

“The Future of Jodo Shinshu in America”

Part III: Why Shinshu?

by Peter Hata

In Part I, I quoted from articles in the LA Times and Sacramento Beenewspapers which described the overall decline in membership in our Jodo Shinshu temples, some reasons for the decline, and some possible solutions.

In Part II, I quoted from both Dr. Haneda and Dr. Bloom, two contemporary Buddhist writer/lecturers who feel passionately about the need for certain changes in our temples to reverse these trends.

However, before we go any further, there is a question that needs to be addressed, a question you yourself may be thinking, which is, “Why all this fuss about the decline in membership in our temples?” Or to put it another way, “Why should we even care about the fate Jodo Shinshu?”

With all the turmoil and upheaval we see in our world today — a fact that is evident from watching the news on any given night — perhaps you and I might be more interested in Jodo Shinshu if it could promise us some sort of “peace of mind.” Most religions do indeed attract many followers with just such a “promise.” Buddhism however, is different. As we saw last month in the excerpts from Dr. Haneda, the essence of all Buddhist traditions — the living tradition — is self-examination. This is the process of “examining and accepting our shortcomings, our self-centeredness and arrogance. It is a humbling experience...” Dr. Haneda also clarified that the process of self-examination “...comes directly from Sakyamuni himself, from his enlightenment which was the insight into the truth of impermanence.”

Impermanence, of course, means change; that you, me, all of our loved ones, indeed every living thing, is constantly changing and, someday, will perish.

Thus it is clear that Buddhism, and perhaps Shin Buddhism in particular, does not, per se, offer “peace of mind.” Dr. Bloom explains why (from “Shin Buddhism in Modern Culture”): “Since peace of mind is merely egoistic satisfaction, it cannot be the primary value and purpose of religion...It is in this way that Shin Buddhism speaks differently to modern man.” As he explains: “From its beginnings, more than 2,500 years ago, Buddhism has been a search for

truth. It was Siddhartha's goal to break through the veil of delusion that blinded humanity to things as they really are...Buddhism is a religion of enlightenment."

To put it another way, the reason Buddhism doesn't promise us peace of mind is simply because the fundamental truth or Dharma of Buddhism is impermanence. If you accept the reality of the Dharma, then peace of mind or "comfort" can only be a dream or illusion. However, as Rev. Sen-ei Tsuge has said (Oct '93 Gateway), "The point is not to "get rid of the pain." That is impossible. Rather, it is to live with the pain, but to turn the focus inward. To achieve this is to attain a kind of rebirth...Kill the ignorance and be reborn in the truth. Then live with the truth." Thus, rather than promises of peace of mind, Jodo Shinshu actually presents us with a kind of challenge. The challenge, as Rev. Tsuge stated, is to "Leave the comfort of your daily life and awaken to the truth."

The answer to the inevitable question of "Why would anyone want to accept such a 'strange' challenge?" is that, though the Buddhist self-examination is a humbling experience, it also leads the way to the "rebirth" Rev. Tsuge talks about, and to what Dr. Haneda calls "the desired attitude of a student, a seeker...This is the essence of Buddhism. It is the spirit of the student, the seeker. It is also the creative spirit." Awakening through self-examination to the true nature of our ego-selves, and to the reality of impermanence — breaking the "veil of delusion" as Siddhartha did — is necessary because only then can we awaken to the Dharma and discover the true joy in living. And as Dr. Haneda states, "only Dharma can give us deep joy, rebirth and a fundamental spiritual transformation."

I think it's important here to clarify a couple of points. The first is that, as Rev. Tsuge had said, we don't permanently destroy our egos, nor can we ever permanently get rid of the pain. We see the true nature of our "evil" or self-centered motives, the truth of impermanence, and that acknowledgment, that recognition or acceptance itself is what can lead to a transformation and spiritual rebirth. Another critical point is that, although at first Jodo Shinshu seems preoccupied with self-evil, this does not in fact lead to a guilt-laden, depressed state of mind. The reason is because, as Dr. Bloom remarks, "Buddhism links the quest for truth with the development of the compassionate heart, the heart of concern for all beings...In Buddhism, compassion and wisdom are inseparable." Again, remembering that the fundamental truth is impermanence, it is clear that all of us are suffering or eventually will suffer. Buddhism simply doesn't allow us the luxury of self-pity.

Those of you Baby Boomers might recall the '60s phrase "I'm okay, you're okay." Actually, while there is merit to that thought, the Shinshu version would probably be "I'm messed up

(e.g., self-centered, judgmental, impatient, fallible, arrogant)...but so are you." Thus, Shinran's and Jodo Shinshu's perspective goes beyond our normal view of interpersonal relationships because, as Dr. Bloom points out, "...it understands that true relations with others only arise when we realize that all our actions are infected by our ego-concern."

So what is the answer to the question "why should we care about Jodo-Shinshu?" It is the same as the answer to the question of why someone would accept the challenge of Buddhism to "awaken to the truth." It concerns the kind of "change-of-heart" or positive transformation that the "living tradition" of Jodo Shinshu — self-examination — has the power to effect in our attitudes.

One of these positive changes is that, as we recognize that not only are we "messed up," but that everyone else is as well, this has the social consequence of reducing our judgmental and arrogant tendencies in our relations with others. It can help bring us together. It can help bring families, communities, perhaps even nations together. Certainly it could make for a stronger Sangha at each temple.

Dr. Bloom writes: "It increases our ability to accept others as they are, when we know what we truly are...Once we recognize this, we can approach conflict and misunderstanding knowing that we too have contributed to it as much as has our opponent. With such awareness, we will be more disposed to seek mutual understanding, rather than self-justification. We will seek conciliation, rather than blame...As the awareness of evil opens to the awareness of compassion, there is a liberation and freeing of the spirit."

Clearly, Buddhism can improve inter-personal relationships. As Dr. Bloom puts it, "Shinran's religious philosophy and life may well be termed 'the religion beyond good and evil' which means giving up the conscious moralistic distinction of good and evil as the means of comparing ourselves with others (where the comparison is usually favorable to us). In such a religious philosophy and life, rather than being a barrier or division, religion becomes a force to unite and bring people together."

Finally, Shin Buddhism can help in regards to what is often termed "our most important asset," which is our youth. Dr. Bloom states, "What is needed for youth and society today is not a society of repression or law and order, but a society with positive ideals in the process of fulfillment, a process which offers its participants a deep sense of life affirmation and worthwhileness. It is such a process that is Shin Buddhism."

One last note. Before you or I start to think, “Well, that sounds fine...Jodo Shinshu is just the ticket to fix all the evils and problems out there,” we must remember that the living tradition of Jodo Shinshu — the process of self-examination — is really challenging us to awaken to our true selves, not someone else’s. As I fondly remember our former minister Rev. (now Rinban) Nori Ito once writing, “Buddhism is not a religion to fix others; it is a religion to fix ourselves.”