Journal of Buddhist Ethics
ISSN 1076-9005
http://blogs.dickinson.edu/buddhistethics/
Volume 29, 2022

Principles for Jōdo Shinshū Social Engagement

Jeff Wilson

Renison University College

Copyright Notice: Digital copies of this work may be made and distributed provided no change is made and no alteration is made to the content. Reproduction in any other format, with the exception of a single copy for private study, requires the written permission of the author. All enquiries to: vforte@albright.edu.

Principles for Jōdo Shinshū Social Engagement

Jeff Wilson [1]

Abstract

Despite omission from much of the record of scholarship on Engaged Buddhism, Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism has significant potential for positive involvement with social causes. Here I propose six principles based on elements of the Jōdo Shinshū teachings that might inspire or inform efforts at reducing harm in the world. I further provide some examples of social engagement from Jōdo Shinshū history that demonstrate how they might be applied.

[1] Renison University College, University of Waterloo. Email: jeff.wilson@uwaterloo.ca. This article arises from invited presentations given to various Jōdo Shinshū groups since 2013. In particular I thank the Center for Buddhist Education, Buddhist Churches of America, Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada, Mo'ili'ili Hongwanji Buddhist Temple, and Toronto Buddhist Church for providing me with the opportunity to present my ideas and receive community feedback. Additionally, a version of this paper was presented to the 2021 International Western Dharma Teachers Gathering, and I thank the attendees for their comments.

Introduction

English-language discussions of Buddhist involvement with social causes—often termed Engaged Buddhism—have been dominated by voices from and attention to the Zen, Tibetan Vajrayāna, and Theravāda/Vipassana communities.[2] Inclusion of material from the Pure Land Buddhist tradition—or even recognition that such communities are also involved in social engagement—is rare.[3] However, despite this marginalization, I argue here that the Pure Land tradition of Jōdo Shinshū (the largest form of Buddhism in Japan) has significant potential as a resource for thinking about and carrying out Buddhist social engagement.

---

[2] Like most terms, there is debate about the proper definition of Engaged Buddhism, and what can thereby be correctly included under the umbrella of Engaged Buddhism. In this article, I draw on the explanation used by the Japan Network of Engaged Buddhism: "Engaged Buddhism is the practice of Buddhism not only for personal liberation but also for the liberation of all sentient beings through the pursuit of social transformation and social justice. Engaged Buddhism is practiced through social welfare and relief activities that address the direct causes of suffering and through social change activities that confront the deeper structural and cultural causes of suffering. Engaged Buddhism also emphasizes individual Buddhist practice and inter-relational practice in community as foundations for holistic change" (Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists). Zen here is meant as inclusive of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese traditions derived from Chinese Chan Buddhism.

[3] For example, there are no Pure Land authors in the seminal anthology *Engaged Buddhist Reader* (Kotler), no attention to Pure Land Buddhism in the key introductory texts *Socially Engaged Buddhism* (King) and *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism* (Fuller), and complete exclusion of Pure Land Buddhism from the major collection *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Queen and King). Pure Land Buddhism received approximately two total pages of attention in the 544-page collection *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Queen) and approximately eight total pages of attention in the 365-page collection *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism* (Queen et al.). All of the above books discuss Zen, Tibetan Vajrayāna, and Theravāda Buddhist contributions to Buddhist engagement at great length. Similar patterns repeat themselves across the breadth of commonly-cited English-language discussions of Engaged Buddhism over the past thirty years.

Pure Land Buddhism shares much with other forms of Buddhism, and in many places it is integrated with other Buddhisms to form part of the general matrix of Buddhist practice and thought. At the same time, Pure Land can be identified as a distinct stream within Mahāyāna Buddhism. Among the independent Pure Land schools, Jōdo Shinshū (also known as Shin Buddhism) stands out due to both its size and its unique interpretation of Buddhist practice. For Shinran—the thirteenth century founder of Jōdo Shinshū—prayer, ritual, precepts, donations, meditation, mantra, and all the other common elements of Buddhist practice are too often based on self-striving or a desire to get a return on one's investment. This is problematic because the self is precisely the source of suffering in the first place, and ego-tainted efforts (which are unavoidable for unawakened beings) are useless for true emancipation.

Shinran solves this conundrum by advocating complete relinquishment of one's own efforts, such that one instead receives awakening as part of a natural process unfolding from liberated reality into our everyday lives. This process arises from the story of Amida Buddha, the widely-popular Buddha of Infinite Light and Life (representing endless wisdom and all-embracing compassion). In Shinran's understanding, true reality takes the form of Amida Buddha in order to provide us with a vehicle to realize such reality in our lives. The vows enunciated by the Bodhisattva Dharmākara (who became Amida Buddha) are the source of universal awakening for all beings, which occurs in each person's life as the Buddha's mind of wisdom-compassion suffuses our minds and causes us to reach the stage of the truly settled. One responds to this free gift of liberation by saying the *nembutsu* (the name of the Buddha), "*Namo Amida Butsu*," in reverence and gratitude. Whereas in other forms of Buddhism this phrase primarily means "Please save me, Amida Buddha," in Jōdo Shinshū it is essentially understood as "Thank you, Amida Buddha." Because it arises from the activity of the Buddha (deep liberated reality) rather than our own self-based efforts, and because it is not instrumental in

purpose (*nembutsu* expresses gratitude rather than seeking to obtain benefits), Shinran says that this grateful *nembutsu* is true and real practice.

In other words, for Shin Buddhists gratitude is key to authentic Buddhist practice. And this central value of gratitude—I suggest—also provides a crucial link between Shin Buddhist practice in general and religiously-motivated action to improve society and protect the natural environment. In the following pages, I explore how gratitude-as-practice and other elements of the Jōdo Shinshū teachings provide principles that might inspire or inform efforts at reducing harm in the world, and offer specific examples of these principles in action.

First Principle: the Indebtedness of Interconnection

Buddhism's awareness of our interdependency with all things provides a vision that can spur us to care for others, because we see that they aren't really separate from ourselves. As Jōdo Shinshū ethicist Ronald Nakasone of the Institute of Buddhist Studies in Berkeley notes:

> The belief in an interdependent world links the destiny of each individual with every other individual. This belief gives reason for everyone to work for the betterment of themselves and all beings. . . As the basis for Buddhist ethics, interdependence provides Buddhists with a sense of community and common purpose. It also mandates Buddhists to conduct their lives in such a way that will benefit all beings. . . In a mutually interrelated universe, since all beings are inextricably bound together in a community, what affects one link in this communal web affects everyone. The idea of an interdependent universe means that the dignity of humanity rises and falls with individual

> actions. What affects one member in this community affects me. My actions will affect every other member in this community. What I do, in turn, will affect every other link in this web. Tug one strand and the whole web vibrates. (Nakasone xx, 32, 46)

For Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists specifically, there is a further level of meaning to our inner togetherness beyond the simple fact of our interrelatedness. The essence of the Pure Land teachings is often boiled down to a key phrase in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, "*Shinjin shōin shōmyō hōon*," which means: "The trusting heart that we receive from Amida Buddha is the true cause of our liberation; we gratefully say the *nembutsu* as our response to the debt incurred by the Buddha's immeasurable years of effort in order to liberate us."[4]

The heart of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism is relational: It is recognition of gifts received via work on our behalf, and response with gratitude to acknowledge and (partially) repay the debt that we've thus incurred. Having received, we have a responsibility to respond in kind. But as Amida Buddha is true reality, it does not need anything from us: not worship, nor donations, nor pledges of loyalty, nor anything else. Thus it seems that there is nothing we can do in return. This impasse is broken by saying the *nembutsu*, which "completes the circuit" between ourselves and the Buddha, and by paying our debt forward to others, who become the object of our efforts to express thanksgiving and compassion, as the Buddha would wish us to do.

This centrality of relationality in Pure Land spirituality and the basic formula of receipt-acknowledgement-indebtedness-action drive

[4] 信心正因称名報恩. This is my own translation of the full meaning of the phrase. A direct translation would be: "The trusting heart is the true cause; chanting is a response to benevolence."

Jōdo Shinshū engagement. When we reflect on our situations, we see that our lives and awakening depend on constant receiving from others. With every breath we incur a debt to the air, the trees, the earth. Countless factors are continually enabling us to live in every moment, to practice the *Dharma*, to experience love, happiness, and awakening. Even if we are vegan pacifists living off the grid, our living necessitates the death of other organisms; and most of us are hardly model exemplars, no matter how much we may wish for that. Fossil fuels and other dirty energy sources underlie nearly every moment of comfort, convenience, or travel for most people; even the roads that electric vehicles are driven on are made by destructive polluting processes. Regardless of whatever our political beliefs may be, our taxes fund activities that are harmful and that we would object to. There is no way to stop incurring debt, for to live is to receive unfairly, until the very last moment.

This indebtedness is deep but should not depress us. It is the very nature of interdependence. If we were not indebted, it would mean we were dead, or somehow had become so separated from everything else in the universe that we stood alone and isolated in a void of infinite loneliness. Being in debt is not shameful—it leads to the recognition that we receive and have an obligation to give, which is a wonderful and mature attitude.

It is recorded that at one time Rennyo, one of the most important Jōdo Shinshū leaders of the past, saw a scrap of paper on the ground. He grabbed it and raised it to his head, exclaiming "How can you waste something that is given by the Buddha!" (Inagaki 131). The combination of his impoverishment and his gratitude meant that he never wasted anything. He understood its value and that everything he received came to him through the efforts of others. As he put it, "What is there that is not the Buddha's gift?" (132). This is a rhetorical question, of course: There is

nothing whatsoever that is not the Buddha's gift. For as long as we live, we are receivers. For as long as we realize this truth, we should be givers.

This holds true in all situations, but is especially clear in relation to the natural environment. We are an expression of that environment, and that environment is a fundamental necessity for the existence of life. Yet our modern human activities pose serious threats to the health of our environment and the other beings who share it with us. Recognizing our indebtedness to the interdependent water, air, earth, beings, and processes that generate and support us, we can respond by trying to minimize harm and produce healing for the living world. We can see such appreciation and indebtedness in various eco-positive initiatives taken by Pure Land temples around the world.

With an awareness of interdependency and a feeling of debt and gratitude, ecological issues have been a matter of concern within American Jōdo Shinshū temples since the early 1970s. Seigen H. Yamaoka, president of the Institute for Buddhist Studies and long-serving bishop of the Buddhist Churches of America (the largest Jōdo Shinshū organization outside Japan) noted in his 1991 statement "A Buddhist View on the Issue of Environment:"

> Living within inter-relatedness is to know that the interdependent world, the universe, and all that is within it, is not for our selfish purposes and uses. Rather, we must live with the view that the world, the universe and all that is within it is compassionately giving to us so that we can live and grow. With this view, respect and gratitude arise, and we realize the meaning of our personal lives in an interrelated and universal sense. Gratitude and respectful introspection bring forth the deeper realization of responsibility to the universe and all that is within it. (pamphlet, par. 19-20)

Commented [AJ1]: Indicate page number of source in brackets?

Commented [JW2R1]: There is no page number: it is an unpaginated pamphlet

Within the Buddhist Churches of America, environmental awareness and action came to be especially associated with the EcoSangha movement, which originated at the Seattle Betsuin Buddhist Temple in the 1990s. EcoSangha is multifaceted: Its work includes encouraging temples to make their practices environmentally sustainable, educational events on ecological issues, and an exploration of how Buddhist thought and ritual can incorporate environmental consciousness. In 2014 the Ministers Association of the Buddhist Churches of America passed a resolution encouraging all BCA temples to develop EcoSangha activities within their local congregation (Buddhist Churches of America Ministers Association). The main Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū organization followed suit in 2016, passing a resolution seeking "to educate, set goals and develop an action plan to help temples and members live in ecological harmony within our communities, State and planet" (Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii Giseikai). The result was the Green Hongwanji program. The following year twenty-two Hawaiian Shin temples (plus the Jōdo Shinshū-based primary and high schools) participated in the first Green Hongwanji audit, examining and reporting their self-assessments on toxins, energy, water, waste, and purchasing practices at their institutions (Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii). Temples in both the mainland U.S. and Hawaii now regularly participate in ecological activities, including periodic eco-audits, environmental activities by *Dharma* school students, and lectures on Buddhism and ecology. In so doing, they acknowledge and act upon their feelings of indebtedness in the web of interconnectivity.

Second Principle: Action Expresses Gratitude

As just indicated, a fundamental aspect of the Jōdo Shinshū process of awakening is an awareness of debt. Such awareness arises from our realization of the gifts we have received. Primarily these refer to the

unflinching support provided by Amida Buddha as the source of awakening by suffusing our lives with the *Dharma* despite our many karmic failings. This is especially embodied in *shinjin*, the heart of trust that we receive from the Buddha, and the *nembutsu*, which expresses our realization of *shinjin*. However, as Amida Buddha is inconceivable and immeasurable, the supportive activity of the Buddha is not limited to *shinjin* provided by the Buddha nor the sound of the *nembutsu*, but potentially encompasses countless causes and conditions that are enabling our process of awakening. Thus it can include the care and assistance that we receive from others, who are foolish sentient beings in their own experience, but from our standpoint are helpers that provide us with material or spiritual support on the path to Buddhahood. Indeed, it is common practice in Jōdo Shinshū communities for ancestors, mentors, and other caregivers to be included in the field of indebtedness and gratitude that drives Shin spirituality. One reason this is possible is because those who have died before us become one with the reality expressed as Amida Buddha, and therefore our ancestors have become Buddha.[5]

When practitioners of non-Shin Buddhist paths make progress toward their goals, they can tell themselves that this is due to their vigorous efforts. But in Jōdo Shinshū our spiritual awakening comes about through the working of power-beyond-self; it is already accomplished by the Primal Vow to liberate all beings, which Dharmākara made in the timeless past. Becoming aware of this liberation, our role is simply to respond with

[5] This is nicely expressed, for instance, by Kyōshin's statement recorded in Shinran's *Mattōshō*: "When the heart of the persons of true and real shinjin attain the fulfilled land at the end of his or her present life, that person becomes one with the light that is the heart of Tathagata, for his reality is immeasurable life and his activity is inseparable from immeasurable light" (Hirota et al. 541). Shinran affirms this understanding in his reply to Kyōshin by leaving this passage uncommented, while correcting minor errors in Kyōshin's statements on other points.

gratitude as we wake up to the compassion we receive. As it is stated in the *Tannishō* (a famous collection of Shinran's teachings):

> The nembutsu that we say throughout our lives, thinking "If it weren't for this compassionate vow, how could such people as ourselves be liberated?" should be recognized as entirely the expression of our gratitude for the benevolence and our thankfulness for the working of Amida's great compassion. (Hirota et al. 673)

For Jōdo Shinshū practitioners, *nembutsu* doesn't do anything other than express our thankfulness. It isn't a prayer or petition; it doesn't generate merit or cause awakening.

Realization of receiving benefits and the arising of gratitude lead to action. This is the natural way: As we feel thankful, we seek to respond. On the one hand, the formal expression of this thankfulness is spoken *nembutsu*, the sigh of relief and cry of joy that spills from us as Great Compassion lifts the load from our shoulders and illuminates our lives. On the other hand, the informal everyday expression of this thankfulness takes the form of acts of kindness and charity. The Jōdo Shinshū missionary Hozen Seki gave an example of such informal actions from his early ministry, when he established a temple in Phoenix, Arizona in the 1930s. There were about a dozen feral cats and kittens that roamed the grounds of the temple. They followed Mrs. Seki around, and she fed them and talked to them kindly. But Rev. Seki was indifferent to them. He never fed them, and they would scatter whenever he came outside. They could sense a non-cat-lover.

All of that changed suddenly, however. As Seki narrated:

> One early September morning I received a telephone call from the hospital, where my wife had been admitted the night before. She had given birth to a baby boy, and both

> mother and son were fine. I burst with joy. Immediately, without thinking, I went to the icebox and took out all the food and brought it to the cats. What a surprised look they had! I still remember their faces as they cautiously ate the food. True, heartfelt happiness automatically reflects outwardly. (8)

The act of giving food to the temple cats was *nembutsu* in that moment: action performed selflessly out of grateful happiness. Such *nembutsu*-as-action is not confined to spontaneous kindness to animals. Work to help reduce the suffering of the world can also be carried out as *nembutsu*. When performed from the grateful heart, social and political action may be a type of *nembutsu* too.

In other forms of Buddhism, positive action in the world accumulates merit, and is part of the path to Buddhahood. But in Jōdo Shinshū understanding, action performed as grateful *nembutsu* doesn't bring us closer to becoming saints. It isn't going to take us to Buddhahood. It can be deeply spiritually rewarding, but it is not done in pursuit of rewards: It is undertaken out of recognition that we have already received so much, and our feelings of thankfulness need to be channeled into expression. Such thankfulness is especially but not solely expressed in the vocalized *nembutsu*. Indeed, Shinran's disciple Kyōshin said that the joy that arises is "boundless and can never be fully expressed" (Hirota et al. 541). Vocalized *nembutsu* does not exhaust the expression of joyful gratitude; our actions in the world also express this gratitude, especially when they contribute to the good of others in accordance with the Buddha's wish that all be relieved of suffering.

An example of action undertaken out of a feeling of gratitude and the wish to extend what one has received to others is Project Dana, a major social service initiative started by two Jōdo Shinshū women, Shimeji Kanazawa and Rose Nakamura, at the Mo'ili'ili Hongwanji temple in

Honolulu (Publication Committee 43). Still based at the Jōdo Shinshū temple but very much interfaith in spirit, Project Dana today includes dozens of temples and churches with over 1000 volunteers. They provide support that allows housebound elders to live in dignity and independence, as an expression of the Buddhist value of *dāna* (selfless giving), based on an awareness that older generations have benefited those of us who received their nurturance. Project Dana provides in-person and phone visits to isolated seniors, home repair, home safety assessments, decluttering, assistance in setting-up medical equipment, and transportation to medical appointments, grocery shopping, religious services, banking, and government offices. Such work is active *nembutsu* in everyday life, arising from gratitude.

Third Principle: Amida Embraces All Beings Unconditionally

An important aspect of Project Dana is that its focus is not only on the elderly—it also provides support to caregivers. Project Dana volunteers train them, host caregiver support groups, provide one-on-one counseling, and celebrate them with quarterly outings. In nurturing both caregivers and care receivers, Project Dana embodies a third important principle: the universal embrace of Great Compassion.

In *Tannishō*, Shinran states, "The Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only *shinjin* is essential" (Hirota et al. 661). Shinran is referring to the forty-eight vows proclaimed by Dharmākara Bodhisattva in the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, one of the primary texts of the Pure Land tradition. These vows are made so that the bodhisattva can become Amida Buddha and establish the Pure Land as a foolproof method for all beings of every capacity to receive liberation. Among them, the eighteenth vow (the Primal Vow) is the most important: it is the vow that *everyone* can enter the Pure Land and be freed

from suffering. This great vow is not based on distinctions between people. It is not a gift given to the good, the rich, the mighty, the enfranchised. Nor is it a prize or reward achieved by the diligent, the hard-working, the insightful, the pious. It is made for absolutely everyone. It is made for men and for women, and for those who are nonbinary or otherwise complicate or transcend this dualism. It is made for straight people and for gay people, and for all possible inclinations toward love. It is made for Black people and white people, and for all people of whatever race, ethnicity, or culture exist. As Shinran understands it, the Pure Land—which is the liberated nature of reality itself—is for all of us.

Amida Buddha completely refuses to discriminate against anyone whatsoever. From this, we understand that all discrimination is wrong and must be resisted. Prejudice must not be accepted in our temples, and it must be resisted in society. Rather, we must recognize our solidarity with all people and all living things, and work to promote this solidarity.

This solidarity arises from the fact that we are all equally embraced, and because all beings have been intimately related to us since the beginningless past. As Shinran says in the *Tannishō*, "All sentient beings, without exception, have been our parents and brothers and sisters in the course of countless lives in the many states of existence" (Hirota et al. 664). He makes this point during a discussion about whether one should say the *nembutsu* for one's parents. (Ancestor veneration is a venerable East Asian Buddhist practice.) Shinran rejects it because it is too constricted: there is not a single being who hasn't been our parents and siblings in the past. Every person you meet, everyone you pass on the street, is your kin. Just as you would not tolerate discrimination against your current mother or brother, you must not discriminate against others or allow anyone to languish under the oppression of prejudice.

To embrace others unconditionally is difficult. Only the Buddha truly achieves it, but nevertheless we strive to emulate that Great

Compassion and do our best to accept others. An example of this is the long history of same-sex marriage in Jōdo Shinshū temples. The very first known Buddhist same-sex marriage in history happened at the Jōdo Shinshū-affiliated Buddhist Church of San Francisco in the early 1970s, approximately fifty years ago (Wilson). In 2010 the largest organization of Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū temples explained the basis for this accepting attitude:

> WHEREAS, the Dharma (universal teachings) provides guidance on how to live mindfully with an awareness of universal compassion which embraces and uplifts each and every person; and
>
> WHEREAS, in order to truly realize universal compassion, we need to cultivate a profound senseof responsibility for the welfare of all beings; and
>
> WHEREAS, the Buddhist ideal of universal compassion does not discriminate between good and evil, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight; and
>
> WHEREAS, Buddhism affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all persons independent of gender; and
>
> WHEREAS, families today are composed of many combinations and what connects individuals as a family is a conscious commitment to share in the responsibilities of life; and. . .
>
> WHEREAS, Shinran Shonin, the founder of Shin Buddhism, affirmed the inherent equality among all people whose lives are karmically (causally) bound and interconnected by teaching that the great Wisdom and Compassion of Amida (ultimate reality) embraces all beings equally and unconditionally without exception. . .

> NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED, that the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, a Shin Buddhist organization, affirms that same-gender couples should have access to equal rights and quality of life as conferred by legally recognized marriage. . .” (Wilson 43-44)

Jōdo Shinshū ministers in the United States have performed weddings for male couples and lesbians, for transgender people, for bisexuals, for polyamorists. Amida Buddha embraces everyone, so there is no possible foundation upon which to build a coherent argument against recognizing the worth of others, whether they seem similar or different from us.

Fourth Principle: Even the Good are Liberated, So Of Course the Evil are Liberated

More than 700 years ago, Shinran said in *Tannishō* that “Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will” (Hirota et al. 663). This is Shinran’s most important teaching in the *Tannishō*, and it demonstrates why he was arguably the most radical of all Buddhist teachers.

Buddhists of the past and of Shinran’s time taught that Amida Buddha’s power and compassion were so great that even an *evil* person attains birth in the Pure Land through the buddha’s power (even though they hardly deserved it). Their real point was that therefore we can be confident that *good* people go to the Pure Land (because they actually do deserve it). In other words, people were told if they obeyed the authorities, followed the rules, conformed to society’s expectations, donated to the monasteries, and did other good practices, they were certain to be reborn through the Pure Land. After all, even *evil* people receive this benefit, at least theoretically. So, be good, and get into the Pure Land.

Shinran absolutely rejected this logic. For Shinran, the Great Compassion does not exist for the so-called good people alone. Indeed, they're not even its primary concern. Therefore, Shinran turned this aphorism on its head and taught the exact opposite, in order to reveal the true extent of Amida Buddha's love and compassion.

Shinran taught that even a good person receives rebirth through the Pure Land way, so therefore it goes without saying that of course evil people do so. Shinran understood that Amida Buddha, the Great Compassion, exists in order to liberate all beings from our suffering. That is the only reason that the Pure Land exists, to be an engine for our liberation, all of us. It is not a heaven for Amida Buddha to enjoy in a blissful trance; it is not a reward for those who somehow earn it; it is not a gated community or a VIP hangout behind a velvet rope. It is the means that Dharmākara Bodhisattva developed whereby to liberate all beings from suffering.

Thus, Amida Buddha cares about the fact that someone is suffering, not about whether they are good or evil according to society's definitions. Indeed, those who are labeled evil are typically the ones who suffer the most and have the least opportunity to somehow pull themselves up by their bootstraps into nirvana through their own efforts. Thus, it is those who need the most help whom Amida liberates first: those who suffer the most, and those who are excluded from elite approaches to Buddhism. They are the first priority of Great Compassion.

"Evil" is often a label that society attaches to the unwanted and marginalized. For example, politicians often target immigrants, especially so-called "illegal immigrants," for attack. Politicians paint such people as criminals, rapists, welfare drags, job-stealers, drug dealers, and more, and then pledge to protect their supporters from such evil threats (Lee 205). Likewise, Muslims in North America, Europe, and elsewhere have endured decades of xenophobic targeting by politicians, the media, and racist

vigilantes. For millennia various patriarchal religions (including Buddhism) and cultures have taught that women are somehow inherently sinful or dangerous, and used this to justify controlling and oppressing them. To be called evil is often a sign not of one's lack of morality, but of the lack of value that dominant society assigns to someone in your group.

Into this situation the Great Compassion of Amida Buddha arrives as a disruptive force. Rather than those who are already given the relative means to reduce their suffering, or who are privileged to escape the suffering caused by prejudice and oppression, Amida Buddha's vow is especially directed toward those who are called evil. Thus the "evil" and suffering must be the first object of our compassionate action in the world. When we seek to positively impact our world, our first question should not be "who deserves to be helped" or even "what can I do to help?" It should be "who is suffering, and how?" All engaged Jōdo Shinshū work arises from the facts of suffering and is a response to those facts. It is not an ego-based wish to feel good about oneself or to act as a savior, nor is it about accumulating merit or receiving distinction. Following from Amida Buddha's example, we look to see where there is great suffering, and we act to alleviate it as best we can. Actually, all lives contain suffering, and there is work to do in all areas for everyone. But the greatest sufferers—the oppressed, the marginalized, the excluded, the disenfranchised—must be our primary concern.

An example of this is found in the work of Takagi Kenmyō. In the late Nineteenth century he was assigned to a Jōdo Shinshū temple that served Japanese outcastes (*burakumin*). Because of their association with professions considered impure by mainstream Japanese standards (such as waste disposal and tanning), the *burakumin* experienced intense discrimination and social oppression, similar in many ways to that of Black people in the United States. Coming into awareness of the plight of *burakumin*, Takagi drew on the teachings and example of Shinran to advocate

for the liberation of outcastes, women, and the poor. He joined networks of activists working to transform early Twentieth century Japan and agitated for change.

In his essay "My Socialism" Takagi called for the complete revolution of Japanese society; his model for a proper society was Amida's Pure Land, for, as he put it "I consider the Land of Bliss[6] to be the place in which socialism is truly practiced" (191). He decried the predations of the rich, noting how they oppressed the poor, especially women and children. As he said, "Amida's main concern is with the common people" (190). Indeed, he proclaimed, "I realize that [Shinran] was really not only deeply sympathetic toward common people, but that he was also, without a doubt, a socialist who realized a life of non-discrimination in the spiritual realm" (190-191). He also advocated pacificism, noting the effects that war had in particular on the poor. For his involvement in social justice movements Takagi was arrested and sentenced to death, commuted to life imprisonment. He died in prison in 1914, but his ideas and spirit of solidarity with the excluded eventually brought him appreciation by later Jōdo Shinshū thinkers (Ogi 2007).

Fifth Principle: I Too am a Foolish Being

In discussing political competitions, social justice, environmental issues, and similar matters, there is always a strong tendency to fall into an us vs. them, right vs. wrong mentality of deep polarization, self-aggrandizement, and vilification of those who disagree. This is a natural but regrettable phenomenon, because rarely are we fully correct or our "opponents" fully wrong, and one goal of Pure Land Buddhism is peace, harmony,

[6] The Land of Bliss is a common term for the Pure Land of Amida Buddha.

and liberation with all people. Excessive anger and hatred of others defeats our actual purpose and pushes us off of the way of Great Compassion.

Shinran was a person of deep personal conviction, so deep that he defied the emperor and the feudal Buddhist establishment, and received severe punishment for his efforts. Yet in his heart he always reflected on the fact that he too was a foolish being, not better than those who opposed him. As he said in *Tannishō*:

> I know nothing at all of good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as Amida Tathagata knows, that an act was good, then I would know good. If I could know thoroughly, as the Tathagata knows, that an act was evil, then I would know evil. But with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real. (Hirota et al. 679)

This is a remarkable statement for a revered Buddhist monk to make. Rather than claiming deep insight or profound understanding as most Buddhist leaders do, Shinran refuses to put himself above anyone else. When he speaks of the buddha alone understanding good and evil, he brings attention to the limits of our knowledge. None of us knows thoroughly, in the manner of a buddha. Buddhas see all the interconnections between actions in the present and past; they see the outcomes of every action and understand human nature and the nature of each individual on a level that unawakened people never access; they continually experience our inner togetherness. Thus, they can truly judge whether this or that action, this or that view, will lead to genuinely positive, negative, or mixed outcomes.

Compared to a buddha, the gulf of "rightness" that I perceive between myself and my opponents shrinks to near imperceptibility. It is like a person standing on a chair next to a person standing on the ground: yes, the person on the chair is technically closer to the sun, but from the sun's point of view, is there really any difference? What a fool I would be if I crowed about my proximity to the sun from on top of my chair!

Shinran teaches that apart from the *nembutsu* said in thankful awareness, all matters are empty and false (Hirota et al. 679). What he's pointing out is our profound self-centeredness in all things, our constant reference to ourselves in all situations and relationships. This self is the central problem in Buddhism; our misunderstanding of it and attachment to it rather than perceiving the fullness of our interrelationality with others is the ultimate source of our suffering (and what causes us to bring suffering to others through our wrong actions). When I encounter the political and social realms, I do so from my limited perspective, and seek gains that will accrue to this foolish self. When I think of the natural world, I relate to it as something other than myself, something I enter into, rather than something that I am a part of. Always my ego is pushing itself forward and seeking to maximize imagined gains and minimize imagined losses, even in my most charitable or seemingly selfless moments. This is true of other people as well, on both sides of every conflict.

Tannishō records a conversation between Shinran and his disciple Yuien-bō. It is a key encounter that helps us to understand how to relate to ourselves and those we oppose:

> Shinran asked, "Yuien-bō, do you accept all that I say?"
>
> "Yes I do," I answered.
>
> "Then will you not deviate from whatever I tell you?" he repeated.

> I humbly affirmed this. Thereupon he said, "Now, I want you to kill a thousand people. If you do, you will definitely attain birth [in the Pure Land]."
>
> I responded, "Though you instruct me thus, I'm afraid it is not in my power to kill even one person."
>
> "Then why did you say that you would follow whatever I told you?"
>
> He continued, "By this you should realize that if we could always act as we wished, then when I told you to kill a thousand people in order to attain birth, you should have immediately done so. But since you lack the karmic cause inducing you to kill even a single person, you do not kill. It is not that you do not kill because your heart is good. In the same way, a person may not wish to harm anyone and yet end up killing a hundred or a thousand people." (Hirota et al. 670-671)

Our differences with those whom we disagree with are not differences in kind—they are differences in circumstance. No person is inherently more moral or good or right than another. Were we born into another's situation, we might well make decisions very similar to them, decisions that seem strange or inexcusable to us in our momentarily current situations. No matter how angry we may feel toward our opponents, they are acting in ways that seem to make sense in their own situations, and were we in those situations with the conditioning they've experienced, we might act similarly. No matter how sure we are that our positions are the best for moving society forward and reducing suffering, we remain foolish beings, just like our opponents, with limited wisdom and poor ability to perceive our own motivations and feelings.

What Shinran's teachings point to is that the so-called evil and the foolish—whom we usually consider to be our opponents—are not our

enemies. They are us. We too are evil and foolish in myriad ways. We must continually recognize our essential unity with those we think of as wrong or wicked. We must not pretend that we are pure saviors. We too are oppressors, caught in systems we dimly perceive, full of blindness and yet enabled to see in part due to the light of the buddha. If we seek to act as bodhisattvas in the tumultuous roil of social issues and politics, we must be conscious of being foolish bodhisattvas fumbling toward reunion with those who are temporarily on the other side.

This is more than just a necessary attitude for Jōdo Shinshū engagement. It is also a guide for how to approach various issues. A murderer causes terrible suffering, but their actions are not solely due to evil choices. Violence arises from the profound ignorance that we all share. It often erupts in circumstances or due to conditioning that might lead any of us to make the same mistake, even if we desperately wish to think of ourselves as peaceful people. To combat violent crime, the best approach is to remove the factors that often precipitate such circumstances: poverty, prejudice, oppression, hopelessness, addiction, access to firearms, and cultural scripts that encourage greed, dominance, or violent "solutions" to challenges in life.

An important example of this principle that I too am a foolish being is manifested in Jōdo Shinshū institutional responses to discrimination against Japanese outcastes. The majority of these oppressed people are members of Jōdo Shinshū. However, the *burakumin* experience within Jōdo Shinshū has been imperfect: discrimination against *burakumin* by Jōdo Shinshū monks and institutions has a long, disgraceful history similar to that found with *burakumin* in other Buddhist traditions. In the 1920s the burakumin liberation movement rose to combat the injustices they suffered, including by Jōdo Shinshū. Ōtani-ha (one of the largest Jōdo Shinshū lineages) was forced to confront how they had failed to live up to Shinran's nondiscriminatory approach to Buddhism. In many sessions

between the 1920s and 1970s, Ōtani-ha official representatives listened to burakumin who confronted and denounced them, emotionally detailing the suffering that the sect that caused. These representatives bore witness to their role in burakumin oppression, admitted their faults, and accepted the blame the institution had earned (Main). In doing so, they were saying that we too are foolish beings. Even those who profess to teach the all-embracing compassion of Amida Buddha fail and allow their ego and blind passions to drive them to acts in violation of the Dharma.

Our failures show that we are still essentially human, just as our opponents are. We must study the problems of the world and make our best effort at choosing the most compassionate, helpful actions to combat suffering. But in doing so we must never lose sight of our inner togetherness with those who act in ways we dislike, and our essential foolishness that is a universal component of human nature.

Sixth Principle: Circulation of Compassion

Tannishō states that "Becoming one with the unhindered light filling the universe, we will benefit all sentient beings." This statement is made in reference to the Pure Land, and raises a point of vital importance. Because of the influence of Christianity in the West, it is easy to mistakenly imagine that the Pure Land is simply a Buddhist analog of Heaven, a place of eternal rest and peace as a reward for faithfulness. Nothing could be further from the Jōdo Shinshū approach to the Pure Land.

Birth in the Pure Land is the true beginning of our spiritual work, not the end. In Shinran's understanding, those who are born in the Pure Land instantly become one with true reality, and immediately return to this world to work at relieving the suffering of those still trapped in ignorance and woe. In accord with Dharmākara's twenty-second vow in the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, the beings of the Pure Land act as great bodhisattvas

speeding from the Pure Land to beings throughout the universe in order to liberate them. As Shinran says in *Tannishō*, "Compassion in the Pure Land Path should be understood as first attaining Buddhahood quickly through saying the nembutsu and, with the mind of great love and compassion, freely benefiting sentient beings as one wishes" (Hirota et al. 663). Attaining Buddhahood is actually the easy part, enabled by the skillful means of the Pure Land developed by Amida Buddha. Next, we roll up our sleeves to spread the mind of great love and compassion to others, acting on our deepest wish that all beings be sprung from the prison of suffering.

Empowered by the Great Compassion, bodhisattvas constantly circulate to and from the Pure Land, the state of *nirvāṇa*, ceaselessly working to help others stuck in the world of birth-and-death. In this way the Pure Land and our everyday reality are intimately connected, not separated from each other. For the bodhisattvas, they are simply two sides of experience: life experienced in its ultimate liberated state, and life experienced from within the ego shell of ignorant foolishness.

To constantly circulate compassion is to keep going when it seems like no progress is being made, or even when things seem to be getting worse. It means to keep coming back to the same problems over and over, never abandoning anyone to languish in suffering. It seems like a tall order, but there are two important facets of constantly circulating compassion that need to be noted. First is the ability to reconnect with the Pure Land through the nembutsu, so that we let the parts of ourselves that wear down be buoyed by the always-embracing power of Great Compassion. Second is the nature of constant circulation: it is not an individual task. Bodhisattvas don't heal the world by themselves. They do it as part of the

Saṅgha of Boundless Life,[7] the fellowship of awakening beings that find solidarity in the inner togetherness revealed by the Dharma.

Among the various flavors of Pure Land practice in Japan, one important strain was Yūzū Nembutsu. This tradition taught that *nembutsu* is fractal in nature: one *nembutsu* echoes throughout the universe to heal all beings, and all *nembutsu* pronounced by others, wherever they may be, reaches and supports the awakening of yourself. You are not an isolated individual chanting in a sea of strangers—your *nembutsu* embraces everyone, and the *nembutsu* that we utter soothes and empowers you on levels beyond ordinary consciousness. We never practice or struggle alone. Shinran himself does not discuss the *nembutsu* in this precise way, but in *Shinran Shōnin go-shōsoku shū* he does affirm directing one's *nembutsu* to all living beings throughout the universe as a way of responding to the benevolence of the buddha (Hirota et al. 562). This circulation of compassion—receiving the *nembutsu* from the buddha and directing *nembutsu* toward others—creates a web weaving all beings into the process of awakening.

We find such an awareness of circulation in the writings of Kenryu Tsuji, the first North American-born bishop of the Buddhist Churches of America. Raised on a farm in British Columbia, he had a deep sense of the how the natural rhythms of life mirror the activities of Great Compassion's working in our lives. As he explained it once,

> Death is neither the end of life nor the termination of life's activity. Waters of the river flow onward to reach the wide expanse of the sea. In time, the water evaporates and becomes clouds.

[7] Boundless/Immeasurable Life (Amitāyus) is one of the two Sanskrit names that the name Amida represents. The other is Amitābha (Boundless/Immeasurable Light).

When moisture saturates cumulus clouds it is released, returning to the surface of the earth as rain. From the skies the rain sustains the life of all living things, from the tallest redwoods to the tiniest crawling insects.

Water flowing in the sea may be called oso eko, the going phase of movement. Raindrops falling to the earth may be seen as genso eko, that is, water returning to its place of origin.

Shinran, just before he died, said "When my life has run its course, I shall go to the Pure Land and return again, like waves of the Wako-no-Ura bay breaking upon the shore. . . When two of you rejoice, remember there are three, as Shinran will be there too."

All human life is a source of energy, of compassion stored in the depth of its innate buddhahood. It may be only a microscopic part of the cosmic compassion of the universe, which we religiously call Amida Buddha.

But once immersed in the cosmic compassion, this energy is a mighty current flowing harmoniously. Human beings are so attached to the body that it is thought that death of the body is the end of everything. In reality, it is the beginning of interaction with the entire universe.

When the body is buried in the ground, it becomes soil in which all living things grow. Shinran Shonin said, "When I die, throw my body in the Kamo river to feed the fish." He was realizing oneness with all forms of life.

As the body is cremated, smoke rises heavenward and gas molecules enter the atmosphere that we breathe. This is the influence of physical energy. Human life is more than just physical energy. It is also moral and spiritual energy released upon the whole world.

> Intangible influence is often difficult to perceive. Nonetheless, it continues to function throughout the universe. How many times have we read the words of Buddha and other masters for inspiration, comfort, strength, and a practical guide to living?
>
> How many times have you picked up an old letter written by your long-departed mother or father, wife or husband, and quietly contemplated its contents?
>
> Just as waters of the river return from the ocean to quench a thirsty planet, human energy now purified in buddhahood—the Pure Land—returns to the world, continuing its perpetual work of compassion. This is genso eko [the returning phase].
>
> Too often the Pure Land is considered a static place of eternal rest far removed from the affairs of worldly beings. Contrary to this belief, the true Pure Land is where cosmic compassion is generated and perpetually regenerated. (24)

As Tsuji explained, the Jōdo Shinshū way of awakening by going and sharing awakening by returning is a natural process, like that of water. Floating on the Primal Vow, we are taken to the ocean of awakening and enabled to return as nourishing rain to nurture others. As we pursue an end to suffering in this world though kindness, charity, and action, we continually immerse ourselves in (go to) the Pure Land and work to spread relief from suffering (return).

Conclusion

The exclusion of Pure Land Buddhism from dominant English-language discussions of Buddhist activism has multiple origins, including assump-

tions by other Buddhists that Pure Land is somehow unsuited to social engagement. In his most recent book, prominent engaged Buddhist author David Loy only notes the existence of Pure Land Buddhism in passing:

> In contrast, most Pure Land schools of East Asia emphasize what happens after death: if one has faith in Amitabha Buddha, he will meet us and take us to his western paradise. Conditions in that ideal realm are so perfect that it is relatively easy to practice and attain complete nirvana there—a process that apparently does not involve any further relationship with this world of suffering, craving, and delusion. (54)

Here Loy seems to dismiss the possibility of ongoing concern for the world by Pure Land Buddhists. Shortly thereafter, he launches into a critique of ideas of heaven, spiritual salvation, and otherworldly Buddhism, stating that these (among other phenomena) discourage environmental activism or other forms of social engagement (57-59). Given that Pure Land Buddhism never reappears in his text, while Zen, Tibetan, and Theravada Buddhisms are all subsequently cited approvingly as resources for what he calls "Ecodharma," it seems apparent that Loy has weighed Pure Land and found it a failure as a possible Buddhist teaching relevant to the ecological crisis.[8]

However, as has been shown here, Pure Land Buddhism does in fact contain significant resources as a contributor to environmental and other forms of social engagement. Within Jōdo Shinshū, entrance to the Pure Land does not sever the relationship with the suffering world, but rather invigorates the bodhisattva and empowers them to immediately return to skillfully tackle the problems and pains of saṃsāra. Furthermore, principles such as the indebtedness of interconnection, the

[8] The subtitle of Loy 2018 is "Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis."

unconditional embrace of Amida Buddha, and the preferential liberation of the so-called evil are potent wells of energy and insight for Jōdo Shinshū practitioners in their application of Buddhism to personal and social ethics.

For scholars of Japanese Buddhism, it is hardly surprising that the Jōdo Shinshū tradition contains potential resources for social engagement, given that Jōdo Shinshū was born as an anti-establishment people's Buddhism during the Kamakura Era and has dramatically affected Japanese society at multiple points in history. Working for the benefit of others is an application of Shin principles and values, and this work deepens understanding and connection to the Dharma. As well as their value as sources of individual spirituality and community building, Shinran's teachings can provide guidance for how to help heal our suffering world through concrete action in society.

Works Cited

Buddhist Churches of America Ministers Association. "EcoSangha Resolution." Buddhist Churches of America Ministers Association, 2014.

Fuller, Paul. *An Introduction to Engaged Buddhism*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

Hirota, Dennis, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryzu, editors. *The Collected Works of Shinran: Volume I, The Writings*. Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997.

Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii. "Temples Assess How Green They Are with the Green Hongwanji Survey." Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, hongwanjihawaii.com/blog/2017/04/10/temples-

assess-how-green-they-are-with-the-green-hongwanji-survey/. Accessed 24 April 2021.

Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii Giseikai. "Resolution 016-03 Green Hongwanji Initiative." Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, 2016.

Inagaki, Hisao, translator. *Thus Have I Heard From Rennyo Shōnin (Rennyo Shonin's Goichidaki-kikigaki)*. Dharma Lion Publications, 2008.

Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists. "About." Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists, jneb.net/about/. Accessed 23 April 2022.

King, Sallie B. *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. University of Hawai'i Press, 2009.

Kotler, Arnold, editor. *Engaged Buddhist Reader*. Parallax Press, 1996.

Lee, Michelle Ye Hee. "Donald Trump's False Comments Connecting Mexican Immigrants and Crime." *Washington Post*, www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2015/07/08/donald-trumps-false-comments-connecting-mexican-immigrants-and-crime/ . Accessed 8 May 2022.

Loy, David R. *Ecodharma: Buddhist Teachings for the Ecological Crisis*. Wisdom Publications, 2018.

Main, Jessica L. *"Only Shinran Will Not Betray Us": Takeuchi Ryō'on (1891-1967), the Ōtani-ha Administration, and Burakumin.* McGill University Libraries, 2012.

Nakasone, Ronald Y. *Ethics of Enlightenment: Essays and Sermons in Search of a Buddhist Ethic*. Dharma Cloud Publishers, 1990.

Ogi, Naoyuki. *The Challenge of Revitalizing Buddhism: Learning from the Engaged Buddhist Movements of Thich Nhat Hanh and Takagi Kenmyo*. Graduate Theological Union, 2007.

Publication Committee. *Japanese Eyes, American Heart. Volume III: Learning to Live in Hawai'i.* Tendai Educational Foundation, 2013.

Queen, Christopher S., editor. *Engaged Buddhism in the West.* Wisdom Publications, 2000.

Queen, Christopher S., et al. *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*. RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

Queen, Christopher S., and Sallie B. King, editors. *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. State University of New York Press, 1996.

Seki, Hozen. *The Great Sound of Enlightenment: The San Butsu Ge (Praises of the Buddha) and the San Sei Ge (Three Vows) of the Larger Amida Sutra of Pure Land Buddhism with a Commentary*. American Buddhist Academy, 1989.

Takagi, Kenmyō. "My Socialism." In *Living in Amida Buddha's Universal Vow: Essays in Shin Buddhism*, edited by Alfred Bloom, World Wisdom, 2004, pp. 189-196.

Tsuji, Kenryu. "Going Phase and Returning Phase." *Turning Wheel*, Spring 1997: 24.

Yamaoka, Seigen H. "A Buddhist View on the Issue of Environment." Buddhist Churches of America Department of Buddhist Education, 1991.