

“Japanese Buddhism in America” Reflections on the Symposium

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THE SYMPOSIUM ON JAPANESE BUDDHISM in America presented four aspects of current scholarly work from a new field of inquiry. Within the growing area of Asian American religions, recent years have seen a growing focus on American Buddhism, and important works have begun to establish significant topics of inquiry. The symposium represents a further development: defining Japanese Buddhism in America as a significant subfield. As one of the presenters, Professor Mark Unno, noted, the phrase “Japanese Buddhism in America” raises the question whether the object is to inquire into the relation between Buddhism as practiced in Japan and in America, or whether the issue is to ask “how Japanese” is Buddhism practiced in America. As the query suggests, issues of religion, identity, and ethnicity are central to this new area, and each presented brought out a different facet of a complex relationship.

In a study of the religious lives of early Japanese immigrants to Hawaii at the turn of the twentieth century, Ms. Tara Koda stressed that it would be inadequate to think of Buddhism’s establishment in Hawaii as a mere transplantation. Emphasizing that most early immigrants came from western Japan, where Jōdo Shinshū is very strong, she focused on the significance of these origins. Both time and place set a stamp on Buddhism in Hawaii. While immigration followed only a few decades after the 1868 edict for a separation of Buddhism from Shintō in Japan, Ms. Koda found that the two remained intertwined for the Hawaiian immigrants, and that it was common for them to observe New Years at Shintō shrines, alongside promoting Buddhist rites at plantation temples. In addition, Hawaiian and Filipino elements were absorbed, creating a Buddhism matching the experience of the immigrants, irreducible neither to Japanese Buddhism as defined by government mandate nor to practice on the American mainland.

Professor Duncan Williams gave a very moving presentation on Buddhism as practiced during internment. Based on a huge quantity of data, including declassified U.S. government documents, diaries, memoirs of camp survivors, and interviews, he showed how the F.B.I. and other

government agencies compiled lists of Buddhist and Shintō priests, regarding them as especially prone to espionage, interning them under the heaviest security and most miserable conditions. Unlike Japanese Christians, who were also interned, but who could look to Christians outside the camps for some assistance, Japanese Buddhists had almost no one to help, save for a tiny handful of Caucasians who had been ordained. But they could do nothing to stop the ransacking of temples where the Japanese had stored their belongings, nothing to stop the sell-off of their land. In these conditions, Buddhism and those few Buddhist ministers working in the camps were an invaluable spiritual center, representing continuity with the past and hope for the future. Internees created beautiful *butsudan* and other devotional items out of the few materials the desert provided, and they held *obon* festivals on a camp-wide scale. One priest sought religious meaning in his internment by reflecting on Hōnen's exile. The experience of Buddhist life in the camps is particularly salient as the U.S. government takes refuge behind the veil of "national security" to justify widespread surveillance of American Muslims as part of its preparations for a second war against Iraq.

Professor Jane Iwamura examines the significance of *butsudan* in the lives of four generations of Japanese-Americans. While the temple is a focus of communal life and ethnic identity, the *butsudan* is the focus of personal religious devotions. The *butsudan* for some is also a symbol of Japanese-American life, and in that sense it seems as important to own one as to tend it regularly. Professor Iwamura also pointed out the significance of generational differences in *butsudan* practice, saying that *nisei* sometimes feel a great diffidence in approaching the *butsudan*, fearful that they may fail to conduce worship "the right way," that is, as their parents thought proper. *Sansei* and *yonsei*, by contrast, seem to feel freer to innovate and to adapt the *butsudan* to the contours of their personal religious lives, rather than feeling that they must replicate a pattern of correct performance. In all cases, however, it is clear that the *butsudan* symbolizes the continuity of Japanese-American Buddhist life, linking those in America to Japan, as well as standing for a sense of connectedness, a link to the future, and personal responsibility to the past, present, and future.

Professor Mark Unno's talk highlighted the combination in Japanese Buddhism in America of aspects of immigrant and convert Buddhism, and he noted tensions between the two, based on ethnicity and generation. He spoke also of the twin tendencies towards commodification or commercialization, on the one hand, and inclusivity and self-transcendence, on the other. He developed three examples, or "moments" to show how deeply implicated in the global economy all religious transactions necessarily are, including those of Japanese-American Buddhism. While the moments

each emphasized the inescapability of being caught up in increasingly globalizing webs of power and influence, each one also contained the possibility of transcendence. Thus no moment lacks the potential for liberation. This is a message from Japanese-American Buddhist experience that is universal, never more relevant than in the present.

In sum, these four presentations exhibited remarkable clarity and insight, as well as humanity, in addressing a coming area of inquiry. I am deeply indebted to Professor Payne and the Buddhist Churches of America for this deeply meaningful and moving occasion.