



TOKUDO

Rev John Paraskevopoulos

On the 15th October 1994, fourteen overseas candidates received initial ordination or Jokiido as Jodoshinshu priests at the Nishi Hongwanji in Kyoto. This was only the second time that an ordination programme had been conducted specifically for Western ministerial aspirants (the first was in 1989). It is expected that such a programme will be available every five years. On this occasion, the candidates hailed from seven countries across four continents, namely, Germany, Austria, Belgium, the United States, Canada, Brazil and Australia.

Those wishing to become Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji priests must receive their tokudo at the Honzan or mother temple. This once - in - a - lifetime rite is conducted at the Goei-do (Founders Hall) before the image of Shinran. The rite consists of adorations, recitation of the Three Refuges and the Creed of Jodo Shinshu, tonsure (shaving of the head), and the receiving of kesa (ceremonial robe) docho (ordination certificate) and a homyo (Buddhist name). The ceremony is conducted in utmost solemnity.

I am often asked why Jodo Shinshu, being a non-monastic Buddhist path, should still insist on tonsure. Historically, the tonsure rite was performed by Shakyamuni Buddha, as well as being mentioned in the Larger Sukhavaltvyuha Sutra. Since then, it has traditionally been regarded as a ritualised physical act of personal commitment to the teachings of Buddhism. For Shin Buddhists, the tonsure rite (which, incidentally, is not obligatory for female candidates) is not only a symbolic physical act of commitment through shaving of the head, but is also a conscious affirmation of becoming an ordained priest of the Hongwanji and of living the life of Nembutsu.

Tokudo literally means, 'to cross from this shore of birth-and-death to the other shore of Nirvana'. When Gautama embarked upon the Way, he shaved his tresses and said; 'In cutting off my hair, may I, together with all beings, be freed from evil passions and hindrances'. Receiving a set of robes from a hunter, he continued, 'Even as these clothes cover me, may I enfold all beings in compassion and free them from evil passions. It is in accordance with this rite as established by Shakyamuni, that Tokudo comprises a tonsure, the wearing of robes and the recitation of the Three Refuges. Tokudo is a solemn promise to rise above all temptations, to refrain from egotism and to diligently pursue the way of the Buddha.

The Tokudo programme comprised of eleven seventeen-hour days of study and training which included lectures by prominent Buddhist scholars (in English), three services a day (including 6am Jinjo service at the Honzan), and individual study sessions. The lectures, given by such eminent academics as Rev Prof. Hisao Inagaki and Rev Dennis Hirota, covered topics such as: Jodoshinshu and its History; Outline of the Triple Sutra of Pure Land Buddhism; Liturgy and Rituals; and Dharma Talk Methodology.

Tokudo, as mentioned earlier, is considered to be only initial ordination. It entitles you to take certain services such as funerals, lead chanting sessions, disseminate the teachings and, depending on which country you are in, give formal dharma-talks. In order, however, to become a full-time temple master with pastoral responsibility for an entire congregation, one needs to obtain Kyoshi or full ordination which comprises another retreat similar to Tokudo, and, usually, a course of formal university study in Buddhism. Tokudo, which must precede Kyoshi [just as Kikyoshiki must precede Tokudo], is primarily a religious rite, whereas Kyoshi is more akin to an

academic and pastoral qualification (tonsure is not taken again). It is envisaged that a Kyoshi programme for Westerners will be offered for the first at time in the next year or so and then approximately every ten years after that.

Tokudo was, for me, an extraordinary experience as well as a very great privilege. Apart from deepening my ties with the Shin tradition in a more formal way, it allowed me to enjoy the profound fellowship of other way-farers from around the world who were similarly treading the path of Amida's Dharmna. This was especially wonderful for those of us from Australia for whom isolation from the larger Shin sanghas has been the norm. The Tokudo retreat also exposed us to some excellent teachers of Buddha-dharma who provided us with the unusual luxury of instruction in English. Of course, the whole experience of receiving ordination in Kyoto at the 'home' of Shin Buddhism was also an experience to be treasured for a lifetime. One can only remain deeply grateful for the 'causes and conditions' that led each of us on a pilgrimage from far-flung corners of the earth to an enriching experience, spiritual, ritual and emotional - immersed at the heart of the mystery that is the Primal Vow of Amida Tathagata.