

# **“The Future of Jodo Shinshu in America”**

## *Part V: 21st Century Buddhism*

by Peter Hata

In these “Future of Jodo Shinshu” articles, I’ve tried to present the ideas of some of the most respected and knowledgeable Buddhist ministers, lecturers, writers and lay leaders in America regarding the challenges Buddhist temples in America must meet if they are to survive and grow into the 21st century. This final installment will present some of the specific changes they and others have suggested, as well as some of my own. But before I list these changes, I’d like to put them into their proper perspective.

At the recent Board of Directors’ Seminar, Bishop Imai asked some hard questions of our leaders: “What is the role of a temple...What is its *raison d’être*, direction and what do we do about declining membership?...It is the Board of Directors’ responsibility to have concern over these issues.” He also asked, “Why become a Higashi Honganji member?...It’s your responsibility to find your own *raison d’être*. We all must receive the teaching, or there is no meaning.”

I think what Bishop Imai is saying is, we should try to keep in mind that we are members of a Buddhist temple, not a social club, Japanese cultural group, or place for weddings and funerals. That is not to say we cannot socialize or enjoy our culture, etc. These elements are enjoyable and important. It’s a matter of emphasis. Cultural elements, etc. are, as Dr. Haneda has said, “‘containers’; whatever importance they have is only because they hold or perhaps stimulate something that is important...that is the living tradition, the process of self-examination.”

This leads me to what I feel is a crucial point. I believe that the future of our temples rests on education. And that we should start with our own self-education. This includes attending services, study classes, seminars and retreats. As was detailed in Part IV of this series, The Mahayana Mission, education, in the Buddhist sense, can lead to the awakening of a deep awareness of compassion. If our Sangha can do this together, we can, as Dr. Bloom has said, “...become an educating community that opens the minds of our members, our youth, the world.” I feel this could become the “rallying cry” of all Shin Buddhists who are concerned about its future in America. And, in the 21st century, perhaps the word “Sangha” can even take on a new and wonderful global meaning.

As members of a Buddhist temple, we should become the “educating community” mentioned above. We should all be *dobokai*, or friends of the Dharma. It has been my experience that when people have “caught the cold of Buddhism,” that rather than complaining about this or that, people become energized and creative, and actually look for ways they can contribute. And what our temple really needs is our energy and creativity, our talents and commitment, not so much our money.

What should we do with all that energy? Let’s put our collective energy together and brainstorm ways to redefine and reinvent the communication of Buddhism. And let’s not limit ourselves to the old ways of doing things. As Dr. Bloom suggests, “We need to constantly re-examine anew the meaning of — and the communication of — Jodo Shinshu in our modern world, just as Shinran did in his.” Let’s find new creative ways to make Buddhism meaningful and accessible, and perhaps even compelling, to our youth, and to people of all ethnic backgrounds. If we can do that, we’ll also build our membership.

Now, some specific examples of changes:

The need for English services was detailed in Part I of this series; certainly, it’s time for Shin Buddhist services to change to reflect the language and culture of America. For example, we’ve already tried English “sutra reading,” but I believe we can and should try even more things, and in particular, try to find new ways of communicating the Dharma. Just as an example, I think many would find it fascinating and instructive to search the internet for Buddhist websites and compare and contrast them with regards to their presentation of Buddhist teachings. The intent here is not to criticize other traditions but to gain insight into our own tradition by juxtaposing it with others. The hope is that we can perhaps discover the universal element in all traditions. This could be done as part of a sermon, or during a discussion group.

Overall, a guiding principle we can use to ease the implementation of any change is to think in terms of “inclusion” rather than “exclusion.” As Bishop Sato once said, “widen the circle of Dharma.”

Finally, regarding our services, American-born and educated Shin ministers are sorely needed. What can we do to increase their numbers? Basically, we American Buddhists must systematically work to encourage youth to consider the Jodo Shinshu ministry as a rewarding life-option. A district-wide committee could be formed specifically for this purpose. We can’t wait for or rely on Honzan (our Japan-based headquarters) to do this. See the next section for more ideas on this subject.

Some ideas from Mary Matsuda of Kaneohe Higashi Honganji, Hawaii:

Mary is the chairperson of "Sangha 2020," which is a small group of forward-thinking Shinshu Buddhists (from various Hawaii temples) who are working hard to find solutions to the problems facing our temples today. I met Mary recently and had a discussion with her (and Rinban Nori). She generously gave me a copy of her group's notes.

Mary: "Some of these ideas may appear very ambitious, but I believe that it is necessary to look at large scale projects and possibilities if Honzan is seriously looking at the survival of Buddhism in Hawaii and North America...These activities should be funded by our District and/or by Honzan; if fund-raising is expected of the core group, it will discourage participation...fundraising activities are generally associated with clubs; this is not a club — it is an organizational program and must be respected as such."

One of their ideas is to initiate something called "pastoral counseling," where a professional social worker (of the Buddhist faith), sub-contracted by the temple, would help families to cope with today's stresses and problems. There is currently a successful interfaith organization in Hawaii known as the Samaritan Counseling Center, which Sangha 2020 is trying to find funding (and district support) for. I believe there are branches here on the mainland that WCBT might be able to work with.

More of Sangha 2020's ideas:

Organize "Living Skills Workshops" run by trained specialists: Christian churches are already doing this. Possible workshops: Effective parenting, Teen Workshop (parent problems, identity, improving grades, peer pressure), Caring for Aging Parents, Stress Management, Dealing with Death.

Establish a bookstore/library where people are welcome to come and read, research, browse and converse (who wouldn't enjoy hanging out at a sort of "Buddhist Barnes & Noble-Starbucks?" -Ed.)

Work with Nishi temples locally and nationally: Join in "Project Dana," participate in their training seminars and invite them to ours; try to arrange to use the Nishi's training center in Berkeley (IBS) to train American ministers.

Develop professionally printed informational packets that address questions such as What is Higashi Honganji? How is it different from other sects? How do I join and what can I expect as

a member of the church (why join?). And for those interested in the ministry: What are the steps and how long will it take? What are the opportunities and compensation? Are there scholarships?

Establish Buddhist Crisis Center and Hotline, and a Legal and Professional Hotline (Legal, real estate, and financial matters and assistance in finding sources of government services, etc.)

Mary concludes: "Implementing plans such as those above will give us the opportunity to give back to the community and reach out to mankind. The present way churches organize their activities encourages self-centeredness as each church is only involved in their own activities, which can become self-serving."

Ideas from Ron Wakabayashi (Former JACL National Director, current Director of Los Angeles County Commission of Human Relations). Ron recently spoke at the Board of Directors Seminar in Newport Beach.

Ron: "LA is the most diverse place...147 nationalities co-exist here. How do you make this work?" This challenge is something Ron finds exciting and wonderful. Buddhism can play an important role in "building bridges between people." (Wouldn't this make a great theme for a "Buddhist Public Relations campaign?")

Use brainstorming techniques to come up with creative solutions to the problems we face...the key is to allow even critical, negative comments: "Get it all out on the table."

Work on the negative image of Buddhism, which along with the Muslim religion, was at the bottom of a recent LA Times survey on people's attitudes to various religions.

Build Consensus: "Facilitate friendliness...Accommodate by being flexible...Make the path to membership easier...Ask people to get involved."

Passion vs. Compassion: In carrying out your role of leaders, balance passion, which gets things done but can get you in trouble, with compassion, which allows you to see things more thoughtfully.

Besides the ideas of these forward-thinking Buddhists, I feel that we should also expand the role of women: Allow and encourage women at the top levels of leadership. The ability of our leadership to make wise decisions will be enhanced if the meeting environment is one where

both male and female are able to contribute at the top levels and to freely express their opinions, knowing that their ideas will always be received with an open mind.

We also need to modernize the way we present Buddhism. I think that the success or failure of any community outreach may largely depend, at least initially, on our public relations "style." You could take the ugliest thing and through slick marketing, create a line of people waiting to buy it. On the other hand, the greatest treasure on earth (i.e., the Buddha-Dharma) could be perceived as useless or even negative if misunderstood. We must try to clear up the many commonly held misconceptions about Jodo Shinshu. We shouldn't assume any previous knowledge about Buddhism.

Community outreach ideas:

I feel it is time for WCBT to "introduce itself" to our community. Not everyone winds up at WCBT because, already being a Japanese Buddhist family, they heard about WCBT and came because it sounded "comfortable." Some of our families "discovered" us in the Yellow pages. Doesn't this make you wonder how many more nice families are "out there?" Look at your neighbors. Most are not of Japanese ancestry or from a Buddhist background, and yet don't you feel most parents would want the same things out of a church experience on Sunday? Perhaps it's fellowship, or maybe it's a yearning for a teaching or way of looking at life that can enhance and enrich their lives and the lives of their children. Such a teaching is Buddhism.

I'm not suggesting we try and "convert" people; simply offer those interested and curious about Buddhism an easy and non-threatening way to sample it. My suggestion is to hold a free "open house" or "hospitality night" in the gym. It could possibly be a lecture series: Let's pick 3 or 4 English-speaking lecturers that we feel can communicate to such an audience. These lecturers might, for example, be asked to present answers to the question, "What does Buddhism offer you and your family today?" After the presentations, complimentary coffee and pastries could be served. Also available free would be Welcome Booklets, Newsletters, a mailing list signup sheet, other printed materials about Buddhism, Temple and Study Class schedules.

We would certainly want to get the message of this event out to as many as possible. With that in mind, we could do what one hugely successful contemporary Christian church recently did in my neighborhood: Send out a flyer announcing the lecture series to virtually everyone in the neighborhood via bulk mail.

Another promising idea is to organize something Dr. Bloom calls “Ko Fellowships.” These are small, informal, intimate gatherings at someone’s house. These types of gatherings can produce unusually rich and provocative discussions. This is not a new idea, but actually an idea that Rennyō Shōnin employed with astounding success 500 years ago. Yet it has much appeal today, especially if we consider that families who come to Buddhism from other religions might find our services too different or even intimidating at first. The Ko Fellowship is just a group that gets together, generally without any chanting, singing of songs, etc. Perhaps refreshments or a “dessert potluck” could be arranged. A brief talk on a contemporary topic could be given by a minister or lay person. Then everyone could freely discuss the topic.

Finally, what can you do? Get involved. Let’s try to stop complaining about what someone else said, did, or didn’t do. Let’s try to see that we are the problem. Or more accurately, I am the problem. I say “try,” because this is the most difficult thing about being a Buddhist for all of us. However, if I am not doing something positive to help, then I may possibly be part of the problem. Another way of putting this is that, once we accept personal responsibility for our problems, we can then easily become part of the solution.

In closing, I want to say that I wasn’t born a Buddhist. I only (grudgingly) became a Buddhist because my wife kept “nagging” me about how we should start attending a Buddhist temple “for our kids sake” (I later learned it was for my sake too). I am not an expert or scholar on Buddhism; I am a musician. That is why, in writing these articles, I have so frequently used the quotes of those more knowledgeable than myself.

I consider all the people I have quoted to be my teachers, but in particular, I would like to express my appreciation to the following people, without whom, these articles could never have been written: WCBT and the North American District for giving me the opportunity to participate, as a member of the religious committee, in the intense Dobo Series retreats of 1991-93 (special thanks to Rev. Gyoko Saito and Rev. Sen-ei Tsuge for their truly memorable lectures...I am still thinking about what they said), to Dr. Alfred Bloom, whom I’ve quoted so frequently from (and have met via the internet’s Shinshu Forum), for his uncanny ability to make the most difficult Shinshu concepts understandable in plain English, and to Rinban Nori Ito and Rev. Motohiro Kiyota, for their constant and generous wisdom and guidance. Lastly, I owe a special debt of gratitude to Dr. Nobuo Haneda. I was very fortunate to have heard him speak at my first retreat in San Luis Obispo in 1989. I feel that it was through him that I was able to meet the Dharma. His interpretation of the teachings have left a deep and lasting impression on me.

My main purpose in writing this series of articles was to try to fill a “gap” I perceived particularly regarding the deep and compelling reasons why we should not only care about the future of our Shinshu tradition, but also why we should take action, and what sorts of forms our actions might possibly take. But these articles have only scratched the surface; there are still many unanswered questions, as well as great ideas waiting to be discovered. Our temples need your energy and creativity. I invite and look forward to your comments, criticisms and participation.