



Research Article

# Pennies from the Pure Land: Practicing the Dharma, Hanging Out, and Raising Funds for the Oldest Buddhist Temple Outside Asia

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Jōdo Shinshū temples outside of Asia draw on mutually-reinforcing networks of Dharma practice, social association, and fundraising/labour to meet community and individual needs. These three phenomena rarely, if ever, occur apart from one another. Rather, each is an indelible aspect of the others, such that fundraising is a form of Dharma practice, gathering with peers is a way to raise money, and Buddhism is practiced as a form of group solidarity and support. These tight weaves have enabled temples to thrive in racially and religiously hostile lands, under changing economic circumstances, and through periods of stability, war, and natural disaster. This article takes as its case study the Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin, on the Big Island of Hawai'i, especially the late 20<sup>th</sup> century building of their multipurpose Sangha Hall. Fundraising for the building demonstrated the necessity of Dharma, social, and economic activities for the financial health of the temple.

**Keywords:** Jōdo Shinshū; Hawai'i; Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin; fundraising; Buddhism

**I**N the August 1995 newsletter of the Toronto Buddhist Church, Rev. Yasuo Izumi provided a parable:

On a dangerous seacoast where shipwrecks often occur, there was once a little lifesaving station. The building was just a hut, and there was only one boat, but the few devoted members kept a constant watch over the sea. Many lives were saved by this wonderful little station so it became famous. Soon, some of the members of the lifesaving station became unhappy that the building was so poorly equipped as a refuge for those who were first saved from the sea. So, they bought better furniture and enlarged the building. Now the lifesaving station became a popular gathering place for its members. They decorated it beautifully and so it became sort of a club.

Fewer members were now interested in going to sea on lifesaving missions, so they hired lifeboat crews to do this work. About this time a large ship was wrecked off the coast, and the hired crews brought in boatloads of cold, wet people. They were also very dirty and sick. The beautiful new club was in chaos.

At the next meeting, there was a split in the club members. Most of the members wanted to stop the club's lifesaving activities because it was unpleasant and a hindrance to the normal social life of the club. Some members insisted that the building was for saving the lives in the sea. However, they were voted down and told that if they wanted to save lives they could begin their own lifesaving station down the coast. They did. As the years went by, the new station experienced the same changes that had occurred in the old. It changed into a club, and yet another lifesaving

station was founded. If we visit that seacoast today, we will find a number of beautiful clubs along the shore. Shipwrecks are frequent in those waters, but most of the people drown! (Izumi 1995: 1)

Temple members who read this parable could pretty easily understand what he was saying, but just to make sure, he made his point more explicit:

Each temple is like a lifesaving station. The Compassion of Amida Buddha expressed in His Name, Namu Amida Butsu, is like a great boat to save our lives which have been sunk in the sea of delusion and suffering for a long time... The primary purpose and meaning of [temples is] to meet and listen to the warm heart of Amida Buddha. If it is lost we will drown again forever in the cycle of birth and death! (Izumi 1995: 2)

In other words: the temple is a holy place with a religious mission, not a social club or cultural community centre. Members should not become possessive of the temple and exclude new inquirers, and more importantly, they should not come just to meet with friends, do activities such as martial arts and flower arrangement, and eat Japanese food. The temple should be devoted to the quest for nirvana and the radical ending of human suffering. Anything less is a dilution of its sacred purpose and a tragic lost opportunity to break free of the chains of birth and death.

Though hardly universal, this is not an uncommon view within the ministerial ranks of Jōdo Shinshū temples in North America and Hawai'i. Various commentators note that such temples provide both religious and social activities, as it is typically put, and often suggest that the former suffer at the hands of the latter. Another dualism that is sometimes expressed is the idea that the temple should be concerned with religious goals rather than fundraising, an activity that takes up a considerable portion of every temple's attention. In each case, the religious nature of the temple is opposed by some counterforce that the commentator feels is a lesser goal, one that puts the spiritual function at risk.

Rev. Izumi is a missionary monk who came to North America in order to spread the Dharma, not to run a business or create opportunities for people to hang out. But the lived reality of Jōdo Shinshū temples suggests it is difficult—perhaps impossible—and certainly artificial to draw too clean a line between religious practice, on the one hand, and social or economic practice, on the other hand. In fact, I want to argue that both so-called social and so-called economic or fundraising activities can themselves be included within the sphere of Buddhist practices carried out by temple participants. Just because it is not chanting or reading sutras does not make an activity non-religious.

Furthermore, so-called social activities play a vital role in maintaining the financial health of the temple. Without providing members with the opportunity to gossip, play sports, and do crafts together, the temple might well face severe financial conditions. This is true not only because social activities directly generate revenue for the temple but also, as will be argued here, they provide crucial elements of connection that foster long-term commitment (including financial commitment) to the temple.

### **Coming to Terms with Temple Economics**

“The examination of temple economics is a relatively neglected approach to American Buddhist Studies,” Senryō Arai and Duncan Ryūken Williams declared in 1999 (Arai and Williams 1999: 23). Sadly, more than twenty years later this statement is still accurate. Arai and Williams' article is one of the very few to draw on hard financial data to analyse Buddhist groups in America. Thus, it remains one of the most important, yet also most neglected, articles published on American Buddhism.

Because there has been little follow-up work done in the path that Arai and Williams broke, it remains the standard narrative for Japanese American Buddhist temple economics. Despite my deep respect for their

article, this troubles me because there are some ways in which it may not be representative of Japanese American Buddhist temples on the whole.

Furthermore, the specific narrative advanced in the article may contribute to the neglect of temple economics as an object of study, or even to study of Japanese American Buddhism at all. They assert—and back it with strong evidence—that “death rites along with the maintenance of ‘Japanese culture’ are the chief activities of these Japanese American [Zen] temples” (Arai and Williams 1999: 21). They contrast this with the world of white American Zen: “...unlike Euro-American Zen centers that focus on the study of Buddhism and the practice of meditation, Japanese American Zen temples revolve around death rituals and cultural activities” (Arai and Williams 1999: 28). Understood simplistically—that Buddhist study and practice are for white Zen folks, while Japanese Americans just do death rituals and cultural stuff—this narrative potentially feeds into white stereotypes about the superiority of “convert Buddhism” and of Asian American temples as mere “ethnic fortresses” (Tanaka 1999: 3). This, in turn, may have driven away interest in pursuing this line of inquiry by scholars of American Buddhism.

To be clear, I appreciate and agree with much of the analysis that Arai and Williams put forward, and I do not accuse them of fostering stereotypes. Quite the opposite: their aims include breaking the stereotype that Zen Buddhism is all about zazen, which was an important intervention, one which Williams further reinforced with his groundbreaking book *The Other Side of Zen* (Williams 2005). My point is that when their narrative is taken up by white scholars and practitioners with minimal personal experience with Asian American temples, it may unfortunately be used to confirm preexisting assumptions and reaffirm pernicious attitudes that valorize white modernist Buddhism over that of Asians and Asian Americans. In this article I will advance a line of argumentation that was suggested by Kenneth Tanaka in his contribution to Williams and Queen (Williams and Queen 1999), which directly precedes Arai and Williams’s chapter: “We should, however, remain cautious about the underlying implication in these observations that ethnic groups are less spiritual. Cultural activities have always played a vital part of Buddhist temples in Asia and were integrated with the spiritual life of the larger communities. Perhaps a deeper, more nuanced analysis *will reveal their spiritual significance* in the lives of practicing Buddhists.” (Tanaka 1999: 3–4, emphasis mine). Without claiming that my work is deeper or more nuanced, I hope to do some of that work here.

Thus, the time seems ripe for a fresh assessment of the interactions between Dharma, social, and economic activities at Japanese American Buddhist temples. To clarify these terms as I use them here: first, Dharma indicates activities or ideas that support religious goals according to Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism (the specific tradition of the case study temple of this article), such as heightening self-awareness, reducing suffering, increasing gratitude, developing wisdom, practicing compassion, cultivating morality, acknowledging indebtedness, achieving peace of mind, and deepening humility.<sup>1</sup> These are most visible in public religious ceremonies such as Sunday services and family memorials, but, I argue, are pervasive in most if not all temple activities, including those that are often considered as social or economic activities.

Socializing means participation in group activities, which create, strengthen, and/or express social cohesion, friendship, emotional/moral/material support, and identity, and provide opportunities for recreation, solidarity, prosocial behavior, and meaningful work. Whereas Dharma can be pursued by the individual (but,

<sup>1</sup> Compassion may be thought of by some readers as primarily an attitude, which is to say, a mental orientation or capacity. American Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists include this idea in their approach to compassion, but tend to understand compassion in terms of actions: compassion is something you *do*. Thus, when I speak of practicing compassion I do not mean the work of developing the feeling of compassion towards others, such as one encounters in the *metta* meditation of the Theravada tradition or the cultivation of *bodhicitta* in the Tibetan tradition. By practicing compassion, I mainly mean acts of kindness, helpfulness, or generosity directed toward other people. These fall under the concept of *dāna* in American Jōdo Shinshū.

to be clear, is usually cultivated in a group setting at Jōdo Shinshū temples), socializing always requires a group, even if it is just oneself and one other person.

Economic labour indicates activities that produce financial, material, or intangible goods which support the existence and activities of the temple community. This certainly includes cash donations and fundraising, but, just as importantly, includes physical and other labour used to create, maintain, or otherwise contribute to the temple. Thus, we should pay attention to the countless hours of volunteer labour (a form of gifted non-commodity product directed at the community) without which no temple is possible. This includes (among other things) the skilled and unskilled craft labour that literally built the early temple structures, as well as the cleaning, cooking, decorating, and other forms of daily and weekly short-term labour that kept the temple going. As with Dharma activities, economic labour can be done solo, but in practice rarely is carried out in such a manner.

The concept that ties these three together is *dāna*, which Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists define as selfless giving. This giving may be money, a kind word, volunteer labour, food, or other kinds of goods. In 2019, I claimed that “we can note that one model developed in the very early stages of Buddhism, persisted in nearly all subsequent Buddhist communities, and served as the primary organizing principle for the majority of Buddhist economic activity” (Wilson 2019: 89). This was the merit model, wherein Buddhist monastics perform merit labour that provides this-worldly and posthumous benefits to laypeople, who in turn provide *dāna* (primarily understood as financial or in-kind donations with direct economic value) to the monks and nuns. That model did indeed drive “nearly all” premodern forms of Buddhism, but I had to include this wiggle-room because there was one possible exception: Jōdo Shinshū. Unique among premodern Buddhisms, Jōdo Shinshū taught that, as Alfred Bloom put it:

It was Shinran’s [the founder of Jōdo Shinshū] distinctive view that faith or trust is endowed by the Buddha, being his true mind of wisdom and compassion. As a consequence, salvation is assured and no special practices or meritorious good deeds [including merit dedication by monks] are required for birth into the Pure Land. After trust in Amida’s primal vow has arisen, all religious activities are viewed as expressions of gratitude and self-righteousness is negated. (Bloom 1998: 38–39)

That is all well and good for the liberatory potential of such doctrine among the masses, but since it dramatically undercuts the traditional merit model of temple funding, it begs the question: how (and why) did Jōdo Shinshū temples survive?

It seems that the nucleus of Jōdo Shinshū’s alternate economic model appears precisely at the point where the traditional merit economy is abandoned. Jōdo Shinshū replaces the instrumental nature of most Buddhist acts with an expressive model, whereby actions do not generate merit, but demonstrate gratitude. Theoretically, no actions are necessary and Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists could just go on their merry way, never giving a penny to the temple. But in actuality, the benevolence of the Buddha creates a relationship of obligation: you have already received liberation, so you should be grateful, and if you are grateful, should you not show it by donating to the temple? Thus, the merit aspect of the merit economic model gets vacated, but the *dāna* aspect of the model comes even more to the fore. Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists engaged in acts of *dāna* in order to express their awareness of and thankfulness for their debt to the Buddha (and ancestors, and all beings, etc.: webs of de facto obligatory gratitude in relation to all sources of benefit in one’s life are part of the basic worldview expressed at Jōdo Shinshū temples). In the process, they kept the temples financially stable. Whereas in a classic merit economy model the monastics are doing merit labour while the laypeople are doing *dāna* labour, we might say that in the Jōdo Shinshū model all members are doing gratitude labour, which especially takes the form of

*dāna* (which now theoretically includes sutra chanting and other activities of the clergy that were previously forms of merit labour).

But *dāna* is not just a direct economic force of donations in Jōdo Shinshū. It encompasses all acts of generosity, including the generosity of being nice to others, mopping the temple floor, organizing get-togethers for community elders, or performing childcare. It is not solely directed at the Buddha, the clergy, or the temple as such, but radiates out in all directions, since all people are sources of benefit in the world of interconnection. *Dāna* helps to create and sustain horizontal relationships between laypeople, not just laypeople and the temple. We can recognize it as a source of “connectionwork.” Connectionwork is a term coined by Elizabeth Williams-Oerberg to bring attention to “the work involved in forming and sustaining connections between religious leaders and their followers, and among followers” (Williams-Oerberg 2021: 501).

Drawing on fieldwork with Himalayan tantric Buddhist communities, Williams-Oerberg especially highlights “the role of aesthetics in Buddhist ritual in creating the ‘sensational forms’ and affective and emotional experiences that help to generate and substantiate connections to the guru and to other participants during this shared [ritual] experience” (Williams-Oerberg 2021: 501). In a thoroughly exoteric Buddhism such as Jōdo Shinshū, religious leaders are remarkably unimportant, and exceptional ritual events are also of low importance. Instead, connectionwork serves to bind participants to their local temple in a much more diffuse manner, and especially works to strengthen bonds between regular laymembers.

These bonds between member and temple and between member and member are often sustained in social and economic labour practices that fall outside of Dharma activities, strictly interpreted, but should not be dismissed as therefore somehow not Buddhist in nature. Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist temples outside of Asia, I will show here, draw on mutually-reinforcing networks of Dharma practice, social association, and economic labour to meet community and individual needs. These three phenomena rarely, if ever, occur apart from one another. Rather, each is an indelible aspect of the others, such that raising money is a form of Dharma practice (*dāna*), hanging out is a way to raise money, and Buddhism is practised as a form of group solidarity and support, which is to say, as a social activity that does connectionwork. These tight weaves have enabled temples to thrive in racially and religiously hostile lands under changing economic circumstances and through periods of both stability and disaster.

### **American Buddhist Origins**

For a case study, I examine the Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin, in Hilo, Hawai’i. Founded in 1889, it is the oldest surviving temple outside of Asia. It provides a full display of the stages that Buddhist institutions have gone through and the economic adaptations that have been necessary as Buddhists adjusted to non-Buddhist societies. This paper draws upon oral history interviews with members and leaders of the Hilo Betsuin, as well as a large stock of archival material held at the Hilo Betsuin, dating primarily from 1961 onwards. Earlier records were mainly lost during the WWII military occupation of the temple and the May 23, 1960 Hilo tsunami.

American temples usually have some type of formal membership, which entails annual dues. These are important, but rarely sufficient, to sustain a Buddhist group of any appreciable size. For example, in 1995 (a year that will be examined in greater detail in this paper’s conclusion) dues made up 21% of Hilo Betsuin’s total budget.<sup>2</sup> Therefore a complex array of strategies are pursued in order to supplement member dues through renting out space, running businesses, stock market investments, golf tournaments, public lectures,

<sup>2</sup> Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Comparative Statement of Income and Expenses for the Twelve Months Ended December 31, 1996. Although this document was generated for the 1996 budget, it includes the final numbers for the year 1995 as well for comparative purposes, thus providing a data point to match with Arai and Williams’s 1995 data. Dues were the second largest single source of income for the temple, behind preschool tuition (35%). For comparison’s sake, rental income was 11%. These numbers are rounded to the nearest whole percent.

Japanese language schools, marketing Buddhist books and items, selling ad space in temple publications and on their radio programs, summer festivals, food sales, bazaars, services such as funerals, and many further practices. Hilo Betsuin employs all of these methods. These sometimes happen at the full temple level, but effective fundraising most often occurs through initiatives of temple sub-groups, often divided along gender and age lines, and all of which have social functions.

Hilo Betsuin has approximately 1000 members, as well as many other participants who are not official members. Not surprisingly, formal Dharma activities, socializing, and fundraising are all constantly occurring at the temple, and must always be considered in light of each other as intermeshed, not discrete, practices. Actually, few if any activities of the temple take place without all three of these elements being present. They reinforce each other and stimulate one another. For instance, the original Hilo temple was formed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to provide religious services to the Japanese immigrant sugar cane-farming community. This was a rough, nearly-single sex environment of hard labour, hard living, and, not infrequently, hard dying, all far from the Japanese homeland. Dharma provided comfort in these circumstances and gave workers something to gather around other than drinking, gambling, and similar camp activities. These gatherings also provoked the need to pay for the minister's upkeep. Thus, wages earned from work in the sugar cane fields were donated to fund the minister's itinerancy between the camps and eventually permitted members to construct a 24x30 foot one-room temple in Hilo, in 1889 (Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii 1989: 227).

While work in the plantations provided subsistence wages, the profit was primarily accrued to the owners, overseers, and other white people in the higher rungs of the island social structure. Work for the temple, on the other hand, produced things for the Japanese Buddhist community itself: temples, language schools, social halls, and so on. As the demographics of the temple expanded due to changes in immigration and other social patterns, the temple community became more Dharmically, socially, and financially complex. Thus, new audiences for practicing the Dharma led to new methods or arrangements of religious cultivation, new subgroups for association, and new needs and opportunities for money-making and volunteer labour.

### **Kitchen Boss Buddhism**

In 1907, sufficient numbers of women had immigrated that the Hilo temple organized a women's group, called (as at most temples) the *Fujinkai* (Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii 1982: 9).<sup>3</sup> *Fujinkai*, established at virtually every Jōdo Shinshū temple, were arguably the strongest segment of the entire temple, and have yet to receive their due in American Buddhist historiography. As Tetsuden Kashima notes, “within the church [a common term for American Jōdo Shinshū temples], the *Fujinkai* was the social center for the Issei woman. The purpose of the *Fujinkai* was to aid the church in preparing refreshments or food, conducting the bazaars, helping needy families, and other such necessary activities” (Kashima 1977: 137–38).

This is all true—*fujinkai* were vital sources of social and economic support—but Kashima omits a third fundamental role of these associations: religious support for the *Fujinkai* members. Hilo's *Fujinkai* regularly participated in overtly Dharma-based activities such as chanting, receiving Dharma talks, and study sessions. Furthermore, there is a crucial element of Dharma activity that is being overlooked in Kashima's presentation: cooking food and other social and economic labour activities are themselves primary means of religious cultivation for Jōdo Shinshū women.

To explain this point, I turn to the work of Paulina Kolata and Gwendolyn Gillson, who argue persuasively that Jōdo Shinshū and other Buddhist “women deploy the gendered currency of food literacy and draw on

<sup>3</sup> Most *fujinkai* went by that name, but some are called Buddhist Women's Association. In some cases, secondary or tertiary groups were organized at the same temple as the generations shifted, resulting in names such as Shin Fujinkai (i.e. “New Buddhist Women's Association”) or, occasionally, less common names such as Dana. Regardless of local names, all function in the same manner.

its aesthetic capacities to generate religious belonging” (Kolata and Gillson 2021: 569). Furthermore, such women use food literacy “to realize Buddhist moralities in their everyday lives” (Kolata and Gillson 2021: 570). Cooking and serving food, in other words, is Dharma practice for Japanese Buddhist women, and has important religious implications for those they feed as well. As Kolata and Gillson explain, food literacy “relates to any kind of embodied knowledge and practices regarding food and its affective potential: how to cook, present, provide, and appreciate it. Women’s food literacy in the Buddhist context is circulated as gendered currency that brings about aesthetic and affective connectivity among Buddhist practitioners... As such, by deploying the currency of food literacy, women make Buddhism perceptible in this world” (Kolata and Gillson 2021: 570–71). Thus, the food preparation and serving of the *Fujinkai* had not only social and economic functions, but Dharma ones as well. This was a truly multifaceted temple organization.

The multiple purposes of the Hilo *Fujinkai* could be clearly seen in guidelines produced by the group: “To help each member become an active Nembutsu follower, (2) to emphasize cultural activities, (3) to foster fellowship and to encourage community services” (Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii 1989: 82). The *Fujinkai* listened to sermons from the minister, supported members through productive activities and socializing, and made significant contributions to the temple: over \$700,000 in the first 100 years of its existence (Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin 2007: 24). Annual bazaars alone routinely netted thousands of dollars.<sup>4</sup> But often fundraising was much more modest. In 1997, Hilo Betsuin elder Fusayo Ito explained what it was like in the pre-WWII era: “This was way before the war, but I remember how every month we used to collect ten cents for the *Fujinkai* dues and twenty-five cents for the *Gojikai* [temple] dues from neighbors who lived in our block. Even then we sometimes had to go more than once to collect the money. In those days even ten cents was ‘hard’ ” (Hilo Hongwanji *Fujinkai* 1997: 21). Ito went on to describe typical *Fujinkai* volunteer activities at the temple:

The *Fujinkai* ladies used to go and help prepare food at Hilo Hongwanji whenever they had any kind of big service... The “kitchen boss” in those days used to be Mrs. Monden’s mother, Mrs. Ihara. Whenever we had a big occasion she would get us together in the kitchen and she would tell us, “Tomorrow we make this and that...” She was very nice. We used to make *nishime* [vegetables in broth]. We used the *hiragama* [traditional pan], and now they just make it in a pot on the stove—it looks so easy now. We used to cook in the *hiragama* with *wariki* in those days.<sup>5</sup> The men used to cook the rice for us. Yuda-san was one of the men, and Yamashita-san helped, too. Then when Mrs. Ihara died, Mrs. Nakashima took over and become the “kitchen boss.” When we had Eitaikyō [perpetual memorial service], or Ohigan [equinox services] or Gotan-e [Shinran’s birthday service], the place was full of people. They used to put chairs in the alley, and the alley was full, too. When we had *otoki* [post-service meal] downstairs, the YBA [Young Buddhists Association] Hall was full.

We used to have *nishime* and *musubi* [meat secured to unvinegared rice with seaweed] and *nigome*, which was like *nishime* but the vegetables were cut in a special way. We used to have *sushi* sale, but not the *maki-zushi* [sushi rolls]. We had *oshi-zushi* [seaweedless sushi]. We laid banana leaves on the bottom of a big box, layered the rice over it and packed it. I remember Reverend Fujii’s *okusan* [wife] was strong and she used to pound the layers of rice to make the *oshi-zushi*. We made *maki-zushi* and *tamago-yaki* [fried eggs] when Mrs. Nakashima was the “kitchen boss.”

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Jane Iida (former temple president), June 18, 2018. Kashima also notes the economic and social importance of temple bazaars (Kashima 1977: 136–37), but once again does not consider whether these gatherings serve Dharma purposes as well.

<sup>5</sup> Ito’s food literacy far outclasses my own. I am uncertain if *wariki* in this context is an ingredient or cooking implement.

We sometimes used to stay overnight in the *kuri* [ministers' residence] when we worked late. Of course, you can't sleep because everybody is talking and people are going back and forth" (Hilo Hongwanji Fujinkai 1997: 20–21).<sup>6</sup>

Food literacy is on clear display in this reminiscence. As we can see from this quote, temple religious activities (Eitaikyō and other special services, etc.) almost always have a social aspect (such as *otoki* in the YBA Hall) and they intersect with moments of fundraising or volunteer labour (working under the kitchen boss). Likewise, social activities (sleepovers at the temple, etc.) almost always have a fundraising or volunteer aspect (such as making sushi) and intersect with moments of religious learning and practice (celebrating Shinran's birth). Finally, volunteer activities (pounding rice, etc.) almost always have social elements (such as hanging out in the kitchen) and religious aspects (food prep as *dāna*).

Maybe the intersection of these things is familiar to readers with personal or research connections to these temples, but it needs to be explicitly pointed out because for many Buddhist groups in North America and Hawai'i this religious-social-economic complex is not nearly as developed. For instance, one common model for white Zen groups is to come together once or a few times a week, sit in silence, and go home.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps there's a short tea with some cookies afterwards, but even if there is, it does not last nearly as long as the post-service activities at a Jōdo Shinshū temple, which go on for hours, sometimes all afternoon, along with activities that fill the rest of the week. In twenty-five years of research I cannot recall encountering any white Zen group that hosts boy or girl scouts, has its own basketball team, or runs a language school. Or, for that matter, that has a dedicated women's group that handles the cooking for the organization as a religious and social and economic project.<sup>8</sup>

In other words, most so-called convert Zen groups devote proportionately far less time to actively social situations than even the least active Jōdo Shinshū temple. Furthermore, their primary Dharma practice model—silently sitting in an unmoving group for most or all of the practice period—is inherently less social than the communal singing, chanting, incense offering, listening collectively to sermons, and, frankly, chatting discretely with one another during the service that makes up the typical Jōdo Shinshū religious gathering.

This Zen example may be oversimplified but it can serve as a basic contrast to make my points about the way Dharma, socializing, and support activities operate as a total ecosystem at Jōdo Shinshū temples. There are also economic effects of both models. Since they mostly need a place to be quiet in, many Zen groups do not need dedicated buildings for their purpose, which means they can get by on a lower budget. Jōdo Shinshū temples, on the other hand, need to pay for and upkeep social halls, gymnasiums, classrooms, kitchens, and meeting rooms beyond the main service hall. All of those require a critical mass of donors and volunteers, a mass that many Zen groups could not dream of marshaling. At the same time, the lack of such facilities and their associated activities decreases retention for many people, and thus such Zen groups are more likely to remain small. It is challenging, for example, to practice Buddhism as a multigenerational family in many Zen groups, and there are fewer options for children, youth, and their over-burdened parents.<sup>9</sup> This depreciates

<sup>6</sup> Ito's memory of ten cent *Fujinkai* dues is hard to date precisely. Her memories of the cooking activities span various years but seem to cluster around the late 1930s, since the *kuri* was built (via donations from the *Fujinkai*) in 1936.

<sup>7</sup> A less common model—that of large Zen centres with residential programming, significant land holdings, and other institutional elements—has received significant scholarly attention on American Zen. My comments here may be less representative of some of these organizations, which boast active daily meditation programs, study classes, and other activities.

<sup>8</sup> Here I am specifically following Arai and Williams's interpretive bifurcation between mostly white Zen centres and Japanese American Zen temples. The latter do sometimes feature some or all of these things. Furthermore, I use the term Zen group as inclusive of both larger (and rarer) Zen centres with residential programs, formal teachers, and other aspects of relatively complex institutions, and more grassroots (and numerous) Zen groups that lack some or all of these characteristics.

<sup>9</sup> This is a general statement, and not always accurate at any specific local Zen group. A minority of American Zen groups do include significant children's programming. In contrast, all Jōdo Shinshū temples feature children's programming as a fundamental activity.



the number of younger families and children involved with such groups, and thus affects their long-term financial viability.

### **Multipurpose Buddhism**

To further explain what I mean about the intertwining of Dharma, social, and economic activities, and how this tight braid leads to enhanced long-term financial prospects (as well as responsibilities), I will now analyze a specific fundraising project of the Hilo temple. In 1993, the Hilo Betsuin announced a new plan to construct a large multipurpose building (“Temple Improvement Process” 1993: 2). The Development Committee mobilised the entire temple community and all of its member groups to raise \$3.6 million for this, the largest fundraising effort in the temple’s 132-year history (Nakano et al. 1998: 8). This was a truly ambitious undertaking: the temple’s entire assets (cash, land, buildings, etc.) only amounted to \$2,236,558.<sup>10</sup> Now they were hoping to raise an amount more than 50% higher than their total worth.

An analysis of this decade-long effort demonstrates the full range of fundraising strategies employed by Buddhist temples and their ability to deftly utilise the tools of capitalist economies along with pre-capitalist patterns of social obligation and Buddhist webs of gratitude-indebtedness (which are a particular aspect of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism) to carry out major building projects. Once built, the Multi-Purpose Complex would provide a place for activities as varied as large Dharma lectures, temple sports competitions, and rental income—which is to say, all three pillars of Dharma, social, and economic activities were stimuli for undertaking the construction, expected to be regular activities within the new building, and were used as motivators to solicit funding:

We need your help to raise 2.5 million dollars to build the Multi-Purpose building. Please do your part.

What does the Multi-Purpose building mean to the temple, you, and your children?

The building will help the temple by providing a capability that we do not now have. With the completion of the M-P building, area religious services, the annual gathafest [Buddhist vocal concert], various island and state conventions, marital arts tournaments, pre-school, *gakuen* [Japanese language school] and dharma school programs, receptions, and sports tournaments will be accommodated. Temple organizations will be given priority in the use of this building. It may be rented out for large public and private gatherings.

On a regular basis, the *Fujinkai* will be able to cook and serve food in the spotless, certified kitchen. The youngsters will be able to play various sports or practice kendo [Japanese sword training] and other martial arts. The adults can have a comfortable exercise space to do aerobics, line dancing or *taichi*. (“Multi-Purpose Building Update” 1997: 2, 6)

Fundraisers included “Pennies From the Pure Land,” which encouraged Buddhist youth to hand over their spare change when they came to the temple, as Reverend Bruce Y. Nakamura explained in the temple newsletter:

A new multi-purpose complex will meet the growing and changing needs of our Buddhist community. In an effort to get as many people involved and aware of this very important community project, the PENNIES FROM THE PURE LAND Drive has been initiated. Its purpose is to focus on as many individuals, especially youth, to save their extra pennies during the week and bring them to their organizational meeting or activity, e.g., Dharma School, Budo (Japanese

<sup>10</sup> Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Balance Sheet, December 31, 1993. I have rounded this and all other sums in this paper to the nearest whole dollar.

martial arts), 4-H, etc. Adults can help of course! The office and entrance of the temple will have stations for collecting pennies. Let's see which organization can collect the most pennies each month!... Thank you for your ongoing kokua-dana! ["Pennies from the Pure Land" (1996), p.6]<sup>11</sup>

The Young Buddhist Association hosted steak dinners, the Dharma school children set up a penny arcade to earn Pennies From the Pure Land, the *Fujinkai* held garage sales and sushi sales, the 4-H Club held recycling drives, the cub scouts held small fundraisers, the judo club, kendo club, and boy scouts took up collections among their members, and countless other contributions from all subgroups of the temple poured in.<sup>12</sup> These activities ranged vastly in terms of immediate impact: the 1999 bazaar raised over \$45,000 for the multipurpose building, while Pennies From the Pure Land netted just under \$800 total. ["A Big Mahalo!" (2000), p.5]<sup>13</sup> But even the smallest contributions were part of the larger pattern. Children contributing their pennies did so as a micropractice that inculcated attitudes of giving and working as a group to have fun and support the temple, attitudes with serious potential later pay-off.<sup>14</sup>

To illustrate this, I collected the names of Hilo Betsuin boy scouts from 1961, the first year in which good records exist. (Sakai 1961: 2; Tada 1961a: 7; 1961b: 7; Kono 1961: 2). Cross-referencing with the list of multi-purpose building donors more than three decades later, I found that multiple boys who'd attended the temple as scouts in 1961 were actively contributing to the fund drive in the late 1990s ("Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Gratefully Building a Promising Future Capital Campaign Donors from December 1995 to July 1998" 1998: 11–14).<sup>15</sup> These included, for example, former scout Barry Taniguchi, who as a speaker at a Scout-oriented Sunday service credited the temple scout program with instilling values and life skills, such as being mentally awake and morally upright, and developing compassion, patience, harmony, and humility ("Scout Sunday" 2021: 9). This list closely aligns with the ideal Buddhist values explicitly advocated by temple ministers, and thus demonstrates how seemingly secular social activities like scouting are infused with Buddhist ideals and become arenas for practicing the Dharma at Jōdo Shinshū temples. Furthermore, former scout Taniguchi served as temple president for two years during the fundraising campaign. He contributed at least \$10,000 directly to the fund and KTA Super Stores, of which he was the president, contributed \$250,000, the largest donation of the campaign.<sup>16</sup>

As temple president, Taniguchi made various fundraising pleas which drew upon the Dharma, social, and fundraising aspects of the temple in an organic, inseparable manner. His 1995 New Year's message recalled:

As a youngster attending Hilo Hongwanji, I remember the fun and carefree times. The temple was our meeting place and we attended Sunday services and Sunday (Dharma) School regularly

<sup>11</sup> Although technically unsigned, internal temple documents make it clear that the author was Rev. Bruce Nakamura. Kokua is a Hawaiian word that means to help. Here it is conjoined with the Buddhist terms *dāna* (selfless giving) in a distinctively Japanese Hawaiian idiom.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example "Bazaar Steak Dinner" (1999): 5; "Steak Dinner Fund Raiser" (1999): 5; "Dharma School News." (1999): 4; "Fujinkai News." (1996): 4; "Fujinkai News." (1995): 6; "Sunflowers 4-h Club Project" (2000): 5; Nakano (1998): 5; "Development Fund News." (2000): 9; "Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Gratefully Building a Promising Future Capital Campaign Donors from December 1995 to July 1998" (1998): 12; "Multipurpose Building Completed" (2001): 9.

<sup>13</sup> Mahalo is a Hawaiian word meaning "thank you." Numbers on Pennies From the Pure Land come from Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Development Phase II Statement of Cash Receipts and Reimbursements for the Year Ended December 31, 1996 and Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Development Phase II Statement of Cash Receipts and Reimbursements for the Year Ended December 31, 1997.

<sup>14</sup> I borrow the concept of micropractices from Kolata and Gillson (2021), who, in turn, build their ideas about micropractices on the discussion in Pérez (2016).

<sup>15</sup> Former scouts of 1961 on the lists of Multi-Purpose Complex donors include Glenn Kimura, Clyde Nishioka, Lloyd Tada, and Barry Taniguchi. As many donations were anonymous, it is not possible to determine if there were other 1961 scouts who also contributed. Additionally, there was a large donation from The Hiroaki, Elaine, and Lawrence Kono Foundation. Lawrence Kono was a 1961 scout who died in 1979. Hiroaki (died 1969) and Elaine Kono (died 1989) were his parents, who were also heavily involved at Hilo Betsuin.

<sup>16</sup> Letter from Ivan Nakano to Walter Dods, Jr., April 1998 [collected at Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin, June 2018]. There were two other donations of equal size: one from the *Fujinkai* (another social group with strong Dharma and economic aspects), and one from the temple general fund. KTA was started as a grocery store by Taniguchi's paternal grandparents; under Taniguchi's leadership as president and board chairman it became the largest grocery chain on the Big Island of Hawai'i.

to receive the teachings of Amida Buddha. After Sunday School, we would jump on our bikes and head for the beach to spend a carefree and fun filled afternoon. Those were the good old days.

As I became older, the demands of starting an independent life and advancing my career became important priorities for me, and attending temple services became a lesser priority. I firmly believe, however, that the values of our Jodo Shinshu teachings were instilled in me during the formative years of my life. The values of selfless giving, of sharing, and of living the right way of life have stayed with me throughout the years. It is only later in my life that I had a compelling feeling to return to the temple, to continue to receive the teachings of Jodo Shinshu...

We would like to make our temple a place where we can continue to share our Jodo Shinshu teachings, as well as becoming a social gathering place for friends. However, the ministers, officers, and board members cannot do it alone. We need your support. Please encourage your friends and relatives to join us in achieving our goals to make the temple stronger. (Taniguchi 1995: 4)

Here, nostalgia for childhood memories mixes freely with Dharma lessons, and the lessons learned in childhood lead not only to professional success in adult life but also back to the temple as the place that ties all of these together. Hovering over all of this is the need for members to support the temple.

Economic labour and social activities are often given spiritual meaning in messages related to the Multi-Purpose Complex, which was ultimately named the Sangha Hall. As temple president Ivan Nakano, who was also the chairman of the Development Committee tasked with raising funds for and building the Sangha Hall, put it: “the Sangha Hall is a testament to the spirit of DANA that flows throughout our temple. Everyone of you should be proud to be able to provide our members and the Big Island Community with such a facility” (Nakano 2001: 2). This reference to *dāna* is the most common such way of spiritualizing the work of volunteers and donors. On one level, it means that the donations and volunteer work that brought about the building are acts of *dāna*. On a second level, it means that the creation of the building is an act of *dāna* by the collective temple, as they offer up to the larger Hilo and Hawai'i community a venue that will be of benefit to everyone. Writing a check, canvassing potential donors, making and selling sushi, digging in one's pockets for loose change, and making a gymnasium and meeting space that the whole island can benefit from: these are all religious acts. Returning to the work of the *Fujinkai*, we can note how Kolata and Gillson provide support for this interpretation: “So it is not only the skill and intentionality applied in preparing the food that is notable. She [Kolata's Jōdo Shinshū interviewee] also perceived it as an expression of Buddhist generosity, one of the virtues of the bodhisattva path. *Dāna*, an act of giving, is an inherent element of Buddhist practice that defines lay practitioners' relationship with their local temple and temple family. Offering food is a meritorious act practiced by women and men alike to accumulate good karma, express gratitude, and maintain temple-parishioner relations” (Kolata and Gillson 2021: 574).<sup>17</sup>

In the recognition letter sent to Multi-Purpose Complex donors as of 1998, Nakano drew attention to both social and spiritual functions of the building:

Very soon, our 18,000 square foot multipurpose facility will shelter our private, social, cultural, and sport programs. Our elders, youth, and general congregation will be invited to activities which will be designed to integrate our multigenerational congregation. The simple building will also

<sup>17</sup> Without denying or delegitimizing lay attitudes that may include good karma, it should be noted that from an orthodox ministerial perspective Jōdo Shinshū does not teach the practice of *dāna* in order to generate good karma. Generating good karma is believed to be both unnecessary (because Amida Buddha accomplishes all the work of the Buddhist path on behalf of sentient beings) and impossible (because unawakened sentient beings are too ego-bound to produce undiluted genuine merit). Regardless of whether such attitudes about good karma are universally held by laypeople, expressing gratitude and maintaining temple-parishioner relations are indeed acknowledged and valorized functions of *dāna* within Jōdo Shinshū.

be the means by which we will be able to carry out one part of our deepest mission: to share our teachings and realize the sangha by gratefully rendering loving service to others.<sup>18</sup>

The final line here is a reference to the temple's fundamental purpose, as stated in the Hilo Betsuin by-laws: "ARTICLE II. PURPOSE. Members shall adore the Compassion of Amida Buddha, share the Jodo Shinshu Teaching and realize the Sangha by gratefully rendering loving service to others."<sup>19</sup> Thus, Nakano asserted that the Multi-Purpose Complex was a direct outgrowth of the temple's *raison d'être*. To create a space where sports and other social activities can take place is to be of loving service to others, in this interpretation. As always, the emphasis is put on gratitude as the primary religious attitude expected of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists.

We should note that the name for the multipurpose complex, Sangha Hall, is quite significant. Its predecessor was simply called the Social Hall. Sangha, whose realization the Multi-Purpose Complex was meant to enact, is the third of the three refuges in Buddhism, along with the Buddha and the Dharma. In many interpretations it refers to the community of monks and nuns, who, as sources of merit and teachers of the way to awakening, provide refuge from the pains of samsara.

In American Jōdo Shinshū, however, it always refers to the total congregation of the local temple, from the youngest pre-school Dharma School student to the oldest Keirokai (Elders' Association) participant. It is in and through the congregation that Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism is practiced and refuge is found. On a transcendent level this relates to Jōdo Shinshū doctrine of communal liberation in the universal embrace of Great Compassion; on a more mundane level, it means that Buddhism is practised via the everyday interactions of kindness, generosity, awareness, and so on that take place in the course of social and other events at the temple. As Rev. Midori Kondo wrote:

*A dojo in Japan was considered a practice hall of the Buddhist teachings. Here at Hilo Hongwanji, the dojo is the multipurpose building, a place where we actively live the life of the Nembutsu teachings. Our Nembutsu practice is to live with the full awareness of the workings of Amida's Wisdom and Compassion. The multi-purpose building will be a place where our youth and their friends, our martial arts groups, and all the affiliates will share the teachings through action. It is through the kindness and generosity of all that this vision of the Jodo Shinshu way of life for our youth and future generations will come to be realized. (Kondo 2000: 1)*

By calling the Multi-Purpose Complex a *dōjō* or by naming it the Sangha Hall, the temple made it clear that the activities that take place there all fall under the rubric of Buddhism, and that practices such as cooking in the Sangha Hall kitchen, sparring in the martial arts *dōjō*, and socializing during the many bazaars and food sales are included in the overall vision of relief from suffering and encountering the Pure Land.

## Conclusion

To revisit Rev. Izumi's opening point, there are Buddhist ministers who offer a Dharma-oriented rhetoric that suggests "cultural" activities should be reduced or removed, and that the temple should only provide Dharma activities. In my observation, this is especially voiced by people who fear that social activities compete with Dharma activities for limited resources (space, time, money, etc.).

This is a valid point of view, but I think an economic analysis, at least, shows it to be misguided. So-called cultural/social activities are important drivers (directly or indirectly) of funding that flows to the religious organization and permits its existence, and they create an environment where the Dharma can be absorbed by osmosis by people who would not come to formal Sunday services. They normalize the temple as a

<sup>18</sup> Letter from Ivan Nakano, Kenneth Ikemori, and Rev. Thomas Okano to Joichi Saito, May 13, 1998 [collected at Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin, June 2018].

<sup>19</sup> Bylaws of Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin, March 8, 1998.

part of the community, not something set aside and apart, and thus make it approachable by people of all generations when they begin to ask genuinely religious questions. Social activities arose because of the immigrant experience, discrimination, and the desire for cultural preservation, but their presence has proven to be a significant asset (not a drain) that helped enable the continuance of the temples and their religious instruction, and, importantly, provided a way for the Dharma to be practiced and applied in less formal situations.

In their analysis of Japanese American Zen temples, Arai and Williams assert that, based on expenditures, Japanese culture seems to be a far greater priority than the teaching of Buddhism, especially to young people (Arai and Williams 1999: 28). As they note, in 1995 Zenshuji in Los Angeles spent 0% of its annual budget on Dharma school and Zen school, while spending 20% of its budget to support ancestral services.<sup>20</sup> A comparison with Hilo Betsuin in 1995 shows that the Jōdo Shinshū temple spent \$23,509 on the Japanese language school and \$219,875 on the pre-school, both of which could be categorized as Japanese cultural activities per Arai and Williams's criteria.<sup>21</sup> The temple also spent \$30,270 on rentals, which often include cultural activities. But money for youth Buddhist education is barely visible: \$115 for YESS Camp (Young Enthusiastic Shinshu Seekers, a summertime program) and some portion of \$685 given as appreciation to volunteers (a significant number of whom are Dharma school instructors). Does this mean that only \$800 out of the consolidated 1995 temple expense budget of \$625,239 was spent on children's Buddhist education?

In fact, Hilo Betsuin had a robust Dharma school with good enrolments, year-round educational activities, and a central place in the temple's consciousness. This suggests there are some problems with a simple balance sheet approach to quantifying expenditures at Buddhist temples. For one, they do not show volunteer hours—but Dharma school instructors (of which there were many) are volunteers, not paid staff. Thus, their considerable (and gendered: in nearly all cases, both in Hilo and beyond, they are female) economic labour for the temple is invisible in a dollars-and-cents accounting approach. Second, Dharma school and similar activities are supported by the salaries of the ministers and staff, the maintenance of the building, utilities, and other line items that do appear on the budget sheet. All of these things are necessary for the Dharma school to operate. Third, temple religious services support the Dharma school: children attend the first portion of every Sunday service and receive a Dharma talk directed specifically at them, before being excused to continue their morning in the Dharma school classrooms. Fourth, as I have argued, we cannot easily disentangle social or cultural activities from Buddhist practice. The Japanese language school and preschool both include instruction and activities explicitly designed to foster respect for and learning about Buddhism. The social activities that take place under "rental" likewise have religious aspects. And what were those scouts up to in 1961? Twelve of them (including Taniguchi) earned the Sangha Award, which involved "a year studying and practicing the teachings of the Buddha. After a year of preparation he [the scout] becomes eligible to take a written and oral test. When one succeeds in acquiring this award, he has the feeling of accomplishment" (Tada 1961b: 2).

I am in no way arguing that Arai and Williams were wrong to highlight the central importance of Japanese cultural activities. My point is that a balance sheet can show 0% of annual dollars spent on children's Buddhist education at a temple where children are engaged in large amounts of Buddhist learning and practice.

<sup>20</sup> I find this portion of Arai and Williams slightly confusing. Throughout their paper, they discuss death rituals and Japanese culture as somewhat separate topics: the former means (in the rest of their treatment) things like memorial services, while the latter means things like bazaars and Obon festivals. Yet, at this moment in the discussion they use ancestral services as their sole example of high support for Japanese culture. At any rate, we can note that in the same year Zenshuji spent approximately \$9,100 on "Church Activities," which likely includes social events based around Japanese culture, and that this is far more than was allocated to Sunday school and Zen school activities.

<sup>21</sup> Honpa Hongwanji Hilo Betsuin Comparative Statement of Income and Expenses for the Twelve Months Ended December 31, 1996.

In the case of Japanese American Zen temples, Arai and Williams conclude that “Japanese cultural activities, not Buddhist religious education or practice, draw the membership to the temple” (Arai and Williams 1999: 26).<sup>22</sup> What about at Japanese American Jōdo Shinshū temples? Hilo Betsuin conducted a membership survey as part of the fundraising process for the Sangha Hall. Their results found that overtly religious activities were a strong draw. Under “favorite temple activities” the results were regular services (25%), Dharma school (10%), seminars (8%), and special services (1%), for a total of 44% (Solid Concepts, Inc. 1997: 23). Several people also listed “all” (6%), so perhaps we should split the difference and assign 3% more to religious activities, for a total of 47%. That is a significant amount. This was balanced by slightly greater enthusiasm for social activities: cultural activities (22%), social activities (14%), *Fujinkai* (4%), Jr. YBA (3%), youth activities (3%), family activities (3%), and volunteer activities (helping the elderly, assisting the office, etc.: 1%). That is 50%, plus 3% for half of “all,” to make a total of 53%. Social or cultural activities therefore won, 53% to 47%. But this neck-and-neck result would not justify a blanket statement that cultural activities, not Buddhist education and practice, are what draw the membership to this particular temple. Furthermore, we have to remember that many people are engaged in those social activities as a form of Buddhist practice. Buddhism is being practiced as people cook and eat sushi, recite the Scout Oath, and hone their judo throws (and in the process, connections are being reinforced that bring financial benefits to the religious organization).

That is an important point not only for insiders to grasp, but outsiders as well. For over 100 years Jōdo Shinshū temples have had to deal with pointed attacks on them as insular “ethnic fortresses” somehow alien and perhaps even menacing to the landscape. These attacks resulted in a long-standing pattern of oppression, from the attempts to close the temple-based Japanese language schools in Hawai’i, to the actual closing of nearly all temples and incarceration of many members during WWII, to lingering scholarship and white Buddhist stereotypes that frame these temples as cultural community centres in a subtly or overtly pejorative manner. Once we can see that hanging out is a way to encounter and practice the Dharma, and that such social activities contribute to the economic viability of the temple as a religious organization, we can nuance such perceptions.

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<sup>22</sup> They also state that “Japanese culture is so central to Japanese American Zen temples that even cultural activities with no relationship to Buddhism have become major activities of the temple.” (Arai and Williams 1999: 27). Examples they provide include a food bazaar coinciding with a cherry-blossom festival and *Shichigosan* (children’s rites of passage) services. While granting that these may initially have minimal direct Buddhist connections, I would argue that in coming to be performed at the temple they may well take on Buddhist dimensions. For example, in Japan, Jōdo Shinshū temples did not engage in Obon festivals. But in the United States Jōdo Shinshū became a primary host of such festivals, which they give new Jōdo Shinshū interpretations of and describe as expressions of Jōdo Shinshū spirituality (see Kodani 1999: 7). Likewise, food bazaars, *Shichigosan* services, and other activities may be experienced as Buddhist by attendees at Buddhist temples. For an example of how Beethoven took on an important role in Buddhist study and practice within Sōka Gakkai, see MacLaughlin (2021).

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