin Buddhism that should inspire us to seek solutions to our problems. I want to call attention to two significant volumes that have appeared recently in the study of Shin Buddhism. The first is by Dr. Galen Amstutz, formerly a BCA minister. He took a Ph.D., taught in a Florida University and now is at the Reischauer Institute at Harvard. His book entitled "Interpreting Amida" (Amstutz, 1997) is significant because it analyzes the way Shin Buddhism has been studied by various segments of the religious and academic world.

The information he provides indicates why Shin Buddhism has been underestimated and unappreciated in the study of Buddhism despite its importance in Japanese religion and history. Not the least of the problems results from interpretations by Shin teachers who have played down its social and political implications in an effort to show that it was not a dangerous religion and adapted to the developing feudalism (Amstutz, 1997, pp. 23, 26, 52, 99). This has the background of the "ikko ikki" and the radicality of Shin Buddhism in the context of Japanese Buddhist history. Pure Land teaching undermined the power of the religious establishment of the Tendai and Shingon orders in medieval Japan. (Amstutz, 1997, pp. 10, 12, 20).

Direct relation to Amida through the Nembutsu sidestepped the elaborate ritual systems and magic of the older orders. His historical discussion of Honganji relation to the state and politics in the modern period is very helpful in assessing the constructive potentiality of Shin Buddhism in society Amstutz critiques also the Nihonjin-ron advocates who stressed the intrinsic uniqueness of Japanese people. They rejected Shinran because he stressed Japan as a little nation in a corner of the world and the universality of Buddhism. Shinran and Shin Buddhism were ignored by Confucian scholars and native National leaning scholars. Shinran was not included among teachers in Tokugawa biographies of Buddhist teachers. (Amstutz, 1997, p. 52). Christian missionaries, on the other hand, generally realized the importance of Shinran (Amstutz, 1997, pp. 57, 60). but regarded it as an obstacle to their own message of salvation (Amstutz, 1997, pp. 44, 63, 64).

Finally Western Orientalist scholars who were also anti-Christian, anti-institutional and individualistic (Amstutz 1997. p. 65, 66, 67, 69, 85) wanted something decisively different from Christianity and were attracted more to Zen. Amstutz points out that despite the advance made in studies of Japanese religion and comparative religion and even Buddhist Christian dialogue, the attention paid to Shin has been negligible (Amstutz 1997, pp. 88, 89) and the many disciplines involved in the study of religion have consistently undervalued Shin Buddhism in Japanese society.

As a result of all these forces, none of the regnant postwar Western assessments of Japan represented the Shin aspect of Japanese cultural history satisfactorily and none tried to take it seriously as a part of the Japanese sociopolitical heritage. With the help of many Japanese, Westerners simply forgot almost everything that had been known about Shin as a major social institution in the early part of the twentieth century; Shin was obliterated in the ordinary public, journalistic postwar discourse of Japan's culture or "personality" in the West and Japanese studies became less, not more, aware of Shin as the 20th century passed. Shin played virtually no role in the postwar construction of Japanese studies in the United States. (Amstutz 1977. p.99).

The second volume is Hee-sung Keel, "Understanding Shinran: A Dialogical Approach." This text is unusual in being written by a recognized Korean Christian theologian who is also a scholar of Zen Buddhism, having received his Ph.D. in that area from Harvard University. He turned to the study of Shinran out of deep personal interest when he encountered Shinran's thought in his study of Buddhism at Yale. He concluded from his further studies that "if the element of transcendence or the logic of negation is to be found in Japanese thought, it is in Shinran that it is found in its purest form." (Keel 1995, p. 5).

According to Keel, "Shinran represents the best of Japanese thought. The seriousness and honesty with which he wrestled with the problem of human existence, the clear cut rejection of the predominantly this-worldly orientation of traditional Buddhism and the Shinto religiosity, the radical break with Buddhism as the state ideology, the intense preoccupation with individual salvation and the humble spirit of egalitarianism with which he led the community of faith he established, are clearly some of the universalistic elements in Shinran's thought that are of permanent value for humanity as a whole." (Keel 1995, p. 7). In Buddhist Christian dialogue, Keel stresses that Japanese thought must learn from both Shinran and Christianity rather than the Nishida and Nishitani streams of thought (Keel, 1995, p. 8).

As background to his work, Keel gives a historical overview of Pure Land tradition and the life of Shinran. He then proceeds to analyze the understanding of Faith, the Life of Faith, Form and Formlessness in Shinran's thought. He deals with substantive ethical and metaphysical issues. Although Keel is very positive in his evaluation and admiration for Shinran, he does have a critique of his thought. He takes issue with the absolute Other-Power perspective of Shinran, claiming that it does not leave room for human initiative in the salvation process. He claims that Shinran's interpretation of faith is "too abstract to be a concrete psychological experience for ordinary men and women and for it to be meaningful in their lives." (Keel 1995, p. 113).

It is in the area of faith and moral responsibility that Keel sees "the most serious problems in Shinran soteriological teaching." (Keel 1995, p. 139). He maintains that "Moral experience, the ultimate agony and despair it produces, may lead us to faith in Other Power, but in Shinran's teaching this faith does not necessarily seem to lead to moral consciousness and commitment. In fact, quite the opposite. Faith has the potential danger of dissolving the ethical tension with which it began." (Keel 1995, p. 147). There are problems, as well, with Keel's approach to Shinran, but I shall not enter into those here. His problems do not abolish the significance for us of the issues he raises.

Keel focuses on significant questions in Shinran's thought with which we must constantly wrestle. Particularly, we must develop a clear basis in Shin thought for participation in social process concerned with the critique of society and the enhancement of human life. What is also important about Keel's study is that, as an outsider he reveals a detailed and competent understanding of Shinran, and he has made use of much contemporary Japanese scholarship and the translations produced in recent years. His work challenges us to take responsibility for Shin thought in the context of religious dialogue and to go beyond the usual pious pronouncements directed only at our own members.

We are now a participant in the world discussion of Shin Buddhism and, as Keel's work becomes more well-known, interest in Shin may grow. We must be prepared to meet the challenge it represents. I regard this as a hopeful summons for us in the future, because it shows that Shinran's thought is of high spiritual caliber and can offer an understanding of life and reality that can be meaningful to modern people. Our problem is not the teaching but, in the commercial context, our delivery system. It requires us to upgrade the education of our members and those who are going to be ministers by providing them with information and insight concerning current trends in contemporary thought and how Shin Buddhism may relate to them. The vitality of our sangha in the future depends on establishing mutual discourse, dialogue, with the surrounding culture, local and worldwide.

Conclusion

In the beginning of this discussion, I indicated that there is bad news and good news concerning contemporary Shin Buddhism. The bad news we all experience. The good news we must realize in the future looming before us. Academic study of Shin Buddhism reveals its potential and viability for modern people. Our problem is whether we can fulfill this or not with our present policies and methods of maintaining or propagating the teaching. With determination we can open new paths into the future, inspiring our members, our youth and perhaps even ourselves. Thank you.

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