

Shin Dharma Net as Virtual Dōjō
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Introduction

Prompted by economic hardships in their homeland, Japanese immigrants began to make their way to the Kingdom of Hawai'i and the west coast of the United States in the 1880's. Bringing with them their language, their customs, and their religion, it was not long before this formidable group of laborers made requests for spiritual guidance from the temples back home. The Nishi Hongwanji branch of Jōdo Shinshū sent several ministers both to Hawai'i and the mainland, and by the end of the nineteenth century, the Honpa Hongwanji Mission in Hawai'i and the Buddhist Mission of North America (later to become the Buddhist Churches of America) were both well established. At first, these institutions catered to the needs of the immigrant communities and their children walking the delicate balance between preserving Japanese traditions and acclimating themselves to their new cultural environment. This community, as is well known, was shaken to its core by the events of the Second World War and the subsequent internment of tens of thousands of Japanese Americans, many of whom were United States citizens. Nevertheless, emerging from the camps to resettle old homes and create new ones, the Honpa Hongwanji Mission and the Buddhist Churches of America reestablished themselves as the loci of religious and cultural support within Japanese-American communities. Today, over a hundred years after their inception, these two institutions comprise nearly a hundred individual temples and churches in Hawai'i and the mainland. With roots that reach deep not only into their rich cultural heritage in

Japan and North America, these communities take part fully in mainstream cultural life.

Throughout its history in the West, Jōdo Shinshū has often participated in American cultural norms which have altered its pedagogic and doctrinal appearance such as the composition of Western style hymns, English services, Sunday Dharma Schools, and the establishment of Young Men's and Women's Buddhist Associations. And as it has participated in these decidedly Western activities, today it also utilizes a new medium of mass communication: the internet and the World Wide Web. Since its inception in the late 1960's and expansive popularization in the 1990's, the internet has become an integral part of the way many gather information, goods, and services through online communication such as e-mail or chat rooms and the even more popular interface known as the World Wide Web.¹ Both the Honpa Hongwanji Mission in Hawai'i and the Buddhist Churches of America on the mainland maintain web sites which act as guides for members and advertisements for potential converts.

The purpose of the present study is to examine use of the internet by American Shin Buddhists in more depth and within the context of one particular site. Rather than exploring the whole gamut of Jōdo Shinshū online, which could ultimately prove too complex for such a narrow study, I will focus on the work of notable Shin scholar Dr. Alfred Bloom and his web site, Shin Dharma Net. This site aptly illustrates the most productive use of the internet by Shin Buddhists in the West to date. Rich in content while being accessible to both the specialist and non-specialist, Dr. Bloom's site creates a virtual *dōjō* for Shinshū practice and study worthy of more in-depth analysis. Through such content analysis, I will focus on three distinctive aspects of his site which have implications for the propagation of Jōdo Shinshū teachings and the formation of Shin communities. It is my belief that this site successfully acts as a mirror of off-line Shin

¹ For a more detailed account of the birth and development of the internet and the World Wide Web, see Tim Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web*. The Institute for Information Studies' *The Internet as Paradigm* is an excellent source for internet structures and dynamics. Interstats.com, the NPD group, and Nua Limited provide reliable Web traffic information. And the Internet Society provides useful information on the history of the internet and Web.

Buddhism in that it provides a place for practitioners to further explore both the doctrinal and practical aspects of their faith. And yet, this site falls short in creating genuine community, a fault clearly of the medium rather than the site itself or its producers and members. Nevertheless, Dr. Bloom's efforts to create a forum for the further propagation and sharing of the *dharma* is admirable and a model for other Shin communities in the West and beyond.

Content Analysis of Shin Dharma Net

Shin Dharma Net (www.shindharmanet.com) is produced and maintained out of Hawai'i. Jōdo Shinshū has had a rather long and colorful history on the islands since the first Japanese immigrants landed there some hundred and thirty years ago. In 1889, the Reverend Soryu Kagahi, arrived in the West and set up the Hongwanji Honpa Mission to administer to the spiritual needs of the Japanese plantation workers. In 1897, the Reverends Hoji Satomi and Yemyo Imamura established a temple in Honolulu. Rev. Imamura, who lead this temple well until the 1930's, was as much a charismatic social leader as he was a religious leader, and it was under his guidance that the Japanese community became well established in Hawai'i. He instituted a Buddhist Sunday school, held services in English, and held out for a vision of a cosmopolitan, worldwide Buddhism which, unfortunately, did not survive his death. Further hampered by internment during the War, the Japanese community nevertheless reestablished itself in the later half of the twentieth century, and the Honpa Hongwanji Mission survives with all its vitality and vibrant spirit today. Boasting thirty-six individual temples across the islands, the Mission is still tightly linked to its mother temple, the Nishi Hongwanji in

Kyoto, Japan, and has a distinct flavor compared to its North American cousin.²

Having served as Buddhist studies professor at the University of Hawai'i and as dean of the Institute of Buddhist Studies,³ Professor Alfred Bloom began work Shin Dharma Net in 1997. At the time, the site was little more than an extension of the correspondence course created by Dr. Bloom based on his work *Shin Buddhism in Modern Culture: A Self-Study Course*. His intention was to help share the teachings seizing on the internet's capability of reaching such an extensive audience. Over the years, the site grew in complexity, and eventually he added to it the "Cyber Sangha," an online group of fellow practitioners who did not have ready access to Shin temples wherever they lived. It was with the help of one such member from Arizona that the site was updated to its present form including space for the Cyber Sangha, several texts and sutras, and ample educational resources. Dr. Bloom's stated purpose on the Welcome page to the site is "to share information concerning Shin Buddhist tradition and Pure Land Buddhism as it is presently practiced and interpreted by Shin communities in the West and Japan." The main page is simple and straightforward, easily navigable to the wealth of information. Dr. Bloom has gone to great lengths to present us with a comprehensive account of Jōdo Shinshū. His site has history, culture, humor, academic and practical information clearly organized and easily accessible for any web surfer. It is also particularly interesting to note how connected the site is to the larger, global world of Shin Buddhism on and off-line. He includes links (www.shindharmanet.com/links/links.htm) not only to the Japanese headquarters of his own tradition, the Hongwanji Temple in Kyoto, but the sites to the Ōtani branch of Jōdo Shinshū and other Pure Land Temples. In addition to links to his own temple in

² For more detail on the history of Shin Buddhism in Hawai'i and North America see Alfred Bloom's "Shin Buddhism in America: A Social Perspective," in Prebish and Tanaka's *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, Donald Tuck's *Buddhist Churches of America: Jōdo Shinshū*, and Tanaka and Nasu's *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism: The Challenges Facing Jōdo Shinshū in the Contemporary World, Essays in Honor of Professor Alfred Bloom*.

³ For more detail on Dr. Bloom's life and career see Tanaka and Nasu's *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism: The Challenges Facing Jōdo Shinshū in the Contemporary World, Essays in Honor of Professor Alfred Bloom*.

Hawai'i, he has connections with the Buddhist Churches of America on the mainland and an excellent representation of individual temple web sites. Of the sixty-plus BCA affiliated temples, roughly half have active web sites. Dr. Bloom includes links to twenty-three of them, a number far greater than some of the sites themselves which may have links to geographically close temples if any at all. Though it is tempting to go into great detail of all that Shin Dharma Net has to offer, I will focus on three points of particular interest to the present study: (a) the Cyber Sangha, (b) the Shin Course, and (c) other resources comprised of various sections including texts, sutras, worship rituals and Shin etiquette.

Cyber Sangha

The Shin Dharma Net Cyber Sangha (www.shindharmanet.com/cyber/) was initiated by the Honpa Hongwanji Betsuin in Honolulu, Hawai'i to link together fellow Shin practitioners who may not have ready access to a temple. The site encourages those who do live near a temple to seek out those preexisting communities. In lieu of geography, however, the Cyber Sangha acts much in the way of real world temples and churches. For an annual membership due of thirty dollars, one will receive the monthly news letters of the Honpa Hongwanji Betsuin and the Buddhist Studies Center. Additionally, one receives a discounted rate on books purchased through the Honpa Hongwanji Bookstore.

Most importantly, however, one is connected to a small community of fellow practitioners and guided by Alfred Bloom and the Rev. Ruth Tabrah who are available to answer any questions members may have via e-mail. According to the site, there are at least seventeen members of the Cyber Sangha, most of whom have placed brief testimonials online attesting to the ways in which their faith and practice of the Pure Land Way has been beneficial in their lives. One gets a sense of the the life of this virtual community through the following testimonial of a *sangha* member from North

Carolina:

[After] a deep tragedy occurred in the lives of our family, I felt the need for the teachings about Amida in my life as presented in this book [*The Teachings of the Buddha*]. I searched the net and came upon sites for Shin Buddhism, in particular Al Bloom's site Shin Dharma Net and also The Shinshū Forum, presented by Claude Huss. I have been to visit the Ekoji Temple in Springfield, VA. I have been also been communicating with Al Bloom via e-mail. I have come to realize that as a whole, the communities of Shin Buddhists are warm and caring people. I have also have come to realize that trusting in the Great Vow and the Name are like a cushion which support me when I fall and rejoice in when I'm happy. I am very happy that the Cyber Sangha has been started by the hard working folks in Hawaii and am looking forward to being a part of it.⁴

According to Dr. Bloom, there are currently thirty-two members of the Cyber Sangha, who each not only have access to the newsletters and support of their online ministers but are connected with each other via e-mail. How well this virtual community interacts with one another will be discussed in some greater detail below.

Shin Buddhism Course

The Shin Buddhism Course (www.shindharmanet.com/course/), based on Dr. Bloom's *Shin Buddhism in Modern Culture*, was originally a correspondence course offered in part through the Institute of Buddhist Studies and is the oldest element of Shin Dharma Net. Prompted by the opportunity to share the dharma with the vast audience afforded by the internet, Dr. Bloom began Shin Dharma Net with this educational goal in mind. Having enjoyed his correspondence with students via surface mail, he wished to continue this trend via the web.

The intention of the course "is to enable the reader to explore Shin Buddhism. . . historically and in modern context" and to "stimulate thought and enrich their

⁴ <http://www.shindharmanet.com/cyber/members.htm>

understanding of the teaching.” The course is divided into twenty-five chapters, each with a short quiz at its end to check for understanding. Topics include “The Contemporary Age,” “The Mahāyāna Background,” “Kamakura Buddhism,” “Shin Buddhism in the American Context,” “The Symbolic Structure of Faith,” and “Shin Buddhism in an Encounter with a Religiously Plural World.” The quizzes at the end of these chapters contain both multiple choice questions and more abstract, reflection questions giving the text at once the feel of an undergraduate course book and a source book for spiritual guidance. For example, in the chapter on “Religion as Manifesting Truth,” one multiple choice question reads:

Shinran distinguished two types of Nembutsu. They are:

- a) self-power Nembutsu and Other Power Nembutsu
- b) shallow Nembutsu and deep Nembutsu
- c) settled Nembutsu and dispersed Nembutsu

while one of the reflection questions reads:

Many people today turn to religion in order to find peace of mind. The author states that peace of mind is merely egoistic satisfaction. What do you think? Examine your own motivations. Why are you drawn to religion?

The site lists the answers to all the multiple choice questions, a bibliography, and a section on sources for further reading. It is clear that the course is not meant to be an authoritative manual of Shin Buddhism in itself, but to guide the reader with serious reflection on his or her own personal religious quest. The Shin Course is the oldest part of Shin Dharma Net, and Dr. Bloom takes a great deal of pride and satisfaction in this work. Over the years he has received a plethora of responses from readers who have gone through the twenty-five chapters, reflected on the questions, and have been positively benefited from the site.

Other Resources

Finally, there are several places on the site where one can find the “life” of Jōdo Shinshū. Under the “Shin Basics” tab, one finds a section on “Etiquette and Symbols” (www.shindharmanet.com/shinbasics/etiquette.htm) which includes brief descriptions of the purpose and meaning of *nenju* beads or reasons for bowing in *gassho*. There is a section for *sūtras* and other document which includes translations of the three Pure Land Sūtras as well as a link to an online translation of the *Tanishō* hosted by the web site *The Living Dharma*. There is also a section on worship which includes several commonly chanted *sūtras* and Shinran’s *wasan*. These various sections provide ample insight into the nuts and bolts, so to speak, of Jōdo Shinshū ritual life beyond the more abstract and academic aspects of textual study and philosophy. More, we also come to find critical reflection on these writings and practices (www.shindharmanet.com/writings/). From the Reverend Patti Nakai we can read a brief essay on Dharmacara’s 35th Vow and how it can be interpreted in less sexist and misogynistic ways. Toshikazu Arai provides an article on the importance of promoting peace in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11th. Lay teacher John Hite of Chicago writes on the importance in Buddhism of no-self, that to “know self” equals “no-self.” Apart from providing the visitor with the bare bones of ritual practice — the “what do we do” as Buddhists — these sections also provide glimpses into the world of Jōdo Shinshū life off-line. One gets the sensation of listening to *dharma* talks, readings temple newsletters, or engaging in conversation after a Sunday morning temple service.

The Dharma and the Sangha

Shin Dharma Net then can be seen as a storehouse for teachings, resources,

information, and contacts into the off-line world of Shin Buddhism. However, is the site merely a portal back into the real world or is it an example of virtual Shin Buddhism? To fully answer this question, however, we must first deal with a more difficult one; what *is* Shin Buddhism in the real world? What is the practice of Jōdo Shinshū followers? This question, of course, is far too complex for the scope of the present paper. Therefore, I would like to suggest that there is something that we can say about the *life* of the Shinshū practitioner, and this life is embodied in the *dharma* and the *sangha*, that is through the teachings and through community. Once we understand the central place teaching and community have within the life of Jōdo Shinshū, we can then determine if this life is indeed reflected online through Shin Dharma Net.

Coming into contact with the teachings is of central import to Shinran's soteriological framework. In the *Kyōgyōshinshō* he writes that the "true teaching" is the *Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra* and that the purpose of this *sūtra* is to teach Amida Buddha's name thereby bringing sentient being to enlightenment in the Pure Land. His claim that enlightenment is brought about by the dynamic power of the Buddhas through a spontaneous moment of *shinjin*, it should be noted, is entirely textually based within the *sūtras*.⁵ And in the later tradition, one can find a similar concern for textual study based not merely in the three Pure Land Sūtras, but in the larger world of Mahāyāna and even non-Mahāyāna Buddhism. The *Kyōgyōshinshō* is rife with quotations from sources not typically viewed as "Pure Land," and in the modern era we can see a concern for other strands of Buddhist learning focusing on the Four Noble Truths, *dukkha*, transmigration, and *karma*. It should also be noted that the Shinshū tradition both in Japan and the west has been to some degree an academic tradition. One needs look no further than Ryokoku University or the Institute of Buddhist Studies to see the import that study has had within the life of Shinshū.

Studying the teachings, however, is not the end of this path. If we consider

⁵ See James c. Dobbins' *Jōdo Shinshū: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan* and Galen Amstutz's *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism*.

Rennyō's thoughts on the "Fivefold Teaching" of Shinshū⁶, we see that meeting a good teacher is only the second step leading to coming into contact with Amida's grace and light. And it should be noted that Rennyō does not simply suggest that one meets a teacher by picking up a book, but that one *meets a teacher*, that is a person from whom one learns of Amida's primal vow. And just as clearly as we can see the central import of the teachings along the Shinshū path throughout history, we can also see the import of community itself. While Shinran is well known for not having set out any clear guidelines for institutional form or organization, we can look to his personal example for glimpses of the life of Shinshū communities. He organized his followers into *dōjō* and placed himself on the same level by calling them "companions" or "fellow believers." These simple meeting halls or "way places" developed over time into more traditional temples with formal devotional and ritual structures including the recitation of Shinran's *wasan* or passages from the *sūtras*.⁷ But it is clear that beyond providing a space for believers to repetitively recite *gathas*, temples and churches also provide a place for practitioners to meet and share their experiences of faith. Temples are the sponsors of countless *dharma* groups for old and young, men and women. Visiting scholars or ministers may give lectures. Social groups form. Communities are strengthened.

Shin Dharma Net is no different. On Dr. Bloom's site we can find information on and discussions of Shinran's thought as well as selections from the *Dhammapada* and links to such non-Jōdo Shinshū sites as the Buddhist AIDS Project, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the Journal of Buddhist Ethics, Women Active in Buddhism, and even the main site of Mt. Hiei. Through this site one can have access to virtually all the information contained in children's Dharma School lecture, the Hongwanji's guide to Jōdo Shinshū, even the works of Shinshū founders and masters. One can learn the basic worship services of Jōdo Shinshū practitioners, download Romanized versions of the

⁶ Rodgers, p. 187.

⁷ Dobbins, p. 66.

Shōshinge, the *Junirai*, and the *Sanbutsuge*. One can read all three Pure Land Sutras as well as Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō* both in English and Japanese. All of the ritual and symbolic forms are clearly defined. And through e-mail one has access to two ministers to provide feedback along the path. Thus, from one perspective, this site provides the essential elements of Jōdo Shinshū teachings as well as contact with Jōdo Shinshū teachers.

However, there is one aspect of teaching which the site can not provide, and that is what Hiroyuki Itsuki describes as *menju*. He writes

Books are fine for abstract intellectual learning. But there are some things we cannot get from books. We must recognize the importance of learning by sitting face-to-face and hearing a person's voice, touching his hand, having physical contact. There are also important things the nonverbal communication of the voice and the face can offer that reasoning cannot. We can feel these nonverbal messages. We don't only understand them, we feel them.⁸

The importance of oral, face-to-face communication is underscored by the fact that even Rennyo's letters (a written form of teaching) were read aloud throughout Japan at individual temples. *Menju*, Itsuki suggests, is not something which can be grasped with the intellect but is something which is ephemeral, intuitive, and at the very core of spreading the *dharma*. The internet and World Wide Web do in some sense connect people across the globe. One does have access to people who are not physically near you. However, this connection is a false one because while persons are connected, they are separated by the medium itself. The computer, the screen, the interface and silicon cables themselves are all necessary for this connection to be made, but none of these is required for true *menju* which occurs unencumbered by technology. While it is true that thanks to the internet I can download images of my newborn niece from my brother in San Diego, several hundred miles away, these photographs (and even video!) do not

⁸ Itsuki, p. 136.

take the place of holding her in my arms. While I can have a virtual conversation with a teacher via e-mail, this can not take the place of being in his or her presence, hearing the voice, interacting with the whole person.

Shin Dharma net provides all the essential elements of religious life to its visitors. One can learn the rudiments of Shinshū practice from its virtual pages, and the Cyber Sangha potentially provides a place to create a community. Though one could imagine the members of this online *sangha* being called to a communal service via the ringing of an electronic bell and listening to music or dharma talks on MP3 files, this is not the character of the Cyber Sangha. On the contrary, membership in the group gains one a subscription to two newsletters and more immediate access to Shinshū ministers as well as, at least in theory, other members of the *sangha*. Dr. Bloom notes that most members come to the site with questions about Shin Buddhism, they engage in an e-mail dialogue wherein he may answer questions, and they continue on their way learning and growing largely through self-study. "I usually give the names and [e-mail] addresses of other members if they wish to contact and share ideas, but I have not seen this happening," states Dr. Bloom. "Because of other obligations and limited experience, I have not found a way to make it a community."⁹

Some thinkers, such as internet philosopher Gordon Graham, have suggested that online communities are not possible because of a limited definition of "community" itself. Community is defined as a group of persons united by subjective and objective interests and adhering by choice to a predetermined set of rules or codes of behavior. Common online community members do not have to adhere to any rules; members come and go freely. Graham suggests that "there is no reason in principle why an Internet community should not have the same essential features as an order of nuns."¹⁰ Shin Dharma Net's Cyber Sangha, however, does retain many of the features of a community. Its members join of their own will, they have the same interests and

⁹ Personal email correspondence, 9 April, 2003.

¹⁰ Graham, p. 142.

must adhere to at least one basic rule, payment of a membership due. But is there something missing from this definition of community which would make the Cyber Sangha more *dōjō*-like in character? I would suggest that the Cyber Sangha's inability to grow into a more active and vibrant community is due in large part to the very nature of the medium. As mentioned earlier, the internet creates a false sense of connection. Though users are "connected" via the Web, they are separated by the interface with the machinery. Graham points to one such shortcoming of the internet when he notes that communication in this medium is primarily written. Users of the internet may in fact be connected to one another, but they are not *chatting*, they are *writing*. Even with an armada of emoticons at their disposal, there is much to be said for simple inflection of voice, hand gestures, and the power of face-to-face human interaction, of human touch. There is a spirit of Itsuki's comments on *menju* at work here when Graham writes

It is no accident that Internet groups are sometimes referred to as "communities of the mind", often with just this implication of a higher, freer form of exchange. But in fact I think the reverse of this sort of Cartesianism is true. Pure *minds* are impoverished *persons*. If this is true then exclusively electronic communication, which consists in linguistic exchanges between disembodied intelligences, is a seriously limited form of communication between persons. It may, it does in fact, make relationships possible and facilitate the confluence of shared interest, but it does so in a restricted form and the restriction means that an Internet community of thought and interest, even if it satisfies the three criteria I set out, is a second-rate form of community.¹¹

Concluding Perspectives

In the course of this paper I have examined the web site of Dr. Alfred Bloom in comparison with real world Shin Buddhism. Shin Dharma Net is an excellent example of the work which Shin Buddhists are doing online for it is complete with an extensive

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 145.

collection of teachings and links to other web sites and temples and an active Cyber Sangha. Through this content analysis, I have demonstrated how the Cyber Sangha, the online Shin course, and the various texts and worship materials contained therein have commonalities with how Jōdo Shinshū is practiced in the real world. It is through these areas that the site successfully creates a virtual *dōjō*, a place where practitioners can come and study the *dharma*, consult teachers, and share their knowledge with other Pure Land devotees. However, the site's attempt to create an online community falls short as many members of the Cyber Sangha, isolated by geography and separated by computer screens, remain disconnected from one another without coming together to form a more cohesive community in the way that Buddhists have done in the real world. But this failing is in large part due to the medium itself which, while connecting people via telephone wires, separates users by limiting any true communication to merely the written word. There may come a day when technology overcomes this barrier and internet users are able to communicate in a more complex and endearing way via silicon, but such speculations are not wholly appropriate here. As a religious historian, all one can do is comment on what *was*, what *is*, and not on what *may be*.

But even without speculating on new technology or innovations which could enable the Cyber Sangha to feel more like a "real" sangha, there are several current forms of both high and low tech devices that could simulate the real world online. At the web site of the Mountains and Rivers Order of Zen based in upstate New York, one can receive not only teachings but meditation instructions. Abbot John Daido Looi has even held *dokusan* sessions online, though the results were less than satisfying. He states, "I would give an answer, and then I would just sit here waiting. Two or three minutes would go by before the response came. Part of what [*dokusan*] is about is instantaneous response."¹² With faster cable or DSL internet connections, this seems to be less of a concern. Provided everyone was on the same platform, one could have

¹² Zaleski, p. 163.

instant connections. On an even lower-tech scale, one could easily add chat room technology to a site and provide a place where people can upload their thoughts as they have them. An example of this sort of freeform chat room technology can be found at www.dharmaring.org/chat, though I must admit that on every occasion I've signed on, the discussions were either in Spanish or I was the sole participant. The downside of open-access chartrooms is that everyone has access to them, regardless of religious affiliation or motivation. At the Buddhist list serve hosted by [Google](#), for example, the discussions usually have nothing to do with Buddhism, and when they do participants are arguing among themselves with the sort of abusive language afforded by anonymity. For chat rooms and list servers to be most effective, there would have to be some sort of user protocol or secure entrance to the group.

But, ultimately, I feel like these ways of creating a broader platform of communication and conversation among Cyber Sangha members isn't really necessary. It is my not so humble opinion that people need to feel connected to one another in some real, *tangible* way. We might be able to replicate the tangibility of real human interactions online through chat rooms at least — virtual reality at most — but we would only be *replicating* tangibility. There is nothing inherently flawed with real human interactions; do we need new technology to “fix” them?

Shin Dharma Net then cannot be slighted for its inability to establish *menju* between persons separated by geography but connected by silicon. The medium itself sets up a barrier between those persons it is meant to unite. And Dr. Bloom is conscious of this deficiency. “The Cybersangha,” he states, “was not designed for people who belong to temples or have them nearby. It was for people who are isolated and want a connection to a Shin community and see what goes on there, if they were to belong to a temple. Wherever possible I send them to local temples.”¹³

The true promise of the internet, I believe, is not so much in its ability to connect

¹³ Personal email correspondence, 9 April, 2003.

people but to connect *ideas*. It is a world wide storehouse of ideas and teachings which can be accessed by anyone, anywhere. Through such exchanges of ideas, one can foster understanding and tolerance of other persons and groups which were previously seen as “the other” and were separated not only geographically but ideologically. Thus, the internet acts as a bridge between groups and holds potential to help overcome sectarian differences. Shin Dharma Net is an excellent example of an attempt to do just this. The strength of this site lies in its ability to connect not only various peoples separated by geography but in connecting various groups. The site has an extensive collection of links to diverse organizations across the globe, some Pure Land, others not. But more than merely listing both Shinshū and non-Shinshū sites, the site also contains the most extensive list of Jōdo Shinshū temple sites online. As mentioned earlier, while half of all Buddhist Churches of America temples and churches maintain web sites, a small portion of these contain links to other BCA temples and the lists are surprisingly incomplete. As if individual temples were wholly unaware of their place within the larger organization, very often the links pages contain links to geographically close temples or particularly striking and extensive web sites such as Dr. Bloom’s Shin Dharma Net or the Living Dharma produced by the West Covina Buddhist Temple. If the promise of the internet lay in its ability to transcend sectarian differences, the sect itself needs to overcome its own internal differences. In this capacity, using the internet and the World Wide Web to communicate and foster community between individual temples and churches flung out across North America could strengthen the larger organization of the Buddhist Churches of America and the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawai’i and ultimately strengthen the foundation of the Pure Land teachings in the West.

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