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**BWA: Pillar of the Hongwanji**

**By Rev. Yoshiaki Fujitani**

Philip Wylie, a very well-known author of popular novels, tells of his experience in once speaking to an all-women's convention just like this. He tells of arriving a bit earlier at the convention site to settle his nervousness, and he was pensively pacing the floor when he was approached by a young lady, who smiled and introduced herself and engaged him in conversation. "You're Philip Wylie, aren't you? And you're nervous, aren't you?" "Huh! How do you know?" he asked, taken aback. And the young lady said, "Well, otherwise what are you doing in the women's powder room?"

I kinda feel I'm in the same situation. Although I was not caught in the women's bathroom, I'm a bit nervous, as you can see. It's not very often that I have the opportunity and privilege of speaking to an all women's gathering, but not being as nervous as Philip Wylie doesn't make my task any easier.

Did you know that I was selected to participate in this gathering because someone thought I would be an appropriate candidate because I come from a family of six sisters? Our eldest, Terry Yoshida left us a couple of years ago, but, yes, I've been surrounded by bossy women all my life. Can't you tell? Of course, I'm just kidding. In fact, I'm very grateful that I've been asked to be here today, and I thank you and Lois and her planning committee for this very rare and coveted chance for me to join you. Thank you very much, and I say this as an octogenarian who has been made to feel useful again.

First, let me explain the title of the talk. It was given to me by Lois Ohta, Chairperson of the 11<sup>th</sup> BWA membership conference, who suggested, "BWA: A Pillar of the Hongwanji" which coincides with what I had in mind, because Lois referred to something I had written in the Introduction to the book, HOSHA, which was published in 1989 to commemorate the centennial of the establishment of the Honpa Hongwanji in Hawaii. Boy, time flies, doesn't it? In the book

I used the Japanese expression “*enno shita no chikara mochi*” and said the ladies of BWA were that: “*enno no shita no chikaramochi*” of the Hongwanji. So, we are on the same wave length. Yes, there is no question at all, the Buddhist Women’s Association is a pillar of the Hongwanji, and the members are themselves pillars, since the organization is composed of very unique individuals, each a jewel in herself...with her own skills and talents, and needs and idiosyncrasies as well. Some of you might want me to say that the BWA is THE pillar of the Hongwanji, but although it might be true, we have to be tactful, you know, otherwise the menfolk will be habuteru for sure.

By the way, the dictionary explains that the expression, “*Enno shita no chikaramochi*” means one who does a thankless job or one who puts in an unappreciated effort, like doing the cooking and manning the buffet tables, and doing the monthly hoosha sweeping and dusting of the hondoo and onaijin, and preparing the floral arrangements for the altar,...but I think these are extrapolated meanings. The words literally translated read, “the strong one who holds up the veranda or porch,” the pillar, in other words. Hmmm, I have seen some pretty muscular women at the otera. No, I’m again only kidding.

There have been many gifted and outstanding women in the history of our tradition. The Buddha’s stepmother, Mahaprajapati comes to mind, who was the first woman to be admitted into the Bhikkuni-sangha, or the Sangha of Nuns. But even before her, there was a young peasant girl named Sujata, who shared a bowl of milk with Siddhartha Gautama in a kind deed of dana, when he abandoned the long ordeal of fasting. Then there is Baroness Takeko Kujo of the Hongwanji who founded the Asoka Hospital in Tokyo, and who ruined her health working to help the victims of the Great Earthquake in 1923. And we have had strong and effective leaders in the Hongwanji in Hawaii, such as Kiyoko Imamura, Bishop Emyo Imamura’s wife, Aiko Fujitani, and more recently, Toku Umehara, Dorothy Ono, Nancy Shiraki, and Lois Yasui, to name a few who have already left us...and I’m sure you have your own list of wonderful former ladies of BWA, who have contributed much to Buddhist and Hongwanji leadership, and left a wonderful legacy for us to admire and to follow.

The other denominations of Buddhism have also had many outstanding women leaders. About twenty years ago, when I was still at the Buddhist Center, I was privileged to meet three outstanding lady scholars and who were active on the international level. Perhaps some of you remember meeting them, too. There was Dr. Chatsumarn Kabhilsingh, a Thai lady professor at Thammasat University in Bangkok; Also Dr. Rita Gross, religion professor at University of Wisconsin; and Bhikkuni Karma Lekshe Tsomo, who had been an actress earlier and then became a Buddhist nun.

Of course, there remain numerous great ladies today in our midst, and I'm sure you are all familiar with them, and they continue to provide needed leadership among us.

But today we take them all off the pedestal, which they of course richly deserve, and look at the membership as a whole of the Buddhist Women's Association of Hawaii, what used to be called the Hawaii Bukkyo Fujinkai, and ask, Quo Vadis? where do we go from here? And I invite you to consider some of the thoughts I share with you for your edification.

For our convenience we divide the discussion into the three aspects of our faith: Buddha Dharma, and Sangha. All Buddhists always declare "Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhamman saranam gacchami, Sangham saranam gacchami:" We take refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. Buddha represents our spiritual aspect, Dharma has to do with doctrine, and Sangha is the organizational aspect, which has to do with history, structure, and activities of the Buddhist community.

Let's look into the spiritual aspect first. This area has to do with our individual relationship with the Absolute Other, the Other Power, which is actually unknowable, but for our convenience we objectify it with images and names. Thus, for some among us it takes on an anthropomorphic form and comes to us as the Most Wise and Compassionate Amida Buddha, who embraces us and never forsakes us. To grasp our relationship with the Other, words such as 'Oneness' is used. For me, personally, I have been finding a lot of meaning in the simple poem Bishop Ohara penned nearly fifty years ago, and at every opportunity I have been sharing it at temple services. What he wrote was simply, "Only when I have time I look at the mountain, but when I am busy the mountain looks at me." It tells of the Buddha's ever presence in my life. Remember, Shinran Shonin wrote a similar Japanese poem in which he says, "Though I cannot

see, my eyes blinded by evil passions, I know He is there because I feel the warmth of his wonderful compassion.’ To know that we are embraced by Amida Buddha is faith or *shinjin*. I’d describe this simple acceptance as a ‘childlike’ response of gratitude to the Buddha. I remember being among *obaachans* in services and hearing them loudly saying ‘*arigatai, mottainai*’ along with their *onembutsus*. For all of us it is important to establish our solid relationship with the Other, with the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life.

It is also important to give ourselves the chance to broaden our knowledge, too. As you all know, one of the first things established in Hawaii with the coming of the Hongwanji was a night school where English was taught to anyone who wanted an added language skill to get along in the community. Education, then, has been one of the foremost concerns in our Hongwanji tradition. We are all familiar with the teragoya or temple shed school established at local temples, and that simple concern with education continued to the highly touted Japanese High School, the Hawaii Chugakko, Hawaii Koto Jogakko, the English Hongwanji Mission School, and the Pacific Buddhist Academy. Learning, it may be said, has been an important emphasis in our tradition. That might explain to an extent the presence of a sizable number of teachers and former teachers in the BWA.

All I’m suggesting is that creating opportunities to learn something new, or something better, might be something for our ladies to consider improving the quality of life.

I would think getting to know our community better might be worth considering. About 40 or 50 years the Hawaii Betsuin offered a six week series entitled, “Know Your Heritage,” and had experts from the community participating so that we could know more about our Japanese, Hawaiian, Chinese, Korean, and other cultures. I remember Koji Ariyoshi came to talk about the labor movement, Cecilia Lindo shared her Hawaiian heritage, Richard Sasaki discussed the business community. Fifty years ago the Nuuanu Valley religious community started the Union Thanksgiving Service on Thanksgiving Eve at the Saint Clements Episcopal Church on Wilder Avenue and people began to get acquainted with Buddhists, Jews, Episcopal Christians, Unitarians, Methodists, Catholics, and others. I believe these are great learning opportunities.

Then, it is important also to learn about the history and doctrines of our tradition. We are fortunate to have the Buddhist Study Center on University Avenue. The Director there is Rev. Muneto, and he is always ready to support your educational needs. I'm sure he would be happy to listen to your requirements and help wherever possible.

Also, there are many agencies, religion-based or public, out in the community manned by sympathetic, knowledgeable, and sensitive individuals, who are there to serve the needs of the community. You ought to get to know those people, because they will gladly help you if you ask them in carrying your planning and executing burdens.

I'm aware that in certain cases a serious problem is the availability, or rather, the unavailability of funds to finance your programs. One solution might be to pool funds and sponsorship and carry out programs like study sessions on the district level. Another is to set aside a lecture fund or PR fund for certain projects. That might help.

Then we turn to the third area...that of the Sangha. While this is a vast area, I should like to limit myself to the consideration of how the BWA could help in the area of its relationship with the minister. Technically our Hongwanji Sangha is not too different from that of Southern Buddhism in composition, but quite different in organization. It is composed of four sections. The original terms in the Indian language of Pali are: Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasaka, Upasika, meaning Monk, Nun, Layman, and Laywoman. But since the functions of the Hongwanji clergy are different from that of the Southern school, whether male or female, they are called ministers rather than monks or nuns. And the rules of conduct that bind the clergy are certainly not as stringent as those that rule the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis of the Southern school, so the interaction between the clergy and the laypeople is very different as well.

I'm sure many of you have thought seriously about how you can be of help to the minister and his or her family. I am one who has benefited much from the kindnesses of a member of the temple as I was growing up. My father was a minister at Pauwela Hongwanji on Maui from 1921 to 1934. There was a Miss Teruko Kawabe, a spinster, language school teacher, and mother's aide / baby sitter, who died last year at the ripe old age of 101. When she was 15 or `16 years of age she was sent by her extremely strict father to help at the temple and especially to be

a personal aide to my mother and Miss Kawabe, or Teruko-san, as we called her, was my baby sitter for many years. I've loved her as much as I've loved my own Mom. I'm not sure whether such a situation can arise today, but it is possible that a similar relationship with your minister's family might occur, but that's besides the question at this point. Today I was thinking especially about how young some of the Japanese ministers of today are and that there might be a need to help them not only in speaking English or reading English passages, but more basically to help them become acclimatized to a Hawaiian/American environment. Of course there are a number of Sansei and non-Japanese ministers who might not need any language assistance, but I'm sure there are other areas in their work and in their family life where help would be welcomed. Of course, you should be discreet in your asking whether you may be of help to them or not. After all, ministers have their own styles, and their pride, and they certainly would hate to lose face, as you can imagine.

Personal help, I believe, falls in the same category as helping with the upkeep of the altar and the usual drudgery that goes with the traditional support of the temple affairs.

Finally, stanza one in the Dhammapada says: "All that we are is the result of what we have thought; it is founded on our thoughts; it is made up of our thoughts." Basically, then, we are what we THINK. Therefore, we ought to think positively, hopefully, creatively, compassionately.

There is much to be done as women members of our Sangha. I congratulate you on your many accomplishments over the years in support of your temple. I encourage you to continue in your endeavors and look for more flowers that will adorn not only the individual, but also the family, your temple Sangha, and ultimately the entire community.

Because you are pillars of the Hongwanji, we will not expect anything less. Namu Amida Butsu.