

# American Women in Jōdo Shin Buddhism Today: Tradition and Transition

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## INTRODUCTION

FROM THE TIME OF ŚĀKYAMUNI BUDDHA in ancient India until the present day, the participation of women in Buddhism has been hampered by the limitation of gender constructs imposed on them by their Asian societies. Today in America, those limitations are loosening in a mainstream society that is being transformed by developments as wide-ranging as democratization, pluralism, and feminism. It would seem the perfect environment for the flowering of a Buddhist doctrine that professes non-discrimination and universal liberation. Indeed, scholars and adherents now speak of American “Buddhisms” with attributes reflective of their new progressive surroundings. Yet largely excluded from this phenomenon have been the various schools of ethnic Buddhism, considered too Asian to suit Americans. Counted among these is Japanese Jōdo Shinshū, which, although it has been in this country for five generations, appears to have resisted adaptation and thus kept itself on the margins of a growing trend in this country.

The purpose of this paper is to present views of female practitioners of Jōdo Shinshū in America with regard to the doctrine and the institution of the Buddhist Churches of America (hereafter referred to as the BCA).<sup>1</sup> There is ample reason to give women a platform to express their thoughts on these matters. Throughout Buddhist history, women have played a significant role in the practice and development of its traditions, yet they have been marginalized at best, and most often rendered invisible. Rarely have their writings been preserved, their stories recorded, or their opinions asked. Undoubtedly, the women themselves have been accomplices to their own silence, conditioned by the patriarchal cultures in which Buddhism thrived. Nonetheless, one can piece together enough information from scriptures, historical records, literature, and other writings to realize that social developments had a palpable influence on women in Buddhism,

and that Buddhism in its turn affected the image of women in society.

How does the historical link between women, society, and religion relate to Jōdo Shin Buddhism in contemporary America? Clearly, female members, their roles in the temple, and their perspectives have changed since the first-generation immigrant Issei brought Jōdo Shinshū to America over a century ago. Viewed against the backdrop of institutional practice and attitudes, the transformation of women could provide a measure of the assimilation of Shin Buddhism to the West. Asking them directly is the most accurate way to get a picture of what they as practitioners of Buddhism feel about their involvement in this religion. It has never sufficed to try to appreciate women's religious experiences and aspirations as interpreted and assumed by men, even though this was the accepted practice until only recently.<sup>2</sup> On the contrary, the input of women imparts an essential wholeness to the understanding of a doctrine aimed at all beings.

The response of female members to my research proposal was immediate and enthusiastic, indicating that such an investigation was timely for their concerns. Respondents of all ages and generations were earnest and frank in the sharing of their thoughts. What they revealed tells much about the relevancy of both the doctrine and the institution in contemporary times. It also provides indications of what this may portend for the future of Shin Buddhism everywhere.

## METHODOLOGY

The method I used to gather information was administering surveys and conducting personal interviews. Two anonymous surveys were created. The first was for BCA youth, aged fourteen to eighteen, both male and female. I selected this group for analysis because they represent, for the most part, fourth-generation members of Japanese descent, as well as children of mixed heritage. Given that sociological studies suggest that this generation is the most acculturated to the American host society, I wanted to investigate whether their views were more egalitarian than those of their forebears, which tended to exhibit influences, to varying degrees, of a patriarchal and hierarchical society. Surmising that the teenage subjects would reflect American social views of equality, I surveyed males as well as females to test this theory, the results of which are noted further on. A total of 161 responded, split almost evenly between male and female.

I also surveyed English-speaking female congregants of all generations, who make up a large portion of the mainly ethnic Japanese organization. This survey was widely distributed at a national conference and some participants further provided copies to members at their individual temples. One hundred eighty-six responses were returned and they were

still trickling in, replete with heartfelt commentary, long after the unofficial deadline closed.<sup>3</sup>

The personal interviews involved twelve women who demonstrated a breadth of experience in BCA organizational activities, or a commitment to studies in Jōdo Shinshū, or both. I also interviewed female ministers of Shin Buddhism in America to get their perspectives from a teacher's point of view. I did not survey men, though it would be useful to target further research on their views to uncover similarities and contrasts to those of the women.

### KEY ISSUES

Responses to the surveys showed that the women and youth perceived a great contrast between what they understood as an egalitarian teaching and the male-dominant institution:

- The doctrine is neutral regarding sexes. However, nearly all *sensei* are men.
- [The doctrine treats all equally], except all the Hongwanji heads are men.
- The doctrine appears to be gender neutral, however the reality finds very few women in upper positions and as role models.
- I believe there is equality, even though I have never heard of any famous women.
- In stories I hear more about men, but in the doctrine there is no specification of gender.
- Yes and no [equality] because the doctrine was written in a time of male dominance—and to them that's how it was, a given.

In further comments, members find the doctrine acceptable, but they equivocate greatly on the delivery system, questioning whether the institution, its ministers, and its leaders have made accommodations and adjustments so that Jōdo Shinshū will match modern American social expectations:

- Culturally, I think that a male dominant society is still an influence in the religious community as well.
- To the extent that our teachings are intermixed with Japanese cultural views, those influences have different expectations of different genders.

- Nothing that I have learned in listening to the Dharma suggests that [equality can't exist]. In the politics of the BCA, however, I see that there are old world, traditional approaches from Japan that do not recognize the talent and rights of women.

The ambient society factors strongly into this because Americans, and this includes Japanese Americans, are more sensitive than ever before to issues involving equality. The responses to the youth surveys indicated that across the board, the notion of universal equality was fully integrated into their value system:

- [The doctrine] never says that a man or woman can do something the opposite gender can't.
- Our country is encouraging of equal opportunities. (male and female respondents)
- Women are just as good as men; perspectives on Buddhism should be told from both a man's and a woman's perspective. (male respondent)
- I think we should all have the same opportunity and either everyone or no one should be encouraged [to become a minister]. (male respondent)

Both teenaged males and females saw no reason why there should be any distinction made between the sexes in terms of their function in the temple or elsewhere, whether applied to clergy or laity. In fact, they felt women should be encouraged to enter the ministry for the following reasons:

- Because I believe in Jōdo Shinshū everyone is equal.
- So the church is not so sexist.
- Women's issues are important.
- As long as they do a good job it's okay.

Pair this with the women's comments, which indicated that androcentric, patriarchal, and cultural attitudes were a source of frustration both operationally and spiritually, and the urgency to address the situation appears all the more pressing:

- The board members and committee heads are mostly male who make all of the decisions and *seldom* show up for service. This causes me to question their commitment to the religion.

- We need a minister who is receptive and sensitive to the cultural and social challenges of American women in transition.
- I believe the ministers from Japan who carry Japanese notions about women need to learn the Japanese American culture quickly....
- Our previous minister was not only a male chauvinist, but favored certain people. I chose not to be involved heavily and did not really return until we had a new minister...who is very open and respects women. The ministers have to change and as long as they are trained in Japan, they will think and act like a Japanese rather than an American Japanese.
- Perhaps not all temples are like this, but at ours I see the women deferring to the men all the time. Not easy to take for a forty-something Sansei.
- There are Buddhist women out there who don't show up or aren't actively involved. It's not that they are against Buddhism. It's that they're against the way the organization is structured and the position of women. What happens is that because they're raised Buddhist and Japanese, a lot of them feel the way they should react is to be polite and not cause problems....
- I think I am constantly running into barriers and frustrations in the temple/BCA due to being a woman. If I say something at a board meeting or speak out...I am often frowned upon by the men. They see me as a bossy, pushy woman. However, the same thing said by a man is more likely to be seen as being assertive and "having guts." It is more likely to be viewed as a leadership quality. Men on temple boards tend to like more passive styles and wait for things to happen rather than make them happen. They see a problem and wait for someone to fix it rather than attempt to delegate it out.

Whether prevailing social attitudes will contribute to reshaping this tradition of Buddhism remains to be seen, but if historical patterns are observed, the potential does exist, and this presents exciting possibilities for the development of a contemporary and truly universal form of Jōdo Shinshū.

## BACKGROUND AND SOCIOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

Over a century ago, Jōdo Shin Buddhism came west when Japan ended its long isolation from the rest of the world. Japanese immigrants brought with them not only their religion, but also their patriarchal values of the Meiji era. Not long afterwards, the Oriental Exclusion Act (1924) came

into effect, followed by further discrimination during the war years with "evacuation" and internment camps (1942–1945). The community, by then augmented by American-born second-generation Nisei, drew closer together in ethnic unity. The most conservative bastion of the community, the Buddhist temple, signified for many a link with their cultural heritage, and thus perpetuated the Japanese character of the institution. Indeed, sociologists point out that often the goal of the ethnic church is to play a major role in the preservation of customs, language, and group solidarity for the first generation of immigrants. However, they note, as subsequent generations acculturate, the institution is compelled to adapt and reorient its goals or risk extinction. In his 1987 study on the life-cycle of ethnic churches, Mark Mullins poses the critical question: "Are the *religious* goals, activities, and values of this organization worth perpetuating even if it requires the loss or abandonment of its original goal and identity?"<sup>4</sup>

### ACCULTURATION

According to some researchers, the assimilation of ethnic Japanese into mainstream American society is complete in all but physical appearance, and due to the high rate of outmarriage, it is foreseeable that even visibility will soon no longer be a critical factor in identity.<sup>5</sup>

Issei women were generally submissive; their role in the temple was to prepare food, hold fundraisers, and participate in social activities. Their American-born Nisei daughters, however, straddled not only cultures but also radically changing social times before, during, and after World War II. While many remain outwardly passive, deferring to men and fulfilling traditional roles in the temple, their comments in the surveys and interviews were virtually indistinguishable from those of later generations. Their reluctance to "rock the boat" has not stopped them from anonymously expressing forthright opinions about temple shortcomings and the effect these failings are having on younger people.

Third-generation Sansei women came of age in the era of civil rights, feminism, and other sweeping social transformations in mainstream society. They have become accomplished lawyers, judges, doctors, educators, business executives, and public policy makers. They are known to Americans as newscasters, writers, and community leaders who are not afraid to share their views. Indeed, by the early 1980s, they and the fourth-generation Yonsei had become notably absent from the BCA ranks of the *fujinkai*, the venerable Buddhist Women's Association that had been the supportive mainstay of the traditional temple.<sup>6</sup> Where Nisei women have been more apt to persevere with the status quo, younger women, with various options for both spiritual and social life at hand, have quietly chosen to withdraw

their involvement. Kenneth Tanaka estimates, "Even if we took the most optimistic figure...two-thirds of the *sansei* who attended the temple in youth are no longer regular members or attendees of the temples."<sup>77</sup>

In response to a survey question asking if women and men were perceived to be equal in the temple and in temple activities and duties, answers varied widely. Types of responses could be divided into roughly six categories:

- (1) Those who felt comfortable with the traditional paradigm of distinct duties and roles for men and for women, which were termed "separate but equal." Most of the respondents in this group were in their seventies and eighties. In all other responses to this question, age did not appear to have a particular bearing.
- (2) Those who expressed their perception of equality in relative terms, such as "Getting better but a long way to go."
- (3) Those who noted that women, mostly *Sansei*, now fill leadership positions in temples, at the district level, and on the BCANational Board. This is a relatively new phenomenon that began in the last decade and is gradually gaining acceptance.
- (4) Those who expressed discontentment with the expectation that women should automatically do the cooking and cleaning, pointing out that people should do whatever they are good at without having gender roles imposed upon them.
- (5) Those who felt that the system was entrenched in an "old boys' club" mentality that was difficult to breach. It was said that the older women often acted in complicity with this arrangement, either because they agreed with it, or because they were resigned to it.
- (6) Those who maintained that Japanese socio-cultural values, including patriarchal attitudes toward women, still exerted a strong influence in the temple, whether by "older *Niseis*," or by ministers from Japan.

Research respondents indicated that the institution has not kept up with the times, the culture outside of the temple, or the needs of its members. One of the major requirements, they said, was that the religion be made understandable, relevant, and vibrant for today's membership:

- We need a minister who will make Jōdo Shinshū more user-friendly, without a lot of Japanese terminology.
- Every minister has strengths and weaknesses, but the strength we want to build on is the minister's ability to connect with the

sangha so that they're learning. Just that alone will bring them back into the fold.

- The selection of ministers should include laypeople because the ministers will be serving them. If only ministers choose, they will always choose people like themselves. We will never progress if we continue with the same kind of people. We see the results of that. Young people are leaving; they go to their partners' religions.

Many respondents maintain that religion should be made the main focus of attention, to which social and cultural activities would be secondary. In order to fulfill this objective, they see a need for ministers who can relate to them as Americans, and a temple environment that is representative of what they accept and laud as a doctrine of equality for all people:

- BCA could serve women (and men) better with more religious outreach. I don't attend the temple because it tries to be a cultural center as well as a religious institution. I come to hear and learn the Dharma.
- All BCA members can be better served by being encouraged to attend services. BCA would do well to engage in more outreach and public service. Raise the profile in the community so we can be found.
- We have lost many members and countless more that I have gotten to the temple who never return because we are so focused and concerned about the Japanese Americans to the exclusion of all other Americans.... If the BCA does not support change within its temples and produce English-speaking *kyoshi*<sup>8</sup> and *kaikyoshi*,<sup>9</sup> Jōdo Shinshū in the United States will either die or become a tiny ethnic religious practice for the elite few. It will not have a seat at the table of the exciting movement underway, now being called American Buddhism.
- I think we have something that's of value that would be helpful to mainstream Americans because as Americans, we have lots of problems and a lot of it has to do with people being selfish and egotistical.... There's something to be learned from Jōdo Shinshū, a different way of looking at things, seeing how we're interconnected and influence each other, so there's a value...but ministers should learn presentation skills, not just doctrine.
- If the BCA had a vision, it should include identifying and encouraging people to become ministers and to become Jōdo Shinshū followers. Both men and women have tried but if they didn't "fit



the mold," they were not encouraged. Women have a harder time trying to "make the cut." The "good ole boy" network is culturally ingrained, as well as a long-standing practice....

For the first time in history, perhaps, prevailing social values and the tenets of Buddhism are more in accord on the subject of non-discrimination and universality. Yet within the BCA organization, women still notice a male-dominant, culturally Japanese attitude on the part of some ministers and some elders—an attitude that starkly contrasts with the outlook of today's youth, who have been raised on the principle of equality and unlimited possibility, regardless of sex, race, or other distinctions. Some respondents venture that if the temple and the teaching are not made more accessible to everyone, the rapid attrition in membership that started a few decades ago will continue unabated.

#### RELIGION IS THE GOAL

Have the goals of the organization changed? One hundred years ago, devout immigrants requested that ministers be sent from Japan to serve their religious needs. Many members can still recount stories of mothers and grandmothers who lived daily in the Jōdo Shin teaching. In the circumstances of their day, the Issei also came to see the temple as an ethnic gathering place. The events of modern history sustained this focus and prolonged it beyond their own generation. Perhaps due to the dearth of ministers who could truly communicate and relate well to later generations, the religious underpinning of the institution has lost much of its meaning for today's members, and the temple often seems to be held together by other activities. Yet despite or perhaps because of this trend, it is striking that so many women of all generations voice the need to bring religion back as the central aim. What is significant is that they express an opinion that the Jōdo Shin doctrine can still be viewed as a viable spiritual path. If they know about the Thirty-Fifth Vow<sup>10</sup> at all, it is a non-issue to them in this day and age as they focus on the principal import of the doctrine, that of universal liberation:

- The Eighteenth Vow encompasses all.<sup>11</sup>
- The basic truths of Buddhism were there whether man was there or not; the gender thing is created; religion is created. Truth is not.
- I think [the doctrine] was written at a time when men and women were not equal. Our job now is to "reinterpret" the actual words to fit today's society.

- The teachings were written and translated from a male perspective. Therefore, we must analyze and rethink a lot of what is written and develop new interpretations of the teachings.

Accordingly, they add, the Shin Buddhist teaching should also be made available to people outside of the ethnic enclave:

- If we are a Buddhist religion we can't be hypocritical. The BCA has got to change to adapt to a new wave and not be so much of an ethnic Japanese organization...the religion itself can work; it works in America, it's just to find ways to get people to understand that it can work whether you are Japanese or gay or whatever. If the Dharma is the main strength of Buddhism, then it will survive; it's just that the way in which it's propagated may have to change....
- Apparently there is something in the message that appeals to those [who were not born into Jōdo Shinshū]. I begin to realize that the future and the hope for Jōdo Shinshū might have to lie outside the ethnic Japanese community.... As long as people are interested in the doctrine, there will be some institution whether it's BCA or not, even if it's not here. I would be sad to see the demise of my temple, but the important thing is the doctrine because I think the teachings are worthwhile.

Female converts have added their voices to this, indicating a very real opportunity to share Jōdo Shinshū with the wider community. One of the attractions of Shinshū is its aspect of "practice in everyday life." Explains one person who had tried other forms of Buddhism:

- I went on a Jōdo Shinshū retreat, and what I learned was a completely smooth transition [in and out of my daily life]. More came into my life than being lifted up and out of my life and crash landing back in. You were removed [on a Zen retreat] from your life, from your relationships, you were relieved of them so maybe you felt better for a time, but you didn't bring anything back that was useful in your daily life, whereas the Jōdo Shinshū retreats were very healing. We could talk to the *sensei* about the Buddha moving in each of our personal lives. You didn't rise out of your life to do the retreat; you were talking but you had to go and do the dishes, too. It was in life.

## CHANGING NEEDS, CHANGING ROLES

If male-dominant attitudes are an obstacle, the women are proving that they have been able to transcend them without stridency, simply by being who they are—American Buddhists raised to know that the worth of all beings is equal.<sup>12</sup> This does not mean that they want to be the same as the men, nor that they aspire to replace them as the group in power. Instead, they see themselves as working together effectively with the men by contributing their considerable insight, intelligence, and skills in leadership to create a religious institution that will serve everyone more effectively. Says one such person:

- I don't mind doing anything for the church on any level, but it's got to be productive. If it's just to get your name recognized, it's not worth it. You realize that one person doesn't do it, though I did stick my neck out and do a few things because I saw the need.

Knowing what it is to be marginalized may also afford women an informed view on broader issues of access, which are so important to the future of Jōdo Shinshū in America.

Related to this is the realization that young people feel the need to see that this religion is relevant to the diversity of the world in which they live, both through the issues it addresses and the impression it gives. Their typical image of a minister is an older man who speaks Japanese and performs funerals and memorial services. This may be the accepted norm in Japan, but it is hardly inspiring for Americans. Yet here too the difference can be viewed as an opportunity. For while routinization of the tradition may have become entrenched in Japan, the respondents feel it is not too late to recognize that Jōdo Shinshū now finds itself in a completely new environment that is conducive to positive change. Their optimism and enthusiasm toward the survey clearly seem to suggest that the possibility exists to revalorize the teaching and interpret it in new ways that speak to contemporary people not only in America, but everywhere. This is not without precedent. Hōnen and Shinran went through a similar process in their time, departing from Indian and Chinese traditions to create a Japanese Buddhism that worked for them and for their contemporaries.

## THE MINISTRY

Accordingly, respondents say that it is important that the ministry understand and adapt, if necessary, to differences in socio-cultural viewpoint. Without this, there might soon be no listeners to hear them. It is acknowl-

edged that a number of ministers, both Japanese and American, have done much to reach out to congregants to make the teaching relevant to them. However, judging by the comments of the women interviewed, there are not enough ministers in the system with fluency in English, a diversity of perspective, or attitudes conducive to suitably transmitting the Dharma in America. Respondents understand that those who are comfortable with current conditions deserve to have such service continued. But will younger members who remain with the BCA receive a religious education appropriate to their needs? And what of the droves of disenchanting Buddhists who are leaving the organization to seek religion elsewhere—or who have simply become disillusioned by religion altogether?

For many reasons, relatively few young Americans are called to the ministry, and this applies to the Shin Buddhist ministry as well. Without role models with whom they can identify, then, it is difficult for Shinshū followers to find the necessary motivation, even if they can overcome the other factors responsible for the decline in the ministry. Japanese ministers who sincerely wish to share the teaching are greatly appreciated, but their training, say the women, must go beyond learning rudimentary English. It is also necessary that they learn about American society and its cultural values so that they can relate to congregants in a suitable manner. Further, they need to be educated in America, and particularly in areas that congregants identify with the ministry, such as counseling and social outreach. One interviewee gave an example of the urgency for adequate and suitable training of ministers:

- In the United States...it's a very common thing to see your teacher or doctor or minister for counseling. So if your minister cannot give you help and doesn't have a clue, it's terrible. I know of [a member] who had marital problems and went to his minister to get help. The minister couldn't do it, so he went to a Christian minister and got counseling and advice and now he goes to a Christian church. To be turned off by your own minister is not going to be helpful at all to Buddhism in America. This is another course that ministers are going to have to take, and I don't mean some ministers who are interested, I mean every minister because every temple will have people who will request counseling. It's an opportunity for every minister to teach because Buddhism can help you in these kinds of issues...but they're not going to do it if they can't even begin to talk about marriage or problems with children. And if you don't know English, you've got to master it. It's foremost.

Members' expectations of the minister's role is based not only on long-standing temple convention, but is also informed now by social norms in

the surrounding environment. With alternatives readily accessible, people choose what satisfies their needs, and as products of a pluralistic society, are not bound by family religious tradition. Repeatedly, people emphasized that the clergy had to reflect the needs of the sangha here and now in America.

On the topic of women in the ministry, respondents were almost unanimous in saying that they should be encouraged to pursue the vocation if they are qualified. Respondents gave ample reasons to show that the inclusion of female ministers would benefit everyone. Notably, they would add another perspective to what has been an almost exclusively androcentric orientation. The only barrier, it seems, has been the discriminatory stance of some people, which has then fostered an unfounded attitude that women cannot be ministers.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

It can be seen that many related issues arose out of the examination of women in American Jōdo Shinshū today. It was useful and instructive to ask them to share their views, for though they may not always have been at the head of the temple, they have always been at the center. This has enabled them to identify problems that exist and offer concrete suggestions that address the long-term needs of the congregation. Gender issues are not the only problem, but they are indicative of the enormous chasm that has grown between the majority of the American sangha and the traditional culture of the old country. Indeed, the inevitable acculturation of those in leadership, both male and female, will undoubtedly mitigate discriminatory tensions in the laity.

Some of the women made a clear distinction between their faith in the teaching and their trepidation about the institution. In the past decade, more women have begun to push for change by taking leadership roles. Does their presence create holes in the fabric of the institution? Perhaps it does from a traditional point of view, although the transition appears to have been both timely and natural. In any event, the case at hand demonstrates that the BCA needs to be fluid and flexible, as several members question what they call lack of relevance and vision. Therefore, the inclusion of women on a level of parity could be viewed positively as a welcome change, rather than as a threat, that may shake the organization out of its lassitude and bring in new energy.

What do these findings portend for the future? Since they hint at a wide and sometimes contradictory range of opinions, it is difficult to forecast what lies ahead. The negative view might be that the BCA as a religious institution will have run its course if it cannot accommodate the changed profile of its

members. Would Jōdo Shinshū be able to survive in America without this structure? From the creative responses of the women surveyed, it seems as if it would, at least in spirit. Women might even be the ones to lead the way, accustomed as they are to adjusting to changing circumstances.

Listening to many of those who contributed to this research, the hope for the future lies in focusing on religion rather than on ethnic culture. Such a move could change the direction of Jōdo Shinshū in America, but would require that greater efforts be made to adapt the dissemination of the religion to serve all generations as well as non-ethnics. For women, it would mean that gender issues might finally be put to rest as the organization becomes more mainstream.

It is telling that some women are willing to pursue Jōdo Shinshū with or without the institution of the BCA. Some speak of smaller *howakai* study groups and others speak of parallel organizations for people who are not interested in Japanese culture but simply want to study Shin Buddhism. In fact, recently installed Bishop Koshin Ogui was already making innovative adaptations to meet the needs of the American sangha when he was serving as a minister in the Eastern District. While it remains to be seen how he will lead the national organization during this crucial time of cultural transition, the move to create parallel organizations reinforces the idea that in one way or another, change is inevitable. Whether the institution can embrace it or not is another question.

## CONCLUSION

Women have always been a strength in the temple both for their active support and for their influence on younger generations, yet even today they are seldom asked for their views, much less listened to. Their responses to the surveys and interviews show that many of them are eager for change in both the institution and in the way they are perceived. Regardless of generation or age, what most shared contradicted the stereotype of the acquiescent Japanese woman who kowtows to men. A number of respondents expressed displeasure with the traditional status quo and several are taking the initiative to demonstrate leadership capabilities that appear, until recently, to have been ignored. They contribute many insights that stem from their women's experience, which some of them are now applying as they participate in the temple and in the BCA in new ways.

Future research could include a larger sampling of members to enable comparisons between various kinds of temples based on location, size, age of members, and cultural orientation. It would also be useful to determine the views of male members and of the clergy on the same

topics, to verify differences between perception and reality, and to balance the input gathered from the women. Ultimately, this could lead to better mutual understanding and a stronger sense of direction for all involved. Research involving former members would also enable the organization to address problems and deficiencies.

Throughout its history, Buddhism has influenced society, and society in turn has influenced the development of the doctrine and the institution. As it traveled eastward through various cultures and societies, the Dharma has taken root by harmonizing where fitting or necessary with the social environment. Along with the progress of Buddhism, women have often played a key role in fostering the mass appeal of the tradition through their own dedication and devotion. Now Buddhism has arrived in a social environment where women are much less limited by gender constructs. They are free to explore a new sense of self both in their worldly lives and on the level of Ultimate Reality, and they see Shinran's doctrine as offering one possible path in this quest.

In Jōdo Shinshū the word *fukashigi* describes the inconceivable working of Amida Buddha that is beyond conceptual understanding. It seems like an appropriate term to apply to the remarkable confluence of Buddhism, feminism, pluralism, egalitarianism, and the acculturation of Jōdo Shin Buddhists in America. Perhaps beyond all human conditioning and calculation, Shin Buddhism, too, will transcend its bounds.

## NOTES

1. Buddhist Churches of America, *Buddhist Churches of America: 2004 Annual Report* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 2005), p. 19. BCA membership is reported to be almost seventeen thousand nationwide. There is no breakdown by sex, but it is safe to say that women constitute more than half the membership.
2. With few exceptions, women have been relegated to a secondary role throughout Buddhist history. Most of what is written about them has been penned by men who were often monks. Most decisions made regarding roles and doctrine relating to women have also been made by men, often based on cultural tradition. In the past few years, steps have been taken at both the mother temple in Kyoto and in the BCA to respond not only to the reality of social change, but also to the reality of the tenet of "different but equal."
3. Topological breakdown by age: 30–39 (8 respondents); 40–49 (20 respondents); 50–59 (39 respondents); 60–69 (37 respondents); 70–79 (55 respondents); 80+ (26 respondents). By generation: Issei (7); Nisei (93); Sansei (68); Yonsei (2); Other (incl. dual generation, Kibei, non-ethnic; 15 respondents).
4. Emphasis mine. Mark Mullins, "The Life-Cycle of Ethnic Churches in Sociological Perspective," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 14, no. 4 (1987): p. 327.
5. For example, see Harry Kitano, *Generations and Identity: The Japanese American* (Needham Heights, MA: Ginn Press, 1993), pp. 124 and 163; and Mei Nakano, *Japanese American Women: Three Generations 1890–1990* (Berkeley and Sebastopol: Mina Press Publishing, 1990), p. 225.
6. Zen Lotus Society, "Chronology of Events Involving Women and Buddhism," in "Women and Buddhism," special issue, *Spring Wind: Buddhist Cultural Forum* 6, nos. 1–3 (1986): pp. 235–270.
7. Kenneth Tanaka, "A Prospectus of the Buddhist Churches of America: The Role of Ethnicity," *The Pure Land*, n.s., 12 (December 1995): pp. 121–141.
8. Fully ordained minister.
9. Overseas minister (i.e., not serving in Japan).
10. The Thirty-Fifth Vow of Dharmākara Bodhisattva, appearing in the main sutra of Jōdo Shinshū, the *Sukhāvativyūha-sūtra*, allows for women to be transformed into men in order to attain buddhahood.



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11. The Eighteenth Vow, or Hongan, is the primary vow of Jōdo Shinshū, whereby Amida Buddha promises to liberate all beings.

12. According to the *BCA 2004–2005 Directory*, some eighteen women are now presidents and some twenty-seven fill positions as vice-presidents on roughly sixty temple boards across the nation. Buddhist Churches of America, *Buddhist Churches of America 2004–2005 Directory* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 2004).

