

settled, both the head and the heart become one. Soon one feels the entire body breathing, but gradually one even forgets that he is breathing at all. With even greater deepening, one's entire body becomes sensation itself; the body melts into sensation. Then, one senses oneself to be a "single mass," like the embryo. Soon, even this notion of a "single mass" is forgotten, and the boundary between the self and the cosmos disappears. This revealed reality is none other than liberation itself.

I believe these insights by Wes Nisker and Kōshirō Tamaki have helped to show the unity of the individual and the universe from a biological, physical and spiritual perspective. I would like to suggest that this unity serve as a basis for understanding the traditional unity of Amida and the self.

### Some Concluding Thoughts

I am fully aware that the interpretation that I have proposed in this paper steps outside the traditional framework. Yet, I am not prepared to regard my proposal as a new interpretation within the level of Shinshū traditional studies (*kyōgaku*). I would, however, see my proposal as one consideration on the level of education (*kyōiku*) or, to use a more traditional term, propagation (*dendō*). What is needed in the contemporary world is a way of bridging the essential teachings of Shinran (*kyōgi*) and the mindset of the vast majority of people. For this purpose, we cannot rely on the ultimate discourse (*hottoku-ron*), but we need to shift the paradigm to that of the perspective of the seekers which I should like to refer to as *seikatsu-ron*, the "discourse on engaged-living." I realize that others have been involved in this project (though not have called it as such), but this paper would have served its purpose if it serves to trigger even greater discussion on this important issue facing Shin Buddhism.

## Issues of Ethnicity in the Buddhist Churches of America

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February 18, 1942, early morning, still in our night clothes and huddled by the heater, we listened grimly to the news over the radio. There was a loud rapping on the back door. Three men stood there. They were the FBI. "We came to arrest Rev. Matsuura," said one, as they came through the door.<sup>260</sup>

This paper is concerned with the issues of ethnicity within the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). The paper will be descriptive in nature, based on interviews, surveys, and personal observation.<sup>261</sup>

As the institution representing the Nishi-Hongwanji branch of Shin school of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism in the continental

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<sup>260</sup>An account of a wife of a BCA minister residing in the central coast region of California. For a fuller citation of her description, see Shinobu Matsuura, *Compassionate Vow* (Berkeley: Matsuura Family, 1986), p. 63.

<sup>261</sup>My role within the BCA has been that of an active participant since adolescence as a Dharma (or Sunday) school student, a youth leader, a seminarian, a BCA minister, and a faculty member of the Institute of Buddhist Studies, a BCA sponsored seminary and graduate school in Berkeley, California.

United States, the BCA celebrated its centennial in 1999.<sup>262</sup> In 1997, the BCA was comprised of a national headquarters located in San Francisco and sixty temples served by sixty-one priests.<sup>263</sup> Total membership in 1996 stood at 16,902, a figure that represents a gradual attrition from the 1988 figure of 20,021 and a 1977 count of 21,600.<sup>264</sup> The numbers of priests reveal a parallel decline from its peak of 123 in 1930, to 71 in 1981 and to the 61 priests in 1997.<sup>265</sup>

The choice of this topic, ethnicity, is partly motivated by my desire to clear up some points concerning the common perception of the BCA as, at best, a paradigmatic ethnic Buddhist institution and, at worst, an 'ethnic fortress.' The focus is also a response to the ongoing debate on the issue of two kinds of Buddhism in America as reported by Charles Prebish and others: the one 'ethnic' or 'Asian American' and the other 'white' or 'Euro-American.' The

<sup>262</sup>Nishi-Hongwanji (or Hompa Hongwanji-ha) and Higashi-Hongwanji (or Ōtani-ha) are by far the two largest among the ten existing branches of the Jodo-Shinshū school in Japan and are the only ones represented in the United States. Of these two, Nishi-Hongwanji is overwhelmingly larger, with approximately 175 temples, fellowships, and branches, compared to approximately ten belonging to Higashi-Hongwanji.

<sup>263</sup>1997-1998 Directory (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1997), pp. 2-10.

<sup>264</sup>1996 Annual Report (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1997), p. 29. Due to the method of determining membership, the actual 1996 membership population is significantly larger. These figures do not include children and even adult, married children who may continue to participate in the temple activities as part of the family headed by their dues-paying parents. There are also Japanese American families who are not official members but participate in many of the cultural programs held at the temples. Further, actual statistics are even more difficult to obtain since temples maintain differing sets of criteria for determining membership.

<sup>265</sup>Donald Tuck, *Buddhist Churches of Canada: Shin* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1987), pp. 78, 96.

two are seen as mutually isolated and very distinct in their membership and focus.<sup>266</sup> Ethnic temples have served not only the spiritual but also the cultural and social needs of their members, particularly among the most recent of the immigrant population. In contrast, many observers note that Euro-American groups focus primarily on spiritual practices. We should, however, remain cautious about the underlying implication in these observations that ethnic groups are less spiritual. Cultural activities have always played a vital part of Buddhist temples in Asia and were integrated with the spiritual life of the larger communities. Perhaps a deeper, more nuanced analysis will reveal their spiritual significance in the lives of practicing Buddhists.<sup>267</sup>

This division has also contributed to the smoldering debate concerning the question, 'Who represents true American Buddhism?' Some Asian American Buddhists are offended at the suggestion that white Buddhists are the sole contributors to the creation of American Buddhism while ethnic Buddhists are seen as having played virtually no role in it. Helen Tworkov, the editor of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*, for example wrote, "Asian American Buddhists . . . so far . . . have not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism."<sup>268</sup>

<sup>266</sup>For an excellent discussion of this debate, see Charles Prebish, "Two Buddhisms Reconsidered," *Buddhist Studies Review* 10, no. 2 (1993): 187-206. This issue surfaced in essays for the general readership by Victor Sōgen Hori and Rick Fields in *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1994): 48-52, 54-56.

<sup>267</sup>Realizing this 'hidden' treasure of these cultural expressions, some Euro-American writers such as Rick Fields and Jan Nattier have suggested that Euro-American Buddhists reevaluate and even learn from the rich complex of cultural-religious heritage practiced in the ethnic temples. See essays by Fields cited above and by Nattier mentioned below. See also Rick Fields and Don Farber, *Taking Refuge in Los Angeles: Life in a Vietnamese Buddhist Temple* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 1987).

<sup>268</sup>*Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Winter 1991): p. 4. Ryo

This viewpoint ignores the history of contributions made by groups of Asian American Buddhists, some entering their second century of roots in American soil. What is implied, according to Asian American critics, is that Buddhism becomes truly American only when white Americans become seriously involved. This form, then, is called 'American Buddhism,' distinguished from simply 'Buddhism in America,' i.e., Buddhism as a foreign religion practiced by Asian American Buddhists.

In contrast to the two-category dichotomy, Jan Nattier has proposed a three-category model using an economic paradigm: the Buddhists are elite, missionary, or immigrant, and their Buddhism is respectively an 'import,' an 'export,' or 'baggage.' Elite Buddhists' belong to a higher socio-economic class, are highly educated, and overwhelmingly of European descent. Due largely to their economic prowess, they were able to actively 'import' their preferred brands of Buddhism, primarily the 'meditative' Tibetan, Vipassanā, and Zen traditions. 'Missionary' or 'evangelical Buddhists' are chiefly represented by the Sōka Gakkai organization in the United States, whose conscious missionary activity was funded and directed from its headquarters in Japan since 1960s. The Sōka Gakkai has a substantial percentage of African American, Latino, and Asian American members; in 1983 55 percent of its members came from non-European ethnic backgrounds. Lastly, 'ethnic Buddhists' are those who brought Buddhism as part of their "baggage" when they immigrated to the United States. Nattier regards their form of Buddhism as 'the most complex and sophisticated' due to its concern with the entire fabric of life, spanning many generations, rather than a focus on the

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Imamura sent a rebuttal, and the controversy intensified when the rebuttal was not printed. His letter and Tworlov's reply were printed in *The Sangha Newsletter* (Newsletter of the Wider Shin Buddhist Fellowship), 7 (Summer 1994): 2-10.

individual search for enlightenment.<sup>269</sup> The BCA would fall under this 'baggage' category.

In this paper, 'ethnicity' is seen as possessing two dimensions: culture and race. Culture is further distinguished into traditional arts and shared values. The arts refer to any number of Japanese-inspired fine arts and martial arts: flower arrangement, tea ceremonies, *shigin* (recitation of Chinese poems), *kendō*, *karate*, *aikidō*, etc. Also included here is instruction in the Japanese language, which traditionally includes calligraphy and appreciation of Japanese literature. 'Values' refers to the shared worldviews that were especially prevalent among the issei (first generation) immigrant population. These values are best represented by gratitude (expressed as *arigatai*; *kansha*), frugality (*mottai'nai*), industriousness (*kinben-sa*), responsibility (*sekinin*), and 11 obligation (*giri*).<sup>270</sup>

The racial aspect of ethnicity is evidenced in many ethnic groups by their members' powerful drive to associate with others of the same national background. This need was, in the case of BCA members, accentuated by external forces that impacted the Japanese Americans before World War II, including their incarceration during the war. The Buddhist temple served as refuge within a hostile social environment.

### Historical Background to the Ethnic Nature of the BCA

Religion and ethnicity are closely related phenomena in North

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<sup>269</sup>Jan Nattier, 'Visible and Invisible,' *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Fall 1995): 42-49. The quotation appears on p. 49a. A more academic treatment of this subject is found in her essay in Charles Prebish and Kenneth Tanaka, eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America*: (University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>270</sup>The most prominent among these has been 'gratitude,' which Robert Bellah not only cited as the hallmark of Tokugawa religious value but one noticeably prominent among Shin followers.

America. Much of the development of religion in the New World could not be fully understood without taking into consideration immigration patterns and the role of ethnic bonding. The BCA certainly fits this pattern. For a non-Christian and non-European immigrant population such as the BCA membership, the role of ethnicity was perhaps even more crucial and enduring. I will mention here some developments from the first fifty years of BCA history that contributed to the strong ethnic nature of this religious institution.

The arrival in 1899 of the first missionaries, Dr. Shuye Sonoda and Rev. Kakuryo Nishijima, took place within an atmosphere that was far from friendly or receptive. For example, a combative attitude can be detected in the San Francisco Chronicle caption to the photograph of their arrival as it noted,

They will teach that . . . pure Buddhism is a better moral guide than Christianity' (emphasis added). The reporter goes on to describe Buddhism as challenging the ultimacy and nature of the Christian concept of God as nothing more than a 'figment of the human imagination.'<sup>271</sup>

Similar attitudes existed even within the Japanese community. The groundwork for the arrival of the official missionaries had begun several years earlier. One year before their arrival, a Buddhist representative met with the Japanese Consul in Seattle, but, according to existing records, this government official was not favorable to the idea of bringing Buddhism to the United States. He feared that the introduction of a 'foreign religion' would cause numerous problems for the Japanese and Americans who were, for the present, coexisting peacefully. The Consul was annoyed by the idea and inquired whether the American government would allow the entrance of a 'foreign religion.' He

<sup>271</sup>Ryo Munekata, ed., *Buddhist Churches of America*: Vol. 1, *75 Year History, 1899-1974* (Chicago: Nobart Inc., 1974), p. 47.

saw Buddhism as a threat to the relationship between the two peoples.<sup>272</sup>

Thus, it is no great surprise to learn that the Shin priests sent from Japan, though called *kaikyōshi* (missionaries or, literally, 'emissaries' [*shi*] who open up [*kai*] the teachings [*kyō*]), rarely carried out active propagation activities beyond the existing Japanese American communities. This was due partly to political considerations. It appears that, prior to World War II, the Japanese governmental attitude noted above fostered a tacit understanding among the 'missionaries' that they were to stay confined to the Japanese American communities.<sup>273</sup> This understanding was further reinforced by the fact that these priests had been invited to existing Japanese American communities in order to serve their cultural, social, and spiritual needs. Consequently, the priests found themselves being discouraged by their lay 'hosts' from actively propagating beyond their communities. The lay members needed their priests to help create a social oasis within the sea of racial hostility.

The hostilities aimed at the Japanese in the society at large contained ample references to the Buddhist temples. For example, testifying before a subcommittee of the House Committee on

<sup>272</sup>Tetsuden Kashima, *Buddhism in America: The Social Organization of an Ethnic Religious Organization* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press; 1977), p. 14.

<sup>273</sup>This is based on a personal conversation with a BCA minister who knew several older ministers who had experienced their government's admonition. It does not appear to be a documented policy but more in the realm of an 'unwritten rule.' Rev. Julius Goldwater further corroborated this in a phone interview in November, 1994. He was one of the few Caucasian Shin priests who served the BCA community in the years immediately prior to and during World War II in the Los Angeles area and served as custodian of temples during the incarceration of the Japanese Americans.

Immigration in 1921, Senator James D. Phelan of California explained:

There are seventy-six Buddhist temples in California and I am told that they are regularly attended by Emperor worshippers' who believe that their Emperor is the over-lord of all.<sup>274</sup>

Valentine S. McClatchy, publisher of the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper, voiced similar claims:

The Japanese hold that their Mikado is the one living God to whom they owe their very existence, and therefore all obedience.... Buddhism, which is tolerated in Japan, has Shintoism grafted onto it.<sup>275</sup>

Bishop Kōyū Uchida did not allow these accusations to go unanswered, as attested to in his statement to the House Committee:

We wish to strongly emphasize that our Churches have nothing to do whatsoever with Shintoism, politics or any imperialistic policy formulated by the Japanese government. Our mission is to elevate the spiritual life, not to dictate politics, or policies of any government. We should also like to point out that Buddhism is democratic, an ideal long held by the citizens of the United States of America.<sup>276</sup>

It requires mentioning here that it was Bishop Uchida who had pushed for all the temples to refer to themselves as a 'church,' presumably to blunt the appearance of being too foreign.<sup>277</sup> However, anti-Japanese sentiments continued to crescendo,

<sup>274</sup>Kashima, *Buddhism in America*, p. 32.

<sup>275</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>276</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>277</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 17-18; Ryo Munekata ed., *Buddhist Churches of America*, p. 49.

culminating in the 1924 Alien Land Laws and the Oriental Exclusion Act. According to the new laws, Japanese nationals could no longer own property, and new immigration from Japan was terminated. Ironically, the Exclusion Act proved to be a windfall for the Buddhist temples. Many *isseis* (first generation or the immigrant generation) interpreted the law as extremely unjust. As a result, many of them, including those who were 'fence-sitters,' became members of the Buddhist temples. The Buddhist temples came to be perceived as bastions of Japanese culture and refuges from the storms of a hostile society. This is reflected in an observation made during that period about the Gardena Buddhist Church near Los Angeles:

After the passage of the Immigration Law of 1924 discriminating against the Japanese, the number of Buddhists increased rapidly, and so did that of the Buddhist churches. Before that event, some of them had been hesitant in declaring themselves Buddhists, considering such an act impudent in a Christian country. But the immigration law made them more defiant and bold in asserting what they believed to be their rights; it made them realize the necessity of cooperation for the sake of their own security and welfare, and naturally they sought centers of their communal activity in their Buddhist churches.<sup>278</sup>

Eighteen years later World War II dealt the ultimate blow to the Japanese American communities: the internment. Of the approximately 110,000 people interned, 60 percent were Buddhists, and the vast majority of them belonged to the Shin school. Among the first to be rounded up in the early days of the war were the Buddhist priests. Among them was Rev. Issei

<sup>278</sup>Kosei Ogura, 'A Sociological Study of the Buddhist Churches in North America, with a Case Study of Gardena, California, Congregation,' Master's Thesis, University of Southern California, 1932, pp. 85-86.

Matsuura of Guadalupe, a small farming community in central coastal California. Mrs. Matsuura, a highly respected spiritual and community leader in her own right, later recalled those terrifying events in her book, *Higan* (Compassionate Vow).

February 18, 1942, early morning, still in our night clothes and huddled by the heater, we listened grimly to the news over the radio. There was a loud rapping on the back door. Three men stood there. They were the FBI. 'We came to arrest Rev. Matsuura,' said one, as they came through the door. I had a foreboding that something like this would happen. But when the time actually came, I felt crushed. I was instructed to pack a change of clothing for my husband. Hurriedly, I put his underwear and toiletries in a bag. Separately, I wrapped his *koromo* (priest robes) and *kesa* (a miniature version of the original monastic robes that is worn around the neck), *seiten* (book of sacred writings) and *Kanmuryōjukyō sūtra*.

'Only bare necessities,' they said, but he being a minister, the extra religious articles were allowed. My husband walked the long corridor to the *hondō* (Buddha hall), lit the candle and incense and quietly read the *Tanbutsuge*. Our youngest daughter, Kiyō, and I bowed in *gasshō* (the placing the palms together as expression of reverence), realizing this may be our last parting. The FBI stood at attention through the sutra chanting.<sup>279</sup>

In April 1942, Mrs. Matsuura was evacuated to the camps, along with the entire Japanese American community in the Guadalupe region. She would later write:

<sup>279</sup>Matsuura, *Compassionate Vow*, 63. I have taken the liberty of affixing brief explanations of the Buddhist terms in the parentheses that follow the terms.

Whatever land and property were acquired in the almost fifty years of immigrant history leading up to that day were to be sold at any price or just abandoned. We were told to leave with only what we could carry. Bearing numbered tags identifying us as 'enemy aliens,' and steeped in uncertainty, we tearfully left our home.<sup>280</sup>

Ironically, the most critical step in the Americanization of Shin Buddhism took place in the internment camps located in Topaz, Utah. The great change started with a series of meetings at the Topaz camp in early 1944 and climaxed with a conference in Salt Lake City (east of the quarantined zone) in July of that year. A new constitution was adopted that called for a shift to English as the primary language and a change of the name from 'North American Buddhist Mission' to 'The Buddhist Churches of America' (BCA).

But at the same time, these events reflect the forces that would shape the strong ethnic character of the BCA. This historical background served to galvanize the BCA communities to cohere around issues of ethnicity, which at times eclipsed the religious motivation in many of the churches' members.<sup>281</sup> Many BCA members came to equate being Japanese Americans with being Buddhists. In other words, their ethnically driven political identity and religious affiliation were intimately connected. By making this connection, they risked being seen as more foreign

<sup>280</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 65

<sup>281</sup>Kashima, *Buddhism in America*, 20-21. He cites San Diego and Guadalupe as examples of temples that had a strong sense of ethnic community. In San Diego, it was the 1916 overflow of the nearby dam that served as a catalyst to consolidate the community toward the founding of the temple. The Guadalupe community was Buddhist due to pragmatic reasons; it turns out that the Buddhist missionaries in Los Angeles responded positively one day earlier than their Christian counterparts to the request for the establishment of a religious center. This sealed the Buddhist affiliation of their religious center.

and less patriotic since, as we saw above, the American political establishment regarded Buddhism as foreign.

I now wish to examine the BCA's current situation by enumerating what I regard as ethnic preservation and ethnic rejection trends.

### Ethnic Preservation Trends

A recent questionnaire surveying the opinions of teachers and parents of Dharma school (Sunday school) children in three temples in California, included the question, 'Why do you take or send your child/children to Dharma School?'<sup>282</sup> Following are some of the answers entered by the respondents:

- 'Learn Buddhism; fellowship with other Dharma School children and staff; association and linkage with other Japanese American families and friends'
- 'Expose them to Buddha Dharma; expose them to other Buddhist children'
- 'Exposure to Buddhist teachings and Japanese culture'
- 'To be exposed to Japanese culture and Buddhist thought'

These responses reveal motivations that are rooted in the parents' desire either to instill Japanese culture or to foster association with other Japanese Americans. In my own

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<sup>282</sup>As part of Shinshū History II course in the spring semester 1993, four students at the Institute of Buddhist Studies conducted a survey based on a questionnaire at Berkeley, San Francisco, and Watsonville BCA temples. The survey's objectives were to determine 1) profiles of the pupils, parents, and teachers of the Dharma schools, 2) the parents' reasons for taking their children to Dharma school, 3) their reasons for belonging to a BCA temple, 4) their level of knowledge about the basic teachings, and 5) the degree to which their Buddhist understanding was actually connected to Japanese cultural beliefs, customs, and practice.

experience, these responses are representative of the *sansei* (third generation) who are now mostly in their mid-forties to mid-sixties.

This interest among the *sansei* parents may very well support the 'ethnic revival' thesis discussed by sociologists.<sup>283</sup> They maintain that in immigrant populations in general, those of the third generation take a deepened interest in their ethnicity and cultural heritage as compared to their parents, whose interests were financial stability and social acceptance. From their more privileged position, particularly in their educational background, the third generation is able and can afford to look back toward its ethnic heritage.

This thesis, in my view, does apply in great measure to *sanseis* in the BCA. We need not look very far to find examples of 'ethnic revival' cultural expression, such as the music group, *Hiroshima*, whose unique integration of Japanese instruments with contemporary American rhythm catapulted them to national recognition. In the political arena, the redress movement for the financial reparation of World War II internees was largely initiated and carried through by the ethnically inspired third generation. The success of this movement, which virtually everyone considered an improbability, could not have been accomplished by the second generation alone.

The BCA's high level of ethnicity can be discerned in the manner in which the temples also function in ways that sociologists call the 'base-institution.' The temples serve as legal umbrella organizations, providing facilities for clubs and sub-organizations engaged in cultural programs such as Japanese language school and martial arts.

It appears that cultural activities at the temples will continue to flourish, abetted in part by the sustained interest in both Asian

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<sup>283</sup>Marcus L. Hansen, "The Third Generation in America," *Commentary* 14 (1952): 492-503.

martial arts and fine arts shown not only by Shin members but also by the public at large. The interest in Asian culture shows no signs of abating, since for a growing number of Americans it no longer carries the stigma of being foreign. Furthermore, this interest in Asian culture has gone beyond the traditional artistic forms to include values that are associated with or emerge directly from Buddhism. Many parents speak of the hope of instilling in their children such values as interdependence and cooperation, which they see as based in Buddhist or Japanese culture.

One major category of sub-organizations demonstrating a high degree of 'ethnicity as race' is the athletic groups, particularly basketball leagues. These leagues exist throughout the state of California wherever a large concentration of Japanese Americans is found; at least half of the Buddhist temples field teams and serve as sponsors or are affiliated with them in one form or another. Today, these athletic groups, starting with kindergartners, marshal a huge following with active participation of their *sansei* parents. Tournaments are held annually that take these teams considerable distances and include overnight stays with parental participation. Such athletic events show no signs of waning. I predict that these groups will continue to be among the most vigorous affiliated organizations of the BCA temples. They attract a cohort of active, younger parents and a sizable number of children and youth. What makes the athletic organizations interesting to our study are their ethnic ties. Their common bond is not Buddhism or religion, but being Japanese American, since Christian churches and secular community groups also field teams within these leagues.<sup>284</sup> In my view, these athletic organizations have an enormous impact in reinforcing ethnic preservation.

<sup>284</sup>For example, in the San Francisco Bay area the East Bay League includes teams from three Buddhist temples (Berkeley Sangha, Berkeley Otani, and Southern Alameda County), two Christian churches (EI Cerrito Free Methodist and Buena Vista in Alameda), and three

### Ethnic Rejection Trends

Compared to a heightened cultural awareness among members of the BCA, its racial composition will be increasingly diversified. Much of this is attributable to the large percentage of out-marriages among Japanese Americans, which runs around 50 percent. No official statistics are available but I would estimate the percentage of biracial and biethnic<sup>285</sup> children in the Dharma schools throughout the BCA to be approximately 40 percent. Temples east of the Rocky Mountains report even higher numbers that are closer to 50 percent. Euro-Americans accounts for approximately 3 percent of the participant youths within all the BCA temples. This trend toward racial and ethnic diversity is accentuated by the large percentage of former members who have dropped out. The younger generations that have remained in the temples are in reality a small segment compared to the group that has left the temples. While no official figures are available, it is my estimation that perhaps only one-quarter of the regular Dharma school students in the 1960s continue to be temple members. In the San Francisco urban area, for example, a temple member laments that out of twenty-five old friends only two have remained members, even though most of them were still living in the area. This is not uncommon. Even if we took the most optimistic figure, I would estimate that two-thirds of the *sanseis* who attended the temples in their youth are no longer regular members or attendees.

Already the percentage of non-Japanese American membership is estimated to be approximately 15 percent nationally; the figures will be higher outside California. Even within California, certain events such as the summer Obon bazaar festivals are attended by non-temple members of the larger

community organizations (Mt. Eden in Hayward, Oakland, and Diablo in Concord).

<sup>285</sup>The term 'biethnic' here refers to children of marriage between a Japanese American and an American of another Asian descent.

community, often constituting as much as 70 percent of the crowd, as in the case of the Marysville temple in Northern California.

The leadership is also showing signs of change. Several years ago the BCA governing body, the National Board of Directors, included three non-Japanese American lay directors out of a total of forty-one.<sup>286</sup> Of the sixty-one current BCA ministers, five are Euro-Americans.<sup>287</sup> In my estimation, the number of non-Japanese interested in the ministry as a career will remain high in proportion to the general membership. This trend began around 1980 after which four of the five Euro-American priests were ordained. In the future, the percentage of non-Japanese Americans among the BCA seminary students at the Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS) in California or in training in Japan will most likely continue to be high. Of the three IBS students closest to ordination, one is of Caucasian-Japanese parentage, another is of Hispanic and Filipino background, and the third is a Japanese American who was born in Japan and came to this country in his adolescence. Of the next group of students interested in the priesthood, one is biracial (Caucasian-Japanese parentage) and the other is Japanese American.<sup>288</sup>

In the area of cultural values, while the first two generations of Japanese Americans placed a premium on gratitude and obligation, younger generations clearly do not cherish them to the same degree. These traditional Japanese values are often at odds with their lives in the suburbs and particularly in their places of work, where self-assertiveness and self-preservation are required in order to survive and prosper. This conflict is often at the root of

<sup>286</sup>*Buddhist Churches of America: 1994-1995 Directory* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1994), pp. 12-14. Since 1994, this number has dropped to one in 1996 and 1997.

<sup>287</sup>*Buddhist Churches of America: 1997-1998 Directory* (San Francisco: Buddhist Churches of America, 1997), pp. 2-10.

<sup>288</sup>These figures are as of September 1997.

their questions concerning their attempts to live a Buddhist life in the modern world. Although younger generations may turn to the temples for cultural solace and a sense of community, it seems by all indicators that the community may not be effectively sustained by the values of gratitude, obligation, frugality, etc., as was so in the past.

Continual insistence on the use of Japanese language will undoubtedly be a source of hindrance and even annoyance for some. This sentiment can be discerned in the mixed responses in the above-mentioned survey to the chanting of sutras in Shin services. While some find chanting (which is still predominately in Japanese) to be part of the services they enjoy, others clearly expressed unhappiness with not being able to understand what is being chanted.<sup>289</sup> The survey asked:

When attending temple services, what part or aspect of the services gives you a 'good' feeling, or makes you feel good?  
Or what part or aspect of the service do you like the best?  
What aspects of temple services do you like the least? Why?

Examining responses to what aspects of services members liked the least, we find the following (S/B/W = temples: S = San Francisco, B = Berkeley, W = Watsonville; age; gender):

<sup>289</sup>The following are positive responses toward chanting: Chanting is a good feeling. Listening to the message is expanding. (W, 39F); Enjoy sutra chanting and sermon. (S, 35M); Chanting and meditation. (B, 30F); Chanting and the meditation. (S, 28M); The chanting (especially when there is a large congregation) is very stimulating. I also enjoy singing, and actually wish that we would sing more songs during service. (B, 26F); I enjoy Dharma talks that are applicable to me and my life. Also enjoy chanting. (B, 21M); Sutra chanting, sermon, interaction after the service. (W, 47F)

The positive nature of these responses does not necessarily mean, of course, that the respondents are in favor of chanting in Japanese over English or that they support the use of Japanese language in the temples.

- 'Sutra chanting in foreign language.' (S, 46F)
- 'Chanting.' (B, 45F)
- 'Probably chanting, for I don't understand the purpose of repeating words I don't understand. When I read the translation, I'm not sure I want to say them. I generally feel uncomfortable with ritual practices. (B, 44F)
- 'Basic rudimentary religious part: chanting.' (S, 43M)
- 'Sutra chanting, I don't understand the meaning of the sutra.' (W, 48F)
- 'Chanting. I can't relate too well. Not as meaningful, unless in English, but then it's awkward in English. It feels so mechanical or something. I think I'm not disciplined enough of a person to appreciate it!' (B, 38F)

These responses can be interpreted in many ways, but, in my view, they express dissatisfaction with participating in a liturgy rooted in another culture whose language they do not understand. Members would be inclined to enjoy services more if they could understand more of the liturgy. As one member explained, 'I particularly enjoy "Gassho to Amida" (in English) because I can relate to it and understand what I am reciting or chanting' (S, 39F).

The use of Japanese language will continue to diminish as older Japanese-speaking members fade from the scene, and Japanese immigration to the United States remains low. And there are no signs that BCA temples will begin to attract in any significant numbers the non-immigrant Japanese nationals residing in this country on work visas. Those temples that still continue to hold separate services in Japanese are sparsely attended, mostly by English-speaking second-generation members who find the Japanese sermons nostalgic and more comforting. Use of the Japanese language is headed for an inevitable decline in most of the temples.

### Restructuring Shin Education

Another major development taking place is the move to strengthen the temples' religious dimension. Spearheaded largely by a core group of younger American priests in their forties and early fifties,<sup>290</sup> the BCA leadership has begun serious deliberation on 'restructuring,' with the intent to better align the overall institution with the religious needs of a changing membership in the various temples. This proposal seeks to work on three areas: (1) the Institute of Buddhist Studies, (2) Buddhist education, and (3) BCA organizational structure.

The changes in the first two areas aim to enhance the quality of education of ministerial trainees and lay members, respectively. A more sweeping proposal in the third area seeks to change (1) the manner in which business is carried out at the BCA national level, (2) the role of the Bishop to one that is primarily a spiritual leader or an administrative manager of the ministers, (3) the way in which the limited number of ministers is allocated effectively among the temples, and (4) the role of the traditional hierarchy of main regional temples (*betsuin*) and its head minister (*rimban*).

This restructuring is part of the BCA attempt to clarify and define its identity as a Jōdo-Shinshū institution. One explicit manifestation of this attempt can be seen in a proposal by the Ministers Association to change the organization's name from 'Buddhist Churches of America' to 'Shin Buddhists of America.' After being submitted at the annual meeting of the BCA in February 1994, this proposal was tabled for further study, but has

<sup>290</sup> Approximately half of the sixty-one priests are missionaries from Japan, most of whom are committed to living permanently in the United States as permanent residents or naturalized citizens. The other half are Americans of Japanese heritage, with the exception of the five Euro-American priests previously mentioned. The American-born (second) group is generally younger and, unlike virtually all of the Japan-born priests, come from families where the father was not a priest.

so far have not been voted on. Whether the name change passes or not is less significant than the proposal itself, for it reflects the institution's ongoing reappraisal of its identity in response to the changing membership pattern within as well as to other Buddhist and religious communities in the continental United States.

Whatever changes occur, the ethnic elements of the BCA will certainly not be completely eliminated. As stated above, they will continue to persist but will no longer be the defining or core elements of the BCA temples. Many within the BCA realize that ethnicity can no longer be the common bond that holds together the religious communities. They are calling for the religious dimension to assert itself as the common bond and the unchallenged primary purpose of the temples.

This is not to imply, of course, that the BCA was somehow bereft of educational and propagation efforts. To the contrary, history reveals a series of endeavors that were quite progressive in content. They include (1) the publication of *The Light of Dharma* journal in English that reached a thousand mostly non-Japanese subscribers for several years beginning in 1901; (2) the establishment of a Buddhist Sunday school system in 1914; (3) the hosting of the 1915 World Buddhist Conference in San Francisco, drawing delegates from East Asia, Southwest Asia, Mexico, and Hawaii; (4) the ordination of a number of Caucasian priests in the 1930s; (5) the establishment in 1949 of the Buddhist Study Center in Berkeley which served as one of the country's few centers of Buddhist academic learning; (6) the development of the Buddhist Study Center into the Institute of Buddhist Studies in 1966 as a graduate school, which in 1986 evolved into a formal affiliation with the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley; and (7) the 1987 decision by the U.S. Army to grant the BCA the right to train and certify Buddhist chaplains for its forces.<sup>291</sup> Aside from these

<sup>291</sup>For this to be realized, the BCA had to fulfill two primary requirements, the existence of a national organization and a qualified

benchmark developments, the BCA has conducted religious education since its inception. It was in these Jōdo-Shinshū settings that some Buddhist scholars and thinkers received early Buddhist teaching and inspiration, including Richard Robinson, Alex Wayman, Leo Pruden, Gary Snyder, and Jack Kerouac.

This push toward Dharma-centered temples is partially due to an increased desire to understand Buddhist teachings on the part of a growing number of members, including newer converts. The younger generation is better educated and less ethnically isolated and lives in a religiously pluralistic world. Their family makeup is often one of religious diversity. They feel a need to better understand their religion for themselves and to explain their teaching in an intelligent manner to those of other faiths.

In actualizing the new education reforms, the BCA leadership will need to reconcile the growing push to emphasize Jōdo-Shinshū teaching (as manifested in the proposed name change) with so-called general Buddhism, represented by the

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seminary program. BCA's long experience as a nationally organized system with headquarters in San Francisco fulfilled the former requirement. The Masters program at the Institute of Buddhist Studies fulfilled the latter. This Buddhist chaplaincy received ample coverage in the media, particularly in the California press, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *San Jose Mercury and News*, and the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Such media attention was proof that the general American public recognized the significance of the program. This development was not without a controversy within the BCA, however. The supporters saw it as the recognition of the legitimacy of Buddhism in this country, while the opponents objected to the affiliation with the military on spiritual and moral grounds. The training program has yet to produce a single candidate and has attracted very little interest within the BCA. Nevertheless, the BCA role in the chaplaincy program is ironic given its historical past, for it was in the Topaz, Utah relocation camp, administered and guarded by the army, that efforts began to restructure the original organization under a new name, the Buddhist Churches of America.

teachings of the Four Noble Truths and the Six Pāramitās. In the past, these teachings had been stressed, in the opinion of many, at the expense of Shin teachings, which were felt to be understandable only after the basics were mastered. As it turned out) a large segment of the second generation was educated primarily in these general Buddhist teachings with only an emotional appreciation of Shin.<sup>292</sup> There will inevitably be a renewed focus on Shin teachings in order for the BCA to define its identity within the American context. One of the questions to be resolved is the degree to which the basic Buddhist teachings are included or excluded in this process. This task is intimately related, in my view, to the incessant requests by lay members to be instructed in ethical guidelines from a Shin point of view. There is a growing need to be able to apply the spiritual teachings to everyday concerns. Further, such core Shin doctrine as Amida and Pure Land will require, as a recent survey of the BCA membership suggests, presentation other than literal explanation.<sup>293</sup> Moreover, efforts also will be needed to clarify the teachings centered on *shinjin* (often rendered 'faith') in relation to the Protestant emphasis on faith. Undoubtedly, scholars have dealt with these issues in the past, but the time has now arrived for the BCA to undertake a concerted effort in 'Shinshūology' in the rapidly changing American social and religious environment.

<sup>292</sup>The emphasis on general Buddhism and teachings within the BCA was due in part to their ethical and 'logical' qualities. These were perhaps easier to grasp for the lay teachers and members and also served to instill moral values among the young. Further, these basic teachings were presented as philosophy rather than as religion, which proved palatable to the members who regarded Buddhism as 'a system of thought and way of life,' not as a religion in the usual sense.

<sup>293</sup>See the chapter above, "Symbolism of Amida and Pure Land in the American Context." An informal survey taken in 1990 shows that the BCA respondents prefer a symbolic rather than a literal understanding of Amida and Pure Land.

At stake in the restructuring of Shin education is the fundamental question: can the BCA make the effective transition from being traditionally ethnic-centered to becoming more Dharma-centered? The co-existence of the religious and ethnic dimensions in the BCA from its inception, as seen above, is approaching a threshold for a major change in balance and direction.

### Some Concluding Thoughts

The projected changes within the BCA will further call into question the adequacy of a simplistic binary model of Buddhism in America. It will become increasingly unsatisfactory to subsume the BCA under the traditional ethnic model, given the 'Americanization' process that has taken place for nearly one hundred years. This holds true even for the tripartite model (elite or import, missionary or export, and immigrant or baggage) proposed by Jan Nattier; given its century of existence in North America, 'furniture' appears more appropriate a category than 'baggage.'

The BCA finds itself in the context of a number of impinging factors. There is the controversy initiated by Helén Tworokov's view that 'Asian American Buddhists ...so far ... have not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism.' Then, there are a number of BCA accomplishments, for example, in its role as the only certifying institution for the U.S. Armed Forces Buddhist chaplains or its seminary; the Institute of Buddhist Studies, forging a relationship with a consortium of Christian seminaries (the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley) to confer a joint M.A. degree, warrant further evaluation and consideration. The intimate connection between ethnicity and religion applies to virtually all religious groups in North America. The BCA certainly fits this pattern. However, the role of ethnicity was even more critical and enduring for a non-Christian and non-European immigrant

population such as the BCA membership, whose Buddhist identity was specifically equated with ethnic origin and, in the eyes of the dominant society and political leadership, even with a foreign government, i.e., the Japanese emperor. For a Japanese American to be Buddhist before the Second World War came at the risk of being perceived as un-American and even anti-American. Projecting our view into the near future, although ethnicity will continue to be a salient feature of the BCA, it will diminish in importance, particularly in its racial dimension due to the high level of inter-marriages, new converts, and to the coming of age of the less ethnic-oriented fourth-generation membership. Even the cultural dimension will undergo a process of selection in which only those arts that are in accord with the popular American taste - such as Taiko drumming - will survive and prosper. This development will bring about greater heterogeneity within the BCA, and as a result, ethnicity will play a lesser role as the bonding force of the community. The BCA leadership will be severely challenged by the erosion of homogeneity based on ethnicity. In response to the changing times, efforts will be made to move the Dharma more to center stage as the foundation of the institution. Consequently, religious education will be strengthened, which should bring about greater inclusivity and diversity. In defining its identity, the BCA must inevitably address the issue of the boundaries of the Jōdo-Shinshū tradition and its uniqueness in relation to other Buddhist schools.

## CHAPTER 12

## Perspectives of Asian American Buddhists on American Buddhism: With a Focus on their Views on Non-Asian Buddhists

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When categorizing the various schools of Buddhism, scholars often distinguish Asian Buddhists from non-Asian Buddhists. This distinction was the focus of a 1993 essay by Charles Prebish, entitled "Two Buddhism Considered" in which he addresses the topic of "two completely distinct lines of development in American Buddhism."<sup>294</sup> More recently, Jan Nattier proposed a tripartite formula, comprised of Elite Buddhism, Evangelical Buddhism, and Ethnic Buddhism.<sup>295</sup> Here, too, when the Evangelical (which refers to just one school - the Sōkagakkai) is set aside, we are again left with all other groups falling into either of the same two categories.

This distinction is also being made outside the academies, leading to some contentious exchanges. For example, much has

<sup>294</sup> Charles Prebish, "Two Buddhism Considered," pp. 187-206.

<sup>295</sup> Jan Nattier, "Who is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America," in Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka, eds. *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, pp. 188-190.