Jodo Shinshu in California
Observations, Trends and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Buddhism in the United States carries an image of a peaceful compassionate path with great appeal to people seeking spirituality and looking to adopt a new religion. Many Americans like Buddha statues, Buddhist sayings, the Dalai Lama, sitting mediation and other things Buddhist. In a window display at a fashionable store near where I live, a Buddha statue is draped with silk scarf and colorful shawl. I often see statues of Buddha decorating neighborhood yards. Yet Jodo Shinshu Buddhism has not enjoyed the benefits of that popularity, instead suffering from stagnant or declining membership, dwindling participation and shrinking temples. This paper explores what is happening through observations and analysis, noting the challenges and outlook for Jodo Shinshu, along with suggestions going forward.

This paper is not meant to be a strict research and statistical analysis of contemporary conditions. Rather it is based on my own experience and observations working as a Buddhist minister for Higashi Honganji over the past 15 years in Northern California. During that time, I also visited and participated in services at several temples inside and outside the state.

OBSERVATIONS

Today in the continental U.S., there are four Higashi Honganji temples, all based in California.[1] The much larger Buddhist Churches of America, affiliated with Nishi Honganji, has more than 60 temples.[2] Hawaii, historically considered a different district, has five Higashi Honganji temples and 36 Nishi Honganji temples (called Honpa Hongwanji). [3]

Those numbers already represent a historical decline in the total number of U.S. Jodo Shinshu temples. The outbreak of World War II in 1941 forced the closure of many Buddhist temples, as priests were arrested, members harassed, Japanese activities suppressed, and on the mainland, more than 110,000 Japanese Americans forcibly removed from the West Coast into internment camps far inland. Many of those temples never reopened, especially in Hawaii.[4]

After World War II, many first generation Japanese American and their now adult children moved back to their home regions and rejoined their temples. This second-generation "Nisei" began marrying and having children, establishing their own families and participating in temple activities. After the War, during the 1950s and 1960s, temples established many of the activities we see today, beginning popular traditions such as the summer Obon dance (associated with the Obon memorial service), mochi rice cake-making, and summer bazaars. The Junior Young Buddhist Association for teenagers and youth basketball teams also grew in popularity. It was not unusual to see three generations of families attending Sunday service, encompassing grandparents, parents and children.[5]

I remember attending Sunday services at Berkeley Higashi Honganji in Northern California as a child in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The temple was packed with people, including many children and adults. There were grandparents, parents, young adults and children. However the membership list from that time lists merely about 60 families. By comparison, today's membership list contains about 110 families, but these days typical Sunday services are attended by just a few dozen people.

This drop in participation is one of the modern day conundrums facing temples. Despite a larger membership, fewer people are participating in activities. Many of these members donate money to the temple, but seldom attend service or help at events.

I see a few dynamics at work. At many Jodo Shinshu temples in the U.S., the majority of temple members are still Japanese Americans, which is not surprising, given their history and how temples were established by Japanese immigrants and supported by succeeding generations. During the early decades of Japanese immigration in the United States, temples served as de facto community centers—places to meet friends and family, participate in cultural activities, such as flower arranging, bonsai, singing and dance, speak Japanese, and eat Japanese food.

However as Japanese Americans became more assimilated into American society, they became less dependent on Japanese-centric activities at temples, becoming more involved with activities connected to school, work, friends and other social groups.

Many second-generation Japanese Americans such as my parents and many others of their generation I think did not feel a strong spiritual connection to the temple. For example, many of them did not participate in discussions, take classes and read books about Buddhism. They came of age when ministers and temple elders predominantly

were from Japan and were Japanese-speaking. The Nisei generation's first language was primarily English. By contrast, temple ministers typically were from Japan. Parents were "Issei," first generation Americans whose first language was Japanese. "The Issei laity was unconcerned about the clergy's fluency in English, but this was not the case with organizational leaders," according to Michihiro Ama.[6] While some Nisei were encouraged to become ministers, most ministers were from Japan. I feel this Nisei generation generally did not connect well with Buddhism because of the language and cultural chasm they faced and therefore became somewhat of a "lost generation" to Buddhism.

Children of Nisei, third-generation "sansei" Japanese Americans, of which I am a member, felt even less connection to Japanese culture, with the vast majority unable to speak Japanese. Yet only during my generation's maturation into adulthood did temples become predominantly English speaking. Nevertheless, many ministers serving these temples today still come from Japan. Although able to speak English, it is difficult for many of them to effectively communicate with Americans in the same way as native-born people.

Now I must address the challenge of attracting new temple members from outside the Japanese American community by talking about my own experience. When I became resident minister of Berkeley Higashi Honganji temple in 2005, one of my goals was to diversify the sangha by appealing to people outside the temple. One day, a married couple that lived in the neighborhood came to Sunday service. They said they were interested in Buddhism. Thereafter, they enthusiastically came to most Sunday services, attended seminars, and participated in discussions over the next several months. I thought,

"Finally, we are making progress appealing to our neighbors." Suddenly after a year, they told they would no longer be coming, thanked me for teaching them Buddhism, and announced they were going to attend a Unitarian Church.

Similarly, I started an "Introduction to Buddhism" at the temple, an eight-week course. About 30 students signed up, including existing temple members. A third of participants were new to the temple and new to Buddhism. The students all generally were enthusiastic and interested. I hoped at least a few of the new people would start coming to Sunday service, but not a single a new person came.

I felt this challenge was a condition afflicting how Americans-at-large see Buddhism. Often Buddhism seems to be seen as a philosophy to be learned, like math or music is learned from a teacher or book, rather than a path to be lived as a member of a sangha, Buddhist community. People I have seen who approach Buddhism as a form of study or casual reading, tend not to join the sangha. By contrast, people who participate in various temple activities, whether for fun, friendship or spirituality, are more likely to stay involved for the long term. Those activities include participating in youth group programs, joining the women's group, volunteering at fundraisers, helping in the kitchen, going to the summer picnic and so forth.

Nevertheless, there are signs of progress. Over the past few years, the Berkeley temple has added some new members, including a schoolteacher who lives nearby, a gay man and his son, and a semi-retired building contractor, none of who have any Japanese ancestry. They regularly attend services and participate in social activities. Despite the deaths of older members, the number of temple members has held steady at about 110 families and individuals.

Nevertheless the stories I hear from other temples, both on the mainland United States and elsewhere in North America, tell of shrinking membership and declining participation. Fewer people are becoming dues paying members and even fewer people are attending services. On a visit in 2009 to Canada's Buddhist Temple of Southern Alberta, I learned sangha members from different temples joined together because of shrinking membership and created a single large temple. They called this process an "amalgamation." They came from the Coaldale Buddhist Temple, Lethbridge Buddhist Temple, Lethbridge Honpa Buddhist Temple, Raymond Buddhist Temple, Taber Buddhist Temple and Picture Butte Buddhist Temple. Their temple now is located in Lethbridge, Alberta.[7]

Out of nine U.S. Higashi Honganji temples, two temples don't have their own ministers. In the Buddhist Churches of America, the trend in several regions throughout the country is to have a supervising minister overseeing nearby temples that lack their own ministers.

Quite notably in California, two large temples have bucked this trend. In Southern California, the Orange County Buddhist Church, in little more than 50 years, has grown to a robust sangha of 850 members, with Sunday services regularly attended by more than 300 people. They recently completed construction renovation projects, rebuilding a social hall and office building, and raising more donations than originally budgeted. In Northern California at the Sacramento Buddhist Temple, more than 250 people regularly attend Sunday service.[8]

Jodo Shinshu temples still fill an important role in providing funeral and memorial services. Temple members usually want a Buddhist service for their loved ones,

and even non-active and non-religious family members will contact temples about having services if their parent or spouse was Buddhist. However in my experience, the number of families opting for private "family only" ceremonies or no service seems increasingly common. They often cite wishes of the decease or their own preference for their decisions. Families sometimes also prefer to say "Celebration of Life" instead of "funeral" because they think it sounds less depressing and more positive and want to incorporate their own personal touches to the services.

I have presided over funerals incorporating some of these requests. For example, at a funeral for a young wife of a neighbor of the temple, bongos were played during the ceremony. At another service held at a mortuary, the deceased person's family presented a slide show on a movie screen with music during the proceedings. For another service, a family requested that I forgo traditional chanting and incense burning, and instead only give a short talk, because they planned their own way of paying tribute. I declined to participate in that service, explaining that as a Jodo Shinshu minister, I had a prescribed way of performing rituals.

According to a recent story in the Washington Post, a trend towards non-religious memorials has been growing, including for-hire professional celebration-of-life planners. According to a recent story in *The Washington Post*, "Somber, embalmed-body funerals, with their $9,000 industry average price tag, are, for many families, a relic. Instead, end-of-life ceremonies are being personalized: golf-course cocktail sendoffs, backyard pot luck memorials, more Sinatra and Clapton, less 'Ave Maria,' more Hawaiian shirts, fewer dark suits. Families want to put the 'fun' in funerals."[9]

Critics of Japanese Buddhism complain that often funeral and memorial rituals are performed by rote without much meaning because they generate a steady source of income for temples, so that "…Buddhism is a death industry functioning mechanically according to fixed scripts."[10] I think this kind of criticism is somewhat warranted in some cases that I have heard about. Therefore I feel that priests and ministers must make a concerted effort to make death rituals meaningful and relevant for attendees.

Whatever the case, I have found funerals and traditional Buddhist memorials, such as the 49 day service, first year service, third year service, seventh year service and so forth, are good opportunities to engage families and re-connect people with the temple and Jodo Shinshu. By participating in these services, listening to dharma talks and encouraging people to reflect on their own lives, I think people begin to appreciate the purpose of Buddhism and see why it was important to their parents, spouse or love one who were Buddhist.

Unfortunately in my experience, the number of families choosing to hold Buddhist services drastically drops with each memorial service, beginning with the 49th day service, continuing on with the first year service, third year service, seventh year service and so forth.

However I feel the more services that family members hold, the more they come to appreciate Buddhist teachings, rituals and traditions. For example, I served a family who wanted a bedside makurakyo service that immediately follows a death, along with a funeral, a cremation service, an ashes internment service, a 49-day service and a one-year service. Families also are invited to observe "hatsubon," the first Obon—annual summer memorial service after a person's passing—which in Berkeley is held in July. Thereafter

they also are invited to monthly shotsuki memorial services and the annual “Eitaikyo” perpetual memorial service. I have heard about studies that say if people openly talk about and confront their feelings about a loved one’s death, they feel more at peace and suffer fewer incidences of depression. I think these Buddhist services help create a similar positive effect.

Having come from a non-temple family, I had to learn about the meaning of these memorial services. Consequently, I too have come to appreciate their importance. I always try to explain the meaning of rituals and give Dharma talks directly addressing suffering caused by a loved one’s death, with hopes of providing spiritual meaning.

I found usually certain family members were receptive to that message. Afterwards they sometimes would start donating to the temple. Some of them started coming to temple services, such as the monthly shotsuki memorial service. Sometimes they began helping at temple activities. In this way, I found instead of looking outside the temple for new members and greater participation, growth came from within—from the families of existing members.

People appreciate hearing an explanation of rituals and ceremony, especially in easy-to-understand terms. For example, I would say burning incense reflects the Oneness of life and death in that when lighted, the incense is burning, which means it is living and dying at the same time, just like human life. Incense “offering” expresses gratitude for the deceased person’s life and our connection to her or him. In explaining this way, I think the incense burning ritual becomes more meaningful and appreciated to participants.

These explanations need not involve traditional Jodo Shinshu terminology, such as Pure Land, Amida Buddha, primal vow, merit transference, and so forth. Those words and concepts tend to sound too complicated and abstract. The Buddhist teachings must be rendered in a way that is understandable to laypeople and relevant to the audience, in this case grieving family members. Scholars and sticklers to doctrine may fear such explanations are over-simplified, but I think they are necessary steps towards helping laypeople gradually deepen their understanding of Jodo Shinshu.

In terms of attracting young people to temples, youth sports have played an important role. In California, youth basketball teams, both boys and girls, have been part of temples since the 1930s. Originally these teams started, along with associated leagues, as a way for Japanese Americans children to play sports. Historically facing racial discrimination, they formed their own leagues with teams from Buddhist temples, Japanese American community centers and Japanese American Christian churches. Today, team players are no longer exclusively of Japanese ancestry, but include children from different ethnicities, religions and backgrounds.[11]

Today the Berkeley temple's basketball program includes more than 140 children, ranging in age from six years old to 18 years old, first grade through high school. The majority of players are not temple members, but their families are required to participate in two temple fundraising activities—summer bazaar and year-end mochi rice cake-making. Consequently, there is no shortage of help at these labor-intensive activities, with players along parents easily exceeding 300 volunteers.

Berkeley temple's board of directors considers basketball a program run for children of temple members, and now also, for the larger outside community. However, a connection to Buddhism remains part of its mission by emphasizing sportsmanship, participation, friendship and community, reflecting Buddhist teachings of interdependence, Oneness and gratitude. This mission contrasts with many of today's ultra-competitive youth sports programs focused primarily on winning.

The temple's summer bazaar is an annual tradition started more than sixty years ago and features Japanese foods, children games and silent auction items. Many people from outside the temple community come to eat, visit with friends and enjoy the atmosphere. A large number of patrons had parents or relatives who were temple members that have passed away. The bazaar represents a kind of nostalgia for them, so they come to support the temple, although they are not members.

The summer bazaar is the temple's biggest fundraiser, raising roughly a third of total annual gross income. Another third comes from annual pledge donations (taken in lieu of set membership dues) and another third comes from donations related to religious services. Some of today's temple activities were established at the end of World War II, after Japanese Americans returned from internment camps to their old neighborhoods and "…services were begun, and Sunday school, YBA, and other gatherings began to grow again."[12]

Nowadays, the bazaar is publicized on the Internet and social media, resulting in crowds of people, many of who are first-time visitors with no connection to Buddhism. Interestingly, information about temple services and Buddhist holidays also are posted on the Internet, but far fewer new people find their way to the temple for those events.

ANALYSIS

With Berkeley Higashi Honganji temple serving as a microcosm of Jodo Shinshu in California and the greater U.S., I see a fourfold challenge facing temples today. The first is the financial challenge of generating enough funds to pay for operational expenses, such as minister salary and benefits, building maintenance, and program expenses. The second challenge is fostering participation in temple activities such as service attendance, volunteerism, group activities, social events and laypeople leadership positions. The third challenge is growing the number of members to a size sufficient enough to maintain the temple. The fourth challenge is fostering spirituality—guiding people towards a Buddhist path and helping them deepen their understanding and appreciation of Buddhism.

I have heard old temple members talk about the "good old days" when individuals and families participated in all four of the aspects just mentioned. That meant a single family had members who donated financially, helped with activities, joined temple social groups, served in leadership roles and attended services. I have heard stories that decades ago, a majority of families could have been considered this type of "ideal member."

Those "good old days" were a time I think when temples were governed by first and second generation Japanese Americans, when the temple was the center of religious and social activities, and when the Japanese American community had fewer options and outlets. Times have changed.

In observing the contemporary state of the temple, I see most families now pick and choose their activities, rather than try to do everything. There are people whose only connection to the temple is through basketball and who dutifully fulfill their volunteer

obligation, but no more. There are people who come to socialize with friends but are not interested in religion. There are people who devoutly come to service to hear Dharma talks, but are not interested in basketball or social activities.

Those different types of people need not be mutual, nor must they be exclusive. I think what's important is for temples to be financially viable, even if supported by activities and fundraising that are not necessarily Buddhist, through efforts by people who are not necessarily interested in Buddhism.

The temple still serves as a de-facto community center. For example over the years, temple facilities have been used by an ukulele group, Tai-chi class, mahjongg club, bonsai club, music class for special needs students, and youth basketball meetings. The temple board allows outside groups to use temple facilities for their activities, especially if temple members are involved. In return, those groups usually make donations to the temple, generating some income while keeping a steady traffic of people and activity coursing through temple grounds.

Most importantly, a temple's primary purpose is to serve as a place that fosters spirituality and propagates Buddhist teachings. Many temple members, newcomers and visitors are searching for spirituality, seeking answers to questions about their anxieties, fears and suffering. They question the meaning of life, grieve over departed loved ones and are anxious about their own mortality. These concerns form the essence of a temple as a place of Buddha dharma.

Consequently U.S. temples must address these concerns and relate them to Jodo Shinshu in a way that is both contemporary and personal. Therefore the evolution of Shinshu needs to shed stiff and abstract language, and become defined more by human

experience. Only then can laypeople relate the teachings to their own life, deepen their understanding of Jodo Shinshu, and appreciate the temple. By extension, I think their enthusiasm naturally will rub off on other people, attracting new members and encouraging greater participation.

The Berkeley temple is fortunate to have a robust and enthusiastic women's organization called the Women's Buddhist Association, or WBA. Originally called by its Japanese name "Fujinkai," about 15 years ago a new generation of women decided to change the name to update the group's image, which many felt projected a negative stereotype of older Japanese ladies working in the kitchen. The WBA has about three-dozen members, several of whom previously had no affiliation with the temple. While its members support temple activities still by taking care of food and kitchen duties, they also organize fun activities such as crafts-making workshops, casino bus trips, lunch outings and field trips. The also organize an annual Spring bazaar held in March, when they sell Japanese food and handmade crafts. Proceeds support temple activities and facilities upkeep.

I definitely see interest by outsiders in Buddhism. In winter of this year, I taught for the first time a class called "Introduction to Buddhism" at the Berkeley Adult School, the first time a Buddhism class was offered at the school. Twelve students attended the class, ten of who had no or little exposure to Buddhism. They came from diverse backgrounds, including Judaism, Christianity and atheism. All found Buddhism to be appealing and generally attuned to their personal views. I cannot speak to their future intentions.

I found there is a common misperception that Buddhism is more philosophy than religion. Therefore people think they can study or learn Buddhism, like mathematics or music, and that they can take what they want from it. Traditionally Buddhism is a path to follow throughout one's life, guided by the Buddha dharma, a teacher, and supported by a sangha, representing the Three Treasures of Buddhism. Rather than think in this holistic way, a common misperception seems to be that people need only read books, attend a retreat or take a class to understand Buddhism.

Another problem I've seen is Jodo Shinshu's lack of an identifiable traditional practice. To many Americans, Buddhist practice means sitting meditation. Visitors to the temple often asked me about meditation practice. Rather than refer people to another temple, I tried to start a meditation group at the Berkeley temple. In my first year residency, I announced sitting meditation sessions beginning at 8:30 a.m., consisting of 20 minutes of meditation, 5 minutes of chanting, another 20 minutes of meditation, and a 10 minute dharma talk. In the beginning, two people attended the sessions. After a few weeks, they dropped out. Then another person joined, only to drop out later. I continued meditating, vowing to endure for a year. After a while, another person joined, but dropped out. This pattern continued until by year-end, I was sitting alone. I discontinued the sessions, concluding that people liked the "idea" of meditation, more than "doing" meditation. I don't believe adding meditation is necessary for attracting new members.

Nevertheless, I think there's an untapped pool of people seeking spirituality through Buddhism. For example a few years ago, a friend of mine enrolled in a non-secular online 11-week course on "mindfulness" with "some Buddhist teachings," offered by James Baraz, a self-described "meditation teacher." About two hundred people

enrolled at a cost of about $200, which totals $40,000. Baraz has parlayed his instruction into a book, seminars, online course and retreats.[13] I wondered why my friend would take such a course when she could just have easily come to the temple to learn the same thing, but I realized the course was an attractively packaged set of lessons.

What I have found that attracts large numbers of people to the temple are special services connected to Buddhist holidays, such as the Buddha's Birthday (Hanamatsuri), New Year's Day service, Shinran Shonin's memorial (Hoonko) and Seniors Appreciation Day (Keirokai).

Hanamatsuri in April is the most festive service of the year. The altar is decorated with many flowers, showcasing a baby Buddha statue, which is used for a sweet tea offering ceremony. Members use a small ladle to pour tea over the statue, representing rain that fell the day of the Buddha's birth. A guest speaker usually gives the main talk, followed by a skit related to Buddhism, performed by Dharma school children. The skit brings out more children than usual, and consequently brings out their parents and grandparents, swelling attendance.

Similarly, the keirokai senior appreciation day program brings out senior temple members, many of who don't normally come to service. Members considered "keiro," seniors ages 75 and over, are feted as guests at a lunch prepared by male temple members, which distinctly is a Berkeley temple tradition. The keirokai is held at the end of October and is combined with a Halloween party, bringing out children in costumes. The service also is called "Kaikyoki," a memorial honoring past temple ministers. In all, the day's event is festive and fun, which probably is why it attracts the most people, even more

than Hoonko in November, traditionally considered the most important service in Jodo Shinshu.

Publicizing temples and their activities represent another challenge. For example of the nine Higashi Honganji U.S. temples, still two do not have their own websites. Even temples with websites are slow to post new information. Some temples only during the past few years have begun using Facebook, with even fewer using Instagram and Twitter. These forms of social media represent an untapped means of communication. I think barriers to their use have been a lack of understanding of their purpose, a lack of technical knowledge in using them, privacy concerns and fear of the unknown.

In my efforts to make greater use of Internet technology, I helped create a website called higashihonganjiusa.org, meant to encompass all U.S. temples, with articles about Buddhism, information about services and activities and a master calendar. The website was launched in Spring 2018 and already attracted web traffic from across the continental U.S., Hawaii, Japan, Brazil and Western Europe. New stories are announced through the "Higashi Honganji Shinshu Center of America" Facebook page, enabling users to click on links taking them to the website. In a one-month period this year, more than a thousand people saw Facebook postings, generating about 600 clicks on website stories.

CONCLUSION

In California, Buddhism enjoys an image of compassion, tolerance, friendliness and peace. Its symbols, statues and sayings are popular in media, in gardens and homes, and in the minds of many people searching for spirituality. By contrast, Jodo Shinshu

Buddhist temples face a challenging future with sinking or stagnant memberships, declining participation in religious activities, and bottom-line financial pressures.

These challenges may be divided into four areas—membership, participation and funding and spirituality. All four need not be tied inextricably together. Rather, they may be addressed separately on their own terms. For example, fundraising may be done by whatever activities are appropriate and effective, even if not tied directly to Buddhist services. A summer bazaar publicized on social media attracting non-Buddhist patrons helps temples pay bills, stay open and keep maintained. A temple-sponsored sports program attracts youths and teaches positive values, while bringing families to temple events as volunteers, most of who are not Buddhist. Occasionally, new members may result, but not often. With basic physical and financial temple needs taken care of, people who are interested in Buddhism can have a place to go to hear the Buddha dharma.

While visiting Japan and China over the past few years, I was struck by the age of temples. Many temples were hundreds of years old and some over a thousand years old. By comparison, the Berkeley temple still is an infant at 93 years old. What has kept these temples open for so long is the support of the sangha and priests. The reason why it's important to keep temples open is so people who truly want to hear the dharma have a place to go. People in need come to the temple in times of crisis and when seeking guidance. They hope to find answers at the temple.

To keep temples open, each generation must confront challenges of their times. By examining and analyzing current trends, they can find answers and formulate solutions. In this way, today's temples can become the temples of the future.

Footnotes

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