

Buddhism In A New Age

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Today against the background of the Higan observance, I want to make some observations concerning the situation in which we Shin Buddhists find ourselves. Higan symbolizes transition and change as we progress on the path to enlightenment. We move through the rough stream of births and deaths to reach our goal.

Similarly in social life, we frequently encounter extreme conditions when one age is ending and a new age is beginning in the development of a culture. We are now living between the age of the Cold War and the collapse of communism and whatever new age will result from these great changes. We are also living between the end of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of the technological age and Information revolution. We are between the age of great political and social powers and the pluralistic, multicultural age of smaller, repressed peoples who are seeking their right. We see it worldwide and in our own nation in the quest for Hawaiian sovereignty and native American rights, as well as efforts to decentralize government.

We are now in an age where every ideology, philosophy and tradition is undergoing severe criticism and even rejection. The fragmentation of society, values and knowledge has obstructed the emergence of any unifying philosophy of history, culture or personal life. It is an age deprived of meaning or clear guidelines for living. Francis Fukuyama has pointed out in his notable study, "The End of History and the Last Man," that even though liberal democracy has proven to be the best solution to our human problem, modern thought has not been able to develop a consensus on the understanding of human existence and human rights. The passion for recognition and superiority may manifest itself in tyrannies seeking glory and dominance through struggle and conquest, rather than a rational search for equality and mutuality.

Whatever one may think about these conditions and the anxieties they produce, they are part of our historical process and have decades, perhaps centuries, of conditions leading to our present situation.

These conditions have great consequence for Shin Buddhists as we pursue our lives in society and attempt to guide our youth. We are also living between the ages, and we cannot avoid experiencing the results of these many changes. In my own case, I have seen role reversal. In former times, children learned from their parents and elders. However, with technological advances, we sometimes learn from our children. My son has introduced me to the global network of Internet and has taught me how to use it with great benefit to communicate with friends or get needed information.

Shin Buddhism is at a crossroads in the West. We must encourage our youth, not simply to replicate the past we knew, but to chart new paths in the new age. Through the youth we must enter the information age and begin to think of Shin Buddhism without borders, beyond ethnic and language differentiations. We must become an educating community that opens the minds of our members, our youth, the world. Our Sangha must make use to the fullest of those features of the new age that can deepen our understanding of the teaching, broaden our outreach and strengthen our community to meet the many challenges that assail us daily.

Recently, at the BCA National Council, the keynote speaker, Dr. Michio Kaku, a theoretical physicist, urged Shin Buddhists to extend their spiritual horizons. He asserted that beyond

our three dimensional world, there may be a fourth and as many as ten dimensions. His vast vision of the universe is based in science. However, he challenged his audience to think of an equally expansive spiritual view of life.

Though science may go a long way toward understanding the origin and nature of the universe, it cannot resolve the fundamental problems of humanity which emerge from the mind and spirit of people. We have only to remember that the scientists who created the atom bomb, now much discussed during the fiftieth anniversary, had no solutions to the problems that resulted in the use of their discoveries with such tragic results then and since. It is here that Shin Buddhists must bring to bear the wisdom of tradition and their own personal experiences. The Shin Buddhist approach to the new age must involve all members in exploring their faith.

The new age of global communication open to all persons provides unlimited opportunity for us to both study the teaching with people around the world and also to present our message. In the Sutra there is the image of the Buddha's tongue extending to the farthest part of the universe in an instant and his light illumines the smallest corner. Those images now have become virtual reality. By pressing a few keys on the computer, we can instantly reach millions of potential inquirers all over the world. If one surveys the Internet for information on Buddhism, there is a great wealth of resources and discussion groups on Zen or Tibetan Buddhism and even Soka Gakkai. At present there is only the Shinshu Resource Center established by Rev. Gerald Sakamoto of San Jose, and the Shin Buddhist Network set up by my son to assist us in Hawaii.

We Shin Buddhists have an enormous opportunity to reach the world in a way we never could contemplate in earlier times. If we do not take advantage of this means to connect our temples in a network and communicate with the world, we will lose the spirit of the Primal Vow which addressed all beings in the Universe, the "Jippo Shujo." In the "Juseige" sutra passage which we constantly chant in our services, there is a verse which states the Bodhisattva opens the treasury of the Dharma for the sake of all beings universally and constantly walks among the masses, teaching with a lion's roar. We have a great responsibility to enter the new age courageously and with dedication to the spirit of the Vow.

Taking advantage of the information age, however, will be fruitless unless we relate the interpretation of Shin teaching to the new social and cultural situation. We cannot separate the meaning of Shin Buddhism from the meaning or lack of meaning in modern life. We are all part of the Buddha's Golden Chain of Love and Compassion and Wisdom. What compassion or wisdom do we bring to contemporary people? In Japan, Shin Buddhism is being questioned about its relation to the wartime teaching and activities and the problems of discrimination in Japanese society. We are being questioned in the United States concerning such issues as racism, war, women, ecology, abortion. How we treat these questions will determine the future of the Sangha for our youth and ourselves who must face the issues of the day as we go to school, work or fulfill civic responsibility.

To enter the new age is an opportunity to bring the light of the Buddha into a dark world. Amida means Eternal Life and Infinite Light. With the Infinite Light of Wisdom, we may bring a life of compassion to our fragmented world. Thank You. Namu Amida Butsu.