

Notes on the Americanization of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism: Urgency, Adaptation, and Existential Relevance in America, 1986 and Beyond

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PREFACE

Poets are the divine messengers of the inward soul. Therefore, theirs are the words I borrow here to invoke the American soul: its spirit, its darkened terrain, its unconsciousness.

"Midway in our life's journey, / I went astray / from the straight road and woke to find myself / alone in a dark wood" (Dante). "Dark, dark my light, and darker my desire" (Roethke). "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world, / The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned; / . . . / Surely some revelation is at hand" (Yeats), "Oh, Mary, / Gentle Mother / open the door and let me in. / . . . / I have been born many times, a false Messiah, / but let me born again / into something true" (Sexton). "Lord, I am not worthy / Lord, I am not worthy / but speak the word only. (T.S. Eliot).¹

Jōdo Shinshū responds, in the words of Shinran Shōnin, "(The Power of Amida's Vow) is a Light that illuminates the long night of ignorance / Do not grieve over the blindness of one's eye of wisdom / For the Vow is a vessel that floats us on the great ocean of birth and death / Do not despair over the gravity of one's evil."² Although still only dimly perceived in America, the "Something true" and the "Word" prayed for by the poets quoted above is the Name, *Namu Amida Butsu*, which vows the salvation of the unsaveable.

BUDDHISM IS A RELIGION OF SALVATION

The renowned scholar of the *prajñāpāramitā* tradition, Edward Conze, writes, in its core,

"*Buddhism is a doctrine of salvation*" (italics are Conze's).³ And Professor Frederick Streng affirms that "Nāgārjuna's articulation (of the Mādhyamika philosophy) is more than a set of propositions; it is the articulation of a vision which seeks to release human beings from suffering; i.e., *to save them*" (italics are mine).⁴ Even the Zen Master Dōgen expounds, "Forgetting body and mind, by placing them together in Buddha's hands and letting him lead you on, you will without design or effort gain freedom, attain Buddhahood."⁵

Jōdo Shinshū's efforts to adapt itself to its American setting must be viewed in this light. That is, its spread, or increase in followers, is secondary. The ultimate reason Jōdo Shinshū must make itself accessible to America is that Jōdo Shinshū possesses infinite potential towards the salvation of America—from a collective condition of crisis and *duḥkha*.

THE AMERICAN CONDITION TO WHICH JŌDO SHINSHŪ MUST ADDRESS ITSELF

Books on America, written during the past five years are overwhelmingly dark.⁶ This is not a reflection of Cassandra-like alarmism or pessimism, but rather of realism. For aside from the nuclear sword that hangs over us all, America is faced with a number of crises: urban violence, a devastating national debt, an epidemic of drugs, a breakdown of basic social institutions such as the family, a loss of stature among nations, a loss of a sense of community (Americans sue each other with greater frequency than any other people), a breakdown in ethical values (e.g., widespread cheating among students) and the dehumanizing

effects of modern technology, for example. Moreover, pollutants poison our land, water, plants, animals, and ourselves; the disposal of one trillion pounds of non-nuclear but hazardous waste material and one hundred million pounds of nuclear waste material, produced each year, lack sufficient control.

America's karmic past continues to rebound. American Indians remember the decimation of their people and culture and speak out with increasing rage. Blacks act out from their collective unconscious, filled with the memories of more than 240 years of slavery. America's policy of national egotism, manifest toward Mexico and the Central and South American nations' destiny is now bearing fruit. The tragedy of Viet-Nam continues to haunt. Even heretofore quiet Japanese-Americans are now protesting their forced removal to relocation/concentration camps (1942-1945).

Beyond this, the world's population increases by eighty million each year and, albeit indirectly, America is beginning to feel its effects. The shift from an industrial to a technological state is resulting in the phasing out of the middle class and the bifurcation of American society into the very rich and the very poor, with its resultant sense of dislocation. Increasing mobility undermines social cohesion; the writer Vance Packard notes that America is becoming a nation of strangers. The relatively poor quality of education has produced a nation in which one-third of its people are functionally illiterate. Seven hours of T.V. watching every day has blurred the distinction between image and reality. Finally, as the sociologist Robert Bellah notes, in American society "the economy is geared to deliberately stimulate insatiable human desire."⁷

Perhaps sensing America's weakened condition, other industrial nations are overtaking America. Briefly stated, while they export, we import; they emphasize responsibility, we harangue each other about our "rights"; they invest in their future, we mortgage ours; they save, enriching their national wealth, we compulsively spend and deplete our national wealth.

Even the quintessentially American trait of individualism, that affirmation of the dignity and even the sacredness of the individual, it appears, as noted first by the French writer and political scientist Tocqueville, has a dark side. That is, individualism is prone to develop into a sense of isolation and fragmentation.⁸ These, then, are some of the crises that define the American condition, 1986.

THE TRADITIONAL SOURCES OF ANSWERS AND RESOLUTIONS: PHILOSOPHY, PSYCHOLOGY, RELIGION AND THE ARTS

Allied against the critical conditions outlined above are the traditional sources of wisdom: Philosophy, Psychology, Religion and the Arts. An examination of these, however, finds them, in the main, powerless. For example, with regard to philosophy, it can be said that aside perhaps from a crude form of pragmatism ("if it works, it's right and true"), America has no philosophy in the way *Bushidō* or Code of the Warrior pervaded Japanese life for hundreds of years. There are, of course, thousands of scholars who teach philosophy as a technical subject at colleges. Among them, however, are few who live and die their philosophy as did Socrates, Kierkegaard, or more recently, Sartre.

The vast majority of Americans live, for the most part, unconsciously, by pseudo philosophies which, for want of a better term, may be described as "sensualism" ("if it feels good, do it"); or "narcissism" (Me, Me, Me); or "anarchism" ("I'll do it if I feel like it; it's a free country"); or "quantity-ism" ("the bigger the better; the more the merrier"); or "self-gratificationism" ("I want more and I want it now"); or "vigilantism" ("I'll take care of him personally, with *this*"); or "consumerism" ("I just have to have that"); or "success-ism" ("I don't care how I do it, I'm going to make it"); or "commercialism" ("O.K. now, let's figure out a way to make this profitable"); or "hype-ism" ("exaggerate a little; what's important is to get it out there; to publicize, to promote"); or "entertainment-ism" ("The most important thing? To have Fun!!!"). These, of course, are

not solutions. They are the problem.

Psychology, for the most part, is also powerless to do anything toward resolving the American crisis. Although there are over two hundred forms of popular psychologies, they are, in essence, useless, mainly because their basic presupposition is that our conscious mind can significantly influence our unconscious. Depth psychology or psychoanalysis is, of course, more powerful and more effective, but to be effective, according to Freud, one must attend a one-hour session with an analyst, five days per week, for five years. Very few can afford that kind of time or money.

The deepest source of resolution for human suffering is religion. Of the status of religion in America, 1986, several things can be said: First, there is a resurgence of interest in religion. However, a large part of it is on the lower levels, with its emphasis on quasi-magical practices, healing, this-worldly benefits and political power. Second, the religious message of Christianity has been inter-mixed with popular psychology, diluting the purity of its teaching. Christian thinkers such as Tillich have made profound interpretations of Christianity, but these have not filtered down to the masses. And third, the message of such theologians as Altizer that "God is dead" may reflect, partially at least, the spiritual condition in America. God, of course, is Absolute and cannot die. However, the traditional ways of explaining/understanding/experiencing God may have died in America. That is, they no longer elicit any deep spiritual response; they have no real meaning for Americans. This absence of God is reflected in a darkening America.

And what of the arts? It can be said that no one describes the human condition with greater sensitivity, depth, and accuracy than writers. However, despite their sometime incandescent genius for conveying their perception and experience of the American condition, they, for the most part, have no answers. No resolution. They report, but they do not prescribe. This is true for poets (Eliot, Sexton, *et al.*), for playwrights (O'Neill, Miller, *et al.*), and for novelists (Bellow,

Mailer, *et al.*). Because of the failure of these traditional sources of wisdom, many Americans, especially the young, are, according to Harvey Cox, "Turning East"⁹ for spiritual sustenance and resolution. Toward Zen, Nichiren and Tibetan Buddhism, but ultimately to the Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism of Shinran.

THE BRIGHT SIDE OF THE AMERICAN SHADOW

Despite the dark and foreboding account above, America possesses certain basic strengths which make it an especially fertile ground for the spread of Jōdo Shinshū. We must begin with the two pillars that serve as the foundation of America: The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. The former proclaims the equality of all persons and their being endowed with certain Unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. The latter guarantees the freedom of worship and the prohibition of a government-established religion (First Amendment). It provides equal protection under the law (Fourteenth Amendment). And it guarantees the rights of citizen against U.S. or state infringement based on race, color, or previous servitude (Fifteenth Amendment). Contrast this with the religious situation in the People's Republic of China, the Soviet Union, or Iran, and the importance of these two documents becomes self-evident. Objectively, America is blessed, as we all know, with tremendous natural resources: land, space, minerals, soil, water, etc. Its technology leads the world; its material affluence is unmatched.

Psychologically, Americans still retain their pioneering spirit and they continue to seek new challenges and religions. Philosophically, they are pragmatic and willing to test and use anything that works, whether it be a new gadget, psychotherapy, or religion. Its comparative lack of tradition enables it to move smoothly into new territories.

From the very beginning (the Puritan separatists, the Plymouth Colony, the Constitution, etc.), religion has always played an integral part

in American life. This trait continues, symbolically, in the use of the phrase, "In God We Trust" on U.S. currency, in the saying of invocations at state and national assemblies, in its habit of self-reflection and even self-reproach, and in its quickness to help the sick, hungry and poor. No other country, for example, has ever matched America's compassion towards those seeking refuge from persecution and suffering.

These are some of the reasons that America possesses the potentiality to serve as the next religious matrix for a new growth of Jōdo Shinshū. Should this transpire, the implications are infinite because America is both the future of, and a model to, the world. The effects may rebound to the country of its origin, Japan.

CHANGE AND ADAPTATION AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF BUDDHISM

Buddhism's essence is Compassion and Wisdom, and both are manifested as, and through, *upāya*. "*Upāya*" means effective methods, tools, or techniques used to convey Buddhism. Buddhism flourished outside of India, in distant lands such as China, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Indonesia and Japan because of the skillful application and exercise of *upāya*.

The "Biographies of Eminent Monks"¹⁰ records numerous examples of Indian and Central Asian monks employing a variety of techniques to convey Buddhism to the native Chinese. Donran, whom Shinran Shōnin revered, used Taoist examples to explain Pure Land concepts.¹¹ (References to Taoist concepts were widespread during the early years of Buddhism in China). The North Indian Bodhiruci, Donran's teacher, used a feat of magic to convince the Chinese of Buddhism's power.¹² The Central Asian monk, Fo-t'u-ch'êng impressed the Chinese with his ability to cure illness.¹³ Shinran radically altered the reading of scriptural passages and shaped Pure Land doctrine for the sake of the people of the Kamakura Period. In like manner, a diversity of *upāya* must be employed in the struggle to adapt Jōdo Shinshū to its American context.

This need, I believe, is self-evident.

ADAPTATION AS ESSENTIALLY A DIALECTICAL PROCESS

By "dialectical," I simply mean "the interplay of opposites" in which apparently opposing truths mutually influence and enhance each other, much as two pieces of glowing charcoal face each other. With reference to Jōdo Shinshū in America, the "opposites" that present themselves are as follows:

Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism in America must retain its traditional doctrines. At the same time, it must be modified, adapted, and made to conform to its American setting. While grounding Jōdo Shinshū in its objective doctrine, subjective religious experience must be clarified and emphasized. While the preservation of the purity of Jōdo Shinshū doctrine must be of primary concern, there should be no hesitation in making use of insights from other traditions; e.g., philosophy, psychology, literature, modern physics, Zen/Tibetan/Yogācāra/Mādhyamika Buddhism.

While holding Faith to be of the essence (the vertical dimension), a more detailed attention must be paid to the problem of how to ethically manifest that Faith in society (the horizontal dimension). While affirming the suddenness of the one moment of awakening to Faith, stress must be placed equally on the importance of Faith as a gradual process; that is, the nurturing of the awakening to Faith throughout one's life. The moment of Faith must also be viewed as occurring in linear time, as well as continuously taking place in the Absolute Now. Faith must be experienced as both the absolute negation of the self and the absolute affirmation of the self. While emphasizing the importance of a Spiritual Guide (Zenchishiki/Kalyāṇamitra), the need to let go one's attachment to the teacher must be stressed.

The quintessence of Jōdo Shinshū is absolutely paradoxical (for example: "the meaning of no-meaning") but this must be made comprehensible. In the Chapter on Faith in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, the Ocean of Great Faith is seen as negating

all opposites (sudden/gradual; thought/absence thought; meditation/good works, etc.).¹⁴ However, this negation must be experienced as transcending both negation and affirmation.

The American institution of Jōdo Shinshū (BCA) must ground itself in the Hongwanji in Kyoto, Japan, and at the same time work to establish a separate identity here in America. We must exert ourselves toward the spread of Jōdo Shinshū to others, but at the same time know that the ultimate source of that exertion lies in *Tariki* or the "Power of the Absolute Other" and not in *jiriki*, the power of the limited, egotistic self. With regard to salvation, we must be fully aware that there is absolutely nothing for one to do; one is neither capable of, nor required to contribute to, one's salvation. And yet one must exert ourselves to understand and fully comprehend or experience this point.

Jōdo Shinshū must be seen as dealing with one's personal, psychological and social problems, but at the same time it must be known that its ultimate concern is with those problems that have no solution: death, absolute evil, irreversible karmic bondage, etc. The Jōdo Shinshū follower must decry the depth of his or her evil and unconditionally affirm that evil is the seminal source of salvation. In the act of Faith, one must see that one dies utterly (*Zen nen myōjū*) and simultaneously is born anew (*Gonen sokushō*).

In Faith, one must see that one's evil is absolutely fixed, unredeemable, and beyond salvaging and that this evil undergoes ultimate transformation to become its opposite. We must revere the symbols of Jōdo Shinshū, and at the same time transcend the symbols and see the Reality to which they point. Ultimate effort must be expended to go to the Pure Land to be born a Buddha (*ōjō*), knowing that the final goal is returning to this defiled, floating world of suffering to work for the deliverance of all sentient beings (*gensō*).

Finally, and in a slightly different vein, birth into the Pure Land is, in truth, no longer to be

born (*mushō no shō*). Meaning is the negation of meaning (*mugi no gi*). Non-practice is practice (*fugyō no gyō*). "To think that one has attained Faith is to not attain; to know that one has not attained is to attain."¹⁵ "That which is shallow (in matters of Faith) is deep."¹⁶

Thus, the adaptational process is involved and complex. For it to evolve correctly, three major components must be present: 1) clear and objective knowledge of the doctrine of Jōdo Shinshū (that is, its basic texts), 2) subjective or spiritual depth, and 3) time itself.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It must be emphasized that in the attempt to adapt and to become existentially relevant, the crucial thing is not numbers, money, knowledge, administration, or secular notoriety. Such have their place. However, what is of ultimate importance is spiritual depth; depth that is based on *Tariki*, the Other-Power and not *jiriki*, one's own power, of which the essence is delusion, defilement and powerlessness.

Moreover, such spiritual depth must be manifested in the person of one, single individual; concretely and historically. The worth of a true Buddhist is affirmed by two men of different traditions and times. Zen Master Watanabe Genshu (1869-1963) said, "Even one or two who are True Monks will do. Should they appear today in our country, Japanese Buddhism will be saved by that fact alone."¹⁷ Approximately five hundred years before, Rennyo Shōnin taught that "The flourishing of a religion has nothing to do with the large numbers of people who gather or with the greatness of its secular power. The flourishing of a religion is dependent on even one person attaining Faith."¹⁸

FOOTNOTES:

1. Dante, *The Inferno*. John Ciardi (Tr.), *The Inferno* (N.Y.: The New American Lib., 1954), p. 28.

- Roethke, "In a Dark Time." Yeats, "The Second Coming." Sexton, "Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost." T.S. Eliot, "Ash Wednesday."
2. Shinran Shōnin, *Shōzōmatsu Wasan*, Verse 35.
 3. Edward Conze, *A Short History of Buddhism* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980), p. 21.
 4. Frederick J. Streng, *Emptiness—A Study in Religious Meaning* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1967), p. 171.
 5. Dōgen, *Shōbōgenzō* Chapter V, "Life and Death." Lucien Stryk and Takashi Ikemoto (Ed. and Tr.), *Zen: Poems, Prayers, Sermons, Anecdotes, Interviews* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1965), p. 41.
 6. A sampling of material published between 1980-86 (with the exception of the work by Packard). For reasons of space, bibliographic information has been kept to a minimum.

Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism—American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*.

Joseph Granville, *The Warning—The Coming Great Crash in the Stock Market. Why It Is Inevitable. What You Can Do to Avoid It*.

Vance Packard, *A Nation of Strangers*.

David Burnham, *The Rise of the Computer State—A Chilling Account of the Computer's Threat to Society*.

David and Holly Franke, *Safe Places for the 80s—Over 100 Suburbs, Towns, and Villages Where You and Your Family Can Live, Work and Go to School, Safe from Crime*.

Edward Zuckerman, *After World War III—The U.S. Government's Plans for Surviving a Nuclear War*. (Other similar titles: *Nuclear War Survival Skills; Assured Survival—Putting the Star Wars Defense in Perspective; The Cold and the Dark—The World After Nuclear War*, etc.)

George L. Waldbott, M.D., *Health Effects of Environmental Pollutants*.

Pranay Gupte, *The Crowded Earth*.

Jonathan Kwitney, *Endless Enemies—The Making of an Unfriendly World*.

Norman Corwin, *Trivializing America—The Triumph of Mediocrity*.

Maxine Schell, *Limits—A Search for New Values*.

James Coates and Michael Killian, *Heavy Losses—The Dangerous Decline of American Defense*.

Eliot Currie, *Confronting Crime—An American Challenge. Why There is So Much Crime in America and What We Can Do About It*.

Sanford J. Ungar (Ed.), *Estrangement—America and the World*.

Charles Murray, *Losing Ground—American Social Policy 1950-1980*.

Jonathan Kozol, *Illiterate America*.

Montagu and Matson, *The Dehumanization of Man*.
 7. Robert N. Bellah, "The Contemporary Meaning of Kamakura Buddhism." A lecture delivered at a Symposium on Kamakura Buddhism. Univ. of Hawaii, 22 January 1973, p. 22 of an unpublished manuscript.
 8. Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart—Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 37. Perhaps the best socio-

logical study of the American character since Tocqueville's seminal socio-political classic, "La Democratie en Amerique" (2 vols., 1835, 1840), and the later, "The Organization Man" and "The Lonely Crowd."

9. Harvey Cox, *Turning East—The Promise and Peril of the New Orientalism* (N.Y.: Simon and Schuster, 1977).
10. *Kao-sêng chuan*, by the monk Hui-chao (A.D. 497-554). Comprised of 257 major and 243 ancillary biographies. *Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō* (hereafter abbreviated as "T"), Vol. 50, pp. 322-424.
11. *Wang-shêng-lun chu*, T-40-835/c.
12. T-50-428/c.
13. Arthur Frederick Wright, "Fo-t'u-teng," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*; Vol. 11, 1984, p. 325.
14. *Kyōgyōshinshō: Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho*, Vol. II, p. 68/line 10.
15. *Goichidaikikigaki*, No. 214 (Rennyō).
16. Attributed to Hōnen Shōnin, in a letter to Renshōbō of Kumadani. Refer to *Bukkyō Daiji-i*, Vol. I, p. 660.
17. *Daihōrin*; June, Vol. 46; No. 6, p. 152.
18. *Goichidaikikigaki*, No. 121.