

The Context of Jodoshinshu Buddhism

Jodoshinshu Buddhism has no creation story, no apocalyptic end of the universe, no eternal heaven or hell, no divine reward or punishment, no soul, no afterlife of a soul, no petitional prayer, no protective amulets, no supernatural phenomena, and no inborn superiority or inferiority as regards the possibility of awakening. In this, it is more than many others, a mainstream Buddhist sect. The Buddha claimed to have discovered the cause of suffering and how to end it. Religion was thus for Buddhists, seeking the cause of suffering and ending it. The Buddha said that putting off this question until one had a clear understanding of the nature of the universe was like a man shot with a poison arrow holding off treatment until he knew who shot him, what the arrow was made of, what kind of poison was on the arrowhead, etc.

When Shinran Shonin included Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu among the Seven Eminent Teachers of the Pure Land tradition, it was in acceptance of the two philosophical schools of the Madhyamika and the Yogachara. In the attempt to discover what the “self” is, and by extension all phenomena, the Madhyamika school states that anything that exist independently or autonomously can be called the “self”. Nagarjuna’s claim is that such a “self” is an illusion and does not in reality exist. To believe in such a “self” is ignorance, and the clinging to such a belief is

the cause of suffering. This school of *Emptiness* is that all things, including the “self” exist dependently – it is empty of independent existence. The Yogachara school is also called the mind-only or consciousness-only school. It says that reality is but a projection of each individual and that there is no singular objective world. Consciousness and the object of consciousness arise simultaneously as a projection of the individual. In other words, each individual, depending on its karmic programming, projects a picture of “reality”. Delusion for Yogachara is to believe in the pictures as external realities, pursuing what is labeled *good*, avoiding what is labeled *bad*, and indifferent to what is labeled *neither*. Wisdom is to understand that the pictures are simply projections of one’s own mind and therefore illusions not to be taken as real. Like a movie, they should be enjoyed as illusions.

With the above in mind, we must approach Jodoshinshu teachings about birth in the Pure Land, Amida Buddha, Kannon Bodhisattva, Seishi Bodhisattva, Nembutsu, Namo-amida-butsu, etc., etc. in terms of meanings to be understood and “bodily experienced”, rather than realities to be believed in.

Gassho,

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