

Nichiren Buddhism in America

Sunday Service

April 3, 2011

Last Month I attended the Nichiren Shu Congress Meeting in Tokyo. During the meeting Bishop Imai of Nichiren Shu Hawaii District and I, as Bishop of North America, discussed Nichiren Buddhism in America. The reason for this discussion was to expand on a book *アメリカ仏教* or *American Buddhism* with the subtitle “Buddhism will change, America will change too” published by Kenneth Tanaka. Another reason was the existence of many Nichiren Shu priests who were born in America.

First of all, Professor Tanaka teaches at Musashino University in Tokyo. He was born and raised in Northern California as a Buddhist. According to him, the Buddhist population in America is around 3 million, which is roughly 1% of the US population. This figure is still small, but it is greater than compared to many decades ago.

In his childhood, he could not say, “I go to a Buddhist church.” Professor Tanaka pointed out that until the 1980s, Buddhist priests were considered heretics in the eyes of the Christian public. To fit in, Japanese Buddhists copied Christian church design with long pews in temples, singing of hymns or Buddhist gathas (in our case) accompanied with the playing of an organ or piano. Buddhist priests used to wear black jacket, black tie, black shoes, and long hair just like Catholic clergymen. I know exactly what he states because I have been living in America for almost a half century and have witnessed this.

However, within the last three decades, Japan became the number two Gross Domestic Producer next to the USA. As trade increased, Americans bought more Japanese goods and name brands such as Toyota, Honda, Nissan, Sony, Pioneer, Nintendo, Seiko, and others. Americans sought Japanese culture as they began to realize the source of Japanese honesty, vitality, harmony and peace. Part of this culture was based on Buddhist philosophy. Many Americans went to Japan and learned Japanese culture and Buddhism. After returning to the states, they taught Japanese history, culture, and especially Buddhism. Some of them became Buddhist priests.

In his book Kenneth Tanaka does not talk about Buddhism for the Japanese in America because they are still tied to the ethnical style of Japan. Instead he emphasized Zen Buddhism's influence on many Americans. Maybe that is why a majority of American born Buddhist priests belong to the Zen Sect. Professor Tanaka talks about "Engaged Buddhism" as a form of American Buddhism. This is Americans and their families participating in Buddhist activities such as peace marches, protesting against suppression of Buddhists in Asia, particularly China and having philosophical discussions.

We are Nichiren Shu Buddhists in America. What can we do to promote "engaged Nichiren Buddhism?" We have activities such as meditation with the emphasis on chanting Odaimoku or *Shodai-gyo*. We can do *angya* or march while we beat *taiko* and chant the Odaimoku. This may require a parade permit from the authorities. Our faith is based on the Lotus Sutra which emphasizes the practice of the Way of Bodhisattva. This practice is not only salvation of oneself but for others. We, Nichiren Shu members in Las Vegas, volunteer at the lantern festival (*toro nagashi*) in August and pass water to the runners of the Las Vegas Marathon in December every year.

Nichiren Shu in North America will celebrate its 100th Anniversary in three years. Until recently Nichiren Shu was expounded by Japanese priests from Japan for Japanese immigrants and their descendants. Today we have ten Nichiren Shu priests who were born and raised in America including my son, Douglas. Among them, there is one nun. In June we will have a Canadian and Mrs. Inoue of the Los Angeles Nichiren Buddhist Temple who are planning to train at Shingyo Dojo to become ordained nuns. So there will be three female Nichiren Shu priests in North America.

As Nichiren Shu in America begins to expand by locally raised priests, they will surely change Nichiren Buddhist practice. Traditional emphasis by Japanese priests was on funerals and memorial services which was what Japanese members wanted. However, Americans want a more lively form of Buddhism where they can be active participants and not merely attend solemn occasions and ritualized services.

American Nichiren Buddhism should be Buddhism of Americans, by Americans, and for Americans. But American Nichiren Buddhism cannot be created without keeping some of its

base core of Japanese tradition and culture. There is a saying, "Lean a Lesson from the Past!"

Engaged Buddhism can be created without the loss of tradition. It has the flexibility to change with the times and new cultures without sacrificing some customs. There still has to be some continuity, otherwise the message and teachings of American Nichiren Buddhism will be fractured.

Rev. Shoda Douglas Kanai will be training in Japan for about a year starting this June. His aim is to seek something new that has never been done, but something that Americans like to participate in. As the majority of our congregation is female, the message has to be geared towards them. The future of Nichiren Buddhism in America will rely upon this segment. Until American Nichiren Buddhism has been established, it is my goal to be a bridge between the tradition and modern, the old way and the new way.