

LOOK UP! THERE IS A STUPA ON A PINE STREET ROOF

By Sandy Garson

Reverend Hiroshi Jokai Abiko says his ministry is called The Buddhist Church of San Francisco because its Japanese members did not want to cause controversy or seem out of place. In 1898, theirs became the first Buddhist congregation allowed by the city of San Francisco and in response to the needs of the Japanese immigrants in the community, two ministers were coming from Japan to *Hoku Bei*, to establish the first Japanese place of worship in America.

“To be identified as a religious study center in those days,” Reverend Abiko explains, “you had literally to be a church and have a minister or reverend.”

Even more so at the end of World War II, when the Nisei leaving their internment camps in Utah unanimously decided to call their Shin Buddhist places of worship Buddhist Churches of America. The national headquarters may be right next door but the mother temple, as they still refer to it, is Nishi Hongwanji in Kyoto.

Trying to straddle two cultures during the postwar era, the San Francisco Japanese community carefully constructed their enormous religious facility to look both outside and in like all other period buildings. Its exterior of bland ivory masonry punctuated with arched mullioned windows makes it unnoticeable at the corner of Pine and Octavia, an intersection shared with tree shaded St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church and the flashy Stuart Hall High School, both more likely to catch your eye.

You have to look up above the roof, which due to high ceilings inside makes this two-story building seem to be three, and spot the telltale stupa to detect this is a Buddhist building. Or you have to push aside a mature bush to read the 1937 corner-stone: *Butsui Shari Hoto*, a reference to that stupa, with the originally designed Swastika, an ancient Indian icon, separating those words.

It is that Stupa which consecrates the spot. This monument whose conical tiers rise like a spire from a large walk-in global base contains, as do all stupas in the world, holy relics, these reputedly of Shakyamuni Buddha himself. A gift to the Japanese congregation from the Emperor of Thailand in 1935 when that Buddhist country was still known as Siam, the relics are now sitting very uniquely on the San Francisco skyline above Pine Street radiating their blessing down on all of us. It is unusual to put a full scale building like a stupa on a city roof but the church had nowhere else to go.

With its dark paneling and chandeliers, social rooms, library, bulletin boards and office piled with folders, the interior of the cavernous building could fool you as easily as the rest of the exterior does, especially the huge hall of worship with its tidy sea of dark brown pews. You have to get down front to the altar to realize this is not a Christian church but a “*hondo*” or main practice hall. Instead of a crucifix or an Ark there is a scroll depicting Shinran Shonin, the 12th Century founder of Shin Buddhism, and a statue of Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Boundless Light, the guardian of heaven or the Pure Land who is the focus of worship.

Most of that is not meditation, as in other Buddhist sects; it is mantra. Shin Buddhists chant over and over and over: *Namu Amida Butsu. Homage to Amida Buddha, I surrender to Amida Buddha.* The vow is the essence of their practice.

Buddhists of other schools know Amida Butsu as Amitabha Buddha, the original Sanskrit name for this St. Peter of *Sukhavati* (in Tibetan Buddhist, Dewachen), the afterlife paradise undefiled by the raging tide of human emotions or fog of ignorance. That’s why it’s called “pure.”

Most Buddhists solicit Amitabha at times and on matters of death. Shin Buddhists call on Amida all the time, every day in life. Shin Buddhism stands in fact for *Jodo Shinshu*, which means True Sect of the Pure Land. Often translated into English as just plain Pure Land Buddhism, it is the largest religious denomination of Japan and thus Japanese Americans. (Nichiren Buddhists are members of a different sect who for similar effect chant “*Namu myoho renge kyo*” which means “Homage to the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma.”)

Shin Buddhism’s popularity stems from its unique populism. During the 13th Century Kamakura period when religion was deliberately being wrenched from the grip of an arrogant aristocracy (and when the Nichiren sect also came to life), it was founded by an orphaned noble who became a monk in the old school. Because twenty years of study did not resolve his doubts about man’s ability to reach enlightenment on his own, he joined a new circle advocating total surrender of one’s life and destiny to Amida through continual invocation of his name.

Bringing intensified spiritual feeling to what had been rigorous academic and physical discipline—and more importantly, elevating that feeling to the essence of simple, hopeful religion, Shinran-Shonin soon had followers of every caste. He spent the remainder of his life in Kyoto, surrounded by followers he called *friends* and insisting he was neither monk nor layman, marrying like a layman while teaching like a monk, thus forever blurring that line, making the decisive turn toward lay Buddhism in Japan.

An imposing tabletop statue of a helmeted Shinran-Shonin, a stick in one hand and a mala (Buddhist rosary for counting mantras) in the other, stands outside the *Hondo*. The plaque on which he rests says in haiku:

My whole being

I dedicate

to spread Amida's Compassion

The church works hard toward the same end. There are services several days a week, in English at 9:30 in the morning, Japanese a 1:30 in the afternoon. Reverend Abiko, a UC Berkeley alum who trained post graduate in Japan, runs a summer dharma school for children three weeks every June and a dharma camp for sleeping baggers over the July 4th weekend. The church also runs its own Scout programs for Cubs, Boys and Girls. It has a youth group.

The Buddhist Woman's Association (BWA) in joint venture with the Dharma School is working on publishing a cookbook it hopes to sell to raise funds for a new Dharma School program starting in the fall for young families. This year's 65th annual Ginza Fair, held in the building's own gymnasium July 26-27, features in addition to food, children's game, crafts and a raffle, a mini lecture on Buddhism by Reverend William Masuda of the Palo Alto Buddhist Church: "The Buddhist Way of Serene Trust." On the 27th there will be *Obon Odori* Dancing in full regalia out on Octavia Street.

The Church is also actively involved in soliciting seniors for Kokorro: a new Japanese-American assisted living center in the city.

The church membership, according to Reverend Abiko, is nationwide although most of its continual supporters and visitors come from Japantown and other sections of the city. Judging from the bulletin board and newspaper, *The Wheel of Dharma*, members are additionally part of a nationwide mandala of similar centers-- Sebastapol, Lodi, San Diego, Venice, West Los Angeles, San Fernando Valley, Berkeley and San Mateo among them—all under the guidance of a "bishop" in the United States and the *Monshu* in Kyoto.

The national headquarters, The Buddhist Churches of America, is right next door, its entrance around the corner on Octavia Street in an equally bland, masonry matched 1971 building. Upstairs along side is The Buddhist Bookstore. This small enterprise with toys, incense, meditation bowls, statues and posters, is a valued city resource that carries an impressive array of texts from every cranny of Buddhism and is staffed by knowledgeable Buddhists of all sort including Western practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism and Zen.

The Buddhist Churches of America complex also includes the Soko Gakeun Educational Building whose entrance is on Austin St, the alley off Octavia between Pine and Bush.

The Buddhist Bookstore is at 1710 Octavia. Phone is 776-7877.

The Buddhist Church of San Francisco is at 1881 Pine. Phone is 776-3158. Its email address is BCSF@sbcglobal.net. Its website is: <http://www.bcsfweb.org>.