

# Environmental Activities in North American and Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū Temples

**Jeff Wilson**, Renison University College (University of Waterloo)

**Abstract:** This paper documents and analyses environmentalist activities in North American and Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū temples. I argue that such activities primarily cluster around three themes: 1) educational efforts, 2) temple greening, and 3) ritual activity. Jōdo Shinshū environmental awareness began to appear by 1970. However, concerted organized efforts at preventing environmental destruction and inculcating ecological consciousness in Buddhist practitioners only emerged in recent decades, best represented by the EcoSangha and Green Hongwanji movements. The forms of engagement pursued by these movements are significantly shaped by a confluence of Japanese and American/Canadian historical and cultural forces. On the Japanese side, these include the cultural attitude of *mottainai* (“non-wasting”), gratitude to ancestors, and indebtedness. On the North American/Canadian side, these include temples as sources of community organizing and ethnic identity, the post-Carson environmental movement, the Dharma school system, the tendency to apply efforts inwards toward the temple community rather than toward activism in the wider public, and the particular mix of communal activity and individual responsibility that defines the North American and Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū approach to Buddhist practice.

**Keywords:** Jodo Shinshu, environmentalism, Pure Land Buddhism

This essay documents and analyses environmentalist activities in the Jōdo Shinshū temples of Canada and the United States. Pure Land Buddhism has been almost completely excluded from scholarly and popular attention to Western

Buddhist social, political, and environmental engagement. Nevertheless, these temples have developed a general environmental awareness that plays out in several ways. Drawing on oral history interviews, archival documents, and recordings of public events, I argue that their environmentally focused activities primarily cluster around three themes: 1) educational efforts, 2) temple greening, and 3) ritual activity.

The forms of these three engagements—which often overlap with one another—are significantly shaped by a confluence of Japanese and American/Canadian historical and cultural forces. On the Japanese side, these include the cultural attitude of *mottainai* 勿体無い (“non-wasting”), gratitude to ancestors (extended to encompass all the forces that have supported one’s life), and indebtedness. On the American/Canadian side, these include temples as sources of community organizing and ethnic identity, the post-Carson environmental movement, the Dharma school system, the tendency to apply efforts inwards toward the temple community rather than toward activism in the wider public, and the particular mix of communal activity and individual responsibility that defines the North American and Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū approach to Buddhist practice.

## History

Jōdo Shinshū (True Pure Land School) is the largest Buddhist tradition in Japan. Based on the teachings of the thirteenth century monk Shinran, it was highly represented in nineteenth and twentieth century Japanese immigration to Hawai‘i and North America. Missionary efforts began in 1889, leading to the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii (HHMH). Mission activity on the mainland was organized separately, leading to the Buddhist Mission of North America (later renamed the Buddhist Churches of America or BCA), based in San Francisco. Formal activities in Canada began in 1905 and eventually led to the creation of a discrete organization, the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada (JSBTC). Each of these three organizations is affiliated with the Nishi Honganji lineage of Jōdo Shinshū and contains multiple temples as well as some smaller fellowships and/or study centres. There are also a small number of temples that are affiliated with the Higashi Honganji lineage, or are independent, bringing the total number of temples to approx-

imately 120.<sup>1</sup> In English Jōdo Shinshū is often shorted to “Shin Buddhism,” a moniker that began with the famous transnational Buddhist scholar Suzuki Daisetsu (D. T. Suzuki).<sup>2</sup>

As historian Michael Masatsugu notes, Jōdo Shinshū was very strongly represented in the areas from which most Japanese immigration came, and thus “had a disproportionate impact on the development of Issei [first-generation] Buddhism in America.”<sup>3</sup> Scott Mitchell goes further, observing that “it is clear that the origins of American Buddhism are rightfully with Issei and Nisei [second-generation] Buddhists,” who developed many of the innovations that would become hallmarks of Buddhism in North America and Hawai‘i, and who created the backbone Buddhist infrastructure that would eventually enable large numbers of non-Japanese people to become involved in various forms of Buddhism and Buddhist Studies.<sup>4</sup> This includes a large network of locally-run but interconnected (via the Buddhist Churches of America and similar organizations) temples which served as religious and social hubs of the Japanese American/Canadian community.<sup>5</sup>

Environmental awareness began to appear in the temples of the Buddhist Churches of America in the early 1970s. For instance, in 1970, the Pacific Seminar (the primary annual study session of the BCA) included a keynote session on “Ecology and Buddhism” and a mandatory viewing and discussion of *Multiply and Subdue the Earth*, a film about man-made environmental crises.<sup>6</sup> In 1974, Dr. Kawahata Aiyoshi, Director of the Kyoto Lab of Environmental Disruption, conducted a three-month tour of BCA temples, speaking about

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<sup>1</sup> Most of the Higashi temples in the mainland United States are affiliated with the North American District of Shinshu Otani-ha, while the Hawaiian Higashi temples are organized into the Shinshu Otani-ha Hawaii Kaikyoku (Interview with Noriaki Ito, September 13, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> While famous in Anglophone circles as a Zen scholar, Suzuki had significant family, professional, and personal connections to Jōdo Shinshū, and played the roles of speaker, consultant, and mentor within the Buddhist Churches of America. For more information see Dobbins, *Selected Works of D.T. Suzuki, Volume II: Pure Land*.

<sup>3</sup> Masatsugu, *Reorienting the Pure Land: Nisei Buddhism in the Transwar Years, 1943–1965*, 13.

<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *The Making of American Buddhism*, 144; 4–5.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson, “Pennies From the Pure Land: Practicing the Dharma, Hanging Out, and Raising Funds for the Oldest Buddhist Temple Outside Asia,” 64–65.

<sup>6</sup> Buddhist Churches of America, “‘Buddhism in the Coming Revolution’ to be Weighed at Pacific Seminar,” 1.

inflation, resource shortages, and pollution.<sup>7</sup> By the mid 1970s, temple ministers were relating the Buddhist concept of dependent origination to ecology and making statements such as “Ecological and environmental aspects are fundamental to the teachings of the Buddha in that the essence of the teachings is based on the idea of the inescapable interdependency of all conditions.”<sup>8</sup> Beyond conferences and speakers, there was evidence of initial community efforts to engage with environmental concerns. In 1973, the BCA began to support Keep America Beautiful Day.<sup>9</sup> Local temple Boy Scout groups engaged in litter clean-up drives and educated themselves about pollution.

The primary face of Jōdo Shinshū ecological concern in the 1980s and ‘90s was Reverend Don Castro, one of the first white graduates of the BCA’s seminary. A minister at the BCA Bureau of Education and member of the BCA’s Social Welfare Committee, Castro felt there was a natural synergy between Buddhism and ecology, which he first enunciated in 1981 in a two-part series “Buddhism: Ecology as Religion” in the *Wheel of Dharma*, the monthly newspaper of the Buddhist Churches of America:

For some time, I have been fascinated by the sense of Buddhism as religious ecology. It is my intent in the present series of articles to discuss this sense as it relates to conservation of natural resources.... While the term “ecology” derives from the scientific tradition, there is really a latent religious sense to it from a Buddhist perspective for ecology is what Buddhism, as a systematic approach to reality, is all about... if ecology is to be taken in its fullest sense, we must inevitably include the human sciences as well. Buddhism is then partly the science which, within this “cosmic ecosystem,” focuses on what causes dukkha (suffering, anxiety, doubt, etc.) and partly the true life resulting when we live in accord with the Dharma[:] the total ecological experience and highest Truth which roots out the causes of dukkha.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Buddhist Churches of America, “Dr. Aiyoshi Kawahata on Prolonged Tour of BCA,” 3.

<sup>8</sup> Lyons, “San Jose Betsuin Offers Lecture Series,” 3.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymous, “Newsletter Seeks Cooperation,” 4.

<sup>10</sup> Castro, “Buddhism: Ecology as Religion,” 2. Castro clearly intended to make this an ongoing series but stopped after two articles, likely because he was assigned in August 1981 as head minister to Enmanji temple in Sebastopol, greatly increasing his daily responsibilities. He continued to serve as a speaker on the topic at conferences but his next significant essay did not appear until 1987, after he had been assigned as a minister at the Seattle temple. That temple

The following year, Castro was a headline speaker at the Pacific Seminar on the topic of ecology as religion in the context of Buddhism and modern lifestyles.<sup>11</sup> He continued to push Buddhism and ecology into conversation with one another within the BCA over the next four decades, writing many articles, giving Dharma talks on the subject, and serving as an invited speaker at temples across the continent.

Castro was the most consistent spokesperson for ecological Buddhism within Jōdo Shinshū circles, but he was hardly the only BCA minister writing on these topics. For example, in 1991, the Buddhist Churches of America published a pamphlet on the topic, “A Buddhist View on the Issue of Environment,” by the BCA bishop Rev. Seigen Yamaoka.<sup>12</sup> In 2003, Jōdo Shinshū scholars Dake Mitsuya and David Matsumoto organized a conference on “Buddhism and the Environment” at the University of California at Berkeley that led to the 2010 academic volume *How Much is Enough? Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment*.<sup>13</sup>

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had multiple ministers and he was not the senior, which meant he had a comparatively lighter daily load than in Sebastopol, allowing him to once again pursue his personal passion of ecological Buddhist inquiry. In studying Buddhist developments, we must always pay close attention to the actual working conditions of the individuals involved, as this is the context that restrains, permits, and/or influences their participation in larger movements. In Jōdo Shinshū circles, socially engaged Buddhist ministers are always ministers first and activists second, regardless of their level of social commitment. Their congregation’s needs always take precedence over abstract (even if dire) external concerns. When a minister has a heavy load at their temple, their speaking, writing, organizing, and so on about social issues is always negatively impacted. This is one factor in why public philosophizing and opining on social matters has not been as historically prominent in Jōdo Shinshū circles than it was: for the hard-working local minister, such things are not infrequently a luxury that they cannot afford given their busy schedules. This is especially true in recent decades, as the ratio of ministerial supply to temple needs has worsened, often leaving ministers to tend multiple temples. Ironically, even as ministerial “free time” has evaporated, this is also the period when ministers and official organizations have become increasingly vocal about social and political matters. Thus, as a researcher, I am left to wonder just how much more activity would be occurring if the working conditions of contemporary temples permitted it. For information on ministerial assignments during the twentieth century, see *Buddhist Churches of America: A Legacy of the First 100 Years*.

<sup>11</sup> Buddhist Churches of America, *Buddhist Churches of America 1982 Annual Report*, 32.

<sup>12</sup> Yamaoka, “A Buddhist View on the Issue of Environment.”

<sup>13</sup> Payne, ed., *How Much is Enough: Buddhism, Consumerism, and the Human Environment*, xi–xii.

Eventually Castro's life's work evolved into the concept of EcoSangha, the title he gave to an online collection published in 2004 by the Seattle Betsuin Buddhist Temple, where he was a minister.<sup>14</sup> EcoSangha represented Castro's efforts to get Jōdo Shinshū temples to consciously engage with environmental issues, especially in terms of their own wasteful activities and appreciation of the ecological attitudes that he saw as inherent in Buddhism.<sup>15</sup>

In 2008, EcoSangha took a new turn as lay member Karen Akahoshi, disturbed by Al Gore's climate change film *An Inconvenient Truth* and inspired by Castro's ideas, established an EcoSangha group at the San Jose Buddhist Church Betsuin, a process she repeated at the Buddhist Temple of San Diego when she moved there in 2013.<sup>16</sup> Born in the Minidoka concentration camp in Idaho, Akahoshi was the daughter of a pioneering BCA minister in the Pacific Northwest. She participated occasionally in Free Speech Movement protests at the University of California, Berkeley in the 1960s, helped start a Japanese American seniors' centre, and cofounded a cultural school for Japanese American children.<sup>17</sup> Her community activist experiences were crucial to the growing EcoSangha movement, as her networking and organizing efforts substantially contributed to putting Castro's ideas into concrete action.

Akahoshi and Castro worked to embed EcoSangha consciousness in temples throughout the BCA, and in 2014 they successfully led the BCA to pass a resolution on the subject:

WHEREAS, one of the major social issues of our time is a deep concern for the environment;

WHEREAS, with the core teachings of interdependence and compassion our Buddhist religion is inherently ecological in vision and conservation-oriented in practice;

WHEREAS, our Buddhist Churches of America not only consume large amounts of resources in themselves but also serve as a model for personal

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<sup>14</sup> Anonymous, *EcoSangha*.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Donald Castro, October 14, 2021.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Karen Akahoshi, August 11, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Karen Akahoshi, August 11, 2022.

behavior in the homes of each of its members and society at large;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that each BCA temple be encouraged to adopt policies that promote an awareness of the profound implications of our behavior on future generations and to promote ecologically friendly behavior in the spirit of “mottai-nai.”<sup>18</sup>

Many temples took up the charge to investigate their own practices and make improvements toward greater sustainability. The following year the approximately thirty-five temples of the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii made a similar commitment with a resolution passed by their Lay Assembly. It read in part:

WHEREAS, the teachings of the Buddha guides us to act in compassion and wisdom;

WHEREAS, humanity has abused the environment in which we live today;

WHEREAS, our Sangha needs leadership and education on how to live in harmony and sustainability with our precious planet...

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the 2015 Hawaii Kyodan Lay Convention approve a program, the ‘Green Hongwanji Initiative’, to educate, set goals and develop an action plan to help temples and members live in ecological harmony within our communities, State and planet.<sup>19</sup>

The past decade has seen a steady increase in environmentalist programming sponsored by Jōdo Shinshū groups. Some representative examples include the 2019 workshop “Jodo Shinshu, Mottainai, and EcoSanghas” held at the 16th World Buddhist Women’s Convention in San Francisco, Jodo Shinshu International Office’s (based in Berkeley) 2021 panel “Faith & Science: Awakening Compassion for the Future,” and the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples of Canada’s Women’s Federation 2022 two-part seminar “Awakening to the Climate Crisis: A Buddhist Perspective.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> BCA Ministers’ Association, “EcoSangha Resolution.”

<sup>19</sup> Anonymous, *Green Hongwanji Initiative*.

<sup>20</sup> Buddhist Church of America, “Historic 16 WBWC Gathering in S.F.,” 5; Buddhist Church of America, “Faith & Science: Awakening Compassion for the Future,” 2; Toronto Buddhist

## Buddhist Environmentalism in Action

Jōdo Shinshū environmentalism in Canada and the United States has been more than simple philosophical musing on the topic. Especially in the last two decades, it has been carried out through specific actions designed to reduce the suffering caused by climate change and ecological destruction. These actions can be organized into three different but often overlapping areas: educational efforts, temple greening, and ritual activity.

Educational efforts have included newsletter articles, resolutions, Dharma talks, and pamphlets such as those already mentioned. They have also included frequent conference lectures and programs. One example was “Mottainai and Eco-sangha,” a workshop held at the Bay District Buddhist Women’s League’s 2018 conference. As reported by lay member Joanne Gozawa in the *Wheel of Dharma*:

With over 50 people in attendance, the BDBWL workshop began with five Bay District ministers—Rev. Henry Adams, Rev. Harry Bridge, Rev. Dennis Fujimoto, Rev. Kiyonobu Kuwahara, and Rev. Dean Koyama—each giving a Dharma talk about the connection between ecology and Buddhism, and about their personal experiences learning to be mindful in the spirit of mottainai. Then, in small groups, the participants shared their own mottainai-awareness stories. By the end of the workshop, participants vowed to approach their temple boards to support temple-wide mottainai consciousness-raising events and sustainable ecological practices.... During the BDBWL workshop, the participating temples organized into three sub-regions of three temples each to help support each other’s efforts and to propose joint ecology-themed events, with the aim of sustaining the momentum for fostering Eco-Sangha in the spirit of mottainai.<sup>21</sup>

Beyond consciousness-raising, Gozawa stressed how the actual practices of the workshop actualized environmental care and sustainability:

Ecological awareness permeated the planning of the workshop itself. Since

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Church, “Please Join JSBTC Women’s Federation’s First Presentation of 2022 ‘Awakening to the Climate Change Crisis a Buddhist Perspective’ Presented by Ray Nakano,” 15.

<sup>21</sup> Gozawa, “Mottainai and Eco-Sangha: A BDBWL Workshop,” 3.



livestock production is a major stressor on ecosystems, lunch was vegetarian and so delicious that no one thought to complain. Because waribashi, or disposable wooden chopsticks, contribute to deforestation, reusable bamboo chopsticks were provided as utensils, and each participant took home a gift of foldable/portable reusable chopsticks to take to restaurants. Even the plates at the workshop were of the reusable variety, while the tablecloths were 100% compostable, and the centerpieces were simple greenery from local BWA members' gardens.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond workshops at conferences, Jōdo Shinshū groups have held many special programs specifically on environmental topics. Examples include the 2020–2021 series on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals by the Bay Area Buddhist Association (founded by a coalition of Jōdo Shinshū and Sōtō Zen groups), the 2021 Young Buddhist Editorial session “Face-to-Face: EcoDharma,” and Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii’s 2022 Zoom event “Our Interdependent Lives: Food Waste and Sustainability.”<sup>23</sup>

An important place to note educational efforts is within children and youth oriented activities. Many temples have integrated ecological ideas into their comprehensive Dharma School curricula, which run from pre-school through high school. Earth Day programming is part of the regular school year at the Pacific Buddhist Academy, the Jōdo Shinshū-based high school in Honolulu.<sup>24</sup> Youth retreats in the San Francisco Bay Area and Pacific Northwest have been organized around the theme of EcoSangha.<sup>25</sup> An example of how these translate into further efforts is “Think Reusable,” a Girl Scout Project created by San Mateo Buddhist Temple member Hailey La Monte.<sup>26</sup> This five-part series created flyers that temples could post to encourage members to recycle and repurpose materials in order to reduce the temple’s environmental footprint.

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<sup>22</sup> Gozawa, “*Mottainai* and Eco-Sangha: A BDBWL Workshop,” 3.

<sup>23</sup> Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, “Our Interdependent Lives: Food Waste and Sustainability (04/16/2022).”

<sup>24</sup> Pacific Buddhist Academy, “Earth Day 4/22/2022.”

<sup>25</sup> Berkeley Buddhist Temple, “Berkeley Buddhist Temple Board of Directors Meeting July 9, 2019,” 6.

<sup>26</sup> La Monte, “Think Reusable.”

“Think Reusable” calls attention to how local temples are the primary focus of Jōdo Shinshū environmental activities. The temple is the central organizing unit in North American and Hawaiian Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism. In nearly all cases, temples have been organized by immigrant Japanese Buddhist communities, and have served multiple functions as multigenerational religious, social, and community centres. Their lands, buildings, and activities, such as weekly lunches and annual festivals, generate significant environmental impact. They are natural spaces for action, since they are where the community gathers, where the young are educated, and are sites of potential carbon and trash generation.

Awareness of this dynamic is clearly at work in the Bay Area Buddhist Women’s League workshop quoted above. The Palo Alto temple, which hosted the workshop, hosted an environmentally friendly meal in order to demonstrate to other temples how such a feat could be pulled off, and participants were led through exercises designed to help them make their home temples ecologically sustainable. Despite general awareness that environmental degradation is a serious problem, tradition-bound temples can be slow to change and sustainability efforts are not always initially well-received: when the Buddhist Women’s Association at Senshin Buddhist Temple in South Central Los Angeles was slow to give up their disposable chopsticks, minister Rev. Masao Kodani and prominent lay activist Nobuko Miyamoto finally snapped all the disposable chopsticks, forcing them to invest in reusables.<sup>27</sup> Many changes, however, have been made without community upset: for instance, there was little controversy in 2020 when the Alameda temple redid their roof so that solar panels could be installed.<sup>28</sup>

These sorts of changes are what I refer to as temple greening, and are primary aspects of the BCA’s EcoSangha and HHMH’s Green Hongwanji initiatives. The Hawaiian temples distributed a comprehensive survey to all member

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Masao Kodani, October 12, 2021. The same activist, Nobuko Miyamoto, produced a music video which she released on YouTube in 2010 to encourage better practices in the wider Asian American community. See Great Leap/Miyamoto, “B.Y.O. Chopstix”; also see Miyamoto, *Not Yo’ Butterfly*, 273–75.

<sup>28</sup> Buddhist Temple of Alameda, “Solar Power at Buddhist Temple of Alameda,” 6. Given that most American Jōdo Shinshū temples are located in California and Hawai‘i, it will likely come as little surprise that many have installed solar roof panels to cut down on environmental impact and save costs.

temples and schools in 2017 so they could assess the ecological soundness of their practices related to toxins, water, waste, and purchasing. About two-thirds participated, with possibly dismaying results: none of the temples scored even 50% out of 65 possible points for good practices.<sup>29</sup> However, this helpfully revealed the need for change, which various temples subsequently began implementing. For example, Hawaii Betsuin, the largest temple (with a score of 29 out of 65), immediately began a program to encourage people to bring their own cups, utensils, and snack plates to reduce waste.<sup>30</sup>

As for EcoSangha, its impact has been significant and ongoing. There are two permanent EcoSangha groups (at the San Jose and San Diego temples) and another dozen temples in America and Canada have held EcoSangha-connected activities.<sup>31</sup> The San Jose EcoSangha distributed guidelines for all activities at the temple:

1. paper products rather than Styrofoam or plastic
2. compostable utensils and non-plastic bags
3. bamboo chopsticks (sustainable) rather than wood
4. tap water rather than bottled water
5. appropriately labeled containers for recycling
6. recyclable products & washable plates & utensils
7. eco-friendly cleaning products<sup>32</sup>

The permanent EcoSangha groups also hold annual Earth Day festivities that showcase ecological practices and promote environmental consciousness. For instance, San Jose EcoSangha member Jeanne Nakano reported on their 2013 activities:

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<sup>29</sup> Dexter Mar, “Temples Assess How Green They Are with the Green Hongwanji Survey.”

<sup>30</sup> Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin, “Green Hongwanji in 2017,” 7.

<sup>31</sup> There is also a permanent EcoSangha at Seattle University, inspired by Don Castro but run by Sōtō Zen faculty member Dr. Jason Wirth. See Wirth, Jason Tetsuzen, Eddie Daichi Salazar, Elizabeth Myoen Sikes. *Seattle University EcoSangha*. The other Jōdo Shinshū temples are Hawaii Betsuin, Buddhist Temple of Southern Alberta (Canada), Buddhist Temple of Chicago (independent Higashi temple), and the BCA temples in Berkeley, Fairfax (Virginia), Oakland, San Francisco, San Mateo, Seattle, Tacoma, Watsonville, and West Los Angeles.

<sup>32</sup> *San Jose EcoSangha Brochure*.

EcoSangha hosted its 5th annual Earth Day on Sunday, May 5, 2013. Earth Day speaker was Rev. Gerald Sakamoto, San Jose Betsuin Minister and Ecologist. This year, for the first time, the Earth Day service ran from 9:30 am–10:15 am, fifteen minutes longer to allow time to award the winners of the 2013 Earth Day Art Contest. At 10:15 am, Dharma School students & teachers were excused to the annex to participate in pre-assigned Earth Day stations. Grades kindergarten through high school, were assigned to three age appropriate stations each. A bullhorn sounded the end of one station and signaled the move to the next station... Adults attended an abbreviated adult service and joined the Earth Day activities at 11:00 am.

The Earth Day stations were: Aquaponics, Ecopia Farms, Newspaper Seed Pots, Worm Composting, Cycles of Change DVD, T-shirt Totes, Hovercrafts, and Arts & Crafts from recycled materials such as old CD's [sic], kamaboko boards, toilet paper/paper towel rolls, egg cartons, old t-shirts, etc. Crafts included bird houses, hovercrafts, snake craft and paper roll looms.<sup>33</sup>

This description shows not only the educational and temple greening aspects of Jōdo Shinshū environmental activity, but also the third aspect: ritual activity. Earth Day has become a part of the annual liturgical calendar, with dedicated speakers and religious services.<sup>34</sup> Here the view of Buddhism and ecology's convergence expressed by Castro and others finds instantiation in explicitly religious practices of chanting, bowing, and listening to sermons. Thus, participants are not just exposed to ecological ideas, but are taught that Buddhism is an ecologically respectful religion and that "to be a Buddhist is to be an ecologist and a conservationist," as Castro has repeatedly claimed at such services.<sup>35</sup>

Beyond Earth Day services, a further alteration to ritual practices has been the creation of EcoSangha altars. These altars feature Shakyamuni Buddha performing the earth-touching mudra. This mirrors the official EcoSangha logo, which depicts Shakyamuni Buddha sitting atop the globe, reaching down to touch it with his right hand. As Castro explains:

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<sup>33</sup> Nakano, "EcoSangha Committee 2013 Annual Report."

<sup>34</sup> This is also true at the Seattle and San Diego temples, Hawaii Betsuin, and perhaps elsewhere.

<sup>35</sup> Nakano, "EcoSangha Committee 2013."

The “Earth-Touching” mudra of the Buddha depicts the very moment when Shakyamuni Buddha called upon our Mother Earth to bear witness to his enlightenment. Today, Mother Earth is bearing witness to our wanton mistreatment of her. To cure our mother, we must truly change our mind (and lifestyle) so that conservation becomes an integral part of our Buddhist practice.<sup>36</sup>

Such altars are controversial, as they violate the prohibition against enshrining figures other than Amida Buddha. Castro succeeded in placing them at the Seattle and Spokane temples when he served as Rinban of the Seattle Betsuin, the highest status minister in the Pacific Northwest, and he maintains one at his one home.<sup>37</sup> But it is not clear if the temple altars have remained following his retirement.

One of the most active Jōdo Shinshū ecological ritualists has been Rev. Fred Ulrich, the retired head minister of the Manitoba Buddhist Temple. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Ulrich held meditation sessions in Fraser’s Grove Park on the Red River in Winnipeg.<sup>38</sup> Organized into six-week sessions, Ulrich took groups of twenty to thirty people to meditate with the park trees. Procedures differed between various sessions; a common practice was walking meditation through the trees while “trying to feel their life force... we had the trees as the centre of our meditation,”<sup>39</sup> followed by a circle discussion that taught the Buddhist doctrine of interdependence by focusing on the trees. Ulrich described such discussions:

I just tried to focus on doing what we were doing *there*, which is feeling a oneness with living things through direct relationship with living things right on the spot and not making it too theoretical. One thing I did emphasize was that the roots of the tree were all intertwined with the roots of the other trees that they built underground. They were a community, and most of the trees’ lives were underground with the other trees, through the roots. So they made an intertwined living community... the forest trees and the

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<sup>36</sup> Groncznack, “EcoSangha Lecture Series Sparks Interest at Seattle University.”

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Donald Castro, October 14, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> Personal communication from Fred Ulrich to the author, October 9, 2022.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Fred Ulrich, October 7, 2022.

fungi and all the other plants are integrated with each other, through their roots. And they actually send signals back and forth to each other. It's important for people to feel the sense of aliveness outside of their own bodies. Like you have a living body, but there's a liveliness around you everywhere.<sup>40</sup>

These meditations and discussions had multiple interconnecting purposes. They were designed to teach Buddhist perspectives of interconnection, heighten participants' appreciation for trees and living systems, deepen their personal spirituality, and inculcate a sense of personal responsibility toward environmental conservation.<sup>41</sup>

At other times, Ulrich led the group in a more structured tree meditation. Participants would kneel against a tree, pressing against it with their foreheads, hands, and knees. Ulrich told them to imagine the roots of the tree beneath them, and as they breathed out to visualize the breath following the roots to the trunk, the branches, and the leaves. Then with the next in-breath, to contract back from the leaves down to the roots, repeating the process so that they developed a "breathing oneness with the tree" and regained "a consciousness of our entire being with living things, and you will have sympathies and compassion for them."<sup>42</sup> As he explained, "I feel that's the human dilemma right now: we feel like we're the only ones alive. We're the only ones that matter. I mean, I think that's part of Western civilization and attitude. But it's a serious mistake to try to remove yourself from that interdependence with living things. It's a serious spiritual and scientific mistake."<sup>43</sup>

When the weather got cold, Ulrich told participants to bring a plant with them to the temple. The time outside with trees would be shortened and the group would return to the temple, where meditation continued with their personal plants. Other activities included drumming and chanting. At the end of each six-week session, participants sat in a circle and strung *ojuzu* 数珠 (*mālā*) of 108 beads, then exchanged them with each other in another demonstration of interdependence.

Another eco-ritual that Ulrich performed during this time period was

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<sup>40</sup> Interview with Fred Ulrich, October 7, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Interview with Fred Ulrich, October 7, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Fred Ulrich, October 7, 2022.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Fred Ulrich, October 7, 2022.

funerals for trees. Dressed in his Buddhist minister's robes, Ulrich went to Kildonan Park (across the river from Fraser's Grove) to conduct a funeral service when a windstorm toppled several hundred trees. The format followed a common form for North American Jōdo Shinshū memorial services: he rang a bell, chanted *Sanbutsuge* 讃仏偈 (Verse Praising the Merits of the Buddha), and expressed sympathy to the trees for their death, noting that they would still contribute to life on Earth.<sup>44</sup> He ended with a pointed statement, saying that if it was necessary for humanity to die out in order that the planet's trees survive, may that come to pass. Latent in this vow was the feeling that humanity's destructive actions threaten the health of other living things and that we have no greater right to life than they do:

They're going to die and they contribute so much to the animals' life and so much to insects, they're like a little community. I just felt sorry for them. I felt compassion for them, and I just wanted to say goodbye to them, you know? But I do think that just further back is this idea that we humans have selfishly done damage for various reasons. I think that you have to pay the karmic payment in that. You can't just ignore it. You can't just do things, forgetting there's a lot of cause and effect. That's what's happening to us. We're sort of forgetting and ignore cause and effect.<sup>45</sup>

Ulrich carried out ten to fifteen similar tree funerals in Kildonan Park, Fraser's Grove Park, and other parks in Winnipeg before his retirement in 2014.

In September 2022, the Manitoba Buddhist Temple introduced a new ritual into its repertoire: it inducted an elm tree outside the temple as a member of the congregation. The ceremony was inspired in part by Thai Buddhist tree ordinations and, like those rituals, it included wrapping the tree with a saffron cloth reminiscent of the robes of Theravada monks.<sup>46</sup> The Jōdo Shinshū ceremony, however, was not a simple reproduction of the Thai ceremonies, as it was developed with different elements. For example, while a symbolic ordination was part of the process, the ceremony was continually described as

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<sup>44</sup> *Sanbutsuge* is an excerpt from the *Larger Pure Land Sūtra*, often used as a liturgical element in Jōdo Shinshū services.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Fred Ulrich, October 7, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Darlington, "Translating Modernity: Buddhist Response to the Thai Environmental Crisis."

bringing the tree into the congregation's membership.<sup>47</sup> This is in keeping with North American Jōdo Shinshū notions of sangha: in Thailand, the sangha are the ordained pure monks who occupy a higher social station than laypeople, whereas in Canadian and American Jōdo Shinshū the sangha is the entirety of the congregation, all of whom (clergy and lay) are equally embraced by the compassion of Amida Buddha. In other words, the tree was recognized as a fellow traveler on the path and an important contributor to the temple, honoured but not set apart.

The ritual was presided over by Ulrich, with assistance from Reverend Tanis Moore, the current minister of the Winnipeg temple. The tree was wrapped beforehand, and then the formal service began with ringing a bell, followed by chanting the three refuges in Pali, English, and Japanese, as in a regular Jōdo Shinshū service.<sup>48</sup> The tree was given a Dharma name—Dharma Phala (“Fruit of the Dharma”)—and a temple member played a song on the *shakuhachi* 尺八 (Japanese bamboo flute).

The service concluded with a benediction called “Touching the Earth” which Ulrich authored and often reads at his park meditation sessions and temple services:

We gently caress you, the Earth, our planet and our home. Our vision has brought us closer to you, making us aware of the harm we have done to the life-network upon which we ourselves depend. We are reminded that we have poisoned your waters, your lands, your air. We have filled you with the bones of our dead from war and greed. Your pain is our pain. Touching you gently, we pray that we may become peace-bringers and life-bringers so that our home in its journey around the Sun not become a sterile and lonely place. May this prayer and its power last forever. Namo Amida Butsu.

This title, “Touching the Earth,” recalls the Earth-Touching Buddha that is venerated by the EcoSangha movement.<sup>49</sup> If the ecological intent of the ritual was

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<sup>47</sup> Interview with Tanis Moore, September 28, 2022.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Tanis Moore, September 28, 2022.

<sup>49</sup> Ulrich and Castro are long-time acquaintances and were even roommates during seminary. While acknowledging the likelihood of cross-fertilization of ideas (both men were always ecologically minded), Ulrich does not feel that his fondness for the Earth-Touching Buddha is



not clearly apparent, Moore (who had originated the idea of the ceremony) made it explicit in her interview with the *Winnipeg Free Press*: “It’s a way to make a point about what’s happening to the environment today.”<sup>50</sup> The temple repeated the ceremony as part of an interfaith exchange called “Inner Peace, Earth Peace: Buddhist-Christian Spiritual Practices” in November 2022, wrapping and bestowing a Buddhist name on an elm tree outside the Westworth United Church.<sup>51</sup>

Another possible item for inclusion in this category of ritual activity is temple participation in environmental community service. For instance, in 2022, the Windward Buddhist Temple in Kailua, Hawai‘i picked up trash along a local road for Earth Day.<sup>52</sup> While such activities could easily be seen as secular, I suggest that they are religious in nature since they are carried out by a religious organization, in service to religious ideals (as we have seen, Buddhism is taught as an ecological religion), and allow members to exercise their religious sentiments through concrete action.

As with educational efforts, children and youth oriented activities are an important source of such community service. For example, in 2019 the United Jr. YBAs (Young Buddhists Associations) of Honolulu took stewardship of Kamehameha Highway as part of the Adopt a Highway Service Program and, in 2021, the United Jr. YBAs of Kauai held a beach clean-up.<sup>53</sup> The intergenerational nature of Jōdo Shinshū temples stimulates ecological action: adults inculcate environmentalism through Dharma School, Scouting, and other activities, while youth provoke temple-wide participation in recycling, trash pick-up, letter-writing campaigns, and so on, as service opportunities or to earn merit badges. Ellie Wong of Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin’s Girl Scout Junior Troop 185 explained one such example:

For my Bronze project, my partner Kacie and I did a beach cleanup at Sandy Beach because we realized that Hawaii’s beaches are not as clean as they

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a direct influence from Castro. Rather, he suggests that similar minds traveled along similar paths to both appreciate the same motif. Interview with Fred Ulrich, October 7, 2022.

<sup>50</sup> Longhurst, “Buddhist Temple’s New Member is Direct from Nature.”

<sup>51</sup> Personal communication with Tanis Moore, October 27, 2022; Longhurst, “Contemplating the Benefits of Meditation.”

<sup>52</sup> “Earth Day 2022 Kuulei Road.”

<sup>53</sup> Naho Umitani, “United of Honolulu,” 13; Madison Doo, “United of Kauai.”

should be. We also learned that a lot of our trash ends up in our oceans. Additionally, marine animals such as turtles, mistake the trash as food or get tangled up in the trash and suffer.... In response we partnered with Sustainable Coastlines Hawaii to host a beach cleanup.... We had no money to buy supplies for the beach clean-up, so we recycled cans to earn money and asked for donations. We recruited scouts and their families, along with friends to help us clean Sandy Beach. I used my leadership skills by sending out emails and promoting the beach clean-up by making a slideshow to present at the leaders' meeting. On the day of the beach clean-up Kacie and I, and over 50 volunteers collected 70 pounds of trash! I hope our beach clean-up inspires others to keep Hawaii's beaches clean. By doing this everyone including marine life benefited from a clean beach.<sup>54</sup>

With contributions by adult teachers and young activists, a mutually sustaining cycle develops that keeps ecological concerns active in temple communities.

It should be noted that while the three activities of education, greening, and ritual can be discussed discretely for purposes of analysis, they are not truly separate phenomena. Most often, an ecological activity performed by a Jōdo Shinshū temple has elements of two or all three activities. The temple-greening efforts of the various EcoSanghas receive regular and favourable coverage in Buddhist Churches of America media, thus teaching people across the continent about ecological harms and possible solutions.<sup>55</sup> Ritual efforts, too, have educational connections. For example, temple member Robert Miyai produced a video of the Winnipeg tree ordination ceremony to encourage environmentalism.<sup>56</sup> Educational events often include ritual elements: the Zoom seminar, "Our Interdependent Lives: Food Waste and Sustainability," began with a Dharma talk by Reverend Blayne Higa, which he completed by placing his palms together in *gasshō* 合掌 and reciting the nenbutsu 念佛.<sup>57</sup> Indeed,

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<sup>54</sup> Wong, "Bronze Project Beach Clean-up," 10.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Buddhist Church of America, "EcoSangha at San Jose Betsuin"; Buddhist Church of America, "San Jose Betsuin Celebrates First Anniversary of EcoSangha"; Buddhist Church of America, "San Jose Buddhist Church EcoSangha Earth Day," among many other sources.

<sup>56</sup> Living Dharma Centre, "Manitoba Buddhist Temple Tree Ceremony."

<sup>57</sup> Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, "Our Interdependent Lives." *Gasshō* is the Japanese

*gassho*, *nenbutsu*, and brief Dharma talks or benedictions are usually part of Jōdo Shinshū sponsored forums on ecological matters.

## Sources and Expressions of Environmentalism

One of the most common terms used in Jōdo Shinshū discussions of the environment is *mottainai*.<sup>58</sup> This term is commonly heard in Japanese American Buddhist circles as an admonishment not to be wasteful, an expression of chagrin when one has been wasteful, or a deeper expression of regret when one feels they have not been able to live up to the responsibilities and debts incurred by the work of others in the past. An example of the latter is at the heart of Jōdo Shinshū spirituality, as the practitioner comes into awareness of the enormous efforts of Amida Buddha in the primal past that established the basis for one's liberation in the present life. Such enlightening efforts must not be wasted; the practitioner should continuously turn toward the Buddha with gratitude and utter the *nenbutsu*. On a more worldly—but not less religious—level, the efforts of ancestors, parents, and community leaders of the distant and recent past are a source of obligation for acknowledgement, upholding and transmitting of teachings and institutions, and expressing thankfulness. *Mottainai* means such efforts cannot be wasted.

*Mottainai* is used in secular Japanese discourse, but in Buddhist communities it is given overt Buddhist meaning. In 1960, Rev. LaVerne Sasaki asserted that “*mottainai* is the truth of dependent causation,” meaning that we are what we are due to innumerable causes and conditions, and those causes that led to our fleeting human life must not be squandered.<sup>59</sup> We should turn ourselves toward the buddha-dharma, realize our imperfection and the embrace of Amida Buddha, and experience awakening. Given that dependent origination—or interdependence, if one prefers—is a fundamental cornerstone

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version of the *añjali* mudrā; *nenbutsu* (written as “*nembutsu*” in American and Canadian Jōdo Shinshū communities) is the act of saying the name of Amida Buddha.

<sup>58</sup> *Mottainai* is a complex concept which has drawn significant commentary in English and Japanese language Jōdo Shinshū sources. A comprehensive overview is beyond the scope of this article. One helpful example of commentary on *mottainai* is Yakumo, “*Mottainai*.”

<sup>59</sup> Akahoshi, “‘Shibui’ and the Meaningful Life.”

of most Buddhist ecological thought, this association with *mottainai* would have environmentalist outcomes. In 1970, Rev. Shojo Oi made the connection explicit in a keynote address on the topic of realizing the innumerable benefits provided by Amida Buddha for the Young Adult Buddhist Association Conference, reprinted in the BCA monthly *The American Buddhist*. Oi drew upon the traditional teaching of the four debts (“agents,” in Oi’s telling), which he enumerated as the Buddha, parents, teachers, and all sentient beings. Explaining the latter, he said:

The relationship implied is none other than “engi” (dependent origination) and the Buddhist feeling of “engi” is expressed as “Mottai-nai” or “Okage-sama.” The abuse of natural resources in the name of promoting the welfare of fellow beings under any system of society has come to the fore as a serious study of the word “Ecology.” Because the preservation of nature is directly linked with the very existence of the individual this problem may bring together concerted efforts amongst the human elements of production—labor and the manipulators of capital. It should be added that “Mottainai” is not only to prevent waste of natural resources (or time and effort of man) but also to appreciate that one is in command or control of such means or resources and that with this deep awareness would expend these in the most worthy manner. As a summary, “Realize Amida’s Immeasurable Benefits” means to live the life of a Buddhist with awareness of “engi” and this expressed in one[’s] way of life is to lead it in “mottai-nai awareness.”<sup>60</sup>

Here, *mottainai* is illustrated through awareness of society’s and the individual’s reliance on nature, with a warning about failure to manage natural resources wisely.

But the reference is mostly in passing for Oi. It would take time for *mottainai* to acquire a fully ecological resonance which matched the rise of ecological consciousness in American and Canadian society. As usual, Castro was one of the first to articulate this, though similar rhetoric would eventually become common as *mottainai* took on ever greater ecological significance in Japanese American Buddhism. Here is Castro in 1987:

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<sup>60</sup> Oi, “Realize Amida’s Immeasurable Benefits,” 4.

The feeling of “*mottainai*” arises out of an awareness of the interdependence of all existence and how we must live at the expense of other beings. While we cannot help but cause pain to others, it is through our Buddhist practice that we try to minimize the pain we cause others... Often I am asked how to live Jodo Shinshu in our daily lives. Frequently, the question is asked while we are enjoying refreshments following a Sunday service; eating off a paper plate and drinking from a Styrofoam cup with plastic utensils. Following our discussion, everything is dumped into the trash, used once and wasted! This is truly “*mottainai*”, especially since all this time we have cupboards full of ceramic dishes at the temple which we almost never use anymore... We have lost their [early generations of Japanese American Buddhists] spirit of “*mottainai*” at this very juncture of history when we need it most for many people today have become acutely aware that we are destroying our world with our waste, all in the name of progress and for the sake of convenience. I am not speaking here merely of trash. Waste or pollution is an accumulating by-product of our opulent lifestyle, a lifestyle which caters to desire which, in Buddhism, is the very cause of all pain and suffering. Some of those problems with the greatest potential for disaster seem to me, to name just a few, the destruction of the earth’s protective ozone layer, the so-called Greenhouse Effect, the pollution of the world’s water supplies, the loss of wilderness and radioactive waste.... In Shin Buddhism, we often speak of our deep indebtedness to all that supports us, for all existence is possessed of Buddha nature. It is our responsibility to conserve our great physical and cultural endowment for the future. This is the true meaning of the conservation movement, a movement motivated by humility and gratitude.<sup>61</sup>

In Castro’s telling, awareness of interdependence leads to *mottainai* consciousness, as we come to feel humbled and grateful for what the natural world provides and seek to avoid wasting or harming that source of life. Pollution and environmental disaster are caused by a loss of *mottainai* thinking, where short-sighted and selfish convenience clouds our greater Buddhist vision of the whole. Values that are simultaneously part of Japanese culture and Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism—such as indebtedness, feelings of regretful humility, and

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<sup>61</sup> Castro, “Jodo Shinshu in Modern Life.”

determination to fulfill responsibilities to others—weave together with standard ecological notions and *mottainai* to create a tapestry of ecologically aware Buddhism.

Further strands would be added to this tapestry. In 1995, Rev. Noriaki Fujimori argued in an essay, “Shin Buddhists’ Approach to Environmental Problems,” that ecological consciousness should emerge from Shinran’s teaching that Amida Buddha’s Great Compassion embraces all beings equally, including animals, and brings them to liberation.<sup>62</sup> He cited a specific excerpt from Shinran’s writings as justification:

There will be none among devas, men, and even insects that fly, crawl, or creep, who, upon hearing my Name, fails to awaken a heart of compassion. Dancing with joy, they will all be enabled to come and be born in my land. Fulfilling this vow, I will attain Buddhahood; if it not be fulfilled, may I ultimately not attain Buddhahood.<sup>63</sup>

Fujimori joined this with another of Shinran’s teachings: that in the cycle of *samsāra*, all beings have been our kinfolk and thus we should view all of them as close relations whom we wish to relieve from suffering. These attitudes are especially prominent in latter-day Jōdo Shinshū advocacy for LGBTQ+ groups, BIPOC, and women’s rights, but continue to be applied to the realm of environmental matters as well. Fujimori stated that:

It is time for Shin Buddhists to reconfirm our mission from the viewpoint of environmental issues. I believe that by being involved with environmental issues, we can practice Shinran’s teaching... [and] we will be able to accomplish our missionary work.... By supporting the native people’s movement to recover and restore the natural environment, we can truly live up to the teaching of Shin Buddhism.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Fujimori, “Shin Buddhists’ Approach to Environmental Problems.”

<sup>63</sup> Fujimori, “Shin Buddhists’ Approach to Environmental Problems,” 102.

<sup>64</sup> Fujimori, “Shin Buddhists’ Approach to Environmental Problems,” 102, 106. This quote indicates Fujimori’s interest in native Hawaiian culture and activism as an important guide in transforming Japanese Hawaiian attitudes and practices to become more ecologically aware and sustainable. Contrasting traditional Hawaiian cultivation practices with the environmen-

Thus, for Fujimori, ecological action was more than simply a good idea: it was itself a possible expression of Jōdo Shinshū practice and awareness. In classic Jōdo Shinshū manner, Fujimori goes on to speak of how the Japanese Hawaiian community has inflicted ecological damage, and he accepts responsibility for his own role. This sort of confession of imperfection and self-humbling is a standard part of Jōdo Shinshū Dharma talks and essays. As he explains:

It is important in our practice of Shin Buddhism to reflect upon our behavior, so that we can take responsibility for what we have done. If we are aware that our attitudes are against Amida Buddha's Vow, we can accept any criticism as kind advice of a zenchishiki, a good teacher. Then we can change our behavior as Shin Buddhists.<sup>65</sup>

Here Fujimori highlights introspection as a Jōdo Shinshū technique for becoming aware of the ecological harm that one has committed, in order to stimulate a recommitment to improved sustainable behavior that is in accord with Amida Buddha's vow of universal compassion.

Other frequently cited values for ecological Jōdo Shinshū are interconnection and non-dual wisdom. This is the approach offered by Bishop Yamaoka in a 1991 essay, in which he attempts to tackle the question: "As Buddhists, what can we do for the environment?"

We must transform (and have our views transformed) so that words such as "Natural world," "environment," and "all life forms" are not used for the purpose of separating, isolating, exploiting and manipulating something in order to edify our own needs and shortcomings. We need to see how things live and are in inter-relatedness. It is in the context of inter-relatedness that Buddhism expounds on the wholeness of all things. In the doctrine of Dependent Origination (*Pratitya samutpada*) nothing is created or can exist apart from this network of inter-relatedness; things do not exist in-

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tally destructive golf courses favoured by Japanese Hawaiian Buddhists, he closes his essay with the zinger, "Here in Hawaii, I hope in the near future, I will see some Shin Buddhists learning to plant taro, instead of gripping a golf club" (106).

<sup>65</sup> Fujimori, "Shin Buddhists' Approach to Environmental Problems," 106.

dependently of each other. This network is not a static process, but one of dynamic motion with an infinite potential.<sup>66</sup>

Yamaoka continues by claiming that loss of an interdependent mindset leads to concentration on the ego, and that this leads to both individual suffering and environmental destruction.

From recorded time to this day, we retain a fundamental flaw in our human character. We have a tendency to think, and to deeply believe, that all which surrounds us is there for us to discover, use and discard. If the ego is given continued full play in such a belief system, the result will be the end of the beauty and balance of natural inter-dependence. Such a shift will also pull the flawed human, who is ignorant of the reality of life, into a state of pain and ultimate extinction.<sup>67</sup>

An attitude of interconnectedness is common among ecologically minded North American Buddhists of various traditions. In Yamaoka's discussion, it takes on a distinctively Jōdo Shinshū cast, as it is inflected with the central Shin Buddhist spiritual attitudes of the Dharma working naturally upon us from beyond ourselves, of awareness of receiving compassionate support, and of responding to support with gratitude and a feeling of indebted responsibility:

As Buddhists, how to live at peace, the art of living within inter-relatedness, is to emerge from the "ego-survival person" that separates us from the universal. This is possible, according to the Buddha, through the wisdom and compassion of enlightenment working in our lives. Living with inter-relatedness is to know that the inter-dependent world, the universe, and all that is within it, is not for our selfish purposes and uses. Rather, we must live with the view that the world, the universe, and all that is within it is compassionately giving to us so that we can live and grow. With this view, respect and gratitude arise, and we realize the meaning of our personal lives in an

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<sup>66</sup> Yamaoka, "A Buddhist View on the Issue of Environment."

<sup>67</sup> Yamaoka, "A Buddhist View on the Issue of Environment."



inter-related and universal sense. Gratitude and introspection bring forth the deeper realization of responsibility to the universe and all that is within it. We realize the equality of all sentient beings in the Great Compassion... We need to understand that humanity cannot exist by itself. Humanity exists because of the Compassion of all the known and unknown inter-relationships that are connected to it. Our challenge is to work for all life, the world and the universe, with reflective gratitude and respect.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

Today, the average Jōdo Shinshū temple in North America and Hawai‘i is moving toward environmental sustainability, though some are moving faster than others. There is a widespread awareness of the serious challenges facing our planet and communities, and a desire that Buddhists participate in solutions. Ecological consciousness is informing Buddhist philosophy and practice, is embedded in the children’s Dharma school and youth activities, and is a frequent topic of discussion and—to varying degrees—action.

Interestingly, there are further resources in the tradition that remain untapped. The idea of the Dharma-Ending Age, which has implications about how human activity leads to a degradation of environmental living conditions, is one of them. The Dharma-Ending Age (*mappō* 末法 in Japanese) is a central concern of Shinran and, historically speaking, few sects have affirmed it as vigorously as Jōdo Shinshū. However, it has yet to be connected to ideas of the Anthropocene in Jōdo Shinshū circles.<sup>69</sup> This may reflect that while Jōdo Shinshū environmentalism draws on in-group elements such as *mottainai*, Amida Buddha’s universal compassion, and temple-based community action, significant philosophical influences on this issue in Canada and the United States

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<sup>68</sup> Yamaoka, “A Buddhist View on the Issue of Environment.”

<sup>69</sup> There is one ironic exception: my own work. In addition to my academic role as professor of Buddhist Studies, I am also an ordained monk in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, and serve the Toronto Buddhist Church. In that role, I have written about environmental and other challenges in the modern world in light of *mappō* thinking from the Buddhist tradition. An example of this appears in my book, *Living Nembutsu*. However, it is often unseemly to analyse oneself in an academic paper, and thus I have excluded my own work from this paper.

have also come from other Buddhist sources.<sup>70</sup> Prime among these are Thich Nhat Hanh and other Zen teachers, whose works are far more readily available to mainstream English-speaking readerships than Jōdo Shinshū voices. For example, in 2022, the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, as part of its Green Hongwanji initiative, issued a statement on environmental harmony that committed the member temples to:

- understanding the inherently interdependent, holistic nature of Buddhism;
- transforming environmental actions by first transforming environmental thinking;
- teaching clean, healthy, sustainable environments as a basic human right;
- acting effectively, always informed by Cause/Effect and scientific best practices;
- supporting sustainable societies based on social/economic/environmental equity, universal human rights, respect for nature and for future generations, and a culture of peace.<sup>71</sup>

The statement began with a quote from Thich Nhat Hanh, “We are here to awaken to the illusion of our separateness,” and also quoted environmental Zen activist David Loy: “Engagement in the world is how our personal awakening blossoms.” *Mappō* is of little interest in Zen Buddhism, and thus is not marshaled as a resource for thinking about the environment. Instead, Zen sources talk about interconnection, wisdom, and compassion, and since these ideas also circulate in Jōdo Shinshū discussions, they are readily picked up and

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<sup>70</sup> Of course, these philosophical influences come from non-Buddhist sources, too. Akahoshi’s influences include Al Gore, Castro’s include Joaquin Miller, and Ulrich was influenced by Gary Snyder, Albert Schweitzer, and his own Métis heritage (Ulrich is a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta). Jōdo Shinshū environmentalism in Canada and the United States draws on elements shared with the wider culture as well as subculturally specific sources. Given that no systematic scholarly attention has been paid to this environmental work, the focus here has been on Buddhist sources. Further research could fruitfully explore the non-Buddhist influences operating in Jōdo Shinshū ecological activity.

<sup>71</sup> Matsumoto and Lohse, “Statement on Environmental Harmony.” Bullet-points are in the original.

expanded upon by Jōdo Shinshū thinkers, who are usually non-sectarian in their Buddhist reading habits.

Since the turn of the millennium, Jōdo Shinshū environmentalism has reflected a greater comfort with public engagement regarding social issues. The 20th century was dominated by first and second generation Japanese American ministers and laymembers who experienced severe persecution, including the incarceration of nearly all mainland members in World War II era concentration camps. That trauma—predicated on the false idea that Japanese Americans, especially Buddhists, were likely traitors—led to a common feeling that patriotism needed to be continually proven, and that one should not draw unwanted outside attention to the temple, especially through controversy. Thus, many (though by no means all) were reluctant to speak out about social and political matters, especially in the immediately post-WWII years.<sup>72</sup>

Today, though, power is in the hands of baby boomers who have lived mostly in an age of greater Asian American and Buddhist acceptance (indeed, in Hawai'i they are key power players in state politics, economics, and culture). Many of this generation were influenced in their youth by countercultural elements and feel relatively emboldened to speak publicly on controversial matters. There are also rising influences from fourth and fifth generation Buddhists who are very often hooked into progressive political and social movements. Thus, issues such as ecological crises have moved from the periphery toward the centre as Jōdo Shinshū social concern and engagement have steadily increased in importance and confidence. We can expect that the trends of education, temple greening, and ritual engagement with ecological matters will continue and strengthen further in coming years.

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<sup>72</sup> I do not want to overstate this, as I am only speaking of general tendencies in the relative willingness to take public stands during different stages of Jōdo Shinshū evolution in the United States and Canada. As Tetsuden Kashima noted in the wake of the Buddhist Churches of America participating in campaigns against insulting textbooks and TV programs, “the BCA in 1970 clearly stepped out of what many had considered an insular, conservative community position” (Kashima, *Buddhism in America*, 119). Yet I think other historians of the BCA and HHMH would agree that the ratio of members actively involved in social causes and the frequency with which official bodies tackle larger social issues has increased significantly in the past twenty or so years.

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