

Teaching the Love of Buddha: The Next Generation

Summary: How do Buddhists in America transmit their culture and tradition to new generations? In the Jodo Shinshu school of Japanese Buddhism, Sunday School classes have become an important religious educational tool to address this question, and its curriculum offers a particularly American approach to educating children about their tradition.

At a Sunday Dharma school in a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temple, the second and third graders are coloring the workbook pages entitled “My *Obutsudan*.” An *obutsudan* is a Buddha altar as it is found in every Jodo Shinshu temple and home. At the center is the standing image of Amida Buddha. There is an incense burner, a bouquet of flowers, a candle, a small dish of rice. The children color and cut out the Buddha altar, putting Amida Buddha and the various offerings in their proper places. Placing their hands together in the gesture of reverence called *gassho*, they recite:

Amida Buddha

I offer rice to say “thank you.”

I burn incense to say “thank you.”

I offer beautiful flowers and say “thank you.”

I light the candle and say “thank you.”

Namu Amida Butsu

“Praise to Amida Buddha,” the teacher says, “is the Buddhist way to say ‘thank you.’”

Teaching children the basics of a religious tradition is always a challenge, and status as a religious minority brings with it added challenges. The Jodo Shinshu Buddhist tradition has developed some experience in teaching its form of Buddhism to the younger generation, for it is now in its fourth and even fifth generation in the United States. This devotional form of Buddhism, emphasizing the grace and compassion of Amida Buddha, teaches that this “Buddha of Infinite Light” moves with love toward human beings. Sensing this love, our human response is, therefore, gratitude. The religious expression of gratitude is in the very first chapter of the Dharma School primary workbook: *Namu Amida Butsu*, “Praise to Lord Buddha.” It means “thank you.”

The Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, organized as the Buddhist Churches of America, have led the way in developing a Dharma school curriculum for use with children on Sundays. The education department of its national headquarters in San Francisco develops and supplies Buddhist educational materials to temples throughout the country. It is a distinctively American curriculum, modeled on the kinds of exercises that will enable children to appropriate their faith for themselves:

*This picture is reminding us of
Amida and his teachings.
Amida Buddha loves us all.
His light brightens our world.
He glows with warmth and reminds us of
his promise to help everyone.
Namu Amida Buddha.*

The personal testimony of faith has also been incorporated into the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist tradition, enabling children to speak, in appropriate language, of their own part in the Buddhist tradition. Week after week in Dharma school and in Sunday services, they recite the “Golden Chain,” which has become the first affirmation of faith for generations of young American Buddhists:

*I am a link in Amida Buddha’s golden chain of love that
stretches around the world. I must keep my link bright and strong.
I will try to be kind and gentle to every living thing,
and protect all who are weaker than myself.
I will try to think pure and beautiful thoughts,
to say pure and beautiful words,
and do pure and beautiful deeds.
May every link in Amida Buddha’s golden chain of love
become bright and strong, and may we all attain perfect peace.*