



The Jodo Shinshu Sangha

The Jodoshinshu Sangha is unique in Buddhism. Instead of “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the monks”, for us, it is “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and our fellow-travellers in the Dharma. Because our founder, Shinran Shonin, ended monasticism, the meaning of the Sangha has changed drastically. No longer is the study and practice of Buddhism a full-time occupation for monks, our full-time occupation is our study and practice of Buddhism. Our Sangha is a communal endeavor, although our awakening and awakenings are profoundly individual. The life of the temple is the life of the Sangha, and without it Jodoshinshu would join the ranks of other scholarly hair-splittings and lofty ideas with no life-giving blood flow. Not wanting to be a part of temple life is like not wanting to test a theory. The experience of the Nembutsu is exactly that – an experience. The calculating mind, self-power, other power, just Namoamidabutsu, suchness, things as they are, etc. are all words used to describe an experience that includes but is not only an objective observation. It is not something someone “acquires” or “gets”, then ceases to “be” or “do”. Our self-centered life is a sham, and yet, it is all we have. It is all we have, and yet, there is always so much more. It is Namo and Amidabutsu. A lifetime of ignoranceenlightenment.

In terms of a science class, Buddhism is like lecture and lab. The lecture can be in a group or alone, but the lab must be in a group. If the theory of Buddhism is about the ego-self, then that encounter must be with and off other ego-souls. To say I can understand Bodhi without the interference of other human beings is called “a Buddha for himself” - in Mahayana, a flawed achievement. It is very much like

a hermit saying he understands human beings and therefore wants no contact with them – unless of course it is to tell them so. In America, where the old neighborhood communities are a thing of the past, our temple sanghas have become the new neighborhood communities, albeit week-end-commuter communities. The temple-sangha therefore is the dojo, the original word for temple when Buddhism first enters China. Dojo means “*Bodhi-place*” or the “place where Bodhi was cultivated”. A dojo’s primary function is a place where one can encounter one’s own ego-self, not a place to unconsciously or consciously indulge it. The function of ritual too, is to challenge the ego, not to entertain it. If a temple’s primary function is to preserve a culture, serve community needs, be a fun place, then it is a cultural center, a community center, or a playground – but it is not a temple. A temple or dojo is a place where a community gathers together to encounter their individual ego-self over a lifetime, and learning the unique definition Buddhism has of Oneness and Interconnectedness. Those cultural and social activities that help us in this endeavor should be encouraged – those that tend to encourage our penchant for ego-inflation should be discouraged. Our sangha is a full-blown community, from the hells up to and including the heavens – it is a living, breathing, blood-flowing entity. Anyone who finds himself in it can’t help but be changed. Anyone who stands by and observes such communities, remains an observer, watching life go by.

Nam an dam

Rev. Mae