



The Role of Buddhist Temples in Japanese-American Communities in the U.S.A.

by Masami Nakagaki

The various activities of Japanese Buddhism in America, especially Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, were officially started with the establishment of the Buddhist Church of San Francisco in 1898. In the years following, many temples were established including the Sacramento Buddhist Church in 1899, the Fresno Buddhist Church in 1900, the Seattle Buddhist Church in 1901, the San Jose Buddhist Church in 1902, the Buddhist Church of Oregon in 1903, the Oakland Buddhist Church in 1904, and the Los Angeles and Hanford Churches in 1905. While not part of the Buddhist Churches of America, the Vancouver Buddhist Church was established in the same year. In 1906 the Watsonville Buddhist Temple came into being, followed by Stockton Buddhist Temple in 1907, the Guadalupe Buddhist Church in 1908, and the Bakersfield and Vacaville Churches in 1909.

Within the decade from 1900, Buddhist churches and temples were established at a tremendous rate in the major cities along the west coast of mainland United States. The following decades saw further growth with the establishment of the Salt Lake Buddhist Temple in 1913, the Tri-State Buddhist Temple in 1916, and by 1930 there were a total of thirty-five churches and temples in the Japanese-American communities in the United States mainland.

These facilities served the people extremely well, functioning as centers for religious, cultural, educational and social, as well as community-wide, activities. To illustrate, I wish to refer to the activities of the late Reverend Jōen Ashikaga, an outstanding pioneer minister. Accounts show that the Reverend Ashikaga had come to San Jose by the spring of 1902, at the latest, when he was twenty-five years old. At first he is said to have lived in the home of a caucasian family, washing dishes and doing other menial jobs that were available. In time he rented a room and managed things on his own. By August 28 of that year he had established a temple in that district. His activities, which were offered to the Japanese immigrants working the orchards and who had come alone or were bachelors, included religious education and propagation as well as personal guidance and counseling, social activities promoting fellowship and recreation, and extended to cultural activities as well. For the young immigrant workers the Buddhist Church served as the only community center available. It was also one of the most valuable and useful social facilities, where the problems shared by the immigrants could be discussed in the Japanese language.

This situation is brought out in Reverend Ashikaga's memoirs, *Ichiju no kage* (*Shade Under a Tree*):

It was about one in the afternoon when I arrived at Los Gatos by train from San Jose. I then hired a wagon to take me up onto the mountain roads for fourteen miles. Here I was to receive, and attend to, the body of a Japanese immigrant who was killed in an accident while engaged in logging activities.

I recall it was a cold day in winter. It was past 4:00 p.m. when we were able to officiate a simple funeral rite at the spot, with around thirty other Japanese living there present. When I returned to Los Gatos it was already past 10:00 p.m. It was too late to return to San Jose as the last train had left. I had no choice but to put up for the night at a small hotel run by a Chinese innkeeper. The cost of hiring the wagon and the hotel lodging were so high that I had no means to have breakfast or, needless to say, the train fare back to San Jose. I was perplexed and had to make up my mind to walk all the way back to San Jose.¹

The words in this short passage clearly bring out the difficult conditions with which the pioneering ministers had to encounter and cope. By employing any available means such as trains, horse carriages and even on foot, it must have been very difficult to call on the Japanese immigrants working and living up in the mountains. These immigrants were not seeking political asylum, nor were they pursuing religious freedom. In fact, it was difficult for them to consider America to be their permanent land as they had come merely to earn their wages on a temporary basis. Moreover, since it was the goal of the immigrants to become the successful ones and return to their homeland with flying colors, America was as before, from the very beginning, a foreign country; a place of temporary residence and the place to work and accumulate their earnings.

Except for a very few, the majority of them had never considered establishing permanent residences or raising a family on American soil. True, they had language difficulties, but their desire to return to their homeland as successful persons remained with them. The stronger this desire, the more difficult it became for them to lay down their roots.

The more they were marked as "aliens never to be naturalized" the more they tended to form Japanese tradition-oriented communities. The formation of common behavioral patterns was important to them based on the ethnic solidarity of the same blood, language, culture and race. Social cohesion, too, was enforced (enhanced) by a collectivity oriented society which formed the Japanese tradition-oriented rural community system. Along with these internal factors at work there were other exterior factors which included the matter of Japanese exclusion and the limitations set forth in the scope of their activities such as the professions they were permitted to pursue. It is clear that it was difficult to expect the Japanese workers in America to enjoy the same rights and social benefits as their American counterparts. They were inclined to establish closer ties with Japan and they established Japanese (citizens') associations, *Kenjin-kai* associations, Buddhist temples and churches for Japanese members, and moved in the direction of establishing non-assimilative and non-Americanized racially-exclusive oriented organizations.

In regard to their business activities, they had small self-owned enterprises such as grocery stores, laundries, restaurants, confectioneries, drug stores, photo studios, jewelry stores, dry goods stores, shoe repair shops, small hotels and apartments, floral shops, barber and beauty shops, service stations, dress making shops, etc. These were conducted as small family businesses, catering only to the Japanese population and located within the Japanese communities, and were the factors which gave rise to the Japanese "towns" in the cities of San Francisco, Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, Watsonville, San Jose, Fresno and Los Angeles, serving primarily the Japanese laborers in the nearby farming areas. It should be mentioned here that wherever the Japanese congregated they built their own Buddhist churches.

Taking San Jose as an example, in the accounts in the *Historical Outline of Buddhist Propagation in America* compiled by the Headquarters of the Buddhist Churches of America in 1936, we find that;

By 1902 the Japanese population in the Santa Clara County where San Jose is located grew to several hundred, and especially during the harvest season it increased to about 3,000. These conditions gave rise to Japanese towns and the establishment of Buddhist temples.

The Reverend Jōen Ashikaga, mentioned previously, had devoted himself to propagation and education in the San Jose area and laid the foundation for the San Jose Betsuin Temple. In the spring of 1906, the year of the San Francisco earthquake, Reverend Ashikaga was able to meet with the Reverend Zuigi Ashikaga. By the end of May of that year he was assigned to the Hawaii Betsuin Temple in Honolulu primarily through the strong request of his brother-in-law, Bishop Yemyo Imamura of the Hawaii Hongwanji Mission. In August of the same year Reverend Honen Takahashi, who was assigned by the headquarters in

Kyoto as the first minister to the San Jose temple, had recorded the difficult situation of that time in the magazine *America* (1907 issue, Vol. II, No. 2, p. 34) as follows:

During the five years since the establishment of the temple, despite the fact that there were sincere and devoted ministers assigned, and primarily because of the short periods of their assignments, they were not able to take the initiative in their work. However, today there has been an increase in the number of Japanese immigrants, indeed up to 6,000. Since my assignment to the San Jose Temple the Japanese immigrants have shown an upsurge of interest and determination and have already adopted a resolution to build their temple. To realize this, a drive to raise funds through donations was started not only by visiting the homes of Japanese immigrants residing 20 to 30 miles around the city of San Jose and visiting nearby counties and villages, but also extended to those who worked the peach, apple, and grape orchards and the radish and potato farms.

In the course of such visitations I observed the living conditions of the immigrants and found them to be appalling. The immigrants lived in huts like pig pens and were paid wages of one or two dollars a day. They saved their meager earnings and sent them to their families in Japan, to be rewarded with letters of thanks from home which they always carried with them, and continued to work and toil, day in and day out.

This vivid account brings out the truth regarding the most unfavorable working conditions they were subjected to including low wages, heavy labor, and long working hours. It also shows us how the immigrants had saved their wages by denying personal needs, how they had remitted to their families what they had saved, and what they had endured in bringing their own temple to reality.

Another view of the difficult situations existing at that time is found in the death records of the temples. The case of the Sacramento Buddhist Temple is given below.

According to the *North American Daily Newspaper Annual of 1972*, a survey was made of the 298 *issei* residing in the Sacramento area. Included in the first five listings is the birthplace of the *issei* (first generation Japanese) according to *ken* (prefectures).

<i>Hiroshima</i>	- 78 persons representing	26.0%
<i>Yamaguchi</i>	- 44 persons representing	15.0%
<i>Wakayama</i>	- 40 persons representing	13.0%
<i>Kumamoto</i>	- 22 persons representing	7.0%
<i>Aichi</i>	- 18 persons representing	6.0%

In addition to the above, other prefectures were listed in the order of Okayama, Kochi, Fukushima and Fukuoka.² It would seem that the death record of the Sacramento Buddhist Temple in 1900 would reflect the trend of the Japanese population in regard to the birthplace of the

deceased, for they show that the number of deaths according to the various prefecture persons were recorded as Kumamoto 6, Hiroshima 5, Aichi 4, Wakayama 3, Yamaguchi 1, and Fukuoka 1. Because of the relocation of the Japanese population before and after World War II, it is true that there was constant shifting from place to place within the immigrant population. It is evident, nevertheless, that from the beginnings of the Japanese immigrant history in America the immigrants from the prefectures of Kumamoto, Yamaguchi, Wakayama and Aichi had already settled in this area.

The death records of these immigrants also reveal the causes of death in detail. Here are a few examples:

- a. *On January 26, 1899, he was shot to death by a robber at East Park camp.*
- b. *On March 24, 1900, he fell to his death from a tree while working at the farm.*
- c. *He died of tuberculosis at the Japanese boarding house in Sacramento.*
- d. *He died of beri-beri at the age of 34 at Woodland Japanese camp.*
- e. *He died of high fever at age 21 in Vacaville district.*
- f. *She died of stomach illness at age 3. She was the first daughter.*
- g. *He died of over-work at age 22 in Yolo County.*

Through these accounts we can clearly see how the early immigrants had worked themselves to death under extreme conditions, how the workers in the orchards and railroads succumbed to the high-fever sickness, and also how some had died by beri-beri and tuberculosis attributable to malnutrition and exhaustion. In many cases the period of their stay in America was very short and it is most lamentable to think that young men in their 20's and 30's could not realize their dream of returning to Japan "with flying banners." Along with other conditions causing these deaths, the inadequacy of medicine and medical care cannot be overlooked. Accounts also show that in the case of the death of a bachelor, two or three immigrants from the same district or village would get together and have a funeral officiated, and sometimes funerals were held by acquaintances and friends. At other times prefectural organizations such as the Aichi Club or the Japanese Citizens League extended their assistance, at which time the Buddhist ministers cooperated to their fullest. These are actual examples which bring out the high degree of social cohesion, solidarity, and mutual aid of the Japanese community. This, in turn, shows the important role the Buddhist temple had assumed in formulating a well controlled and orderly Japanese community.

As indicated above, it is apparent that already a *nisei* child, three years of age, had passed away, which establishes that by 1900 there were Japanese families already settled here. At that time not only were the medical facilities and medical care unorganized, but the family life in the labor camps was far from ideal. Bringing up a family under these conditions must have been quite unfavorable. The death records of the period from 1900 to 1910 represent the time

when the birth of *nisei* children showed a marked increase in infant and child mortality. Some of the former died just two days after birth and others survived for less than a month. At that time the midwives and doctors were few in number and thus there were cases when a baby was delivered by the husband (*kai-suke*), who had no knowledge about childbirth. Or due to the hard labor before birth the delivery became very difficult and oftentimes the recovery from childbirth was slow and incomplete. Symptoms of infant and childhood diseases went undetected, coupled with the lack of doctor and nursing care, and all these conditions not only pinpoint infrequent and inferior medical care, living standards and culture in general, but at the same time show us that there were no services offered in terms of social welfare.

The workers of this period had no recourse but to act basically in accordance with the principle of self help and could not expect any assistance or services in terms of social security or welfare. The assistance offered by friends, pioneers, and people from the same prefecture, or mutual aid and helping patterns, were based on human feelings of affection and sympathy, temporary and by various degree, and inevitably developed the feeling of indebtedness between the providers and receivers.

Be that as it may, there still were community-wide organized charity organizations and the bulk of the services, in this sense assistance, labor, condolence and encouragement, and consultation and counseling were usually offered by the members of the Christian and Buddhist temples on a mutual basis. However, if an example of a community-wide organized charity organization were to be considered it may well be the California Japanese Benevolent Society which was established in San Francisco in 1901, with the Japanese Consulate General being the center of the activities. In following the conditions evolving around this movement we can see that as the Japanese population in America increased, the services offered by the Society also expanded into help for the ill and included medical care for the members of poverty-stricken families, even to the formalities required for their return to Japan, the care and upbringing of orphans, emergency care in the event of calamities, even funeral arrangements for the poor and other social needs which kept increasing and developing.

To achieve this the Japanese Benevolent Society got its start with a fund of \$2,400.00 which was raised by the efforts of the ministers, housewives and other women of staff members (especially of the Japanese Consulate General, Yokohama Specie Bank, Mitsui Bussan and Toyo Kisen) of Japanese organizations. The activities were continued by the volunteer services of these special organizations and a community-wide participation could not be expected. What should be especially mentioned is the fact that the members of the Benevolent Society, composed of the Buddhist ministers and others affiliated with the temple, devoted themselves, with the cooperation of ministers and fathers of the Christian churches, to acquiring land and building the Japanese Community Cemetery at Colma in San Mateo County and erecting a monument dedicated to all who had

passed away. The Benevolent Society still continues its functions and manages the cemetery to this day.

As the above has indicated, it is clear now that in those days when the social security system and social welfare were not yet organized, the Buddhist temples were not facilities solely for religious rituals and activities. They had grown along with the growth of the Japanese community as effectual centers of social welfare and provided tranquility and peace of mind to the pioneering immigrants from Japan. Moreover, even after the members of the Japanese community changed from immigrants to Japanese-Americans, the Buddhist temples still remained as the center of communication for them, providing the ideal setting for getting together and exchanging ideas, and above all, serving as the place to hear and practice the Buddha-Dharma, and thus

achieving community solidarity.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Nishimoto, Sosuke, "San Jose Buddhist Church and Rev. Jyoen Ashikaga," in *Hojyo Ejitzu Kanreki Kinen Bunshū*, Hikari wo kiku, 1971. Kyoto: Nagata bunshodo, p. 117.
2. Number of listed names represents the heads of families. Therefore, these 298 names represent 298 families. Also, this list does not include nisei families. Horinouchi, Isao, *Americanized Buddhism: A Sociological Analysis of a Protestantized Japanese Religion*, Ph.D. Dissertation at U.C. Davis, 1973, p. 407.

DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE PURE LAND BUDDHISM

(Part I)

(continued from page 9)

Tao-yen, Chü-an Ta-yu, Yuan-hsi Ch'uan-teng, Ling-yueh Chih-hsü, and Ku-hsi Ch'eng-shih. The most eminent of these was the master Chih-hsü, who advocated the theory that "the Three Learnings have One [Common] Origin," and who also stressed the necessity of upholding all three traditions—Ch'an, Pure Land, and Vinaya—as an exclusive reliance on any one of them would lead to the decay of Buddhism as a whole. Nevertheless, Chih-hsü believed that the most essential of these Three Learnings was the Pure Land Tradition. Contemporary with these masters were the laymen Yuan Hung-tao and Chuang Kuang-huan, who also composed works extolling the Pure Land teachings.

During the Ch'ing Dynasty (1616-1911), the Pure Land teachings came to be advocated by an ever larger number of laymen. Active during the K'ang-hsi period were the laymen Chou K'o-fu, Yü Hsing-min, and Chou Meng-yen, who all wrote works encouraging the practice of Pure Land devotions. During the Ch'ien-lung period (1736-1795), the laymen P'eng Chao-sheng and P'eng Hsi-su compiled biographies of persons who had attained rebirth in Sukhāvāti. P'eng Chao-sheng composed an especially large number of works praising Pure Land teachings, and worked for the wider dissemination of these doctrines.

Toward the end of the K'ang-hsi period (1662-1722), the monk Shih-hsien Ssu-ch'i, emulating the work of Chu-hung, organized a Pure Land society (*lien-she*) in Hang-chou. The influence of this society spread widely, and Ssu-ch'i came to be called "Yen-shou come again" (*Yung-ming tsai-lai*), and became the object of much popular affection and veneration. This period also saw the activities

of the monks Hsing-ts'e, Hsü-fa, Ming-heng, Ming-teh, Ch'i-neng, Fo-an, Shih-ch'eng, and Chi-hsing. These monks were active in the K'ang-hsi and Ch'ien-lung periods in their cultivation of the Pure Land teachings. At a slightly later period the monks Shui-chang and Hu-t'ing continued the compilation of biographies of persons who had attained rebirth in the Pure Land. At a slightly later date, the monks Ta-mo and Wu-k'ai, and the laymen Chang Shih-ch'eng and Chen i-Yuan, wrote works extolling Pure Land practices.

From the time of the Sung Dynasty onward, Pure Land teachings especially flourished in southern China. But with the founding of the Ch'ing Dynasty, the capital of China was moved to the north to the city of Yen-ching (renamed Pei-ching, "the northern capital"; present-day Peking). At this court, the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet and Mongolia was especially honored, and so it happened that during this dynasty Pure Land doctrines and practices were largely limited to southern China. From the Ming Dynasty onward, Chinese Buddhism appears to have lost some of its vitality and much of its originality and creative genius, and this was evident too in the case of Pure Land literature. Much of the published Pure Land literature consisted of nothing more than excerpts from the writings and thoughts of the great masters of the past.

With the establishment of the Republic, Chinese Buddhism underwent a slight revival, but with the advent of the Second World War and the subsequent socialist revolution on the Chinese mainland, much Buddhist work came to a halt, to be only slightly revived in the last two decades on the island of Taiwan, in Hong Kong, and in certain Southeast Asian centers.