

“The Future of Jodo Shinshu in America”

Part II: The ideas of Dr. Haneda and Dr. Bloom

by Peter Hata

As we saw last month in Part I, recent articles in the LA Times and Sacramento Bee identified several key factors influencing the decline in membership in our Jodo Shinshu temples. Reading both the Times and Bee articles was for me, in many ways, like *deja vu*.

Back in 1992, I wrote a couple of articles in which I quoted at length from lectures given by Dr. Nobuo Haneda, noted Buddhist lecturer and author of “December Fan,” “The Evil Person” and “Heard By Me.” Dr. Haneda’s comments seemed to foreshadow those that we hear today. Not only does his vision of the future for Shinshu — and the need for change — appear to be in line with the statements from the Times and Bee articles, but he helps us understand why change is necessary: Because our tradition comes from Shinran Shonin, himself a radical who broke away from the meaningless, out-of-date traditions of his time.

In the Gateway article, *Dr. Haneda Speaks at Higashi Hoonko*, he says: “...in order to insure a future, we must first make a distinction between two kinds of tradition in our temples. The living tradition of Buddhism is self-examination. Self-examination is the process of examining and accepting our shortcomings, our self-centeredness and arrogance. It is a humbling experience, but one which also leads the way to the desired attitude of a student, a seeker. As such, self-examination is completely non-ethnic and non-cultural. It is universal.” This is absolutely critical to Dr. Haneda. “Buddhism is either for everyone, or it is worthless,” he said...The dead tradition is made up of things like chanting and ancestor worship. These he cited as only secondary priorities. Of these two traditions, it is the living tradition (self-examination) that Dr. Haneda feels we need to promote in our temples. It is universal, dynamic, practical, and is the essence of Buddhism. Thus it is the one thing that can foster the survival and even the spread of Buddhism in America.

However, Dr. Haneda had not meant that practices like chanting and ancestor worship be abandoned, just that they are secondary priorities. To quote again from the article:

“They are like ‘containers,’ he said. 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. All Buddhists who are serious about the Dharma clearly differentiate the

Living Tradition from the Dead Tradition. An example is Shinran Shonin: he was a harsh critic of the dead tradition, a radical negator and destroyer of the dead tradition. But this was out of deep respect for the Living Tradition. It was not for the sake of negation, but out of deep respect for the Living Tradition.”

In the second Gateway article, featured in Special Obon Program, Dr. Haneda challenged us to redefine our priorities, to place the emphasis in our temples not on the ethnic and cultural elements, but on the essence of Buddhism, which of course is the “living tradition.” To quote the article:

“This is the essence of Buddhism. It is the spirit of the student, the seeker. It is also the creative spirit. The living tradition comes directly from Sakyamuni himself, from his enlightenment which was the insight into the truth of impermanence.”

In his talk, Dr. Haneda further explained that there is a real difference between culture and religion: “Culture is not self-negating. It is something that we enjoy. In religion, on the other hand, the self is challenged and negated. Culture can give us amusement, comfort and pleasure but only Dharma can give us deep joy, rebirth and a fundamental spiritual transformation.”

In concluding his talk, he called the living tradition of Buddhism a “wonderful treasure,” and declared “If we hide it in our ethnic container, it is a crime. It is the living water that can quench the thirst of all humanity. It can liberate all the people in the world.”

To Dr. Haneda, an ongoing problem is that the Shinshu Buddhist tradition here is controlled by Japanese headquarters. He says, “What is crucially needed is a ‘July 4th Independence Day’ in our Buddhist calendar too. It is our problem, we have to do something about it ourselves... there is precedence for this independence — Christianity, Judaism, Catholicism — they all became independent from the country of origin. This is the inevitable way if Buddhism is to survive in this country.”

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Dr. Alfred Bloom, Prof. Emeritus of Religion, Univ. of Hawaii, echoes in many ways the feelings of Dr. Haneda. To Dr. Bloom, the problems we see in our temples seem to “point the finger” as it were at the “entangling web of tradition and subordination imposed by the Japanese religious perspective, “to quote from his series of articles entitled Shin Buddhism in Modern Culture, published on the Shin Buddhism Network homepage. “Tradition,” he says,

“should be a stepping stone to deeper insight and experience, and not a barrier to growth. Tradition should not become ingrown, but should be out-growing as it correlates to the ongoing times...we should consider Buddhism in the following way: Buddhism is a movement, not a position; a process, not a result; a growing tradition, not a fixed revelation.”

Dr. Bloom goes so far as to identify what he calls the “Japanese Problem.” How the Japanese ethnic and cultural traditions have stood in the way of progress, of the true process of renewal, self-questioning and growth that is the essence of Shinshu. He writes, “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...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.”

Another aspect of this problem, says Dr. Bloom, is that “racial homogeneity, reinforced by language and culture, makes it difficult for non-Japanese to enter the heart of the Buddhist tradition.”

Echoing Dr. Haneda’s and others call for American-trained ministers who can comfortably and confidently communicate the Dharma to Americans, Dr. Bloom writes, “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. “To Dr. Bloom, one can begin to wonder if in fact Buddhism is 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,” Dr. Bloom observes, “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.” Of course, there have already been attempts to adapt Buddhism to the west but, as Dr. Bloom points out, these were carried out only superficially, in “piecemeal” fashion. “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 American community — is only now beginning to occur.”

Furthermore, like Dr. Haneda, Dr. Bloom makes a plea for us to question tradition: "If tradition does not manifest and make clear the truth, what is tradition? For religion to remain vital, its followers must keep the question of truth open and uppermost in their considerations." Of course, as Dr. Bloom points out, questioning Buddhist traditions is indeed difficult because, "Buddhism, wherever it appears, Mahayana or Theravada, Southeast Asia, Japan or Hawaii, is highly traditional and this traditionalism is one of the factors that makes it difficult for Buddhism to change in the face of modern problems." However, says Dr. Bloom, to question a religious tradition does not mean disrespect, but, instead, "a deeper respect in an attempt to understand and appreciate deeply the roots which brought that tradition into being."

Despite the challenges however, Dr. Bloom, like Dr. Haneda is optimistic, basing his optimism on the timeless and liberating truth that is the essence of Buddhism. He states, "I believe that, despite its past experience and history, Buddhism in America stands at the threshold of a new era...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."