

Shin Buddhism and the Buraku-min

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The issue of discrimination is a concern for every religion that claims to teach Equality and Freedom, but in fact many people have suffered discrimination from religious groups. In the past, discrimination in America has been against women, black people, and other minorities. Today especially it is a global issue as the world becomes more interdependent. In its broadest sense, the danger for increased social division is rising between the economically advanced countries and the third world. In addition, more attention needs to be given to the problem faced by the Buraku-min in Japan. I am a Buddhist and, as my practice, I wish to focus on the issue of the Buraku-min. In other words, I see the mission of Buddhism through this issue. You may not know that there were many outcast people in Japanese history who are called Buraku-min. They have been discriminated against in Japan for over 400 years. Japanese Buddhists have been deeply involved historically with this issue.

When Shinran (1173-1263) first established Pure Land Buddhism in Japan it liberated those who were oppressed by any restraint and discrimination. (In fact, most Buraku-min belong to his Buddhist group even now.) Nevertheless, after later followers of Shinran organized themselves into denominations (called Jodoshinshu, or Shin Buddhism), they gradually became tarnished by discrimination and incorporated into the feudal system of Japan. Also, in this past half century, Shin Buddhism has had a number of incidents showing discriminatory administrative practices that reveal a misunderstanding of Buddhism. Most recently, however, Shin Buddhist followers have eagerly worked against this decadence since we have been burdened with it through such a long history. To assist in this task, I will explore the history of the Buraku-min and reexamine how our Buddhist Mission relates to it: that is, I would like to present Shin Buddhism through the issue of the Buraku-min. This subject will be divided into three sections:

- 1) historical development of the Buraku-min
- 2) Buraku-min today
- 3) Buddhist mission

1. The historical development of the buraku-min

Discrimination is a human issue and across time and space it arises for similar reasons: distorted social attitudes, religious convictions, a concern for political or social advantages, and other historical factors. For the moment, I will only discuss the process of discrimination in the history of the Buraku-min with our denomination.

In identifying the original source of discrimination against the Buraku-min, there are three different opinions. The first opinion is that it originated from their occupations, namely, certain people experienced prejudice because they did "impure" tasks from ancient times. These tasks specifically dealt with various unpleasant, fearful, or mysterious events such as killing animals, bleeding, and child birth. It became a sacred prohibition to avoid contact with such conditions or with the people responsible for handling them. Otherwise, one might become contaminated by pollution, thereby bringing disasters to the community. Sometimes the notion involved discrimination against those who worked with dead bodies such as butchers, a leather dresser, and grave-diggers. When political authority used force

to ensure the continuity of these occupations within certain family lineages, particular groups were formed in Japanese history called "Buraku-min."

The second opinion is that the Buraku-min had its origin in religious traditions. Buddhist ideas of "non-killing" and karma were used as tools of discrimination against those who are engaged in those impure jobs. Although humans must kill living things for their survival, to kill was interpreted by Buddhists as the most evil and unethical act, with the result that it was used to discriminate against those particular people. Karma was understood as the fate which people received because of evil actions in previous lifetimes, and those born into families assigned to the lowest occupations were considered to deserve this life of impurity. These ideas were popularized in Japan, creating the negative image of "Buraku-min".

The third opinion is that discrimination against Burakumin had its origin in racism. It was said that certain groups represented different nationalities and races from China and Korea, and that they differed from the purity of the Japanese race. The physical appearances of these people were highlighted as based upon race and they were excluded from pure Japanese society. I think that these ideas are based on popular images, but also represent common discriminatory attitudes in human history.

In the modern Edo period (1603-1868), these discriminatory attitudes were institutionalized. The Tokugawa government organized the feudal system as a social order based on the preconditions of discrimination. The feudal system is a social system in which a ruler divides and possesses the land, dominates and controls the people, and builds a class hierarchy (shi-no-ko-sho-eta-hinin): from the highest class to the samurai, farmers, craftsmen, tradespeople, impure people, and non-human people (the last two lowest classes were regarded as Buraku-min).

The differences in their occupations meant differences in their human values. In addition, their family genealogy and residence determined their ranking in that class system. The ruler had divided each class to tightened up its regulations, and culturally used Confucianism to preach to the people the virtue of serving under the higher classes. The purpose was to keep order by having each class discriminate against the lower ones while not resisting the higher ones.

This system even worked among the Buraku-min who were divided into two classes. A particular political concern of great importance was to control the farmers who represented eighty percent of the population in Japan at that time. So, it was said: "force them to pay taxes as much as possible, while not letting them die and not letting them live." Therefore, Buraku-min were used to ease the minds of farmers by showing that at least their status was not the lowest.

From the Middle ages, Shin Buddhist followers in the Hongwanji denomination had a huge membership since it attracted the support of those who were oppressed by the ruling class and reorganized them under the flag of freedom. But in the 16th century, the political powers divided the Jodoshinshu into two: the Shinshu Otani-ha and the Hongwanji-ha. In order to protect themselves, the two Jodoshinshu groups themselves became very political in order to maintain their own movement. Since then, both have converted to the values of the ruling class and controlled their own members. Later when the state forced all people to belong to a Buddhist temple, it was said that "the imperial family is in Tendai, the peerage is in Shingon, the nobility is in Jodo (Honen's followers), the Samurai is in Zen, the beggar is in Nichiren, and Shin Buddhists (Shinran followers) are at the bottom." (Tendai, Shingon, Jodo, Zen and Nichiren are other Japanese Buddhist denominations.)

This meant that only the Hongwanji welcomed the lowest class of people, and carried out an important ideological role in teaching the ideas of karma and "rebirth in the Western

Paradise after life" in order to consolidate that class. Actually, those people were forced to give up working out their religious destiny. They came to believe that they were fated to be born eta (impure beings) and should be resigned to their karma. They were told to seek the Western Paradise of Pure Land when they die, while maintaining loyalty to their temples in this life. In addition, each Hongwanji built its own feudal system by ranking the affiliated temples to make them easy to control.

In the Meiji period (1868-1911), the government made radical social innovations. The state opened its doors to foreign countries though the previous regimes had a policy of seclusion. Because of the threat of being oppressed by western powers politically and militarily, the Meiji government made great effort to build a fascist state by elevating the emperor into a living god who should be served by every Japanese and by reemphasizing the feudal system. As a matter of fact, a new class order had been built in the society, namely, the highest class, the emperor, the peerage, the Samurai, citizens, and the new citizen. Although the government announced new regulations to release the Buraku-min, it just meant a new label for them as the "New Citizen, " while their situation remained the same. In addition, since the people were badly shaken up by the radical changes in the state, their anxieties increased and were directed against the "New Citizens" as another reason for discrimination.

After World War II, Japan was changed into a democratic political system by the US occupation. In fact, the Japanese constitution has three main principles: Renunciation of War, Political sovereignty, and Fundamental human rights. Therefore, the political basis to enable the liberation of the Buraku-min has been improved theoretically. However, it was impossible for people to deny their history with the Buraku-min and to be reborn without prejudice. Instead, the reality and consciousness of discrimination became hidden deep in people's minds, and the topic of the Buraku-min and using any discriminatory words about them became taboo.

In 1922, the National Equality Society (Zenkoku-suiheisha) was founded in Kyoto, Japan by the Buraku-min to do away with their inequality. (This movement was later given support when the Declaration of Human Rights were established.) Mankichi Saiko, who was a founder of that movement -- and who was also a Shin Buddhist priest -- vowed:

We shouldn't disgrace our ancestors and violate humanity by our harsh words and terrible actions. We, who know how cold the human world is, and how to take care of humanity, can seek and rejoice from the bottom of our hearts in the warmth and light of human life.

For this reason, a society of equality has been established. May there be warmth in human life! May there be light in the midst of humanity!

The first public message of the Zenkoku-suiheisha Movement was influenced by the thought of Romain Rolland, Gorky, and Shinran. The movement refused to give the customary donations to the Hongwanji organizations for twenty years, and announced their vow to their other Buddhist members. They desired to have solidarity with those who are discriminated against and those who are with the Buddha. Since then, following their vow, they have carried on their struggle against the Hongwanji organizations.

The Hongwanji was censured many times by the Zenkoku-Suiheisha Movement. Finally in 1969, it confessed that it had been discriminatory and had not accepted responsible for that reality.

The Hongwanji organization was censured repeatedly beginning in 1922 for not giving up their own feudal system which ranked temples and priests until very recently. Also, it formed a closed society by protecting specific rules and traditions. Consequently, it had

undoubtedly lost any sensibility about how they caused others to suffer. They had lost their Mission.

At every censure, hundreds of Buraku-min gathered before the Hongwanji and accused it of violating their human rights. It was reported that at one gathering a woman was crying and a man was shouting in a heart-breaking voice. The Hongwanji priests were just standing with their heads drooping. Each priest was requested to make every effort to stand against the decadence of the Buddhist order (sangha).

As can be seen, discrimination against the Buraku-min was perpetuated in Japanese history and was even reproduced within the Jodoshinshu denomination. Also, Buddhists should recognize that it is still existing and is deeply rooted in unconscious attitudes, and therefore, Buddhists must be answerable for it.

2. Buraku-min today

The issue of discrimination against the "Buraku-min" is a most serious matter even today. Historically, the villages of the Buraku-min were widely distributed in the western area of Japan. In this region people have received discriminatory treatment because they are from those villages. In fact, as a consequence there has been a loss of employment and a rejection of intermarriage even up to today. In addition, these people are greatly discriminated against through rumors and gossip by other people in urban areas. They are always looked at coldly and are excluded from respectable society.

Japanese society as a whole is called a mura-shakai (village-society), which means that it is very closed to outsiders. Each community passes on ancient, unwritten customs and rules that are carried on to the next generation. Within each community are Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines to support forms of reverence to ancestors and nature worship that bind its members together in a partnership. Every person must belong to a temple or shrine organization and must cooperate with its members. They are very conscious of their own territory, and in that sense exclude others. As a result, a pattern of discrimination continues to exist in their minds.

As for moral education, innocent children are taught prejudices by their family, teachers and neighbors. They are taught that there are particular areas where they should not go. Although at school, they learn about equality, ethics, and manners as a social being, in general, they hide from facing the reality of local social traditional Buraku-min villages, people are not informed about the history of Japanese discrimination. The educational system does not even acknowledge the existence of internal Japanese discrimination in the past and present.

As an example, one can point to the measures taken by the Japanese government to counter discrimination against the Buraku-min in 1965 in order to establish the human rights law. Their investigation reported that: In fact, discrimination against the Buraku-min today is based on the feudal order of discrimination which exists visibly and invisibly in our society and appears in many ways. Discrimination can be classified into two kinds: psychological and actual. Psychological discrimination exists within the awareness or consciousness of a human being, and appears through the medium of talk, words, and actions.

For example, it is insulting to others to be branded with titles from the feudal order and refusing to communicate because of unreasonable prejudice, bias and feelings of hatred. So the task is to break up the control of that mindset. On the other hand, actual discrimination is about the living conditions of the Buraku-min. For example, there is substantially no guaranteed opportunity for education and employment.

There is no right to political involvement in the government by voting in elections, and they are excluded from being the subject of political policies. Actual discrimination is also indicated in the environment characteristic of the Buraku-min region which has the worst living conditions, a lower occupational level, a higher average cost of employment insurance, and a lower average educational background.

These forms of psychological discrimination and actual discrimination are connected as cause and effect, and work to reinforce each other: namely, psychological discrimination causes actual discrimination, and then the conditions produced by actual discrimination give people ideas to support psychological discrimination. As a result, these mutually reinforcing causes keep circulating and recreating discrimination. From Dowa taisaku Investigation Report in 1965

On January 10, 1969, a law was established to end discrimination, but the situation of the Buraku-min is almost the same now as twenty-seven years ago. Today, a basic law to liberate the Buraku-min is being demanded.

In conclusion, I must mention that today's discrimination is ignored by many people. It is said that those who stepped on a foot never know the pain of those who were stepped on, and this kind of ignorance is also a serious issue of discrimination. Buraku-min is there to be discriminated as long as the individuals are not awakened to how much they suffer. In addition, I was told that many Japanese immigrants to Brazil and Hawaii were originally discriminated against as Buraku-min. Although Japanese Buddhist Temples worked for their community, these temples have ignored their history of suffering.

3. The mission

We Shin Buddhist followers, are now starting a movement through encountering the issue of the Buraku-min, namely, we are seeking a way to take responsibility for our karmic actions in history since the foundation of our religion is thoroughly involved with the liberation of the Buraku-min.

Beginning 31 years ago, the Shinshu Otani-ha denomination started the Dobo-kai movement for priests and their members to promote self-discipline and certain idealistic values. However, through the experience of being censured, the issue of discrimination became embodied in the movement. Actually, those who censured it were questioning the significance of this movement and its religious meaning in terms of whether it is true to itself or not. And as a result the Otani-ha denomination has been shaken by criticism and suspicion among its members.

As an organization, the Otani-ha is struggling to get rid of its feudal system and discriminatory forms of administration. For example, the issue of the succession of the abbot has smoldered for over 20 years, and has flamed scandals that caused former abbots to quit their position and separate from the organization. These scandals show various contradictions of foundational religious principles with regard to whether succession should be based on blood-lineage and whether this faith is for those who oppress the people. Other drastic administrative reforms are also being developed, particularly dealing with financial affairs. Regarding an organization with money and religion is openly debating in all its aspects.

In June, 1995, the Shinshu Otani-ha denomination officially announced its No-War resolution, which reflected deep concern about the grave crimes of World War II and the pledge to participate in the peace movement. In particular, it urged members to reexamine modern history, and (1) to redeem the reputations of those it had excluded, (2) to apologize to Koreans and other Asian people who should be invited to the convention of this

denomination in 1998, and to promote future friendship with them; and (3) to educate everyone about that history.

These are not different kinds of activities, but they are various aspects of the same movement relating to the issue of Buraku-min which motivated individuals to reflect subjectively. In addition, the encounter with the Buraku-min enable us to practice opening our eyes to history. The issue of the Buraku-min will make followers to be clear about Shin Buddhism practiced as an idealism or spiritualism separated from reality.

The significant feature of Shin Buddhism is that through its practicing that one awakens to the prejudice inside oneself and the injustice of the world, and vows to touch the Truth and the Universe. The Shin Buddhist followers call the name of Namu Amida Butsu, which has the same meaning as this practice in their every day living. Therefore, the liberation of the Buraku-min encompasses the internal and external dimensions of Shin Buddhist practice. In conclusion, the denominational branches of Shin Buddhism in America today have experienced events that symbolize the same dynamics that appear in the case of the Buraku-min.

In the article on "Pure Land in America" that appeared in the Summer 1995 issue of *Tricycle* magazine, it said that Shin Buddhism came to America with the immigration of Japanese workers toward the end of the last century. This description is about those who follow the religion throughout generations in America. For example, in 1994, there was a case regarding discrimination in California in which a woman charged a temple of the denomination with sexual harassment.

Although they disputed with each other, the issue for the temple should not be whether it wins or loses the suit. Rather, it should be how BUDDHISTS should respond to this issue subjectively. As far as this case is not able to be seen in its religious dimensions, the temple still is burdened with discrimination. It is just the same as the denomination in the past had ignored the reality of the Buraku-min and had kept its organization in line with the feudal system. This is Shin Buddhism which is attached to the sectarianism.

In addition, instead of hiding the scandal, is it being openly discussed in public to show what the denomination has learned from its critics about the Buraku-min?

On the other hand, a certain temple in Kauai, Hawaii has a very unique activity. The temple minister and members are practicing Buddhism through communication with the native Hawaiians, prisoners, and sick people. The resident minister, Reverend Noriaki Fujimori, made an oath in a recent ceremony that his temple would strive to live the vows of Amida Buddha Vows as its Vows. He declared: "If I see anyone who is discriminated against, that I will be in pain with the person."

The founder, Shinran said that Shin Buddhism is established only by the salvation for those who are excluded in the world, and he believed and practiced it. This is the beginning of the liberation of Buddhism, of Shin Buddhism. History informs the present, and what does the history of Buraku-min and Shin Buddhism tell us about today and tomorrow? I believe that this report shares the same concerns as the readers of this magazine.