

From Past Adversities, New Directions for the Future

This month's essay is the last one I submitted as a student in the Jodo Shinshu Correspondence Course. My hope is that through my posting of these essays in the Echo, that others in our Mountain View Sangha who are interested in finding out more about Buddhism and our Jodo Shinshu traditions consider joining the JSCC as well. The required workload is not too great as the assigned readings are on 15-20 pages long. Each individual can choose to seek more reading and background material if they desire (as I started to after beginning the course), but it is not required. Most of all, I hope that the examples of what I've written show that there is no reason to be intimidated by the JSCC. The course materials are straightforward and easy to read and the only requirements are one essay a month. As always, I strongly encourage anyone who is interested in learning more about Buddhism and our Jodo Shinshu traditions to sign up for the JSCC.

The following is from the JSCC History of Jodo Shinshu section. Please note that this example is simply my response to the question posed by the course and not the only answer to this question.

Question:

This month's reading was a continuation of propagation overseas, into what has developed into the BCA, Canada, and South America districts. All the overseas districts had to face and cope with numerous issues, including socio-economic hardships and difficulties, societal pressures and discrimination, and changes in societal ethics, personal priorities, and configuration of the family unit. In the process, the temples and sanghas have adapted well in various ways, and this ability in itself is an aspect of the engagement of the Jodo Shinshu teaching. An example is the development and creation of this on-line study course. In your essay, present one or two issues and how they have been coped with. Also, include your thoughts as to elements and traits of Shinshu and general Buddhism that you feel are important to retain and those that can be adapted.

John's Response:

Two major issues which affected Jodo Shinshu in the continental United States were the increasing Nisei population in the 1920's and the internment of all those of Japanese ancestry during World War II. While these two events occurred sequentially in time, their cumulative effect on Jodo Shinshu Buddhism in America was quite significant. Also, with reflection on these events, we are able to see opportunities that will help enable Jodo Shinshu, especially the Buddhist Churches of America, to grow into the future.

The 1924 Immigration Act is often cited as a pivotal issue affecting the Japanese in America. However, it is also the timing of Immigration Act combined with the coincidental increase in the Nisei population that created issues within the Japanese communities in America.

“The 1924 Immigration Act also affected the Japanese immigrants' view of their children, the Nisei. Immigrant leaders had begun to shift their attention from the Issei to the Nisei before its enactment. Under an editorial policy established by Abiko Kyutaro, the *Nichibei Shimbun* changed its own

emphasis from January 1924. Attaching much greater importance to the Nisei generation, this newspaper began to declare repeatedly that the future of the Japanese in the United States lay with the Nisei.”¹

The Immigration Act represented the Issei’s failure to overcome exclusion despite all efforts made to assimilate into American society. In response, they transferred their aspirations onto the Nisei who, in theory, had all the rights that came with their American citizenship. The future of the Japanese in America depended on the Nisei and therefore their education and position in American society became the primary focus for the Issei. In order to cope with this increased focus on serving the needs of the Nisei, the North American Buddhist Mission (NABM), implemented activities targeted for the Nisei. Sunday Schools, church socials and athletic activities were started in order to begin adaptation of NABM churches to American society. While these modified social and religious services offered by the NABM churches were important to the Nisei so they could maintain their ethnic culture, the introduction of these activities and the increasing use of English by the Nisei began to highlight the different needs of the Issei and the Nisei at the NABM churches. In order to accommodate the needs of both generations, two sets of services, one for Issei and another for Nisei, were instituted. A surprising windfall of the actions taken in response to these actions was a growth of the NABM. From 1924 through 1941, twenty NABM churches or temples were built. Towards the end of this period, the Issei were accepting their permanent relationship with the United States. Though many had come to America with intent of gaining wealth and returning to Japan, the passage of time and the birth of the Nisei solidified their ties to the United States.

“This is not to say that the Issei ever felt at home or at ease in America. This was an adopted country, but they knew that the adoption was only one-way; America had often indicated to them their impermanent status. But the familial ties with the American Nisei, the economic ties to their occupations and farmlands, the social ties to the community, the psychological ties, binding the group together through suffering and endurance of anti-Japanese prejudice, were all factors keeping them in America.”²

With this acceptance, the Issei increased their investments in systems that would help serve the needs of the Nisei while maintaining ethnic identity. A system that benefited from this drive was the NABM.

It was almost immediately following the period when Issei shifted their focus onto the Nisei, that World War II broke out. From 1924 when the Immigration Act was passed through 1941, while there were still many individual acts of discrimination against Japanese, there was no further large scale legislative action taken against the Japanese in America. This all changed in 1942 when Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the West Coast of the United States to be declared a military area and subsequently the internment of all persons of Japanese ancestry. In response, Rev. Kenryo Kumata, a Nisei minister who was the information officer of the NABM issued the following letter to all NABM churches.

“Your attention is called to the Proclamation of Lt. General J. L. DeWitt outlining[g] the Military Zone. In keeping with this proclamation it behooves the Buddhists to:

1. Respect the Government of the United States and its laws and regulations; to hold fast to your religious faith in Buddhism, and to be calm and collected at all times.

¹ Ichioka, Yuji (1990). “The Issei”. The Free Press. New York, New York. p.252

² Kashima, Tetsuden (1977). “Buddhism in America”. Greenwood Press. Westport, Conn.. p.43-44

2. Cooperate with the Defense of the United States of America and as loyal citizens and residents understand the vital necessity of and conform with the regulations pertaining to evacuation.
3. Make all preparations within each Buddhist Church to be able to cope with problems arising from evacuation.
4. Prepare for the evacuation of the Buddhist Churches itself, if the need arises.

May we remind you to complete the survey of your community as has been suggested to you in our communication No. 11, and be ready to evacuate in a quiet and orderly manner.

With the Blessing of the Buddha
(signed) Rev. K. M. Kumata
Buddhist Churches of America”³

This letter emphasized the loyalty of the NABM to the United States and warned its ministers of possible internment so they could begin preparations. However, the most noteworthy item in this letter is the use of “Buddhist Churches of America”. This is one of the first recorded usages of this name for the institution and was done without official approval from Hongwanji or the member churches. As can be inferred from this letter, the Nisei were beginning to take it upon themselves to quickly effect further the assimilation of the NABM churches into American society. Once internment became a reality, many Issei leaders felt that there was nothing more for them to lose. As a result, they became vocal with anti-American, and to some extent anti-Nisei, sentiments. In early 1943, the War Relocation Authority issued the “loyalty questionnaire” which contained the infamous questions twenty-seven and twenty-eight. Question twenty-seven asked if the respondent would be willing to serve in the American armed forces. Question twenty-eight asked if the respondent would renounce any allegiance to Japan. These questions, especially twenty-eight, were extremely difficult for the Issei to give any answer except “no”. Since the Issei were ineligible to become American citizens, question twenty-eight essentially asked them to become non-citizens of any country. A majority of those who answered “no” to both questions, sometimes referred to as “No-No Boys”, were sent to Tule Lake to further isolate them from the rest of the internees. This removed most of the anti-American and anti-Nisei leaders from their positions within the Japanese community and from within the NABM organization. This opened the way for a series of meetings over 1944 which transformed the NABM into the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA). In order to cope with these changes, the offices of the new organization were filled with Nisei, aided by an Issei advisory board. The initial formation of the BCA had other three other major organizational changes. First, the BCA disavowed any political ties with Japan. Second, relations with Hongwanji in Kyoto should be minimized. Third, the two Jodo Shinshu sects in America (Nishi and Higashi) should be united. As a result, the election of socho was by members of the member churches whereas in the past the socho had been appointed by the gomonshu from Japan. The new organization of the BCA aimed to make Buddhism more inclusive of all Buddhist thought, less restrictive in membership and more adaptable to the changing needs of the Nisei and their children, the Sansei. In other words, to change the delivery of the Jodo Shinshu religion from one dominated by the Japanese traditions and language of the Issei, to a delivery focused to convey the teachings in a language and manner that would resonate with the Nisei and Sansei.

However, today the BCA remains a sectarian institution as part of the Jodo Shinshu

³ Kashima, Tetsuden (1977). “Buddhism in America”. Greenwood Press. Westport, Conn.. p.51-52

Hongwanji-ha (Nishi) denomination. Also, there still exist deficiencies in English language texts to clearly disseminate the teachings to individual whose primary or only language is English. One of the clearest examples of this deficiency is the translation of *shinjin*.

“The translation of *shinjin* as “faith” was accepted by the NABM and later by the BCA because “faith” connoted the sacred nature of the Japanese word. The English-speaking Buddhist followers were expected to realize the “real” meaning of “faith” as it applied to their religion; that is, they knew the common meaning of the word “faith”, but they were then expected to relearn the Buddhist definition of the term. Unfortunately, many Nisei and Sansei Buddhists may not be aware of the other meaning of the word, and the word “faith” is used as if the Christian connotations of trust and belief were paramount. For instance, the three most repeated sentences in Jodo Shinshu Buddhist, besides the name of the Buddha, are the three homages. The original words are in the Pali language, and the translations used by the Nikkei are: ‘I put my faith in Buddha, I put my faith in Dharma, and I put my faith in Sangha.’”⁴

This is present in many of the English language texts in use at BCA temples and churches, today. The reason the BCA today, differs from the BCA envisioned at its initial creation, is that an immediate and wholesale reconstruction of the NABM was done upon ratification of the new BCA by laws. At the time, the ministers of the BCA were still the original Issei NABM ministers and the majority of the followers were still Issei. In addition, Bishop Ryotai Matsukage retained his position of Bishop from the NABM organization to the BCA organization in order to ease any tensions between Issei and Nisei leaders. Unfortunately, this meant that there was essentially no organizational change for the clergy. The retention of BCA sectarian ties to the Nishi Hongwanji is due to the small number of Higashi followers and ministers. They simply were not able to affect any change in doctrinal direction due to being overwhelmed by the Nishi Hongwanji ministers in the BCA. Finally, the last problem that caused lack of immediate reconstruction of the BCA was the fact that internment was ending and the Japanese in America had more pressing issues to deal with in resettlement. The changes envisioned would have retained all the core teachings of Jodo Shinshu thought, but would have allowed the organization to become more inclusive, less restrictive and more adaptable. The resulting delay in reconstruction of the NABM into the BCA caused many of the deficiencies in being a more inclusive, less restrictive and more adaptable organization that the BCA suffers from today. The major lesson to be learned from this is that, once a decision has been made to affect change, the change needs to be made in a timely manner. Also, the extent to which changes need to be made should not be compromised. As the BCA looks towards a future in which Jodo Shinshu Buddhism will become a mainstream religion in the United States, changes will be necessary. The manner in which the BCA approaches implementation will be critical to the success or failure of those changes. Effective change management processes must be applied and consultation of resources skilled in the implementation and execution of change management processes needs to be utilized. If the BCA fails to invest in this level of commitment to change, then changes cannot successfully be made.

⁴ Kashima, Tetsuden (1977). “Buddhism in America”. Greenwood Press. Westport, Conn.. p.42