

# REACHING JAPANESE BUDDHISTS

WHERE DO WE START IF WE WANT TO DO BETTER?

*Little progress has been made in the development of intensive and specialized training to equip missionary recruits to reach adherents of the world religions. The author presents a solid case for specialized training for effective ministry to Buddhists from his own experience in Japan.*

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There it was: "Training Center for Buddhist Missionaries to North America," just one-half block off of Kita-oji, the thoroughfare I travelled many times each week enroute to our Kyoto Christian Center. The sign was particularly disconcerting and troubling to me, and for more than the obvious reason. It was so because what was happening in that Buddhist training center was in such sharp contrast to the training I (and the vast majority of my missionary colleagues) had received prior to being sent to post-war Japan. Here I was in a bastion of Buddhism surrounded by elaborate temples and with famed Mt. Hiei visible from my study window, and my knowledge of Japanese Buddhism was almost entirely restricted to what I had learned after my arrival in Japan!

In an attempt to make up for my inadequate knowledge of Buddhism, I began to devote some time every morning to reading a Japanese Buddhist newspaper and other Buddhist literature. That exercise later contributed to a doctoral dissertation on Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai Buddhism. But all of that is incidental and somewhat beside the point. The fact is that Buddhist missionaries to North America were getting the kind of training that was so desperately needed by Christian missionaries to Japan. But in our case it had been almost completely overlooked.

As I write now, that first generation

of post-war missionaries is rapidly being replaced by a new generation. They face new opportunities and new challenges. But some things remain the same and one of them is the challenge of Japanese Buddhism--perhaps more firmly entrenched than ever and certainly more widely disseminated.

Three fundamental questions emerge at this juncture. First, how have training programs fared in the 40-45 years that have passed since the vanguard of that earlier generation landed in Japan? Second, what are some of the most important ingredients of a more adequate training program for missionaries going to Japan? And, third, what are the prospects for the future? Let's look at these in order.

## The first question:

How has missionary training progressed during the past generation? This question merits much more consideration than can be given to it here. There can be no doubt that considerable progress has been made in both pre-field and continuing on-the-field education opportunities for missionaries worldwide. Witness the higher levels of general and theological education undertaken by the average missionary; the increased volume of mission-related books and journals; the added courses in the missions curricula of various schools; the inauguration of masters and doctoral

programs around the country; and the availability of seminars and specialized study programs. There can be no doubt that great strides have been made.

However, it appears that comparatively little progress has been made in one very important aspect of missionary training. With the possible exceptions of training for missionaries to Jews and, more recently, Muslims, we still have very little by way of intensive and specialized training designed to help missionary recruits reach large populations of adherents to the other great religious traditions of the world. As a consequence, the missionary recruit heading for Japan today probably has achieved a somewhat higher level of education and may have had a general course or two in world religions. However, when it comes to preparation for effectively reaching Japanese Buddhists, it is unlikely that the new recruit is much better equipped than I and my colleagues were a generation ago.

## The second question

What kind of specialized training makes for effective ministry to Japanese Buddhists? Though education is only one ingredient of successful missionary preparation, there can be no doubt that the higher level of education achieved by many contemporary missionary recruits will stand them in good stead when relating to educated Japanese Buddhists.

## Reaching Japanese Buddhists

But to more effectively preach, teach and witness among Japanese Buddhists the missionary must know Buddhism as well as most educated Japanese know it and they must know it better than less educated adherents. Credibility is at stake here. As one Japanese put it to me: "If the missionary knows nothing of my religion, how does he propose to convince me that it should be abandoned?"

But it is not only credibility that is at stake. More than rudimentary knowledge will be required to understand the Buddhist mentality; to compare and contrast Christian truth with Buddhist teachings; and to explain (and, at times, expose) the vagaries of Buddhist myth and history and thought and practice. Specialized training is required for those tasks--training that entails a careful study of both Japanese Buddhism and Japanese Buddhists.

### Study should highlight the following:

1) *The origin and development of Buddhism*, including its Hindu (Sankhya) moorings, the life and teaching of Gautama Buddha, the origins and distinctives of major schools, the geographical spread of Buddhism, and contemporary developments. This may seem ambitious, but nothing is gained from neglecting the larger picture. I once attended an international conference that featured strategies for reaching the adherents of the world's major religions. The leaders of the section on reaching Buddhists being from Thailand and Sri Lanka, only Theravada (Hinayana) was considered even though Mahayana is more widespread and influential in today's world. Needless to say, conferees from eastern Asia were dumbfounded and disappointed! Wider study would have averted this kind of myopia.

2) *The entry of Buddhism into Japan* and something of its often tumultuous history in that land. Japanese people tend to think of Christianity as a foreign religion and generally unsuited to their culture. The missionary needs to know, and Japanese should be encouraged to reflect on, the peculiar circumstances

surrounding the importation of a (foreign) Indian religion from the (unlikely) country of Korea. They need to understand how early on Japanese Buddhism was informed by Chinese Buddhism, how great teachers such as Saicho and Kukai went to China to sit at the feet of the Chinese masters. Japanese need to rehearse the ups and downs of Buddhism at times when their forebears were attempting to establish their own identity (as recently as the Meiji Restoration and at certain times even in this present century).

What does this history teach us and them? How is it that times and circumstances are so determinative of what is deemed "foreign" and suitable or unsuitable?

3) *The development and teachings of the various schools of Japanese Buddhism*. Schism and strife have characterized Buddhism in Japan almost from the beginning. At times divisions have reflected differences that developed in China and elsewhere, as in the basic differences between Jodo and Jodo Shinshu. At times they reflected Japanese nationalism and iconoclasm as in the teachings of Shinran and Nichiren. Relationships between the schools have at times been amicable, but just as often they have been singularly competitive and highly charged. In any case, the missionary should be prepared to deal with doctrinal and attitudinal distinctives that, though centuries old, still live on in contemporary Japan.

Of course, presence and attraction of the so-called "new religions" cannot be disregarded. Some represent a kind of reformulated "old" Buddhism as in the case of Soka Gakkai. Others, such as Rissho Koseika, can legitimately lay claim to newness in spite of foundations that are profoundly Buddhist. And still others intentionally interweave Buddhist, Shinto, Christian and other notions into a new syncretism. Siecho no Ie is a prime example of this.

All of this has profound implications for the contemporary career missionary in Japan. He/she will deal, not just with Japanese or just with Japanese Buddhists, but with Tendai Buddhists, Jodo

Buddhists, Zen Buddhists etc. The importance of the differences between these groups must be measured by Japanese first and then by missionaries, not vice versa. And when measured by Japanese the differences are indeed critical.

There are still further considerations. We must remember that the Japanese are not confronted by a monolithic Christianity. That presents missionaries with a problem that is partially resolved by reference to a divided Buddhism in Japan. Also with this kind of knowledge it can be shown that Christians are not alone in denying certain Buddhist beliefs. Buddhist teachers themselves often cancel one another out. This latter observation brings us to another and closely related area of study.

4) *Basic Buddhist teachings as taught by Gautama Buddha and as subsequently interpreted by the great masters*. These teachings are, of course, too numerous to even begin to mention here. However, with a view to missionary contextualization, I will put them into three categories.

First, some Buddhist notions are profoundly different from, and diametrically opposed to, the Christian faith. Examples would be the Six Roots of Evil understanding of sin (regret, desire, hatred, fondness, love and being loved); and the "enlightenment" understanding of "salvation."

A second category includes those Buddhist doctrines that have at least a superficial similarity to Christian teaching such as the Trikaya or Triple Body, karma, and nirvana.

In a third are to be found those teachings that are so much like certain Christian teachings that some have treated them as though they were identical. A classic example would be the Mahayana teaching concerning salvation by faith as found in Amidism and salvation by faith in Christian theology. Honen taught that Amida saves all who repeat the nembutsu ("Hail, Amida Buddha!") from the heart in faith. Shinran went even further and said that not only salvation but faith itself is a gift of Amida and that repetition of the name is an expression of gratitude demon-

strating that the mercy of Amida has already been bestowed. When we realize that etymologically and theologically *charis* (grace) in the New Testament is not only unmerited favor but also thankful acceptance, and when we read Romans 10:13 and Ephesians 2:9-10, it does seem that the Buddhist and Christian teachings are almost identical in this regard.

Now the precise use to which the missionary puts this knowledge of the Buddhist teachings of all three types must be left to the individual missionary. However, I will make two observations that seem to me to be very important.

First of all: To teach, preach and witness in Japan without reference to Buddhist doctrine is to miss out on one of the most effective methods of gospel communication, comparison and contrast. Remember, we do not really know what something is until we also know what it is not!

Secondly: It should be remembered that no single doctrine or notion can be fully understood when separated from the system of which it is a part. In a very real sense, the Buddhist teachings that are most like Christian teachings are at the same time most unlike them because they are part of the Buddhist "whole." (In reference to the illustration above, Buddhist faith relates to Amida. But Amida is not Christ. In fact, even according to some Buddhists Amida "is not!")

5) *Buddhist rituals, practices and behavioral patterns.* The missionary who is oblivious to the meaning and significance of Buddhist celebrations such as Buddha's birthday and Obon (festival for the dead), and with Buddhist rites such as those connected with death and ancestor veneration, is at a great disadvantage. Without this knowledge it is unlikely that she or he will be able to take advantage of certain significant opportunities for Christian evangelism and instruction on the one hand, or to deal with the problems these observances occasion for Christian living and church

life on the other. This is not to be interpreted to mean that any outsider including a well-prepared missionary will have all the answers. But it is to suggest that, apart from adequate preparation at this point, the missionary will tend to be a part of the problem rather than a part of the solution.

6) *Appreciation for the contributions of Buddhism to Japanese culture.* While the

nese friends have settled for what I call "multi-religion"—i.e., the compartmentalization of religious life in such a way as to believe and act like Buddhists in certain situations, like Shintoists in others, and so on. Recently, it has even become rather fashionable to be "Christian" at least once in a lifetime. Christian wedding ceremonies are now quite common even among adherents of other religions or no religion!

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religion of the Buddha is idolatrous and inimical to faith in Christ, there is much that we can learn from Buddhist propagation and much that we can appreciate in Buddhist productions. For example, Nichiren Shoshu Soka Gakkai propagation methodology could teach us how to improve our methods of evangelism if we were prepared to learn. And much of Japanese art, architecture, decor, and etiquette which we rightly admire stems from Zen. To admit this and to show appreciation by word and deed is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of strength.

#### Study of Japanese Buddhists

Turning now to a brief study of Japanese Buddhists, it would include at least the following aspects:

1) *Japanese Buddhists as syncretists or "multi-religionists."* Most Japanese are firmly convinced that "though there are many roads on Mt. Fuji they all lead to the same summit" and understand the religious implications of this. But, except in certain cases such as in Siecho no Ie mentioned above, there has not been a concerted effort to blend ideas from the various religious traditions into one homogeneous whole. Rather, our Japa-

This brings to mind the response of an elderly Japanese to one of my evangelistic sermons early on. With great emotion he said, "Sensei, I am so impressed by what you had to say tonight. I and my family have been Buddhists and Shintoists for as long as we can remember. But tonight I have made an important decision. From now on we will be Christians too!" Only careful study

will reveal both the validity and invalidity of his "decision" and ways to deal with it effectively.

2) *Japanese Buddhists as secularists and materialists.* One of my university professors attempted to dissuade me from going to Japan by saying, "My experience in Japan teaches me that the Japanese are interested in a changed economic picture here and now; not in pie in the sky bye and bye."

He was right, of course. But he was also wrong. Like large numbers of Americans many Japanese are interested in a religion that promises prosperity and the good life. The "new religions" tend to capitalize on that. But, unlike many other Americans, most Japanese who give evidence of being materialistic and secularistic have no intention whatever of depriving themselves, their ancestors, or their progeny of the good offices of priests, buddhas, and bodhisattvas (savior-beings). All alike have their respect and, at appropriate times and places, their money and even their veneration.

Japanese Buddhism has a primary stake in matters of the soul, the netherworld, and the hereafter. It is precisely in these matters that Christian leaders expe-

rience some of their greatest challenges and some of their greatest opportunities.

3) *Japanese view that logic and doctrine are inadequate.* It has always amused me that, though Buddhism eschews doctrinal in favor of experiential knowledge, the various schools often split doctrinal hairs and on that basis go their separate ways. And it has always amazed me that Buddhist believers of the various sects take refuge in the logic of their faith even when that “logic” is facile or even illogical! The explanation seems to be that the average Buddhist wants to be assured of doctrinal integrity and logical validity, but is quite content to rest in thinking that the “experts” have both well in hand. In the final analysis, the right “feel” in relation to one’s faith and involvement is more important to Japanese in general and perhaps to Japanese Buddhists in particular. To the degree that this is so, it is evident that Christian approaches must respond to both biblical priorities and Japanese proclivities.

### The third question

What are the prospects for more specialized training? Currently, missionary education is in flux. In addition to those changes referred to previously there is a trend toward re-naming the discipline itself. Mission studies are now becoming “intercultural studies” in various schools. Valid reasons can be adduced for the change. But if we have learned anything about words it is that they are not just labels, just “sound and smoke,” as some would have us believe. They have their own power. It will prove difficult to re-name the discipline without reforming the offerings. In all likelihood the tendency will be to short-change biblical/theological/religious studies while strengthening the study of culture and culture-related subjects. If so, intensive study of mission theology (which has been fairly important in the past) will be neglected. And specialized study of the various religions (which seldom has been available in recent years) will still be overlooked. Therefore the place of the biblical/theological dimension of mission studies deserves full thorough treatment.

## Reaching Japanese Buddhists

Concerning specialized study of the world’s religions and their adherents, it appears to me that three factors argue for a more optimistic outlook in spite of what I have said above:

First, a greatly increased exposure to Oriental religions among Westerners generally has heightened interest in those religions on the part of scholars and laity alike. About one year ago a former student called my office to inform me that he had an opportunity to teach world religions in a local college even though he had only very limited exposure to them in university and seminary. He requested any course materials I would be willing to share and what he received must have been rather overwhelming.

While preparing this manuscript I had another call from the same student. He was ecstatic. He said that he never dreamed that the subject matter was so voluminous and complex. Nevertheless, as a result of his study and teaching his ministry both in the college and in his church had expanded beyond his fondest dreams. Scores of people in the college and in the church had questions and problems growing out of their association with adherents to other religions or, at least, with teachings stemming from those religions.

Second, the advance of religious inclusivism and pluralism, liberal churches and institutions will demand a response from conservative evangelicals. It is increasingly apparent that this response will have to be an informed one, much, much more informed than the kind of response that holds up an index finger and quotes John 14:6.

In the third place, the growth and success of programs designed to provide classroom instruction and hands-on experience in reaching various Jewish and Muslim groups (referred to above) should serve to heighten awareness of the need for specialized training. If there is a need for special preparation for missionaries to Jews and Muslims who share so much of our own religious tradition, how much greater the need for enhanced training when targeting those with whom we share little more than a

commitment to transcendence? The establishment of the Sunrise Center for Buddhist Studies is an indication that we are beginning to recognize how urgently needed this kind of training is.

### Conclusion

During my years in Kyoto I became well acquainted with one of Japan’s foremost and most wealthy scientists. I led Bible studies in his laboratory and in his home. He listened. He asked questions. He read the Bible. One Christmas Eve when visiting us in Illinois he came very close to making a decision for Christ, but he did not do it then and, to my knowledge, he never did.

On one of my summer trips overseas I went to his laboratory. A hostess quickly prepared tea and summoned the scientist’s wife. After greeting me warmly she became very somber and said, “I regret that in my sorrow and busyness I did not write to you. Last Christmas Eve my husband suffered a heart attack and died. Please come with me.”

A limousine took us up the mountain to the home we had visited so often in years gone by. She led me down a narrow corridor to a newly-constructed and spacious room. It was empty except for a large, ornate Buddhist altar. On the altar was a picture of my friend along with his *ihai* (ancestral tablet), other Buddhist paraphernalia, and a copy of the New Testament. Now his widow turned to me apologetically and said, “Sensei, please do not misunderstand. I put the Bible that my husband used when attending your studies on the shelf because he said that was the only religious book he really trusted. As for the rest, please try to understand. I didn’t know what to do. But please remember that we are Japanese.”

All sorts of questions flooded into my mind at the time and come flooding back every time I picture that room with its single furnishing. Among those questions two can appropriately be asked here:

Would the story have been different if I had been specifically trained to reach Japanese Buddhists? And, will future missionaries have the benefit of that kind of training?