

## A Vision of Jōdo Shinshū: Fulfilling the Primal Vow in History

by Alfred Bloom

We are fast approaching the threshold of the twenty-first century and the third millennium in Western civilization. In our tangled world of military, economic and social struggle, such rare turning points take on symbolic significance as they point to new possibilities for humanity. New turning points offer challenging prospects for the Hongwanji in Hawaii, Canada, Europe and the Buddhist Churches of America as each of us looks forward to our respective centennials and pauses to reflect on the future of Jōdo Shinshū as it begins its second century in American society.

Such threshold junctures of history force all of us to contemplate the future, particularly as followers of Shinran and participants in the heritage of Jōdo Shinshū. While we cannot *predict* the actual future that will unfold before us, we can *project* a future that will inspire us to work to fulfill our deepest ideals.

We cannot review in this short space our lengthy and complex history which brings us to our present condition. However, whatever its character and problems, it represents the continuing unfolding of Shinran's vision reported in the *Godenshō* in which he saw the masses of suffering and yearning people of his time and was commissioned by the Bodhisattva Kannon to marry and live among the people, working with them to fulfill the Vow to save all beings.

At a later time, Shinran was to employ as a motto for his life Zendō's words in his *Jishin Kyōninshin*: "We teach others the faith which we have received." Essentially, it means we share our faith with others. Thus, the *vision* and *mission* of all of us as followers of Jōdo Shinshū is to carry

on the fulfillment of the Primal Vow in history.

I believe that in order for Jōdo Shinshū to meet the second century in America with vitality and commitment, we must view ourselves not merely as a Japanese religious tradition bound by ethnic and family ties, or as a community of specific beliefs, but as a living embodiment of the ongoing process of the realization of Amida Buddha's compassion and wisdom. This has passed from Amida to Sakyamuni, through the seven great teachers to Shinran, and eventually through Shin history to ourselves.

With this self-understanding motivating and shaping our sangha, Jōdo Shinshū can truly become a world faith, opening the horizons of Amida Buddha's compassion to all beings. We must transcend ethnic and national boundaries that are simply the karmic result of historical conditions. In line, then, with the mission of the Primal Vow, we will become *mission-oriented* in the deepest meaning of the word.

What is it that we have to share with our fellow human beings? It is clear that Jōdo Shinshū is eminently equipped to bring the message of Buddhism to the ordinary people of modern society through its understanding of the value of the householder life. The recognition of lay life and the affirmation of the everyday world that is the Jōdo Shinshū faith makes it exceptionally adaptable to the life of modern society.

Viewed through the perspective of religious history, Jōdo Shinshū can be seen as the fulfillment of the ideals of liberal religion in the West. Yet it maintains a basis for lively devotion. It

affords the profound experience of *shinjin*. It avoids the excesses of rationalistic criticism of religion. Thus, Jōdo Shinshū spirituality is at once affirmative of human life and critical of human attachments and extremes.

Further, Jōdo Shinshū avoids both the uncritical adulation of leaders and the spiritual and social dependency the “guru” phenomenon frequently produces in popular “isms.” It also avoids the exclusivism and dogmatism found in Western religions. There is, in Jōdo Shinshū, a foundation for deep personal religious commitment and the awareness of all-embracing reality; a foundation and awareness that permit a critical, intellectual approach to religious phenomena.

Jōdo Shinshū affirms the wholeness of the person: physically, emotionally and intellectually. The vision of our destiny within the fulfillment of the Primal Vow draws us together as a true sangha, bound by a common purpose, activated by compassion, and guided by the wisdom of the Vow.

Inspired by the vision of the Vow’s fulfillment in history, we can set ourselves to address the application of Jōdo Shinshū to the many personal, social, intellectual and spiritual issues of our age.

In this second century, the 21st century, Jōdo Shinshū can project a globally embracing future to all beings everywhere. Instead of being pawns of the future, with such a vision we can be dynamic participants in ongoing dialogues concerning the future.

Despite our small size within the totality of world society, I believe that, inspired by such visions and mission, we can and shall become a significant voice constantly witnessing to the compassion and wisdom of the Primal Vow of Amida, which embraces all beings without distinction and never abandons anyone to despair of hopelessness. This is my personal vision and my hope for Jōdo Shinshū fulfilling the Primal Vow in the history of the future.