



The Answer

善
心
信
仰



Q @ A for Shinshu Buddhists

VOLUME 04 Nos. 03 & 04

March & April 2009

FOR QUESTIONS, COMMENTS OR CONTRIBUTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT: fukumotodsgn@pacbell.net or sensei@vhbt.org

This combined issue contains unedited essays I wrote for the Jodo Shinshu Correspondence Course. I passed.

As it matures, what do you think Buddhism in America will look like??

The implied basic premise, which is not written, that Buddhism is a singular entity I believe is wrong. I feel this is akin to evaluating all Christianity and using the Catholic Church as representing all of Christendom. My personal experience with this (Buddhism) lies in that growing up, I never knew the meaning of the Nembutsu, all I ever learned was the 4 Noble Truths, the 8 Fold Path, the 6 Paramitas. Ironically all my Buddhist friends, regardless of sect, also had the same understanding. It seems that for those who did not convert, Buddhism has always (so it seems) been plain vanilla or a Theravadan Buddhist Path doctrinally, but no way to achieve it (no practice).

We all grew up with the wonderful understanding that we were not a religion, but a way of life, a philosophy on a way to live. We grew up without knowing of the many colored lights or flavors of Buddhism; we were only introduced to a small singular light bulb or the flavor of vanilla. I am not saying this is wrong, but when there is a spectrum of lights and a chorus of flavors, why then were we not introduced to the flavor or light of our Buddhist tradition.

If there is American Buddhism today, it is steeped in the Theravadan tradition, but without the practice or the means to achieve this Awakening we have all been taught. In the Buddhism I grew up with, we were Americans and Buddhists, with no real understanding why. If we do not learn our tradition's doctrinal path, then all we become are paper Buddhists, fine

to look at but with no substance. In order for American Buddhism to become, it first must understand what it is. The Tibetan Buddhists have been doing this and although, one of the smallest denominations in the USA, it appears to be the dominate form. Sokka Gakkai, with its aggressive brand of secular Buddhism has far reaching implications, again, because it clearly states it's doctrinal case. Zen is in appearance a dominant Buddhist form because it clearly showcases (to the American norm vs. the immigrant off-springs) one must suffer and endure to achieve something great.

Judo, before it became Americanized, was only a sport and a spirit beyond competition. Today, in order to appease the American mentality, a full range of colored belts must be given to show achievement. They now have competitive Judo instruction, so now it is more apt to be called "the winning way" versus "the gentle way." This is wrong on so many levels, yet this is the reality we face and (most likely) cannot change. But, does that make it Judo, or something else? Just because you take up the form, does that still make it Judo, or is there a spirituality missing? I believe this is what American Judo has matured to, focusing only on the "goal" (of winning) and not on the "way."

Which way American Buddhism? I have no studies, no surveys, no academic research verifying my beliefs, only personal experiences and observations. I have my insights and instincts on this matter they all indicate that I am right. When I am approached by non-Buddhists, one of the first comments they will make is either about being a pacifist, a vegetarian, or about reincarnation. None of which I am nor believe in. For me American Buddhism as it matures, must accept its everydayness and not become the exotic flavor of the

day. In order to do this, the distinct variations of each sect must clearly be taught in a concise manner for the world to see. I believe Tibetan Buddhism has done this, Zen to an extent and Sokka Gakkai, the lay organization has also done so, but is this American Buddhism, I don't think so. Buddhism will become American Buddhism when we (and the American public) realize that we are not just the white color of light you see, but rather as varied and rich as the many colors of a rainbow, and we recognize and accept where we are in that rainbow, then this is when I believe we will have a true American Buddhism. A time when we "just are" and not "trying to be."

American Buddhism is more than simply accepting ourselves as Buddhist, it involves two more things, which I believe defines the American character as it relates to religion. The 2 things are charisma and communications. You throw into that mix the general American sense of who we are, as Americans, then you begin to develop a sense of what American religion is. It is a mix of individualism tempered with a need to be fair, as long as we do not have to compromise selfish ideals. Rules only belong to the weak who aren't able to grasp for themselves, the essence of what religion is. On paper, both legally and socially, we foster freedom of religion, however, in reality you have a society that doesn't always seem to be what they represent themselves to be. We are such a mix of cultures and ideals, that what we have become are individuals that can be swayed by those that are able to communicate with panache and style. Shallowness can sometimes be associated with Americans. We, in America are ruled by the "sound bite," thus maybe we Americans are attracted to surface presentations without deep

meaning. There are many serious believers in the USA, however, I am not sure if I can state that is the case for the majority. How deep are Americans religiously? I don't know, but I do know that many will embrace easily understood messages, as long as it resonates with them, and reject those that are complicated or ill presented even if they are wonderful in content. So as I listen to the Rev. Joel Osteen and the ilk, I can see why American Christianity has taken hold and why American Buddhism has not.

Beyond simple presentation is the need to prepare a field to listen to specific messages. If Buddhism is presented as a singular religious entity, then we will only realize failure. As I wrote earlier, the varied colors of our religion is unbelievably rich. But few understand this truth. The Dalai Lama is wonderfully charismatic and is a clear communicator of thoughts and ideas he wants to present. He has been defined by many as the face of Buddhism and as such appears to represent all Buddhists. Most in the USA feel what they read about this illustrious Buddhist is what all Buddhism is about. As I described above this is a seeming trait of most Americans. Many in the USA are not very cosmopolitan, but rather are provincial in thought and experience. Most receive their information via television. They react without serious thought, swayed by emotions versus consideration. I hope I am wrong, but much that I have witnessed, seem to confirm these observations.

Americans have tendencies to put everything we are not familiar with into one box, so that we may categorize and recognize the unfamiliar. This maybe as much human as it is American, but it is what I have observed. This shallow nature (towards Buddhism) can only become mature if we are able to share the joy of our Buddhist beliefs with conviction and commitment. Only then will we be ready to take our place within American Buddhism not as a single entity, but as a religion rich in the textures of the 84,000 paths introduced by the Shakyamuni Buddha.

Dr. Bloom wrote to me, "I am quite in agreement with you that we must understand the doctrinal content of our tradition or it is something that is just formal. However, this requires a strong education program which is only just beginning, here and on the mainland. The earlier emphasis on the ethical probably had as its basis the need for something easy to communicate to youth, and also to show that Buddhism made good citizens in the face of the

discrimination that the community faced. In Hawaii it was taught by the white Christian majority that you could not be a good citizen if you were not Christian. Unfortunately, we have a society that asks: What do you believe? And our youth often have no answer; they have feelings which they cannot articulate coming from their Buddhist experience."

American's take on religion will define who we can become as American Buddhist. Just as we do not define Christianity as one entity, Buddhism cannot be defined as one entity. Only in this acceptance, can we truly grow into becoming American Buddhists. Buddhism that is engaged is mature. In order to be engaged, knowledge and commitment must be part of that mix. Without this, Buddhism is just a light fixture, whereas the true source, electricity is everywhere and active. Until Buddhists realize this truth, how can it mature? It can only mature when acceptance of who we are is true and real and not what we imagine it to be. When that happens, I believe American Buddhism will finally begin the maturing process and become a true American Buddhism and not an empty suit, with little heart and content.

What is your insight into the doctrinal conditions for Jodo Shin Buddhism to remain as an influential religious institution in the United States?

The migration of Buddhism to Japan from China, Korea and India was only available to those with time, money and volition to study and aspire. The wealthy and powerful of that time accessed Buddhism because of their assets and power. They rationalized their Buddhist beliefs because they felt that it would bring prosperity and security to their society. Society being defined as the aristocracy and those with power and money (comprising only about 5% of the general population). Buddhism in it's early development in Japan was not for the common person, but for the elite it would serve. The elite had time to contemplate and pursue a spiritual Salvation, only the elite could access Buddhism.

The plight of the common person was usually confined to assure the next day's meal or shelter. How could the common person benefit from this elitist foreign religion if the masses were not only overworked but illiterate? Won-hyo, a famous Korean Buddhist scholar maintained that, "...by living in society as a lay person he could better serve the people." It was this type of attitude that exemplified Buddhism as an

equally accessible religion. He promoted Pure Land Buddhism as a way to Salvation through the devotional practice of reciting the Buddha's name by the masses complementing the meditative practices of the monks. Other Korean scholars such as Pak-Chongbin focused on lay society stressing the equality of men and women because Buddhism is devoted to the liberation of all sentient beings. Although the Pure Land path Japan may have began with these types of interpretations, it evolved into something that is pure Japanese in attitude and understanding.

Jodo Shinshu is the biggest religious institution in Japan today. The historical ascent of Jodo Shinshu in Japan can be summarized by the phrase, "Ondobo Ondogyo, or Fellow Travelers and Practicers." In Mahayana Buddhism, with its goal of becoming enlightened together with all beings, Shinshu enables men, women and children the availability of Buddhahood regardless of class or wealth. What greater gift could the ordinary Japanese receive than the gift of spiritual Salvation at a time of turmoil and hopelessness. I believe for the ordinary person, who only had the time to prepare for the mundane tasks of everyday survival, an easy Buddhist path embracing all was ripe for reception into the Japanese way of life. History proves this to be correct, once introduced, the ordinary Japanese found refuge in the Pure Land path filling them with hope and promise of a better life to come.

Shinran Shonin, founder of Jodo Shinshu, had as his primary audience ordinary Pure Land followers, or people from various walks of life that he called friends and fellow practitioners; he called them "Ondobo Ondogyo." He identified his fellow travelers as foolish beings or the objects of boundless compassion by the Amida Buddha. The ordinary Japanese person could now access Buddhism without the need of wealth, intellect or power. Shinran Shonin wrote in a letter to Joshin-bo: "Simply achieve birth, avoiding all scholarly debate. I recall hearing the late master Honen say, 'The person of the Jodo tradition attains birth in the Buddha Land by becoming his foolish self.' Moreover, I remember him smile and say, as he watched humble people of no intellectual pretensions coming to visit him, 'Without doubt their birth is settled.' And I heard him say after a visit by a man brilliant in letters and debating, 'I really wonder about his birth.' To this day these things come to mind." I believe Shinran Shonin wrote this to convey his understanding of Buddhism, encouraging readers to share the contents of their hearts

and not their heads when following the Nembutsu Path.

I believe Shinran Shonin expressed his understanding of Buddhism: the Truth is simple but not necessarily easy to grasp because we are led astray by our attachment to words and letters. This becomes the path open to all when Faith and Sincerity in the Amida is preminent in Salvation, and not wealth, intellect or power. Therefore, the followers and practicers only need to deepen their awareness and faith in the Amida. This opens the path of Salvation for the foolish beings we are.

In the preface of the Shohinge by Ryukoku University (1963), this was written, "Buddhism is a great spiritual asset bequeathed to humanity by Sakyamuni, the enlightened One. But its scope is so large and variegated that people today may be at a loss as to how to get access to the treasure-store of Dharma. We cannot possibly read all the scriptures, nor successfully practice the methods of attaining Bodhi while busily occupied in earning a living. Besides, our intellect and practice are deceptive and misleading due to the deep-rooted, delusory self-attachment which blinds us spiritually. This impossibility of attaining Bodhi on our side is made a possibility by Amida Buddha, who channels the way for us to the Castle of Enlightenment by turning all the truths and merits of Dharma over to us. Herein lies the essential characteristic of Shin Buddhism." I believe this is the spirit and power of "Ondobo Ondogyo." This, I believe, has the power to move and motivate the masses. However, in the ensuing 750 years since Shinran Shonin's era, his powerful yet simple message seems to have become lost in translation.

The power of Jodo Shinshu has the potential to become the most influential religious tradition in the United States. I believe because of the inconsistent interpretations of Jodo Shinshu, it remains anonymous as a religious presence. The other Buddhist traditions, although smaller and with less history in the United States, appears to be more dominant and influential. They seem to be more focused in their beliefs.

Shinran Shonin wrote this, "The people of the countryside, who do not know the meanings of characters and are painfully and hopelessly ignorant, may easily understand, I have repeatedly written the same things again and again. The educated reader will probably find this writing peculiar and may ridicule it. But paying no heed to such criticism, I write only that

foolish people may easily grasp the essential meaning." Shinran Shonin's words have potential to dominate, but only if we the foolish can realize our foolishness.

What do you think about the change of Buddhism during this transition or how do you evaluate it?

Humankind has been aware of Buddhism as a religious path for about 2600 years. During that time people have changed the understanding of the Buddha's teachings to suit their purposes. The teachings began when Gotama Buddha Awoke to the Truth, beginning a ministry that has spanned the globe and continues today. However, from the moment of his death, those that remained were left to their own interpretations of the teachings. The Buddha was no longer a beacon for their faith but now only an inspiration for the Truth that saves us from suffering.

Honen Shonin observed that, "Faith varies so long as it is based on 'Self-Power,' for we all have different intellectual capacities, and the faith based upon them cannot be identical; whereas the faith based upon a power other than the Self is one that is given by the Buddha to us, ignorant beings, regardless of our moral attainment and therefore, what makes up my faith cannot in any way differ from the faith embraced by Zenshin, they are identical. My faith is not the outcome of my ingenuity. Those who entertain a faith other than that which has just been referred to, may not go to the same Pure Land where I am bound for. Let this be thoroughly understood by all." Although the context of the passage is different, what Honen Shonin points to is that it is our short comings that keeps us from understanding the message given; the Truth that saves, however, continues unchanged. I contend that the message of the Buddha is unchanging, it is the interpretations that we give it that has changed. The Truth that the Buddha shared is the settlement and assurance that to be Awakened is to follow the path.

In the home country of Buddhism, it is remarkable that it has all but died out as a major religious presence. The reasons can vary, but the decline cannot be denied. The rejection of a soul by the Buddha, differences in the approach to family life and other possible reasons may explain the decline. Buddhism with its emphasis on not delaying monastic life versus the Hindu's need for fulfilling family and social obligations before searching for emancipation may yet be another. Whatever

the reasons, the decline is real. The Truth that the Buddha brought to the country of his birth is true and real yet not acknowledged. Although many had received his message, many may not have been ready to hear or receive it. When a message is not fully understood, especially when the originator is no longer there to confirm it, the message is open to interpretation. His country of origin may not have been able to interpret the teachings to its full understanding, however, this is where the Wheel first turned.

As Buddhism migrated to China at the beginnings of the Christian Era, it began an amalgamation of thoughts and interpretations because the Buddhist (Indian) and Chinese views of life differed. The Chinese view being more empirical and the Buddhist view more transcendent and beyond this world. However interpreted, each reflected truths as perceived and nurtured by the culture Buddhism encountered. Nevertheless, Truth remains Truth, and with each new encounter, the interpretation of the Truth changes with the personalities and understandings of those groups. The Truth of the message remains unchanged, however the method of achievement now takes an interpretive turn.

In the Kyogyoshinsho, in the chapter on Realization, this is written:

"All dharmas, however, are produced from the mind; there is no other realm. [Thus,] sentient beings and environment are neither different nor identical. They are not identical, for they are distinct in meaning; they are not different, for they are the same purity..."

"Question: The purity of [the world as] sentient beings refers to Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Is it possible for human beings and devas there to be included in the purity?"

Answer: They may be termed pure, but they are not actually pure. Consider, for example, that sages who have renounced homelife are called 'bhiksu' because they have slain the villainous blind passions, but those renouncing homelife who are yet foolish beings are also called 'bhiksu.' It is like this. Further, a prince who is to be anointed possesses at birth the thirty-two marks of excellence [of a cakravartin king] and the seven treasures belong to him. Although he cannot yet perform the kingly offices, still he is called 'cakravartin king,' for he is certain to become king. So it is with all those human beings and devas [of the Pure Land]. They join the truly settled of the Mahayana and ultimately realize

dharma-body of purity. Because they will realize it, they may be called "pure."

As Buddhism migrated to other lands and cultures, the Truth remains "pure." However, the interpretation of the Truth changes with each new encounter. These encounters yields additional interpretations where each claims, offers, argues, or emphasizes the authenticity of their view. Yet the foundation of Truth transcends our petty differences that we have built around Buddha's teachings. I feel when one is sincere of heart, our petty truths are changed to be one with the Buddha's Truth. I contend, whether we are the sage "bhiksu" or foolish "bhiksu" we are still "bhiksu." The various interpretations of Pure Truth that the Buddha Awoke to begins when the Buddha was no longer a corporeal beacon for Truth. Those who sought the Truth after the Awakened One passed on only saw the Truth based on self-intellectual and experiential capacities. However, the Truth shared by the Buddha is and always will be true and real uncorrupted by the petty differences interpreted by ordinary people.

What would it mean for the Buddha to be everywhere? Who or what would the Buddha be in such a case?

Gotama Buddha taught, "...this is the great nirvana. Also, it is so called because of the great self, for the great self means the truth that nirvana has no self and is absolute freedom. Since nirvana has nothing to grasp at, it can contain every and all dharmas as they are. Since it is everywhere like the sky, though it cannot be seen directly, it can be shown to people at will." He further taught, "The Buddha is not an ordinary man. His body, his mind, and his insight permeate universally all the countries of the world, transcending boundaries and obstacles eternally and without change." According to his teachings Buddha is everywhere because he is nowhere. The Buddha is clear in his intent, "Even though this physical body perishes, the body of the Dharma that I taught remains forever." "Through the eyes of insight, compassion, and reverence, you will see the Body of the Dharma that is far superior to mine. Only those who rightly perceive the Body of the Dharma will become aware that I shall remain in this world as before and never leave their sides." "The Dharma that I have taught you through the years is the teacher that you must follow." This is the essence of what the Buddha expressed as his omnipresence and I believe this is true and real.

When Gotama Buddha became the "great self" he also became the Tathagata. His teachings transcend his presence, and just before he died he said, "From now on, if you disciples discuss this among yourselves and practice accordingly, it will mean the continuous and imperishable existence of the Dharmakaya of the Buddha."

I can accept his universal presence, but not the efficacy of his teachings unless he was alive today. Remember, shortly after his death Massa-Kassapa observed the irreverent behavior of Subhadda towards the Buddha, "Only seven days have passed since the World Honored One's demise, and this man speaks such words. The flower of the true Dharma will soon be scattered by this kind of man, like unstrung flowers that are easily blown away by the wind." Like the flowers blown away, today's causes and conditions make the path impossible for ordinary people like me to follow.

Further, Buddha can be everywhere because within each sentient form resides Buddha Nature. Buddha nature cannot be destroyed, decayed nor seen, yet we ordinary people posses it. The Buddha said, "...Buddha nature is called the mind of great faith, for by means of such faith one can complete the path of the bodhisattva. Since all people will realize this without fail, I say that they all posses Buddha nature. Buddha nature is the Buddha." Accordingly the "mind of great faith" will lead us to Nirvana. I further believe that the great "mind of faith" is the Nembutsu and is the one vehicle in which all can ride equally.

Finally, the only Buddha that saves is described by the Gotama Buddha thusly, "...if you maintain the mind of faith... and offer the Buddha even one stalk of a flower, you will be able to reach nirvana on account of that merit...even if someone only once thinks of the Buddha in his mind, and even if he only once pays reverence to him, he is destined to realize nirvana... if someone hears the name of the Buddha, he will be able to enter nirvana on account of that merit...I shall become a refuge for all those who have no refuge..." I believe that this describes the Amida Buddha the Gotama Buddha spoke of at Vulture Peak, the Buddha who saves all just as we are.

A Final Thought:

I hope you enjoyed the essays I wrote for my classes. I had many conflicts with my first essay, but from these conflicts came a greater learning for me. For these conflicts, I came to appreciate my reviewing teacher

because she questioned what I wrote. As a result, I studied harder and answered more clearly with these essays written.

These essays were on General Buddhism and not Jodo Shinshu. As a result of this conflict, I wrote answers directed to the course question thoughtfully, yet still hold true to what I believe as a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist. And being who I am, I could not help but finding a Shin message regardless of the references given to study.

On another note, I will be leaving for Japan in March and try to enter Chuo Bukkyo Gakuin's Honka program (completion confers Tokudo & Kyoshi ordinations). I know that I am asking a lot to be allowed into the Honka program (a 1 year course), but that is what I am aiming for. If successful, I would also like to try and apply for the Kenkyuka (advanced course and 1 more year) program. If I am able to pass the entrance test and complete the Honka program course, I would like to become a Kaikyoshi and teach in any Kyodan that would welcome me as a minister. I am older than most, but have a deep desire to continue to learn and grow in our Shinshu faith. I hope to share this experience and knowledge with others in the United States of our wonderful Shin Doctrine.

One of my greatest hopes from childhood was to learn about and to be able to share our Buddhist beliefs. In 1988 I learn of our doctrinal teachings. With this I began my search for understanding of who I am as a Shin Buddhist, and of sharing the Nembutsu Path that I follow.

With my children out of college and working or living their own lives, finally gives me the opportunity to pursue my own spiritual dream. If I am able to attend and graduate from Chubutsu, I will be able to embark on a new journey in my life, a joyful life of sharing the Nembutsu with other travelers and believers on our path to Awakening.

Finally, a reality check, if I do not pass the test, I will continue to write the Answer and continue to share as I have been for these past 3 years. I will be disappointed in myself for being given this opportunity and not being able to succeed. However, regardless of what happens all I will do is accept that what is and go forward. The Joy of the Nembutsu will not wane in me, it will only grow.

Thank you for reading the Answer over these past 3 years and I hope to restart it when opportunity arises again. In gassho.

NAMO AMIDA BUTSU