

# **Buddhism in North America: Growth, Humor and Shin Spirituality!**

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**I. Growth:** There are now over 3 million Buddhists, including Richard Gere and Tina Turner, and 25 Million people who say they have been "influenced" by Buddhism. The city with the most number of Buddhist schools in the world is not Bangkok, Kyoto or Taipei but Los Angeles. There are over 80 different schools of Buddhism in L.A. and close to that in many other metropolitan areas in North America, including Vancouver and Toronto. The talk hopes to throw light on the characteristics of Buddhism in North America and its reasons for growth.

### A. Buddhist Population in the U.S.

- 1) Those who see themselves as Buddhists: around 3 million
  1. New Asian-American Buddhists (those who mostly arrived in the U.S. since the 60s, the Vietnamese, Thai, Korean, Cambodian, Laotian, and Sri Lankan).
  2. Old-line Asian-American Buddhists (those who were established before the Second World War, the Chinese and Japanese).
  3. Convert Buddhists whose main practice is meditation (predominately, Euro-Americans belonging to Zen, Vipassana and Tibetan traditions).  
\*Dharma Debate between a Tibetan and Zen monks at Harvard.
  4. Convert Buddhists whose main practice is chanting (Sokagakkai International – U.S.A., comprised of a sizable percentage of African and Hispanic Americans).
- 2) Night-stand Buddhists: numbers are unknown, but perhaps another few hundred thousands. \*Entrance Exam for Muslim, Christian and Buddhist.
- 3) Those who have been "influenced" by Buddhism: 25 million

### B. Characteristics:

- 1) Women in leadership roles.
- 2) Lay leadership and married clergy.
- 3) Socially engaged Buddhism.
- 4) Spirituality (personal religious experience) over doctrine, creed and institutions.  
Meditation as practice.
- 5) Emphasis on the "here and now."  
"Yesterday is history. Tomorrow's a mystery. But this moment is a gift.  
That is why we call it the present!"  
\*Comic strip of "Jesus is Coming" and "Buddha here now!"

## **II. Shin Buddhist Temples in North America through a Humorous Lense:**

**Humor:** One of the aims of Buddhism is to minimize our attachments. Another way of expressing this is not "to take ourselves so seriously." We can gain some hints from a number of humorous tales from traditional Buddhism in Asia as well as jokes concocted by North American Buddhists, for example, "Why couldn't the Buddha vacuum under the sofa?"

### A. Temples as Social Institution

\*Three drowning men in prayer.

\*"My daddy says, 'you are the poorest minister we've ever had'."

\*The "B" Buddhists: Bingo Buddhists, Bazaar Buddhists, Board of Director Buddhists, and Basketball Buddhists.

### B. A temple needs to be a "Big Tent" with Dharma as the center pole that includes many needs and functions.

1) Buddhist institution: spirituality, philosophical, mythic, the magical.

\* Dalai Lama: "Do I remember my past life?  
Mmm, I don't even remember what I did yesterday."

2) From Ethnicity to Universality.

3) Practice what our teachings teach, and people will gather!

\*The Village contest.

\*"Why couldn't the Buddha vacuum under the sofa?"

\*Zen monk and his disciple: "Are you still holding on?"

\*A Buddhist monk and hot dog

**III. Shin Spirituality:** While the traditional ways need to be kept alive, we must explore and share the ways of "accessing" the truth and the vitality of Shin spirituality. I hope to share a bit of my own appreciation of what Amida means to me.

A. One concrete Shin "practice" I can do daily: Meal Time Gassho and Recitation

B. My personal basic outlook:

1) I actively seek to clarify the rational/philosophical ways of appreciating the workings of Foundational Reality (= boundless life force) (Daishun Ueyama)

2) Yet as Shin Buddhists we must retain the Sacred Story as "myth" that serves as the "centerpiece" of the teachings that express Foundational Reality. (Akira Ōmine)

\*It doesn't exist like that Dr. Ty Unno's mother's episode.

3) I seek to actively find my personal expressions of the workings of Creative Nature as Boundless Life Force, which calls for each of us to take notice, commit to, and internalize them in an emotive-resolve manner. (Shōtō Hase)

C. Awakening to Boundless Life Force in our lives: They cannot simply be taken for granted but we need to consciously be attentive to them, which mature within us as Manifestation of Reflection (*yōgen* as discussed by Prof. Hase).

1) Leo Bascaglia: "Freddie the Leaf" (a best-selling book of a decade ago by an American with an appreciation and understanding of Buddhism.)

2) Exhilarating scenes of California hills near the Redwood country

3) Keiko Hirano: "We'll become the wind and shake the branches with the birds."

4) Our loved ones: My wife's cancer scare.

5) Ryudai student: Through her mother (See the full text below)

D. Implications:

1) Offers a broader and concrete way of appreciating Amida within our daily lives.

2) Encourages us to appreciate and care even more for nature and the environment, which in light of recent announcements on global warming can only be helpful toward a solution.

3) Any enhanced appreciation of our loved ones can only help to improve interpersonal relations within and outside the family, thereby addressing the concern for the breakdown of family life, which Prof. Ueyama saw as one of the causes for the crisis.

4) With this heightened awareness of the Manifestation in Reflection, we are able to develop greater appreciation for the Amida of the Sacred Story, for it will have been infused with our experiences of expressions Boundless Life Force.

## "Being Embraced ..."

By a Ryūkoku Univ. graduate student, Ms. Uchimoto Mikuru  
(*Ryūkoku*, *Shūkyō-bu hō*, No. 78, pp. 41-53)

Translated by K. Tanaka

Mom, was your life short? Or was it long? Everyone says that it was short. But ... 50 years is more than twice my age. Fifty years is half a century, isn't it? Half a century seems somehow very long.

Fifty years ... I wonder if it's short. I wonder if it's long.

Mom, was your life a happy one, or an unhappy one? Everyone says that they feel sorry for you 'cause you got cancer.

Mom, you experienced a lot of suffering from cancer. It must have been really hard when you lost your breast. You know, I wanted to give you mine. And it sure was scary when we thought about the cancer spreading. I really wanted to give to you my life. When we were told that you had only 3 months to live, we were so saddened, so frightened, and felt such pain that as our tears wouldn't stop.

Mom, since you been gone, it's been quite lonely.

But you know what, it's strange to say, but I liked my mom with cancer. Actually, I liked you much more than before you got cancer. I really don't know why, but I liked you even more.

Mom, there were a lot of things you taught me after you got cancer. You taught me about the hardship of illness, my weakness, the fragility of life, people's kindness, and gratitude ...

I remember, you were always so grateful. Even though you knew that your life was coming to an end, your words of "Thank you" were incredibly powerful and profoundly moving. It was just a simple phrase, "Thank you," but they were warm and made me feel good inside.

Having gotten cancer, mother, you lived life fully. You treasured each and every moment. You treasured every person that you spoke to and every person that you met. You lived life fully, so very fully. I liked my mother who lived life to its utmost.

Mom, was your life short? Or was it long? Mom, was your life a happy one? Or an unhappy one?

Mom, I wonder if I can live as long as you. I wonder if I can live my life as fully as you did. I can't ask you that now, can I?

But you know Mom, there is one thing that you taught me, which I realized after you were gone. When I put my hands in gassho and recite "Namo Amida Butsu ... ," I feel as though you are embracing me. Yes, I am being embraced by my mother's incredible warmth and compassion.

Mom, whatever happens to me, I know that you will always be with me. Mother, thank you. "Namo Amida Butsu, Namo Amida Butsu, Namo Amida Butsu."