

Watsonville Buddhist Temple serves Japanese-Americans

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Special to the Sentinel

First of a two-part series

WATSONVILLE — More Japanese-Americans live here than in any other place in the county. For those Japanese-Americans, the local Buddhist Temple has been the center of religion and social communication since early 1900.

According to the 1980 census, 42 percent of the Americans with Japanese ancestry in the county reside in Watsonville. Many of them grow vegetables, strawberries and carnations, and play an important role in the agriculture of the state.

The Watsonville Buddhist Temple, 423 Bridge St., belongs to Jodo Shinshu (the Pure Land Sect). The sect was founded by Shinran Shonin in early 13th Century Japan. The Buddhist Temple here has eight affiliate and six non-affiliate organizations.

Dharma School, one of those affiliate organizations, was established in 1924 to give religious training to youngsters and was long called Sunday School. Since the name reminded people of Christian Sunday School, it was recently changed to Dharma School. However its existence itself shows a Christian influence. There are no Buddhist Sunday Schools in Japan.

Every Sunday morning at 10 a.m., pre-school to high school age students arrive at the temple to learn the Teaching of

Buddha (Dharma) for one and a half hours. About 60 students are enrolled.

Dharma School once had more students. According to a commemorative book published in 1981 for the temple's 75th anniversary, 265 students from Watsonville, San Juan, and Santa Cruz were enrolled in the Dharma School in 1935.

It's believed the reason for this decline is the smaller size of today's families. Ben Umeda agrees and adds, "Young couples are busy establishing their lives, busy making money. They have their own life and seem to be indifferent to our activities at the Buddhist Temple." Umeda, a Watsonville resident since 1953, is one of 50 members on the Board of Directors of Watsonville Buddhist Temple and serves as co-chair of the Redress Committee for the local Japanese American Citizens League.

Ikuo Nishimura, in his early 50s, is the "Sensei" (priest) at the Buddhist Temple. Nishimura gives Dharma School service in English. Although he has lived in the U.S. for almost half of his life, he still has a Japanese accent.

His service is somewhat Christianized. It is opened by an inspiration and followed by a Gatha Sutra (song), reciting of a Sutra, and incense offering. Nishimura then asks the children to repeat:

"We are all Buddha's children. We all follow Buddha's teaching. We'll all be

nice to everybody."

Nishimura next takes out a piece of rectangular paper. A cross is drawn on it. "Which line do you think is longer?" he says, peering intently at his students. "The vertical and horizontal lines have exactly the same length. But the vertical line looks longer, doesn't it?"

With this he tries to teach students the same value and importance of "Otoosan" (Father) and "Okaa-san" (Mother). He concludes his service with:

"Let us pay our respect to our parents. Please show your sincere appreciation."

After the service, students divide into eight groups and learn more about Buddhism from older members of the temple. "We have a hard time looking for instructors for Dharma School," says Yoko Umeda, chair of the Japanese American Citizens League and an instructor for many years at the Dharma School and pre-school. "People drive their children to Dharma School and leave right away. They probably think they're doing a parental duty, but we certainly need their help."

"People donate willingly to the temple, but many of them don't come out and help," adds Ben Umeda. Donations constitute a large percentage of the temple's income. For the 75th anniversary of the Watsonville Buddhist Temple, a bell and Shoro (bell tower) were donated by the temple members. The Shoro was worth close to \$48,000.



Watsonville Buddhist Temple serves as religious and social center.

Beside the Dharma School, the Buddhist Temple supports Young Buddhist Association, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, Japanese Language School, a pre-school for children, Adult Buddhist Association, and Fujinkai (Women's Association). There are also non-affiliate organizations for Shigin (recitation of Chinese poetry), flower arrangement, tea ceremony, and Kendo (Japanese fencing).

At least once a month the temple holds a religious service such as HoOnko (Shinran Shonin's Memorial), Hana Matsuri (Buddha's Birthday), and Shotsuki Hoyo (Monthly Memorial Service). On the first Saturday evening of the month, people gather at the temple for

Shotsuki Hoyo to pay respect and gratitude for those who have died during that month in previous years. Although this would be a family event in Japan, it is one of the community activities here.

In his "Shotsuki Hoyo" sermon, Nishimura tells a story to his parishioners about two Buddhist priests in a small village in Japan. Sixty people out of 400 families are present at the temple. One of the priests was of the Shingon sect and the other of Jodo Shinshu. Parishioners of both priests began to argue which priest was greater.

"The priest of Shingon sect walked barefoot over burning wood to show his greatness. But none of his parishioners

followed him," he says, "The priest of Jodo Shinshu, on the other hand, prepared a bath tub with water in it. He warmed the water with firewood, and took a bath. When he asked his parishioners to take a bath, too, they were willing to do it. This is the principle of our Jodo Shinshu."

After this sermon, Nishimura's glasses fall down suddenly and break. Giggles are heard here and there, but he is serious. He picks up his broken glasses and tries to fix them. Finally he gives up and looks up, smiling.

Giggles again.

Next Friday: Education at the temple.