

Reflections on Being Ordained

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LAST MARCH at the Nishi Honganji, the headquarters or Honzan of the Jōdo Shinshū Honganji-ha in Kyoto, I was one of 66 persons receiving tokudo (initial ordination) from the head Abbot. Some 25,000 men and 5,000 women currently hold this entry level rank of the Shin Buddhist priesthood, but since I am only the third Caucasian woman in Honganji history to be so ordained, there was a focus of newspaper reporters, television cameras, and generally friendly but curious interest in my ordination and my reasons for becoming ordained.

At the time, I felt uncomfortable about being so interviewed since, to me, tokudo was a spontaneous natural step in my own process. Over a period of some 27 years, mine had been an evolution from an initially intellectual attraction to Buddhism to a specific experiential choice of Shin Buddhism, a choice made before I came to know Shinran himself through his writings, a choice made while Amida Buddha and the Nembutsu still seemed barriers too difficult for me ever to break through. There was no dramatic conversion. I had never been a seeker. It had just come about gradually, in a naturally unfolding way.

This is not easy to explain in a few minutes of trying to answer reporters' questions. It is not easy to write about "why tokudo?" as in this article, since tokudo for me was the same "becoming so by itself" phenomenon as was my having become Buddhist. The suggestion of tokudo was made to me some five years ago, and then again this past October. By then, the time was ripe. I was ready. And I did it—or, rather, it happened to me.

During the tokudo rehearsal at the Nishiyama Betsuin I did not enjoy feeling as different as the television cameras tended to make me feel. But the following day, at Honzan, neither reporters nor cameras were permitted. In the reality of the ritual itself, my feelings of naturalness returned. The flavor of the dharma, the teachings, seemed to fill my senses as my turn came to be given a pinch of fragrant incense to rub on my hands and then on my robes. The light of the oil

REFLECTIONS

lamps that have been burning continuously in Honzan for more than four hundred years symbolized in a profound way to me the continuous light that is Amida Buddha, whom D. T. Suzuki described as “the ultimate reality of absolute suchness.”

During our pre-tokudo seminar, our lecturers covered general Buddhism and the history of Pure Land Buddhist thought, linking Shinran’s teachings with those of Sakyamuni in a way that emphasized what to me is the great difference of Buddhism, an intellectually and existentially attractive difference which speaks directly to we science-oriented persons of the twentieth century. We yearn to be reality-oriented, to know reality, to really know, to be sure. This is exactly what the teachings of the Buddha address: this yearning, the suffering it causes, the delusions we experience. He explores our nature, and the nature of reality, of things-as-they-are while, at the same time, liberating us from our having to be “right” by showing us the bright, open horizon of “neither this nor that.”

Naturalness, the oneness and interdependence of all life, a liberation from exclusivity, elitism, superiority and discrimination were the fresh new horizons opened to me when I first began to read about the Buddha and his teachings.

That chilly March afternoon in Honzan, I was the single non-Japanese receiving tokudo in an environment and culture far different from my European roots and American heritage. Yet to be there seemed to me the most “at-home” feeling I have ever experienced. My good friend and teacher, Professor Miyaji Kakue, who first suggested this step to me several years ago, describes tokudo as a “spiritual evolution.” In my own view, “spiritual evolution” is what has happened to me since 1956 when, soon after Hawaii became my home, I was asked by an American publisher to write a small introductory book about a subject on which I knew absolutely nothing at all: Buddhism. An editor urged me to try. I was between novels, and excited by the prospect of learning something new. My research began with reading a number of books such as Conze’s *Essence of Buddhism* and the writings of Percheron and Christmas Humphreys. The technical vocabulary baffled me. I had studied philosophy during my four years at the University of Buffalo, and worked at a student job as proofreader and editorial assistant to the *Journal of Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* but in my major in English Literature, and minors in history, philosophy, languages and education, I had never once had more than the most passing superficial encounter with Buddhism.

So in 1956, meeting the Buddha for the first time, I read voraciously, feeling as if doors had suddenly been flung open in my mind. With the enthusiasm of someone convinced they have discovered a great new way of thought, I began accepting speaking engagements at Young Buddhist Association meetings and conferences, urging the teenagers and young adults then feeling the postwar push to Americanize by leaving Buddhism, to *not* leave until they understood

what it was they were about to leave behind. For me, their Buddhist heritage was not simply a respected legacy from immigrant parents or grandparents or great-grandparents, not an ethnic or cultural heritage, but a modern, relevant, universal, liberating way.

I was not yet ready to say “way of life” because, at that point, my attraction to Buddhism was still a head trip. I hadn’t really taken it in. I didn’t really know what I was doing or saying for I was still myself stumbling along the edges of the path of Shin Buddhism. In 1966 I ran for public office in Hawaii, and in the political confrontation of the campaign, my opposition provided me the first taste of taking the teachings into my own life. To face ugly hostility and bitter, highly emotional antagonists left me with no choice but to experience the truth of Sakyamuni’s “You cannot fight hatred with hatred.” Compassion, from then on, was not a word, or an abstract concept, but something I had known and felt in my heart and my gut, in every fiber of my being as I faced five hundred negative pairs of eyes all determined to defeat me. For the first time, too, “neither this nor that” leaped from the category of a theoretical abstract, from a technical phrase that appealed to my intellect to the gut-reality of my coming to terms with the fact that whether I won or I lost the election, either way was okay. I didn’t know the word for how I felt then, or what I felt: *Sonomama* (things-as-they-are).

Once, long ago in a country temple on the Big Island of Hawaii, a Shin Buddhist minister’s son accosted me, holding out a large scroll that depicted Genshin’s description of the levels of Buddhist hells. “If you can’t understand this,” he said, “you cannot be a Buddhist. Anyway, Buddhism is not for someone like you!” There was nothing I could say to this man who refused to accept the universality of the Buddha’s teachings, the reality of those hells in everyone’s life, and the all-embracing, non-discriminating, non-distinction of Amida’s Vow. To think that I would or could be accepted just as I am by every other Shin Buddhist everywhere might lead me to think there was really no need for Amida’s Vow! And except for a few such rare incidents, I have always been made to feel at home in Jodo Shinshu—in Hawaii and in Japan.

That feeling of belonging, of comfortability, was probably why, during and since tokudo, it has taken me some time and the exercise of considerable effort to begin to comprehend that to those whose heritage is Buddhism, and particularly Shin Buddhism, my process—and my feelings about its spontaneous naturalness in my life—seem unusual enough to inspire a common set of questions. One: “How did you, a westerner and former Christian, become Shin Buddhist?” Another: “What does nembutsu mean to a Caucasian who never heard of—and never heard—*Namu Amida Butsu* until they were well along in adult life?” And, the currently persistent question from friends and strangers in Japan, Hawaii, and the mainland United States: “Why tokudo?”

REFLECTIONS

The inference in many of these questions (depending of course on the questioner) is either astonishment that a Christian should feel so natural about becoming a Buddhist, or doubt that a westerner can really become and feel part of an eastern tradition. My feeling is that some of the questioners lump culture, ethnicity, and religion into one non-crumbleable cookie. For them, it is so.

The intrusion of such questioning by newspaper and television reporters during the ten day pre-tokudo period when, supposedly, I was sequestered from the outside world, continued to distress me long after the final ceremony was over, the programs aired, and the articles printed, read, and largely forgotten by most people. In my view, our entire group had been newsworthy in that of the six "foreigners" in the tokudo group at Honganji International Center in Kyoto, three were men and three were women; four of us were relative newcomers to Buddhism and to Jodo Shinshu; five of us were from lay backgrounds; and for all six, tokudo represented a genuine inner turning point in our lives.

The other five, however, were of Japanese ancestry. The media seemed to assume (or so I surmised) that to anyone who is of Japanese ancestry, Buddhism can be a natural path to follow. My sense of having become a part of the tradition i-self, the feeling I had in receiving tokudo as somehow being affirmed as a meaningful basic part of the timestream of all being, of being itself—my deep feelings about the nembutsu as my spiritual, existential connection with the boundlessness of ultimate reality, was difficult to try to get across. At the time, the focus of cameras and questions seemed to me to be "off" but I perceive now that it was I who was "off," locked into my limited, subjective, self-centered point of view. My illusion that they thought me an "oddity" was *my* illusion. To see the videotaped segments, and to listen to the translation of the articles showed me once again the blind ignorance of my assumptions and the bottomless depths of my pride and vanity. The coverage, when viewed and read with unbiased eyes, communicated and celebrated the very feelings I had on receiving tokudo, making clear to viewers and readers that Shin Buddhism is a way of life and thought and spiritual focus that can be the comfortable, natural, spontaneous way of anyone who selects it, anywhere in the world.

It was only as I sat down to write this article that I realized the request to write it, and all the questions that friends and reporters—and strangers—asked, were not something intrusive, but the cause and condition provided me to answer the question in terms of my own life, even before 1956 and the *innen* of being asked to write about Buddhism. "Why tokudo?" It was a question for me to explore for myself as well as for those who asked it of me.

I began thinking back, in terms of my early life, on the way a personal philosophy can evolve, on the conditions that lead to choosing a particular spiritual linkage. The process can very naturally lead a westerner to an eastern tradition—as naturally as has always been the missionary assumptions that an easterner

can quite spontaneously and comfortably become a Christian. For me, of course, the move to Hawaii was the fortunate circumstance but as I reflect on my childhood, on my school and university years, and the early years of my marriage and becoming a mother, it seems to me that at any one of many points along the way, if the teachings had been there for me to encounter, becoming Buddhist could have been as natural and spontaneous at ten, or twenty, or thirty as it seemed to me to be at thirty-five.

My birthplace was Buffalo, New York. My parents were divorced when I was three, and from then on I was raised by my maternal grandparents. They were the kind of casual Christians who believed churches to be essential for the good of society and other people, but who never attended any church and never identified themselves with a particular denomination. They simply called themselves Protestants and were pleased but astonished whenever I sporadically attended Sunday School at one or another of the churches to which my friends belonged.

I think probably the years from eight to twelve are a time when religious intensity is strong. This was so for Hōnen and Shinran, whose family circumstances nudged that natural intensity into religious vocation. At ten, I thought that becoming a missionary would be a great thing (the result of attending a summer vacation school taught by a missionary lady with considerable charisma). For me, however, there was never seriously any choice of vocation or career other than writing, a gift that seemed to have come to me at birth. I was first published when I was six years old and in childhood wrote many poems. Two hang in my memory: a poem about Jesus that stressed his ordinariness as a human being; and a poem titled "Change" which expressed wonder at the limb cut from a living tree, tossed onto a campfire, and quickly transformed into white ashes.

Writing has, in a sense, been my life. This is one of the strong bonds I feel with Shinran, who was the kind of writer I have not yet been able to be. For years, over my typewriter, I kept a card with a quotation from Albert Camus: "We writers are lucky. Some people just live their lives. We writers write ours too." Encountering Shinran directly through his writings was something I experienced long after I began to identify myself as Shin Buddhist. It was Dr. Taitetsu Unno of Smith College who, in 1975, first introduced me to that remarkable Shin Buddhist classic, *Tannishō* (Tract Lamenting the Differences). I read and re-read Dr. Unno's and other, earlier English translations. I slowly made my way through *Shinshū Seiten* (Sacred Writings of the Shinshū). I marveled at the verses of Shinran who never held back in writing down his real self. Having thus met Shinran, I began to re-read the life and teachings of Sakyamuni with fresh eyes. Their unflinching, severe, self-honesty, their willingness to come to terms with how it is and not how they wish it were, their focus on "the ulti-

REFLECTIONS

mate reality of absolute suchness,” gave me the heart and courage to try to begin to face my own self, to write my life as Camus’ quotation urged.

Over the next six years I made a beginning in a series of articles titled “Sakyamuni, Shinran and Me” which were published in *Metta*, the monthly journal of Honolulu’s Buddhist Study Center, which is an outreach project of Honpa Honganji Mission of Hawaii. I look upon this article as one more episode in that series, a further attempt to look at my life and myself in terms of inner reality and my nembutsu connectedness—the same reality which Sakyamuni and Shinran expressed. It is their example, their teachings that made it possible for me to walk through the fearful gate of “what will people say?” “what will people think?” and face myself as they faced the reality of themselves, a process that is neither painless nor easy, and that cannot be done without a strong light that makes it possible to really see. The light I am talking about is, of course, the light of wisdom and compassion that illuminates all our lives.

For me even to confess to an inner life—a spiritual life—is, in a way, a surprise to myself for I am one of that generation who spent childhood in the economic devastation of the Great Depression and who came of age during World War II. We are a generation whose lives—at least in America—seemed to leave little room or time for contemplation, and for whom political stability, economic security and world order (our ideas on this latter of course varying from one part of the world to another) were life’s top priorities.

We were old enough to remember horse-drawn vehicles in the city streets delivering milk or ice or bread, and yet young enough to have looked up at airplanes as being something totally expectable flying across our part of the sky. Radio was our childhood companion. In our twenties, television was so new that it was almost suspect. We lived, we were sure, in an age of technological miracles, vast extensions of communication, and such pleasant domestic amenities as dishwashers, microwave ovens, automatic laundry equipment, and reasonably dependable contraceptives. We were one of the first generations in the history of the planet to view the “heavens” as outer space and to venture into it—at least vicariously through our no longer suspect television screens.

We were, perhaps most of all, the generation who remembered when death had been visible in our neighborhoods, when wreaths hung on the doors of houses along any street were a reminder of the reality of death,—that reality we have put out of our lives by safely secreting the ill, the old, and the dying out of our sight—and minds—in hospitals and care homes. The hearse never drives up to anybody’s front door in American cities and suburbs anymore. But as death becomes invisible, its seeming unreality becomes a torment. Secretly, at least for me, the idea of death, of my own death was a hellish inner specter plaguing me into and throughout my twenties and early thirties. I have never been able to write about this before. Beginning early in my high school years,

the alienating awareness of a “me” thinking about “myself” who was an “I” moving through the everyday routines with such outward zeal and self-confidence gave me the feeling of a double vision that sometimes made me dread to see my own reflection in a mirror. Who was I, anyway? What was I? Why this shaky inner whirlpool of thoughts behind the “me” of such a calm face? As I began adult life, this inner whirlpool eddied around one overwhelming vortex—the silent secret internal struggle against the realization that one day, any day, I would die and—at the same time—a fascination with the idea of death, a fascination that led frighteningly near the temptations of suicide.

At the time, I thought I was the only one, anywhere, who knew such inner turmoil. Now it seems to me that this is a universal turbulence, a state of being everyone faces sometime, a turbulence that is the snake pit, the hell into which each of us descends in our own private inner way—almost a pre-condition for finding a philosophical and religious grounding, a framework of spiritual identity in which the questions that really matter can be addressed without embarrassment, hesitation, or fear. Living through such a period, I died every day, several times a day, saying goodbye to life while, at the same time, I yearned desperately to go on living.

For my generation, religious tradition was no longer a powerful enough heritage to simply let it go at that. My education, my living in the world of things-as-they-can-be-proven-to-be, of science, of sharp, clear black and white divisions like right and wrong, life and death, subjective and objective, left me in a religious, emotional, psychological limbo on this great matter that all we humans face, but for which our twentieth-century materialistic western world does not offer credible solutions—indeed, seems not even to recognize the problem.

What could I believe in? I was, those first years of my life, convinced I did not need to believe in anything at all. Religion was something that had been of historic importance, that was now almost an anachronism in a world where “ideology” was the word to use for one’s belief and commitment—not in how things are, but in how they ought to be. Like the rest of my generation in America I had been taught that I could do or become anything I chose, that success was my birthright, and that I was totally self-sufficient, self-reliant, a non-dependent individual.

It is seldom fruitful to speculate “what if,” but fruitless as the speculation may be, I sometimes wonder how different my life might have been if I had been exposed to eastern ways of life and thought, practise, and insight during my undergraduate studies in philosophy and history. Buddhism in any of its many avenues to enlightenment was not an option opened to American students in Buffalo, New York in 1941. For many in the west, it still remains an option that is never opened or offered or—if it is—is presented as “eastern,” Asian, exotic, or “fringe.”

REFLECTIONS

Somehow, I was never a seeker. It is as if, instead, the Buddha came to find me. During those first postwar years when I was a young wife and mother, religion was a distant, different, unopened package, like a gift one keeps in the closet somehow always intending to unwrap it but never finding the right circumstance or time. I was, for several years, a Unitarian, always carefully explaining to other Unitarians that I was not a Christian Unitarian. How funny our own limits sound when we look back and recognize them!

As casual, as nominal, as non-Christian as I liked to fancy myself, it was absolutely necessary for me to walk away from it, and I did so, with both mind and body, in the spring of 1957. I had gone to an Easter sunrise service in Kona with my mother-in-law, who is a devout Episcopalian. Listening to the sermon, the minister's words suddenly hit me. "If you cannot absolutely believe that Christ arose from the dead, and rolled away the stone, then you are not a Christian." It was as if I had been jolted awake. "I'm not a Christian. I can't be. I'm leaving!" I whispered to my mother-in-law, and much to her chagrin I walked out of the service. I simply had to. From that point on, intellectual though my first interest was, I began to walk the Buddha path. There was no longer any other religious option for me.

But I was very smug about that walking! As time passed, I was, by age fifty, a success in all the ways that success can be judged. I was a well-reviewed author of numerous books. I had been elected to a minor but ego-bloating position in Hawaii's government. I was a doctor's wife, living comfortably, and sure that my marriage was strong since I was convinced I knew all the ways to avoid the failure that I then considered divorce to be. Both my sons were healthy, and good students. I was at long last in close and loving touch with the father I had never known in my childhood. I was fairly arrogant about being Buddhist and made long, involved speeches on any possible occasion. In every way, I felt so secure that I was unable to see my total insecurity, blind to the cliff edge along which I walked.

It was as if I had never really heard the teachings to which I had long been listening—never really heard the teachers who kept trying to tell me that there would be a time in my life when there was absolutely nothing I could do, nowhere I could go, that the limits of my self-power would be reached and, then, at that abyssal point, I would see there was no option whatsoever except to entrust completely in the Vow which I could speak and write about so glibly. It was 1971 when that happened to me. After 28 years of marriage, my husband rejected me, insisted I give him a divorce so that he could marry the woman who had long been my best friend. Without the grounding of Buddhism I doubt that I could have emotionally survived that failure in the one area of my life, the critical area of my life, in which I had been so sure I would be certain to succeed. No effort, no calculation, no design on my part could change his mind. It was

hell for me. I would not have believed that only a few years later I would look back on the divorce with a feeling of deep and sincere gratitude, both to the husband who had released me to begin a new kind of existence and to his new wife, my old friend, who had made that release possible. Arigatai: I am deeply and sincerely grateful. I now enjoy a freedom, a carefreeness, an openness that I would never have believed possible. I also have come to see that it was I, with my blind assurance and self-centeredness who really was the root cause of the failure of that marriage.

There was an interval, a long interval, when my younger son refused to see or speak to me. I could then begin to appreciate the suffering I have always caused my mother, to whom I have never been able to feel or be close. The truth of Shinran's "ultimate unreliability of all human relationships" really hit me, and again new horizons of understanding and appreciation unfolded.

Dr. Taitetsu Unno once said that when one becomes a Shin Buddhist, taking the teachings totally into one's life, making the teachings one's focus and base, then one no longer asks either "Why me?" or "How come?" no matter what may happen. This is so. Mine is not a calm, peaceful, tranquil life. Sometimes I cannot be pleasant even to my mother. Often I argue with my sons. I enjoy my grandchildren. I treasure my dharma friends. I value living alone, although there are times when it is too lonely. I once fancied myself to be an excellent typist. Then I got reading glasses and saw how very many mistakes I make. My life has been like that, periods of enormous self-confidence and assurance that I was nothing but "right" and "good." Listening more and more intently to Shinran's teachings, and through him exploring more deeply into the teachings of Sakyamuni, I am increasingly made aware of my constant mistakenness, of an inner darkness which is indeed as Shinran put it—snakes and scorpions in the heart.

To have walked this far along the path gives me the absolute assurance I am, indeed, bombu: a foolish, ignorant, arrogant, passion-ridden being. That is my human condition. And once again, arigatai! In March, only a few days after receiving tokudo, I wrote a short article for *Metta* about my tokudo experience. I called it, "Joining the Bombu Club." Disrespectful as this may strike some, that sums up how it was, and is, for me. Shinran called himself "neither priest nor layman." His was a new kind of spiritual identity, a philosophical, religious, and ethical breakthrough for all of us, the final severance of the bondage of 'this' or 'that.' He was "neither this nor that," living an ordinary everyday life as an ordinary everyday person but with the spiritual intensity and commitment of a priest and monk. To chant Shinran's *Shōshinge* (Song of True Faith), to absorb its meaning, is to share Shinran's awe and appreciation and deep personal awareness of the no-self working of nembutsu, of the compassionate, ceaseless, nondiscriminating activity of Amida's Vow.

REFLECTIONS

Tokudo was the only ordination Shinran ever received. So, in a sense, having received that ordination, I too am now “neither priest nor layman,” neither this nor that. It would be an idealistic, pompous lie to finish this account by saying that something in me was ready to make a deeper commitment, to study harder, to try to share more, but that wasn’t why—though such a statement sounds really good. The truth is that, just as in Dr. Unno’s proposal of no “Why me?” or “How come?” in Shin Buddhism, for me there really was no “why” in receiving tokudo. It was simply the next, natural step, a decision that seems to have made itself—as it does for anyone, and can for anyone, whoever, whatever, and wherever he or she may be.