

JISHIN KYONINSHIN

Sharing Our Faith with The World

By Alfred Bloom

Dr. Alfred Bloom, Dean of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, presented this message as the keynote speaker for the 1988 Federation of Dharma School Teachers' League's Conference,

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Introduction

I have entitled my talk with you Jishin Kyoninshin – Sharing Our Faith With The World. In approaching this topic I want to put it into the context of the situation of Jodo Shinshu in contemporary American society and the Western world. What I have in mind is the tendency we all have to look backward nostalgically to past glories and achievements. I am always interested in the various anniversaries of our temples and the soon to be centennial of BCA in 1999 and the Hawaii Sangha in 1989. It is important to remember the struggles, sufferings, devotion and service of the lay people and ministers who have established and maintained the life of our religious community. However, this remembrance must always be for the purpose of a broadening and challenging future that looms before us.

We cannot hold on to the past for the sake of the past alone. The past is the stepping stone across the river of time. Rather than recreating the past, we must project a future into which we can move, nourished and directed by the insight and wisdom from the past. What kind of future do we hope for as Jodo Shinshu becomes a more active participant in the American social and religious world? What kind of attitudes and commitments must our members develop in order to contribute to shaping the future of our society? What kind of educational experience can we offer our youth and our members that will strengthen their commitment to Buddhism and prepare them for leadership and participation in the new social and religious world that is emerging? Will we be shaped by the future, or will we shape our own future?

Against the background of our position in American society, I want to emphasize that our future depends on educating all our members in their faith as the basis for our survival and expansion in American society. We must take more seriously the implications of the social and cultural transition from Japan to America which Jodo Shinshu has confronted. Without going into detailed social analysis, Jodo Shinshu has moved generally from a communal, ritualistic context to a more individualistic, more doctrinally oriented context. It has moved from emphasis on loyalty to the group to commitment to the teaching. In Japan one does not ask what do you (as an individual) believe. The question is: what is your family

affiliation, your Bodaiji? In America we are confronted more frequently by questions: what do you believe and why?

As a consequence of this transition, the educational function of the temple must be placed in the forefront of temple life and greater efforts must be made to make the rituals meaningful and expressive of the values and spirit which are the essence of Jodo Shinshu.

I believe the topic of this conference points to the essential issues confronting Jodo Shinshu. The phrase Jishin Kyoninshin indicates two phases of religious life. It goes without saying that first one must believe or have faith oneself (the first phase Jishin), before one can teach others (Kyoninshin, the second phase). Both phases are inseparable and feed into each other. The thrust of Shinran's statement in using this phrase lies in sharing the truth that motivates our lives with others. The phrase became the basis of his own evangelistic effort.

With respect to the first part of the phrase, there is the amusing story of the Myokonin Shoma of Sanuki. At an important religious service he tugged the robe of the abbot as his procession passed and asked: How is your faith? The implication is that even the religious leader must have faith as the foundation of his work.

The inseparable relation of the two dimensions or aspects is illustrated by our common experience. When one finds a good sale or deal on something, we freely share the news with others. The more meaningful or significant an experience is, the more we desire to tell others. Sharing, communication, networking are all terms in common use today, and they reflect the Jishin-Kyoninshin principle.

Both knowing what we believe and sharing it become all the more essential and important because of the increased participation of Jodo Shinshu in our pluralistic, highly diverse and changing society. We are required to struggle seriously to understand our faith, articulate it, and integrate it with the best social, cultural, and scientific learning that we receive through public educational institutions.

In the transition we have mentioned earlier, Jodo Shinshu has moved from a more affective, sentimental orientation to a context demanding more intellectual focus. Our youth, as well as ourselves, live in a context of freedom and critical, analytical thought. We are constantly faced with a great challenge to transform our emotional attachments to our faith, nurtured by family and community, to intellectual insight which will give stability to our commitment. Shin Buddhism is not the only religious tradition facing this challenge, but it is more serious because Buddhism is not as widely recognized and accepted in the society as are traditional forms of Christianity.

In response to these conditions in our society, I want to consider with you the basis, method and style of Shinran's teaching activity so we may gain guidance from his example in taking up the challenge of sharing our faith. I would particularly characterize Shinran's ministry as one of vision and mission.

I. Shinran's Vision and Mission

The warrant for the mission and outreach of Jodo Shinshu comes initially from the experience of Shinran himself and the interpretation of the third abbot Kakunyo. Kakunyo relates Shinran's vision in the Rokkakudo in Kyoto in which the Bodhisattva Kannon appeared to Shinran and promised that he would assume the form of a woman as a helpmate for Shinran to embellish the world. Shinran was to make all people aware of this vow. We are told that in the vision Shinran looked east and saw a great assembly of people whom he addressed, following the Bodhisattva's request. Kakunyo comments on the vision as follows:

When we think of the purport of this vision as described in the record, we notice herein symbolized an auspicious opening for the establishment of the True Sect and the propagation of its doctrine of salvation. (D. T. Suzuki, *Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism*, p. 170)

Quoting Shinran the principle of Shinshu mission is declared:

It devolves upon me under the guidance of these two Bodhisattvas (Kannon – Prince Shotoku, and Seishi – Honen) now to proclaim far and wide the original Vow of the Tathagata, through which it is that the True Sect has arisen and the doctrine of Nembutsu (recitation of the Buddha's name) is gaining ground. (Ibid., p. 17)

Shinran's experience and vision indicate the necessary foundation of any spiritual effort. There must be a vision, a deep sense of purpose and meaning related to human need. Such a deep purpose gives strength to endure when we face obstacles in our path.

We should not be put off by the idea of vision such as Shinran received. Though some people may have very special experiences to motivate them, we all may have degrees of experience. In my own case, I was affected greatly by a dream a number of years ago in Hawaii. When I went to Hawaii, I was rather non-conformist in dress. I was advised by a dear friend in Hongwanji that such attire might put off members because they were more conservative. I had been asked to speak at a laymen's conference, and it was my first exposure to Hawaii Hongwanji people. As a typical individualist, I was disturbed whether I should conform or not. Soon after the conversation, I had a powerful dream in which I seemed to be attempting suicide. It was a clear dream which I was able to recall when I awoke. I took the lesson of the dream to be that if I held on to my individual way, unheeding the advice and the larger purpose of my activity, I would effectively be committing suicide. From that point, I became more flexible and understanding of the varying sensibilities of people.

We know from individual experience and modern studies of dreams, that our motivations and decision are greatly influenced as we work out our problems in our sub-conscious. Dreams are important in understanding our waking lives and the purposes we follow.

The idea of vision has a broader meaning beyond unusual experiences. We talk of the American dream, or the various dreams or the visions we have for our lives. We should not dismiss our dreams and vision as trivial, feeling that only Shinran had such a vision. His was very intense, but that in no way undermines our own sense of vision. Without a personal vision based in the spirit of the Primal Vow and the meaning of Jodo Shinshu, there will be no significant future of our community. We will clarify our vision for our time through our sharing together our understanding of our faith in our educational process.

II. Shinran's "Hands-on" (approach to his) Mission

Our discussion of Shinran's approach to his missionary effort revolves about the account of his journey from Echigo to Kanto after the period of exile about 1214. The incident appears in Eshin-ni's letters. According to her account, Shinran had vowed to recite the Pure Land sutras "a thousand times for the benefit of all sentient beings." However, as he undertook to chant the sutras, he came to realize that the true way to repay the Buddha's compassion was "to understand the teaching for yourself and then to teach others to understand." This phrase from the teacher Zendo of China became the motto for his ministry and the theme for this program.

If we take the clue from Shinran, we may say that he moved from a "hands off" (indirect) approach to a "hands on" (direct) involvement with people in spreading the Buddha-Dharma. We should also call attention to the fact that in our chanting of the Juseige, we constantly reaffirm this ideal and principle. The Juseige states:

Ishukaihozo/Kosekudokuho/

Joodaishuchu/Seppo shishiku

I open the store-house of the Dharma for all beings,

Universally offering the virtuous treasure.

Always (working) among the masses.

I preach the Dharma with a lion's voice.

Shinran's active efforts among the peasants of the Eastern Provinces resulted in the formation of a community of faith which withstood persecution and the entangle-ments of the dominant folk religion.

According to some scholars, there may have been as many as one hundred thousand members. Even allowing for exaggeration, Shinran's fellowship reached significant dimensions. In addition, he secured the future of the community through his writings which have endured through the centuries.

Jodo Shinshu cannot be isolated from the world or local community and hope to survive meaningfully in our highly competitive religious environment. We must reach out to the wider community to present our message. The bearers of this mission are not only priests or ministers, but all of us as dobodogyo fellow followers of the way, or perhaps interdependent Buddhist seekers.

III. The Style and Method of Shinran's Mission

The third consideration relative to teaching others, is the style of reaching out exemplified by Shinran. Shinran recognized the ego-drive in teaching. In the *Shujisho*, or *Treatise on Steadily Holding to the Faith*, composed by Kakunyo, Shinran states:

This self who is unable to distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, who has no claim even for little deeds of love and compassion, and yet who is willing just for name and fame to pose as teacher... [how shameful!]. (D.T. Suzuki, *Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism*, pp. 122 – 123)

The importance of this statement lies in Shinran's deep self-understanding. He recognized, that, despite our claims to be representatives of truth, we may only be implementing our ego aggression on the world. This does not prevent him from teaching but modifies the way he deals with followers. He does not impose his will on them. Shinran was not a dogmatic, authoritarian personality. He shared his teaching freely, but he did not consider his followers as his possession. In the *Tannisho*, VI, he states that he does not have even one disciple. In Shinshu all are equal in their faith in Amida, they are dobodogyo – fellow followers of the way.

The clear illustration of Shinran's way of dealing with people appears in *Tannisho*, IX. Here he consoles the follower Yuiembo who is disappointed because his faith seems inadequate. He did not have the joy of faith or desire to go to the Pure Land. Shinran empathizes with him, declaring that he had also the same question. He had learned that Amida vowed specifically to save such people.

Shinran identified with his followers. He did not stand over them as superior in character or knowledge. Shinran shared the life of his followers and in his non-aggressive, non-condemning way drew the people to faith and reliance on Amida Buddha's Compassion and Wisdom.

If we take seriously Shinran's humanity as a *bombu* rather than *Shonin*, we can draw guidance from him for pursuing our own educational and evangelical effort. There are those who reject the effort to reach

out actively because of the methods which contemporary Christians employ. We must distinguish the principle of mission and outreach from the methods. We do not follow aggressive methods, but we must, nevertheless, reach out to offer the teaching as the example of Shinran indicates, and the ideal of the Juseige makes clear.

IV. The Foundation of Shinran's Mission

In our previous comments we have been emphasizing Shinran's personal approach, method and style of fulfilling and implementing the principles of sharing one's faith with others. While Shinran is our example and pattern in mission, there is a deeper foundation for engaging in an outreach effort to share the Buddha-Dharma. This foundation roots in Mahayana tradition and its ideals which came to be eloquently expressed in the foundation story or myth that inspired the Pure Land teaching.

It is our faith that the story of Dharmakara Bodhisattva and his fruition as Amida Buddha reflects and expresses the deepest purposes and intention of ultimate reality for all beings.

The purpose of the 48 Primal Vows and centrally the 18th Vow is to bring all beings to enlightenment or Buddhahood. Shinran defined this process in terms of two spiritual movements. That is the aspect of Going (osoeko) and the aspect of Returning (gensoeko). These two spiritual movements or phases are the basis of personal and individual progress toward enlightenment and the effort of outreach to assist others in their progress toward enlightenment.

All religious reality and activity that take place in this world and our own lives is the manifestation and working of the figure of Amida Buddha. In essence, our existence as Buddhists and our community as a fellowship has its foundation in the very heart and meaning of reality. If this is not so, we are no more than another social organization bound by culture, geography and time. On the contrary, the meaning of our lives is the meaning of our community as it unfolds the reality of Amida's compassion in this social-cultural context. Shinran expresses this understanding in an eloquent passage in the Kyogyoshinsho. Shinran defines the one thought moment of shinjin. As he traces its characteristics and source he declares:

The mind that aspires for Buddhahood is the mind that saves sentient beings ... This mind is the mind of great compassion. For this mind arises from the wisdom of immeasurable light. The ocean of the Vow is characterized by sameness; therefore, the aspiration awakened is the same. (SBTS, KGSS II, p. 259)

Shinjin is the mind of Amida awakened in us. Sharing the Dharma with others in faith is the fulfillment of the Vow of Amida in the sphere of human experience and relations.

The mission of Shinran, the mission of Jodo Shinshu, the mission of BCA is not merely to survive as an organization. It is rather to guide people toward enlightenment. It is itself the awareness of our being grasped never to be abandoned. Sharing shinjin with others is the witness the shinjin lives in us.

Conclusion

We must understand clearly the depth of compassion that permeates and animates Shinran's teaching. Perhaps more than any other teacher, he was aware of the depth of the human predicament of passion, egoism and delusion. He saw that the sea of beings (gunjokai) is also the sea of the Vow (gankai). The source of our hope is that as impurities merge in oneness with the Sea of the Vow, they become of one taste, transformed by that compassion. He saw that the broken tiles, which we all are, are transformed into gold by the Buddha-nature in us all understood as shinjin (shinbussho) (Yuishinshomon'i). These transformations come about when people hear the Dharma and take it into their hearts. His teaching retains its power of transformation. It is up to us to fulfill Shinran's vision and mission in a suffering world through our various efforts in sharing the Buddha-Dharma – Jishin Kyoninshin. Namu Amida Butsu.

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