

Adapting Jōdo-Shinshū Teaching for the West: An Approach Based on the American Work Ethic

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The essentials of Jōdo-Shinshū doctrine are comprised of the interrelationship between *jiriki*, *tariki*, and *shinjin*. In the West these terms have been translated into Self-Power, Other-Power, and Faith, respectively. Self-Power is the self-actuated, self-decided, self-directed thoughts, words, and the actions that are done for self-gain. Its principle feature is that it is rooted in a desire to benefit or protect one's own self. Jōdo-Shinshū teaching emphasizes that this self desire can and does taint the entire spectrum of personal decision making. This understanding is quite easily evidenced in each person's day to day activities that so often are directed towards the fulfillment of some need or some want or some personal want. But Jōdo-Shinshū teaching goes further by explaining that even activities done for the purpose of self-improvement and religious enlightenment, if powered by those self-same personal decisions, are tainted by the desire to benefit one's self. Part of the insightful realization that marks non-retrogression in Jōdo-Shinshū teaching is specifically the profound awareness that thoughts and actions that may be personally and deeply felt to be derived from pure motivations can and still are tainted by this self desire. This aspect of awareness helps to remove the delusion that an individual is entirely dependent only on him/herself. It opens one up to the realization of one's interconnectedness not only to all others around him, but to the fundamental compassionate principle and power of true reality that is Amida Buddha.

Amida Buddha is the Other-Power of infinite compassion that is manifested in our everyday lives to bring each of us to enlightenment. Its "other-ness" is most exemplified in the circumstances that have been created to allow us to hear and learn and benefit from these particular teachings. But more than this is the teaching that the dynamic motion of Other-Power is everywhere manifested for the benefit of all without restriction to those relative few who are knowledgeable about Jōdo-Shinshū teaching. It infuses each person's karmic fruitions with the intention to bring all to the karmic moment of realization.

Part of Other-Power realization is seeing beyond one's self, seeing one's interconnectedness to others, seeing the lessons in self-desire within our karmic fruitions, and seeing Amida Buddha's compassion in all circumstances. Such an understanding of Other-Power leads to continued progressive awareness and insight into the workings of Other-Power. Moreover it leads to a commitment of all thought, word, and deed to act in gratitude for that realization and in concert with that compassion to help in the continuous demonstration and expression of Other-Power.

Faith is the personal experiential realization of the truth of Amida Buddha's salvific power and marks the stage of non-retrogression in one's practice. With respect to Self-Power we have seen how Faith is in part the removal of the veil of ignorance that is self-important, self-aggrandizing, self-forgiving, and just plain selfish. In addition, we have examined how, with respect to Other-Power, this realization is the becoming aware of and commitment to living with the simple certainty of an all encompassing compassion. More than this is also, in part, the realization that awareness and commitment by themselves still only represents a stage of one's particular practice. At such a level it is the doing that demonstrates one's insight and awareness to move from momentary *shinjin* to everlasting wisdom and compassion. Faith here is manifested without exception in all the actions in one's life. Every thought, word, and deed becomes more external evidence that Amida Buddha's Compassion not only has saved but, as in all things, is working through one's self for the benefit of all others.

The introduction of Jōdo-Shinshū teaching into the American way of life has been occurring for almost a century. Over this time its acceptance has been intimately tied to the ability of Japanese-Americans to preserve their cultural heritage in the face of vastly different cultural environment. Succeeding generations have grown up within this different cultural context giving them a uniquely shared cultural heritage. Moreover the significant majority of indigenous individuals remain a product of their own significant cultural and religious roots. This has caused some difficulty for a message that has been honored over eight centuries to appeal to and guide those with such an alternative cultural environment. The present day challenge to all of Buddhism is to adapt the essence of the teachings so that they are more appropriate to the new audience without as well as the rapidly changing audience within.

Initial attempts to translate major Jōdo-Shinshū terms into English have been useful in providing points of resonance so that others might understand the background of Jōdo-Shinshū. Alternatively this has lead to preconceptions and misconceptions as to the true meaning of these terms. Attempts to return to the original Japanese terms as a corrective to these misunderstandings have sometimes seemed to

insert the additional barrier of language between the teachings and their easy accessibility. More recently attempts have been directed towards customizing the message of Jōdo-Shinshū Buddhism specifically for the American audience. The concepts of trans-ethical responsibility¹ has been introduced as a basis for ethical action that recognizes a higher compassion and tries to use that Other-Power guideline for everyday decisions. This addresses the innate American bias to do something positive and pro-active. The idea of Self-Power action with Other-Power attitude as suggested by Corless² attempts to provide a basis for the sundry virtuous activities of individuals as an integral part of Jōdo-Shinshū practice. This addresses the American bias towards individual responsibility and taking charge of one's life. These later two approaches have only recently been introduced so their effectiveness has yet to be demonstrated.

We would like to provide an additional perspective of this approach that tries to more clearly evaluate the target audience. It is hoped that by better understanding the target audience that Jōdo-Shinshū teachings may find a more receptive appreciation of its fundamental teachings. It is not intended to be exclusive of other attempts but designed as an approach that continues their appreciation that the message must fit the audience. Our approach is based on an analysis of the American Work Ethic as it influences the personal bias of those being raised and living in America. A further understanding of this ethic would provide the basis for decisions regarding which aspects of Jōdo-Shinshū teaching to emphasize for the beginning American listener.

The concept of work reaches back to biblical times where the work of God is nothing less than the creation of the universe. Since that time the idea of meaningful work has been a fundamental aspect of human activity. In many ways work has defined our existence just as the answer to the question. "What do you do?" is filled with the association of likely income, life style, living environment, and probably relationships. Honorable work thus becomes more than activity of livelihood but a moral imperative to provide meaning and worth to everyday activities. This underlying basis for work is the foundation upon which work can be termed an ethic.

The status of work continued to be recognized as important in the Bible where the Ten Commandments speak of working for six days to perform all one's labors. The Hebraic teaching emphasizes that work is a gift from God and as such it should be accepted with satisfaction as a good and proper endeavor. Moreover there is the instruction that "he who does not teach his son a trade teaches him to steal." This particular teaching was quite different from the hierarchical civilizations of the time where there were those who worked and those who enjoyed the fruits of those labors. This message continued in the life of Jesus whose honest labors was as a working carpenter. In a study on the contribu-

tion of work to American society it has been said:

Christianity undercut slavery by giving dignity to work no matter how seemingly menial that might be. Traditionally, labor which might be performed by slaves was despised as degrading to the freeman. Christian teachers said that all should work and that labor should be done as to Christ as master and as to God and in the sight of God. Work became a Christian duty. Before the end of the fifth century slavery was declining.

Augustine proposes that "to work is to pray." During the Renaissance creativity is done "to the glory of God alone." The Reformation altered the distinction between sacred and secular work when Luther wrote about the work of monks and priests is "in God's sight no way whatever superior to the works of a farmer laboring in the field, or of a woman looking after her home." Such teachings freed people up to do what they could do best for God. The Puritans came to America as "laborers for their Lord." As a result the idea that individual work has merit is ingrained into American culture. Moreover the nature of American history since has been to glorify and revere the accomplishments of particular individuals as exemplars of all that could be accomplished once determined effort and work was applied to a particular problem. The idea of sacrifice, perseverance, innovation, and achievement are everywhere evident in the biographies of American heroes.

This consideration provides a background for understanding areas of indigenous American interest and areas where Americans might be more naturally attentive. Any introduction of a fundamentally different approach to everyday life must therefore address the question of how this new approach can be used during everyday work and circumstances. It is clear from this presentation of the American Work ethic that Americans would be naturally attentive to an approach that will make immediate adjustments in their behavior towards everyday circumstances. The rubric of "try it, you'll like it" is no where more easily heard than in America. In the next section we will further discuss the individual elements of the Work Ethic and how they may be approached by Jōdo-Shinshū teaching.

A significant area of emphasis regarding the American Work Ethic is in the choice, actions, and rewards made and gained by an individual. It is this idea of individuals that is an inherent part of this concept that each individual bears responsibility for their choices, actions, and the consequences of those actions. The individual here is the unique person who is presented with and part of the circumstances surrounding and contributing to any particular decision point. Not a soul or a permanent self, it is a recognition that each individual is uniquely different and possesses a point of view and a set of abilities and poten-

tialities that are unique to that person. As such it further recognizes that the individual who finds him/herself within a particular set of circumstances has a unique contribution to make towards the further development of those circumstances. This emphasis on the individual and their unique responsibilities has been critical in the American understanding of personal responsibility. It leads us to try to further understand the role of this unique individual as he/she decides and acts based on the American Work Ethic.

The American Work Ethic has three essential elements, (1) individual choice, (2) individual action, and (3) individual reward. This goal oriented approach of decision and action directed toward a specific reward, requires that one identify a reward, decide on a course of activity, and commit fully to those actions that will help in researching that goal. Regardless of the goal, the nature, quality, or quantity of the actual work is not a consideration in the decision as total commitment includes whatever sacrifices are necessary to get the job done. This ethic of achievement by personal effort and experience leads the American to consider the superficial idea of self-power to be good, other-power as not being applicable, and faith as a means only of further self-confidence not as a belief in a higher authority. The concept of Easy Practice for the ultimate reward becomes directly confrontational to the American understanding that effort and sacrifice should rise in direct proportion to the worthiness of the goal. For Jōdo-Shinshū to make the East-West transition, each of these three aspects of the American Work Ethic must be directly addressed.

It is apparent that the classical teaching of Jōdo-Shinshū that emphasizes the largesse and compassion of Amida Buddha to make entry into the Pure Land easy is potentially discordant to American listeners. Though it is well known that Jōdo-Shinshū requires the ultimate sacrifice of all one's selfish motivations and desires in lieu of acknowledged true faith and acceptance of Amida's compassionate power; classical teaching emphasizes the fact that individuals are bonbu and cannot by their own self-power achieve true faith. This is not to say that effort and activity done from compassionate motivation is outside the scope of Jodo-Shinshu teaching—just that it has not been clearly defined. The ideas of trans-ethical responsibility as well as self-effort activity with Other-Power motivation as previously presented are specific attempts to deal with the influence of Jodo-Shinshū teaching into everyday activities. It is thus apparent that finding Jōdo-Shinshū teachings that may help to adjust the work-ethic emphasis on individual choice, action, and reward would materially aid in the American acceptance of Jodo-Shinshū teaching.

The concept of (1) individual choice may be addressed by extrapolating from classical Jōdo-Shinshū teaching. These teachings are embodied in the saying "just because there is an antidote available one

should not drink poison" as well in the doctrine that all post-*shinjin* virtuous deeds are done in gratitude for Amida's Compassion without any thought of personal reward. In the classical presentation of the idea of the presence antidote it is often discussed how Shinran and hence Jōdo-Shinshū teaching is not a license for evil activities. This may be easily extended to the idea of choice given the presence of options requiring evaluation and reflection before choosing poisonous or non-poisonous activities. In the present context it can be understood from the standpoint of individual choice that each of us can choose between virtuous actions and non-virtuous actions. Moreover the classical discussion is firm evidence that choosing virtue over non-virtue is the appropriate decision for all Jōdo-Shinshū practitioners, new and old. The concept of post-*shinjin* activity done in gratitude to Amida and for the benefit of all further emphasizes the idea that there is a role for deliberately choosing a virtuous path in everyday decisions. The normal activity for the most respected exemplar of Jōdo-Shinshū teaching—the post-*shinjin* individual—is a person who consistently does virtuous deeds for the benefit of all. His/her particular motivation is to be in gratitude to Amida Buddha's all encompassing compassion. And yet the evidence of his/her actions is everywhere manifest.

For Jōdo-Shinshū teaching in America, an elaboration of this approved form of individual choice would provide direct and useful instruction for the beginning practitioner. Guidelines, examples, and role models derived from the specific activities of Jōdo-Shinshū devotee actually does. As those activities are different or attractive to the beginner, it offers a reasonable choice for that individual to follow, thus allowing the beginner to choose Jōdo-Shinshū teachings to influence their own everyday actions.

With respect to (2) individual action it is evident that our knowledge of past activities are in the description of the deeds of these various models. Just as one's thoughts and motives cannot be fully known by others, the true experience of *shinjin* cannot be adequately expressed. Since this experience becomes everywhere evident in all the actions of these exemplar individuals, it can then be clearly taught and emphasized that a commitment to Jōdo-Shinshū is a commitment to identifying Amida's Compassion in each and every action of evade living. Using the role model approach individuals may study how one who has fully accepted Amida's compassion resolves and carries through with actions that benefit all. The study of each action and its compassionate ramifications would then lead to a case study understanding of Amida's compassion in each and every decision of a practitioner's life. These case studies would serve as additional guidelines for those trying to make decisions and act on the compassionate principle of benefiting all mankind. Using the model of the American Work Ethic, each individual action is the culmination of having made the decision to pursue a plan

of action based upon the evaluation of the options available. The results of the action are forecasted to bring reward based upon the individual's knowledge and awareness of as many contributing factors as possible. Evaluation of the results are compared to the desired outcome.

In Jōdo-Shinshū teaching the additional factor of Amida's compassion is integral to understanding the multitude of factors that make up each individual incident. Recognizing that Amida's Compassion is every where manifest also gives a unifying perspective to expand one's analysis of every situation. By the same token, evaluation outcomes and interactions in the context of Amida's Compassion with True Faith allows for a much larger thorough awareness and understanding of the total environment in which one is acting.

In the area of (3) individual rewards we can again look to the life of Shinran and others as realized recipients of Amida's unconditional compassion. This concept may be restated for Western understanding by saying that there is no greater reward than virtuously helping others simply because it is the correct decision to make and action to take. Amida's dedication to help each individual is manifest in the guidelines that are made available to us to be able to distinguish virtue from non-virtue. In each effort to better apply those principles is received the reward of a deeper experience with respect to demonstrating to one's self that Amida's teachings apply to present day circumstances. In the individual reward we do not suggest that this is the road to shinjin but simply that the consequences of virtue done for virtue's sake is the greater happiness of all involved. This happiness is a reward that may be received in every choice and every action as one becomes more and more aware of the truth of Jōdo-Shinshū teachings. It is as unique to each individual as are the unique circumstances, decisions, and actions that each individual will make and do in everyday life.

To the uninitiated the American Work Ethic view of individual reward is focused on wealth, recognition, and power. Those who have dared to act upon their dreams and are able to reap the rewards of their labors are now living their dreams. The interpretation of the work ethic has consistently separated the ideas of choice, action and reward. This is not actually the case as repeatedly demonstrated in the practice of medicine where the true focus of the reward is in deciding and doing the action in a more and more beneficial manner i.e., walking the path. One's choice of virtuous deed (diagnostic or therapeutic) as well as learning from that deed to improve patient care is reward in itself. Mundane rewards may be associated with the path but they are not the reason the path is taken.

This is the key to Jōdo Shinshū to reach the American audience. Focusing on the true nature of reward allows one to recognize that the benefits of following Jōdo Shinshū teaching are immediate,

always expanding, and everlasting. (They are the gold standard of true reward.)

For Jōdo-Shinshū in America, further elaboration on this form of individual reward for individual actions is necessary to provide a complete introduction of Jōdo-Shinshū for an American audience. Initiating such contact speaks directly to the propensities of the American Work-Ethic where choice, action, and rewards are so everywhere evident. As empathy is a significant aspect of compassion, it becomes clear that the message of Jōdo-Shinshū must begin to empathize with the different cultural context of present day American audiences. Appreciating the foundations of this American point of view as in part defined by the American Work-Ethic is a first step in that empathetic appreciation. Through a thorough understanding of their bias towards individual choice, action, and rewards it becomes clearer how the message of Jōdo-Shinshū teaching must be adapted in order to be accepted by Americans. It should not be felt in any way that the true teaching is being diluted or watered down for this new audience—simply that this new audience offers greater opportunity to better understand and practice the Other-Power compassion of Amida. For it is not for ourselves that we try to pass on the teachings of Amida Buddha, but for the audience of listeners who have not yet had the benefit of such exposure.

It is hoped that this paper offers yet another step in the process of bringing the true teaching to all mankind. By this examination of the American Work-Ethic we hope to reiterate that compassion towards others begins with a concerted effort to understand the other party. We hope that further efforts towards this understanding will open up new avenues to the transmission of Jōdo-Shinshū teaching.

NOTES

- ¹ Tanaka, K., "Ethics in American Jōdo-Shinshū: Trans-Ethical Responsibility," in *The Pure Land*, n.s., no., 6 (Dec., 1989), pp. 91-116.
- ² Corless, R.J., "Self-Power Practice with Other-Power Attitude: An Interpretation of Mind in Shin Buddhism," in *The Pure Land*, n.s., nos. 8-9 (Dec., 1992), pp. 166-205.