

# **“The Future of Jodo Shinshu in America”**

## *Part IV: The Mahayana Mission*

by Peter Hata

Last month, we saw that the relevance of Jodo Shinshu to us today lies in its power to effect a positive transformation in us, bringing deep meaning and joy into our lives. But is that the ultimate purpose of our practice of Jodo Shinshu? Is it simply for our own benefit?

During the original North American Dobokai program of 1991 to 1993 (dobokai means “friends of the Dharma”), introduced here in the U.S. by Bishop Sato, participants were encouraged to “catch the cold of Buddhism and pass it on.” In other words, after we’ve awakened to the teachings, we should find ways to share them with others. Initially of course, we should do whatever might further our own personal understanding of the teachings of Buddhism. This would include attending Sunday Services, going to retreats, reading books on Buddhism, etc. However, the ultimate end of our study and practice of Buddhism is not just to achieve our own awakening. It is actually to help everyone else achieve theirs.

This idea of sharing the teaching with others is part of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, from which our Jodo Shinshu tradition has evolved. As Dr. Bloom points out (in “Shin Buddhism in Modern Culture”), “All world religions attempt to share their teaching with all humanity. There is no world religion which is not in some way missionary. Mahayana Buddhism is essentially a missionary religion and this impetus appears in Shinran’s writings, particularly his emphasis on the phrase Jishin Kyoninshin, which means essentially to ‘share one’s faith with others.’”

Although it might at first seem to be a big “stretch” to go from working for our own awakening to working for everyone else’s, it is actually not a stretch at all. This is because, as Dr. Bloom has said, “Compassion and wisdom are inseparable...no one truly gains liberation who does not work to share it with others.” In other words, we cannot be awakened without also acquiring compassion. The Buddhist awakening and the simultaneous embodiment of compassion is thus the essence of finding meaning and true joy in life.

The process of sharing the teachings with others might be termed the Bodhisattva path. Dr. Bloom explains that “This is a path where a person starts seeking his own salvation (“salvation” means awakening – Ed.) and ends by rejecting it until all can be saved. The

Bodhisattva dedicates himself to study and knowledge in order to provide or open the way to salvation for all beings.”

If we take the words “all beings” to mean any living thing other than ourselves, a modern-day Bodhisattva would seem to have an almost unlimited range of “causes” he or she could dedicate their energies towards. This could range from those very close to home, such as a person’s own loved ones, to worldwide causes such as helping to save the environment. In a similar way, if the membership of a Buddhist temple came together to work for the advancement of a certain cause or causes, it would in effect be acting as a single Bodhisattva. The most appropriate cause or action for a temple would logically seem to be some form of “outreach” into the immediate community.

However, in our Jodo Shinshu temples, it is clear that historically, very little has been done in the way of “community outreach.” Some reasons for this lack of outreach were given in previous installments, such as the tendency in our temples to promote what Dr. Haneda calls the “dead traditions” or “container aspect” (ancestor worship, chanting, etc.), rather than the “living tradition” or “water” (self-examination). The dead traditions mainly appeal to those of Japanese descent; the living tradition appeals to all.

Another reason might be the way that using *on* or *giri* — duty or obligation — as the basic ethical foundation for human relations makes Japanese and Japanese-Americans act in essentially conservative ways. As Dr. Bloom writes, “There is a tendency to be conformist, unquestioning, and prudent.” Certainly, a strong reason for the lack of outreach must be the fact that most ministers, being from Japan, are, as Dr. Bloom states, “often ill-at-ease in the ways of western culture,” and so are reluctant to take on the challenge of reaching out into the community at large.

In any case, despite the historical lack of outreach, many forward-thinking Jodo Shinshu Buddhists feel that today we stand at the threshold of a new era, one that holds a great deal of promise for the spread of Buddhism. This optimism might at first seem curious, given the tremendous problems and challenges presented by our contemporary society. But as Dr. Bloom observes, “There is a great opportunity within the context of religious freedom to share the Buddhist insights and understanding of life with people in all walks of life, such as we have never had before. Despite the small number which we represent in society, there is, nevertheless, an enormous interest in Buddhism. Shin Buddhism itself attracts people when they are able to study it for itself in Shinran’s writings or modern expositions.”

Furthermore, although it seems paradoxical, it may be that this optimism is actually due in part to the gravity of the problems we face today, and not in spite of them. In other words, the greater the difficulties in our interpersonal relationships — single-parent families, domestic violence, drive-by shootings, racial tensions, etc., — the greater are the problems in our world today. And thus, the greater the need for and relevance of Jodo Shinshu.

With this in mind, Dr. Bloom states, “the sense of mission needs to be developed in a more outgoing articulation of the ideals, values, and potential of Buddhism to deal with the problem of life.” In essence, this is a kind of “call to outreach.” But what does it mean to outreach in a Buddhist sense? If we accept that the ultimate end of our study and practice is not so much to achieve our own awakening, but to help others achieve theirs — in other words, some form of “outreach” — then how do we outreach Buddhistically?

Interestingly, there do appear to be some guidelines for Buddhist outreach. Dr. Bloom points out: “We must emphasize, particularly as exemplified in Chapter IV of (Shinran’s) ‘Tannisho,’ that the important point is non-egoistic action, action which is not an instrument merely for advancing the self but which is action that reveals the compassion of the Buddha. This perception supplies a major consideration in determining in our own time what actions are appropriate to a Shin Buddhist. I believe that one important determination would be — what does that action do to bring meaning into other people’s lives?” In other words, do our actions enhance the lives of those around us?

Thus, the “guidelines” for Buddhist outreach center around the model of the Bodhisattva as one who dedicates himself or herself to study and knowledge in order to provide or open the way to awakening for all beings. As Dr. Bloom writes, “The activities of the Bodhisattva in establishing ideal conditions for enlightenment provides a model for modern people to labor to improve society so that all people may have opportunity to realize their potentials.” Seen this way, Buddhist outreach involves finding ways to spread the teachings; in essence, finding ways to pass on the “gift” of Buddhism to all people in an effort to enhance their lives. But it could also involve almost any effort that is positive and life-affirming, such as working to preserve our environment, or helping people lead more healthy lives.

Of course, one of the keys to the success both of any kind of outreach and certainly to the very future of Shinshu itself is that we must involve our youth. As Dr. Bloom so eloquently states, “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.”

“Above all,” as Dr. Bloom emphasizes, “it must be recognized and understood that Jodo Shinshu, as a Buddhist tradition grounded in universal human experience, is a World Religion. It is not merely a Japanese religion, despite the fact that native Japanese or Japanese-Americans are its major constituency. Accidents of history should not obscure the meaning of a teaching or the mission of a movement.” To Dr. Bloom, “Unless truth and compassion — the basic essentials of faith — are absolutely comprehensive, they are neither the truth nor real compassion.” Dr. Haneda put it even more bluntly when he said, “Buddhism is either for everyone or it is worthless.”

There is one final thing we should try to keep in mind in our attempts at outreach. As Dr. Bloom explains, “Shinran shows that when we act, as we must constantly do in the world, we must understand the true nature of those acts. Our human acts never measure up to the standard of Amida’s perfect sincerity and truthfulness. However, we are not to give up doing good where we can, but recognize that the final outcome does not lie with us...In effect, we must live and act in the world with hopes but no expectations.”

As we awaken to a deep awareness of compassion, we can join with others in the common struggle to secure the welfare of all beings. There will, of course, be times when we will be discouraged and our actions, however well-intentioned, may fail or seem trivial. However, through the continued and enthusiastic study and practice of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, we can — together — all become Bodhisattvas and, by uniting with the infinite power of compassion, share the gift of Buddhism with all beings.