

Ordinary Struggles

Clark Strand speaks with Bishop of the Buddhist Churches of America Socho Koshin Ogui on the subtle concept of practice in the Pure Land tradition.

Clark Strand

Socho Koshin Ogui Sensei is an eighteenth-generation priest in the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land) tradition, the most commonly practiced form of Buddhism in Japan. A resident of the United States since 1962, he became minister of the Cleveland Buddhist Temple in 1977 and of the Midwest Buddhist Temple in Chicago in 1992. In 2004, he was appointed Socho (Bishop) of the Buddhist Churches of America and has been instrumental in the ongoing revitalization and outreach efforts of that organization. The author of Zen Shin Talks, he now lives in San Francisco. Last fall, Tricycle contributing editor Clark Strand spoke with Socho Ogui about the idea of “practice” in Jodo Shinshu and his experiences in combining a Zen style of meditation with a Jodo Shinshu style of living. Photos © Michael Endo



Pure Land bishop Socho Ogui in San Francisco

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The Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) is one of the largest Buddhist organizations in America, is that correct? I think so. We have sixty-five temples and churches in cities around the country.

And yet it hasn't been very visible on the American Buddhist scene. It doesn't appear in the media very often or in the various magazines devoted to Buddhism. Why do you think that

is? Traditionally, Jodo Shinshu has been practiced by the Japanese or Japanese-American community in the United States, and therefore a racial consciousness has very much affected its development here.

Would it be fair to say that Jodo Shinshu has tended to be somewhat insular? Yes, I think so. Part of it is that after World War II, during which many Japanese-Americans had been held in internment camps, there was some anxiety among our members about being too visibly “Buddhist.”

Is that why the American arm of Jodo Shinshu is called the Buddhist Churches of America? It's almost as if the organization wanted to assimilate into the traditional American religious scene. Yes. If someone were to ask a BCA member, “Where do you go on Sundays?” instead of saying San Francisco Buddhist Temple, they might say San Francisco Buddhist Church. It reduces the kind of friction people feel when they hear the word “Buddhist.”

But hasn't that desire to blend in, in part by adopting the outward forms of American religious worship—setting the teachings in the form of hymns, calling your priests ministers, and yourself Bishop—actually made it difficult for Jodo Shinshu to attract converts in America? People like me who went looking for a form of Buddhism to practice in the '60s and '70s were, for the most part, looking for something distinctly Asian. Yes, that's true. A good friend in Chicago who is Catholic said to me recently, “Hey, Koshin, you don't have to copy from our tradition, you know. There are plenty of bishops already. Why don't you call yourself something else?” So I started calling myself “Socho,” a term used in Japan. It means something like “chairman” or “director.” My experience has been that our membership is quite happy to call me something other than “Bishop” today.

Nowadays Shinshu practitioners seem much more willing to talk about their practice than when I first encountered them some twenty or thirty years ago, but I think they're handicapped by the fact that the very idea of practice in the Shinshu tradition is so subtle. If you go to a Zen center, they say, “Okay, do zazen,” and give you very precise instructions on how to sit and quiet your mind, and if you go to a Soka Gakkai meeting, they'll teach you how to chant *Nam-myoho-renge-kyo* [the title of the Lotus Sutra]. But the idea of practice in Shin Buddhism seems like a koan in itself. One of the professors at the Jodo Shinshu university I went to used to say, “Instead of going up the mountain, go down. Go to the bar on the corner and talk with the waitress and find out why she has to work so hard every night. Talk to people who are really struggling and suffering in the midst of life itself and find out all about their questions and their problems. That's the kind of practice that a Jodo Shinshu priest ought to do.”

That's exactly what I mean. A big theme among American converts these days is uniting practice with everyday life, but that very concern just goes to show what a big divide there is between their Buddhism and the rest of their life. In Shinshu there doesn't seem to be any separation at all—which makes it harder to define what it is. I once said to my teacher, “Wouldn't it be a form of kindness to offer some distinct form of practice to people just coming into Jodo Shinshu? Because, apart from attending services and listening to talks, Jodo Shinshu doesn't really have

that kind of form.” And my teacher said, “Well, if you’re married, at least say 'Bye' when you go to work in the morning, and when you come home say, 'It’s so good to see you again.’”

Apart from its emphasis on compassion and on the doctrine of salvation through faith alone—or, as Shin Buddhists prefer to call it, *shinjin*, or “true entrusting” to a power beyond the self—what would you say is the most distinctive feature of Shinshu? First of all is the fact that Shinran, the founder of Shinshu, was married 750 years ago—that he lived with a wife and children in the midst of all the ordinary struggles of life, and that he found the significance of Buddha-dharma in that context. As a school of Buddhism, Jodo Shinshu is very family-oriented. You don’t have to leave home or have a shaved head. Those ordinary struggles *are* the practice, in the midst of which we come to understand and appreciate the meaning of life. Of course, for that very reason Shinran was not officially recognized by the Buddhist authorities of his day. There were no other married priests. A monk who married and had children was considered an outcast in Shinran’s time.

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi once said that he thought Americans weren’t quite priests and yet weren’t quite laymen either. When I first read Suzuki’s words in the early ’70s, I didn’t realize that he was paraphrasing Shinran, who was famous for having said the same thing about himself—that he was neither monk nor layperson. In Shinshu we don’t see any gap between our priests and our members.

So it’s very egalitarian? Yes. That’s what makes it so easy to share our experiences with others, you know. We sometimes hear people say that it might be better if we had some kind of uniform or shaved head that made it easier to identify us as Buddhist priests, but I’ve kept my hair and my ordinary style of dress. Well, I’m losing hair, actually. There’s a limited time in this life when we have hair. But anyway, with our regular clothes, it’s actually more challenging to be a Jodo Shinshu minister.



Because the emblems of Buddhist authority are more or less absent. Is that right? Exactly. We eat together, drink together, play together, and cry together.

I once heard a wonderful story about Shinran. He had gone with a disciple to a funeral, and the disciple told the people there not to be so upset, but Shinran scolded him and said that’s not the way to behave at all. “You should go and make sure that everybody drinks enough,” Shinran said. “Eventually, when they’ve begun to laugh and tell stories about the deceased, your job is done and you can just slip quietly out the door.” You know, in my experience, I would say about eighty percent of the Shinshu followers I visit who are dying are very calm. Actually, “calm” is not the right word. They’re *natural*. There are no worries about whether they’re going

to heaven or hell. One of them made a joke, “Well, the time has come to go to hell, where I could be a little useful.” He was dying, but he could smile. There are many, many people like that. Not long ago, I was called by a man whose father was dying. I went to see him at the hospital, and there he was with his tubes all pulled. So I shook hands with him, and he said in a very weak voice, but a voice that still had strength deep inside of it, “Thank you for everything.” Then his son, a Stanford University chemistry professor, said, “Papa, when I was in Dharma School I was taught that I could see you again in the Pure Land.” And his father said, “Do I have to go to some other place to meet you?” Then, you know, he simply recited, “*Namu-amida-butsu, Namu-amida-butsu.*” [*Pure Land Buddhists believe that by chanting the name Amida Buddha one may secure rebirth in the Pure Land.*] Of course, words are words—just like “Amen” or whatever else you want to say—but *behind* those words lies such a dynamic unity. I’m trying to explain this logically—unity and oneness within the heart of compassion and wisdom that is Amida, the Pure Land Buddha of Infinite Light and Life. But this man didn’t need any logic. He was so calm and natural. That’s a fact. He abandoned himself in Amida.

I sometimes wonder if the reason Jodo Shinshu hasn’t caught on here yet is because it’s very difficult for American converts, who generally take in their Buddhism from the top down, to understand Shin Buddhists, who take their Buddhism from the bottom up. They absorb it through their roots. You tell me stories like this, and all I can think is that this person’s Buddhism goes all the way back through his life like a thread, all the way back to his infancy, to his earliest days. There’s always been a family altar. There’s always been a part of him that can trust, and relax, and unite with the Buddha. That’s so different from the self-power, self-help model that governs so much of American convert Buddhist practice. Well, that’s interesting. It’s something I’ll have to share with other Shinshu followers. Because we’re inside of it, we don’t necessarily see that.

Speaking of a self-power model, I was surprised to learn that you have been talking about teaching meditation at Shinshu temples in America. Could you say a little bit about your reasons for doing that? Well, it arose for the very practical reasons we’ve been talking about. When I was a priest in Cleveland, six out of every ten people phoning the temple were inquiring about learning to meditate. At first I was a little hesitant. I don’t have much experience teaching meditation and, as you pointed out earlier, Jodo Shinshu traditionally doesn’t emphasize such practices. And so I’d say, “Sorry, but you have to learn that someplace else.” Later, I realized, “Wow, Koshin, if you keep going like this, losing six out of ten, you’ll bankrupt your store.” So I thought, “Well, why not?” And so I started responding to peoples’ needs.

What did it feel like to make that shift? I was born the son of a Jodo Shinshu priest in Japan, but my father was very good friends with the local Rinzai priest, and both of them used to go around the village together to get donations for the poor. Then, in the summertime, I was sent to this priest’s Zen temple to live. I thought it was because I was a bad boy, but now I think maybe my father just wanted me to see that it was okay. Years later, when I was visiting Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, he said to me, almost like he was making a kind of joke, “You know, there’s nothing wrong with coming to practice meditation.” So I did, and it didn’t feel strange at all. It was like recalling my childhood. So I practiced with him. Then Katagiri Roshi came from Japan, and I practiced with him too.

So you knew both of these Zen teachers well? Yes. When Katagiri Roshi finally died after many operations, he left instructions with his wife to have me deliver the eulogy. I was a little embarrassed because these very famous, distinguished Zen priests had come from Japan, and here I was, a Jodo Shinshu minister, offering the eulogy.

But there's something right about that too, you know. A Japanese monk friend once told me that a lot of Zen masters have died with the words *Namu-amida-butsu* on their lips. *[Laughs.]* Well, at one point before he died, when he was really weak, Katagiri Roshi said to me, "You know, Koshin, Zen is very difficult." And I said, "Well, there's nothing to worry about." And three days later he died.

Our worrying doesn't change anything. Every time I step onto a plane, I think, whether I'm saying *Namu-amida-butsu* or not doesn't matter at all. I mean, I can always abandon myself to the infinite wisdom and compassion of Amida Buddha. But I don't *have* to do it. I'm already in the hands of infinite wisdom and compassion.

Whether you like it or not. Yes. No choice. The plane may crash, or it may not. So I can read a book, I can have a drink, and I can talk to the next person.

One time when I was coming back from Hawaii, about two weeks after September 11, this lady sitting next to me said, "How come you're so calm?"

"I'm not calm," I told her.

"No, you're *so* calm," she said. "Are you some kind of Japanese businessman?"

"No," I said. "I'm a Buddhist priest."

"Oh, that's great. Will you offer me a prayer?"

I asked her what for, and she said to arrive safely in Chicago. Now Jodo Shinshu priests don't say those kind of prayers, but instead of saying, "No, I don't do that," I said, "Sure!" and chanted a few verses very quietly. Then I made a big mistake.

"It's okay," I said. "Don't be afraid. After all, if the plane falls, it falls."

"No, no!" she said. "Your prayer was supposed to *keep* it from falling!" But I just told her, "I'm sorry, that's beyond my power."

So how did it turn out? Well, I bought a drink for her, and we enjoyed talking together. But when we got into Chicago, she turned to me and said, "You're a very strange priest."

Someone once told me that Zen teaches you to be present and Shinshu teaches you that you have no choice. *[Laughs.]* That's very good. I've been fortunate because I was given a chance to practice both. I enjoyed the feeling of calmness and peacefulness that comes from *zazen*. At the same time, the

older I get, the more comfortable I am with the feeling of just being embraced by the dynamic light of compassion and wisdom that, in Shinshu, we call Amida Buddha. It's very natural.

But doesn't a practice like meditation, which relies so heavily on the efforts of the self, violate the Other Power doctrine of Shin Buddhism, in which we are saved by the mysterious workings of a power beyond the self, as embodied in Amida Buddha? Won't this cause friction with the Japanese Shinshu tradition? The founders of the various Japanese schools of Buddhism all had to identify the uniqueness of their particular type of Buddhism in order to be recognized by the government in medieval days. So they made a special effort to establish unique traditions. But for me, having done the Zen style of practice and the Jodo Shinshu style of living, they just seem to meld together so that I don't see any conflict.

I wonder if you'd be willing to explain more fully what is meant by *Other Power* in the Shin tradition. Amida Buddha is sometimes compared to God, or even Jesus, but I sense there is some difference. It's important to understand the idea of *absolute* Other Power, as opposed to self power and other power. Beyond self power and other power lies *absolute* Other Power. Or maybe, instead of using the word *beyond*, it might be better to say "free from such consciousness altogether."

I see. So if someone speaks of higher power, then that implies that there's a lower power, too—and you naturally want to appeal to the higher power rather than to the lower power? That's right. *Absolute* Other Power is altogether free of the dichotomy of higher and lower power. If Other Power were *opposed* to self power, then we would remain stuck in the same conceptualized view of reality we started off with, and there would be no freedom. But by entrusting ourselves to Other Power—*absolute* Other Power—we move beyond that into the realm of Amida, awakening to unlimited light and life.

Isn't there a poem by the Shinshu poet Saichi that says something like that? Yes. It goes like this: "There is no self power/ There is no other power./ All is Other Power."

Meaning there is *only* Other Power? Yes. Only. That's why Jodo Shinshu Buddhism is a path for everyone. We don't seek to cast away our illusions but to transform them through the deep awareness of the oneness of all life with infinite wisdom and compassion, which itself is the cause of the cosmos. What could be more natural than that?

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Originally published in the Tricycle Magazine, Volume 15, Number 4, this article appears on the Seattle Betsuin website courtesy of the Tricycle Foundation.