

Chapter 7

Shin Buddhism in the American Context

It was during the mid-nineteenth century that Buddhism initially became known to the intellectual and literary world in the United States through the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman. The Theosophical Society founded by Madame H. P. Blavatsky and her associate, Col. Henry Steel Olcott, then further introduced Buddhism to Americans. In 1879, the first major treatment of Gautama Buddha's life appeared in the very popular book *The "Light of Asia"* by Edwin Arnold. In 1893, as result of the World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago, Paul Carus, publisher of the journal *Open Court*, became deeply interested in Buddhism as a basis for resolving the conflict between science and religion. In editing the journal, Carus enlisted the aid of the youthful D.T. Suzuki who later became the foremost propagator of Zen Buddhism in the West.

While Buddhism was thus beginning to permeate the more cultured classes, albeit in a fragmentary and noninstitutionalized way, Japanese migrating to Hawaii and North America were bringing with them their Buddhist traditions. These immigrants provided the basis for the establishment of Buddhist institutions in a Western context and a foundation for a broader effort in propagating Buddhism in American society. Although various Buddhist sects took root in Hawaii, the United States and Canada, by far the largest and best organized were the Honganji branches of the Jodo Shinshu sect, commonly called Shin Buddhism in English. [1]

Buddhism in America was also part of the reawakening of Buddhism in Japan as the various denominations, and particularly Jodo Shinshu, sent clergy to care for the needs of the immigrants who had come to work in Hawaii and the United States. The first Japanese immigrant group arrived in Hawaii as contract laborers in June 1868, the first year of the Meiji era. Accordingly, the members of this initial group came to be called "Gannenmono," meaning people of the first year of Meiji. This group and those who followed as contract laborers were also referred to as "Kanyakuimin" (contract labor immigrants.)

The first immigrant group to settle in California arrived a year after the first Hawaii group, in June 1869, and established what was to become known as the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony at Gold Hill in Eldorado County. In Canada, the first immigrants did not arrive until 1885 and settled largely in British Columbia where they engaged in fishing.

Although accurate data on the movement of Japanese to Hawaii and America apparently does not exist, the available data indicates that only a few tens of Japanese migrated to Hawaii and the United States each year until the mid-1880s, numbered only in the hundreds each year from 1884 to 1890, and in the thousands only from 1891 (reaching a peak of over 10,000 in 1900.) [2] According to Wilson and Hosokawa, the cumulative total of Japanese immigrants to mainland America through 1919 was 237,121, but those who either returned to Japan or died numbered 155,783, showing a net gain of only 81,338. Nevertheless, the 1920 census shows 110,010 “Japanese” in the U. S. mainland, including 29,672 Nisei who were American citizens by birth. [3]

American Shin Buddhism is generally an extension of Shin Buddhism as it had developed to that point when it arrived in the islands in 1888 and on the mainland in 1899. The American situation of Honganji differs from the situation of Honganji in Japan due to the position of the Japanese immigrants in American society. As a minority group experiencing various forms of discrimination and pressures, it was necessary for the immigrants to hold on to the customs, faith, and loyalties which they brought with them. Buddhist temples became social centers and the teaching a source of consolation for those undergoing the hard life of the plantations, farms or cities.

Honganji In Hawaii

The Japanese who came to Hawaii assimilated completely into Hawaiian society. Formal immigration began with an agreement between the Japanese and Hawaiian governments in 1885. The Contract Labour Agreement permitted large numbers of Japanese to seek their fortunes on the developing sugar plantations of Hawaii. They provided the social and religious basis for the development of Shin Buddhism in Hawaii.

Soon after February 1885 the first large contingent of immigrants arrived. However, it was not until 1889 that the first Jodo Shinshu priest came to establish Shin Buddhism in the Christian-oriented islands. Rev. Soryu Kagai set up a small temple in Hawaii and then returned to Japan. Lay people carried on services until the next missionaries came in 1897. Rev. Hoji Satomi established a Shin Buddhist temple on Fort Street. He was accompanied by Rev. Yemyo Imamura who served the Hompa Honganji Mission until his death in 1932. Bishop Imamura was a creative leader and spokesman for Buddhism in the islands and had a stimulating effect on the development of Buddhism. He was held in high respect by the entire community as a religious and social leader through his activities in connection with the sugar strikes.

In the face of the dominant Christian society, Buddhist temples in Hawaii developed their educational and cultural programs. They also attempted to adapt their services to meet the needs of the new environment, manifesting the flexibility that had characterized the spread of Buddhism through Asia. Buddhist temples in Hawaii early on employed organs, pews, hymns, sermons, Sunday school classes with English services and Language schools. Much of the adaptation was pioneered by Bishop Imamura, who believed that Buddhism was a universal faith and should be accessible to those outside Japanese culture.

Despite efforts at adaptation, the Buddhist efforts to pacify laborers were initially welcomed. However, the support given strikers aroused strong opposition and criticism from the general community, while the language schools came to be viewed as a threat to the American way of life. Christian evangelists frequently stressed that Buddhism and Americanism were contradictory. Great efforts were made by Buddhist missionaries to give spiritual direction and consolation to the immigrants from Japan in their many problems as a minority people.

However, the social environment of its followers placed Buddhism in the American scene in a defensive posture. It had to help maintain an awareness of, and respect for, Japanese tradition among people who were not permitted to become American citizens. In Hawaii particularly, it came to the aid of laborers who were being exploited. It was confused with Shinto by outsiders, and it incurred the resentment of Christians who found Buddhists resistant to conversion. Because of the confusion with Shinto, there were suspicions as to the loyalty of Buddhists. Both traditions were viewed as foreign religions in America. This feeling escalated as World War II began, and temples were shut down and ministers arrested.

Honganji in the States [4]

Although there had been other Jodo Shinshu visitors to the United States as early as 1872, Rev. Dr. Shuye Sonoda and Rev. Kakuryo Nishijima were the first Jodo Shinshu ministers sent as missionaries to the United States by the Honpa Honganji. They arrived in San Francisco on September 1, 1899, and began laying the foundation for what became the Buddhist Mission of North America (BMNA) in 1914 and is now the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). Rev. Dr. Sonoda had been head of the Academy of Literature of the Honpa Honganji, which later became Ryukoku University. Rev. Nishijima had been a student of Rev. Dr. Sonoda.

Revs. Sonoda and Nishijima had been preceded the year before (1898) by Revs. Eryu Honda and Ejun Miyamoto who had been sent to America by the Honganji on a fact-finding and study mission. (Rev. Miyamoto had taken a similar trip to Hawaii just the year before.) Revs.

Honda and Miyamoto were sent on their mission in response to a request by some young Japanese immigrants that Honganji send missionaries to the United States. And, as a direct result of the visit by Revs. Honda and Miyamoto, a Young Men's Buddhist Association (Bukkyo Seinen Kai) had been established in San Francisco. This organization, formally established on July 30, 1898, was the precursor of what is now the Buddhist Church of San Francisco.

Revs. Honda and Miyamoto stayed in San Francisco only a few weeks, then traveled on to Sacramento and to other areas of sizeable Japanese population, including Seattle, Washington and Vancouver, British Columbia. And, on their return to Japan, the two ministers recommended that the Honpa Honganji initiate missionary activity in America. In the meanwhile, the San Francisco Young Men's Buddhist Association, which had been gaining members slowly, sent a formal plea to the Lord Abbot of the Honpa Honganji setting forth the plight of the followers of Shinran Shonin in the United States who were unable to hear the lessons of the Buddhadharma and were cut-off from the enlightenment offered by the teaching of Jodo Shinshu.

Thus, while a newspaper (San Francisco Chronicle) account of September 13, 1899 on the arrival of Revs. Sonoda and Nishijima stated that they had "come to establish a Buddhist mission at 807 Polk Street and to convert Japanese and later Americans to the ancient Buddhist faith," [5] their efforts and that of the other Jodo Shinshu ministers who followed were directed primarily towards serving the religious and social needs and interests of the Japanese immigrants who were already (at least nominally) Buddhists and preponderantly of the Jodo Shinshu sect, which after all was the largest Buddhist sect in Japan.

Although Rev. Sonoda was recalled to Japan to further serve the Honganji after some 15 months, he was succeeded initially by Rev. Tetsuei Mizuki, then Rev. Kentoku Hori, and finally Rev. Koyu Uchida who served from 1905 to 1923 as the Kantoku (Director) and later as the Socho (Bishop) of the Honpa Honganji's missionary effort in the United States. And, in the first decade following the arrival of the Sonoda-Nishijima mission, Jodo Shinshu congregations were organized or established in about nineteen areas outside of San Francisco. [6]

As in San Francisco, most of these congregations were started as young men's associations (Seinenkai), several as offshoots of the San Francisco Seinenkai. Use of the name Seinenkai may suggest that these early congregations were comprised of only single men. However, all of these congregations soon after their establishment rented or bought property which could be used as meeting places and eventually as temples, churches and/or Japanese community

centers. And, as the Seinenkai became Bukkyokai (Buddhist churches), Buddhist Women's Associations (Bukkyo Fujinkai) comprised of the wives of the male members of the congregations were established to be what amounted to Ladies' Auxiliaries of the respective churches and temples. Another institution established at some point by most of these congregations was a Japanese language school to provide Japanese language training to the Nisei (2nd Generation) children of the immigrant Issei (1st Generation) Japanese.

Unlike the experience of the Japanese immigrants to Hawaii (which was annexed by the United States in 1898 just before the Honganji's missionary activities in America were begun in earnest), the Japanese on the mainland United States, including the born-in-America Nisei, were not readily assimilated into American society. Coincidentally with the enlargement of the Honganji's activities in America, anti-Japanese attitudes and actions by Americans (particularly those with vested economic interests in the west coastal States) intensified — to the point that further immigration from Japan was stopped by the Japanese Exclusion Act of 1924. Alien land laws of, among others, California, Oregon and Washington States, which were designed to prevent the acquisition of land by Japanese, complicated the acquisition of property for use as churches or temples by Jodo Shinshu congregations.

In the face of the evident anti-Japanese trends in those very areas in which Jodo Shinshu congregations were taking root and growing, the churches/temples they established came to serve not only the religious needs of the immigrants, but also their social and cultural interests and needs and an institutional means of perpetuating their Japanese traditions.

In the 1920s and 1930s, activities designed to meet the needs of the English speaking Nisei members of the temples were established and expanded. Sunday schools (now called Dharma schools) became an essential feature of the temples for imparting Dharma lessons to school age children in English. Various kinds of youth organizations, such as Young Men's Buddhist Associations and Young Women's Buddhist Associations (YMBAs and YWBAs), were also established to provide the youths with additional devotional opportunities as well as social and athletic opportunities and outlets. As these youth groups became organized into regional and national associations, they enabled inter-community networking by the young people of the respective Japanese communities.

It was also in the late 1920s and early 1930s that there was increasing awareness of the need for English speaking Jodo Shinshu ministers. In 1929, the delegates to the Ministers and Lay Representatives [of the Buddhist Mission of North America] Meeting in San Francisco approved the establishment of the Hokubei Kaikyo Zaidan ("Foundation") to support the

propagation of Buddhism in America. One of the objectives of the Zaidan (now called the BCA Endowment Foundation) given in its prospectus is "Training of Buddhist ministers among second generation and other Americans." By 1931, there were 33 churches and a number of branches affiliated with the BMNA, but few of the ministers were fully proficient in English. Thus, Rev. Kenju Masuyama, formerly a professor of Ryukoku University who had arrived in 1930 to head the BMNA as its Socho (Bishop), gave great emphasis to finding suitable candidates among the Nisei to enter into training to become Buddhist ministers. However, except for tutorial type of training that might be given at BMNA Headquarters (as it was to a few individuals), ministerial aspirants had to go to Japan to receive formal training that would qualify them for ordination by the Hompa Honganji. Ironically, successful completion of such training necessitated proficiency in the Japanese language.

Perhaps the instructional program begun in San Francisco by Bishop Masuyama might have grown and become more firmly rooted had it not been for the advent of World War II, during which all persons of Japanese ancestry (including United States citizens) living on the West Coast were removed from their homes by the U. S. Government and interned in camps called "relocation centers." However, even before the Japanese Americans were removed from their homes, many of the Buddhist ministers had been taken into custody by the FBI immediately following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and placed in detention camps because, as leaders of their respective Japanese communities, they were considered to be potentially "dangerous enemy aliens."

Since the Japanese American residents of San Francisco were incarcerated in the Topaz Relocation Center in Utah, the headquarters of the BMNA was established in that camp. Here, in April 1944, it was decided to rename the BMNA as the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) and to incorporate the entity in the State of California. The BCA's articles of incorporation were drafted by the BMNA Board of Directors interned at Topaz and approved by the representatives from the various camps and other communities who attended the Ministers and Lay Representatives Meeting held at the Topaz Buddhist Church on April 28-30, 1944.

The Japanese Americans were not allowed to return to their West Coast homes — and their temples — until 1945. Bishop Ryotai Matsukage returned to San Francisco and re-opened the headquarters of what was now the Buddhist Churches of America in August 1945. In most cases, the temples and any affiliated Japanese language school buildings, had to be used as temporary shelters for the returning evacuees. In many areas, the temples had been used to store the personal property of the evacuees. And in the absence of the members, many of the

temples had been vandalized. Nevertheless, by the mid-1950s, most of the temples were well on the road to recovery from the set-backs of the war years and looking to the future with plans for refurbishing old facilities as well as building new facilities. In addition, because of the movement of significant numbers of Japanese Americans from the various relocation centers to areas east of the Mississippi during the war years, by 1960 new Jodo Shinshu congregations had been formed in: Chicago, Illinois; Cleveland, Ohio; Detroit, Michigan; Seabrook, New Jersey; Minneapolis, Minnesota and Washington, D.C. In 1941, there were 44 temples affiliated with the BMNA, and by 1989, there were 61 temples and 7 Sanghas (Fellowships) affiliated with the BCA.

As indicated above, the initiation of any concerted program for training English speaking Jodo Shinshu ministers was forestalled by the events of World War II. But in 1949, Bishop Enryo Shigefuji began conducting study classes in Berkeley, California. Rev. Kanmo Imamura, resident minister of the Berkeley Buddhist Church further developed the program and the study class was moved to the Berkeley Buddhist Church. And when the new church building was completed in 1955, the BCA Study Center was established in it. In 1956 the BCA established a Special Projects Fund which among other things was to provide funds for the Study Center's library and to cover certain expenses of ministerial students who were to attend. Then it was decided in 1957 to increase the amount to be raised for the Special Projects Fund to support a Ministerial Training Center to be established in Kyoto, Japan in 1959 to train English-speaking ministers from among the students in Japan. However, it was later concluded that it would be more effective to train English-speaking ministers in the United States and the program was transferred to the Berkeley Study Center.

Then, in 1966, the BCA National Council decided to establish what is now the Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS) and the property at 2717 Haste Street in Berkeley was purchased for that purpose. The Institute was officially started on October 1, 1966, and eventually became affiliated with the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) as a graduate school and seminary in 1985. Following its affiliation with GTU, the Institute enlarged its facilities greatly by acquiring its Addison Street building in Berkeley in 1987 with BCA Endowment Foundation funds which had been raised through the BCA's Campaign for Buddhism in America capital fund drive. The Campaign was initiated in 1982 with a goal of \$15 million to aid in advancing the propagation of Buddhism in America.

As a final note on the historical development of Jodo Shinshu institutions in North America, the first Honganji missionary sent to Canada arrived in Vancouver, British Columbia in 1904

and the first church was built there in 1911. Until 1933, the Jodo Shinshu churches established in Canada under Hompa Honganji auspices were placed under the jurisdiction of the BMNA in San Francisco. In 1933, the Canadian churches were removed from the jurisdiction of BMNA, but remained under the guidance of the BMNA Socho in San Francisco. Then in 1936, Rev. Zenyu Aoki (who had served under the BMNA since 1915) was appointed as the first Socho of the Buddhist Mission of Canada. After World War II, the Canadian Mission was reorganized and renamed the Buddhist Churches of Canada with its headquarters co-located with the Toronto Buddhist Church in Toronto, Ontario. As of this writing, there were 16 Jodo Shinshu churches in Canada.

Japanese Cultural Influences on Jodo Shinshu in America

It is interesting that Ruth Benedict wrote her study, "Chrysanthemum and the Sword based on studies of Japanese Americans," which in the absence of direct observation of Japanese in Japan, provided the best situation for such a book. At that time, their basic ethical orientation had come out of the Tokugawa-Meiji period, when the first Issei immigrants came to America.

"On" or "giri" — duty or obligation — has operated among the Japanese Americans as a basic ethical foundation for human relations. This on-giri relationship is essentially conservative. It can be stultifying in personal groups, especially when one sees it in the context of a status society and within a close family situation. What happens in the psycho-social functioning of these principles is that the individual must be more conscious of his external relations rather than what one may perceive in their inner awareness. There is a tendency to be conformist, unquestioning, and prudent. The good is always determined by others to whom one has obligation.

Such an ethical basis for individual relationships and attitudes, together with the net result of all historical and social factors, has left Honganji (the contemporary order of Shin Buddhism in Hawaii, North and South America) with a variety of problems which it must face. The first of these is ethnocentrism; the second is the relation to western culture and the third is, what message does Shinshu have for Americans? While each of these problems also face other institutions and religions, they have a peculiar intensity in Buddhism.

As an illustration, I would refer to the issue of ethnocentrism. In one of my classes at the University of Hawaii several years ago, a young student, who was a member of Honganji on one of the outer islands of Hawaii, explained to her fellow students that her parents had told her she would be disowned unless she married a Japanese. When I inquired a bit among some

acquaintances, I came to realize that the universalism of Buddhism is thwarted by such attitudes in the family situation as it has been maintained among the Japanese in the islands.

Despite the popularity and seeming interest in, and attraction to, Buddhism by non-Japanese, Buddhist temples in Hawaii tend to have few members of other races, far fewer than is the case among other religious traditions in island communities. Racial homogeneity, reinforced by language and culture, makes it difficult for outsiders to enter the heart of the Buddhist tradition in Hawaii. This is certainly true in the more outlying rural communities of Oahu and the neighbor islands. Since most Buddhist ministers in Hawaii are recruited from Japan, a large percentage of them have problems speaking or relating easily in English and are often ill at ease in the ways of western culture.

From this situation there emerged a string of problems. In what way is the Order to relate to western culture? Is Buddhism only a Japanese religion, as the appearance of its membership might indicate? Or is it, indeed, a world religion as indicated by its historic process of spreading from India through all of Asia. Somehow, in America, Buddhism must develop its own distinct form as a part of western culture, as, in Japan in the sixth century, it began to develop its own distinct form as a part of Japanese culture. Though twentieth century Buddhism in America is indebted to Japanese sources and inspiration, it should not be entirely controlled from that source. The inspiration rather must become the wellspring of refreshment, change and renewal.

When, for example, such Buddhist leaders as Bishop Yemyo Imamura sought to adapt Buddhism to the new setting of Hawaii, and prepare for a wider mission to all people in the islands and beyond, the effort was carried forth only piecemeal and superficially. Change and adaptation were limited to alterations in church services, music, hymnology, pews, and temple construction. The crucial internal adaptation in thought and communication with the broader culture of the island or American community is only now beginning to occur. Conditions of earlier times simply did not permit this. The heavy dependence on Japanese clergy and the religious perspective of the members inhibited serious efforts in this direction. Few striking interpretations or applications of Shin, by persons raised within the tradition itself, had been developed within the American context.

The sign posts of Shin history, the ethnocentrism of Japanese Buddhism now call for the adaptation of Buddhism to American society in a serious way. The initial step requires that each individual consider why he or she is a Buddhist. It appears to me that Buddhists have adapted to American society and its lure of success at the expense of their Buddhism.

In my short experience, I have heard very little of why anyone ought to be Buddhist except that it is part of one's family and tradition. I have so far seen little on what is the true role of the clergy, other than ritual concerns, or why it is important and meaningful as a vocational choice. It seems unclear why people should become Buddhist priests. It is generally held that interest in Buddhism and serving the Dharma must begin with deep personal motivation and commitment. Consequently, there has been no systematic effort to encourage youth to consider this life-option. As a result, it seems unclear why a person should become a Buddhist minister. Although the need is great, the recruitment of young people is slow and difficult.

I believe, however, despite its past experience and history, Buddhism in America stands at the threshold of a new era. In becoming aware of its legacy of history and tradition, in assessing itself deeply and realistically in relation to the surrounding culture, Buddhism — and in particular Shin Buddhism — has the opportunity to become free, to chart new paths for those who are Shin Buddhist by inheritance, as well as those who are attracted to the teachings, thought, and the existential meaningfulness of Shinran Shonin.

That existential meaningfulness is rooted in the life story of Shinran, of his personal, spiritual struggle which bears such strong parallels to the deep personal struggles, the alienation and sense of loss and failure of modern men and women.

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Notes

[1] The Jodo Shinshu sect is structurally divided into 10 branches: the Honpa (main branch) Honganji; Otani-ha Honganji; Takada-ha; Kibe-ha; Bukkoji-ha; Kosho-ha; and the four branches in Echizen (Sammonto-ha, Yamamoto-ha, Joshoji-ha, and Izumoji-ha.) The Mother

Temples (Honzan) of the Honganji Branches are located adjacent to each other in Kyoto, Japan and are commonly called Nishi (West) Honganji (with respect to the Hompa Honganji) and Higashi (East) Honganji (with respect to the Otani Honganji).

[2] Robert A. Wilson and Bill Hosokawa: "East to America," pp 28-36

[3] Ibid., pp. 56-57

[4] "Buddhist Churches of America, Buddhist Churches of America, Vol. I, 75-Year History 1899 to 1974," p. 43 et seq

[5] Ibid., p. 47

[6] According to the BCA's 75-Year History, during the period 1899 to 1910 churches and congregations to be affiliated with the BMNA were established in: San Francisco, Sacramento, Fresno, Vacaville, San Jose, Oakland, Los Angeles, Placer (Penryn), Watsonville, Stockton, Hanford, Guadalupe, Bakersfield, San Mateo, Marysville, Lodi and Fowler, in California; Seattle and White River (Auburn) in Washington; and Portland, Oregon.