

Isabelle Bernard's Notes

Increasing Temple Membership Workshop  
BCA National Council Meeting  
Visalia, CA

Friday, March 4, 2016

**The New York Buddhist Church – Oldest Buddhist Temple in New York City**

Hi friends, I'm Isabelle Bernard from the New York Buddhist Church, at present serving as the Board Chair. I also serve on several committees, including Strategic Planning, Special Events and the Finance Committee. In short, I'm someone who is continually considering the present and future of NYBC from many different angles.

First a few words about New York City. "The Big Apple" is always teeming, always busy and is vastly multi-cultural. "NY, NY" is a locus for business, arts and culture...and being so diverse and densely-populated there are lots of venues for spiritual seekers and wannabe Buddhists to seek out! We have Tibetan Buddhism, Theravadin Buddhism, Won Buddhism, T'ien Tai, Soto and Rinzai Zen, Nichiren, Shambhala, Insight Meditation, Sokka Gakkai, etc, etc, etc...often within a few blocks from each other. However, the New York Buddhist Church is the oldest established Buddhist temple in NYC, founded in 1938 by Rev. Hozen Seki. Our statue of Shinran Shonin is landmarked, as is our building: although it's not a typical-looking Japanese temple from the outside, the 'spiritual vibe' is strong on the inside, and our sangha is deeply engaged in the life of the temple. When I first came to NYBC 21 years ago, I felt welcomed and at home almost immediately.

As the city has a plentitude of religious, cultural, entertainment and leisure time activities, we have to work extra hard to get the word out that we are here...and more importantly, that we are worth a visit! I consider PR as hugely important as is offering new activities that may attract visitors. That has been an important focus for me, as we have the same problem as every other religious organization in NY, declining membership due to attrition and time constraints. People work very long, hard days and weekends are precious.

Of course, religious activities form the backbone of our schedule, with Sunday services at the core. Our monthly Shotsuki Hoyo services bring in a fair amount of folks, as do special services, especially Hanamatsuri, Obon, Eitaikyo, New Year's. We have weekly visits by students enrolled in comparative religion classes; Rev. Earl Ikeda or the MAs sit with them and answer questions after service. We also hold classes in Buddhism for Beginners, Meditation and Chanting, a monthly Japanese-language Howakai, a monthly Book Discussion & Dharmachat. In addition, we have cultural offerings in Nihon Buyo (Tachibana Dance Group), martial arts (Kokushi Budo Institute), Soh Daiko taiko and Okinawan dance (taught by Rev. Earl). We do not have a dharma school, but last year new classes in taiko for kids and adults were started by a former Soh Daiko member, Teddy Yoshikami, and the group is growing.

Unlike most BCA temples, we do not hold our Bon Odori festival at our temple or even nearby, but midtown at Bryant Park, which is fun for our members, as well as the NY Japanese-American community, the many tourists who are visiting during the summer and folks who live

nearly or who just come to the park to read and relax. Many spectators jump in and dance with us! (However, unfortunately this event is not a source of any revenue because of the strictness as well as the expense of food and vendor licenses in NY).

I started our Facebook page in 2012, and it has grown slowly but steadily, really exploding in the last two years. I've found that pictures really help a lot in attracting people to the page, as does posting notices of events and special services. We also publicize events by sending press releases to NY1, TimeOutNY, Japanese language newspapers, posting in 'meetups' (which is an online group) and sending out email blasts to friends, etc.

NYBC has participated in the Buddhist Global Relief Hunger Walk initiative for the last three years – happily, our fundraising efforts have been steadily gaining momentum. It's an opportunity to help with a dire problem in the world that is not diminishing. Bhikkhu Bodhi, who initiated this organization, is a wonderful inspiration of compassion-in-action.

NYBC members have regularly attended Vesak (Buddha's Birthday) commemoration at the United Nations. The initiative to have Vesak recognized at the UN was spearheaded by the Sri Lankan and Thai communities, and happily, it has been, for the last several years, recognized and observed there officially. Last year, NYBC, along with other NY Buddhist groups, joined in sending a petition to President Obama to request that the Buddha's Birthday be recognized as a holiday at the White House, much as other religious services are now. Hopefully in the future it will be!

In 2014, we hosted the Drepung Gomang Monks Cultural Tour. This group is of the Tibetan Buddhist Gelugpa tradition (also known as "Yellow Hats" - which is the same sect as HH Dalai Lama). Had great attendance, our sangha as well as many visitors enjoyed spending time with the monks. They made a sand mandala, put on a cultural pageant, had a handicraft bazaar. We also enjoyed a make-your-own momo (Tibetan dumpling) dinner with the monks. Every day and evening brought a steady stream of visitors. A dialogue between our resident minister Rev. Earl Ikeda and Geshe Jampa about how we each engage with the concept of Amitabha/Amitayus and Amida Buddha in our respective traditions was wonderfully educational. We are looking forward to hosting another group from Drepung Gomang Monastery next month. It's a wonderful experience of dharma sharing. And as refugees in exile, they truly appreciate the help and support of our community.

I cannot talk about educational events we've held without first thanking the Center for Buddhist Education, especially Kuwahara Sensei and Rev. Marvin Harada, as well as all the CBE staff, for their hard work. All of Eastern District benefitted greatly by having a MAP session at NYBC in 2014, which 28 people attended. We are all looking forward to this year's MAP session at Midwest Buddhist Temple in Chicago. I hope some of our MA friends will think about coming East to join us...Chicago is an awesome place to visit, too! CBE also sponsored the LGBTQ seminar at NYBC in 2015, which was well attended and much appreciated. The following day NYBC members and friends participated in the NY Pride Parade for the first time, and we are looking forward to marching again in this year's parade! Last but not least, we are grateful for the reinstatement of the Eastern District Ministers tour. Arigatou!

In 2015, our largest event, co-sponsored with the American Buddhist Study Center, was to mark the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the installation of our Shinran Shonin statue, which survived the atomic blast at Hiroshima, and has stood in front of NYBC since 1955. This ceremony brought many in

the larger community together to mark this very special occasion. We truly appreciate that Bishop Kodo Umezu joined us for a truly moving ceremony and commemoration. The sidewalk in front of our temple was packed with attendees, dignitaries and reporters. It was a truly memorable occasion.

We host an ongoing series of yearly concerts – JAQUWA, a Japan-based trio (koto, piano, violin) has come to NY to give a 9/11 commemorative concert since 2014. Duo Yumeno (koto and cello duet) give a yearly performance. Locating the Sacred, a commissioned piece performed by Project Hansori and Soh Daiko, and sponsored by the Asian American Arts Alliance was held in 2013. Soh Daiko gave a fundraising concert in 2015 that not surprisingly, filled as well as rocked the house! Our ukulele group, The New Uke City Strummers, is popular with both members and non-members, and had a well-attended sing-along at our Christmas party.

With any new initiative we may try, some will succeed better than others. But we must try our best, then evaluate, learn and move forward...just as, Ty Unno once said metaphorically, it is the nature of an elbow to bend forward, it cannot bend backwards! Such events also provide an opportunity to meet and chat with new people, answer questions, tell them about us and invite them back. The goals in initiating new events are equally important to our continuing as a thriving community: bring in new people, raise money, share the dharma and increase our visibility. For example, I'd love to start a 'Buddhist Film Festival' at NYBC! How great would that be! Hopefully we can also someday watch videos of events like the Pacific Seminar on our "Big Screen" (which actually drops down in front of the hondo, so really is pretty much movie-sized). Maybe in the future we can even bring Kuwahara Sensei to N.Y. by hologram or in a 3-D movie experience for dharma talks and classes! At the pace of technology, who knows what opportunities may open to share the teachings of Shinran Shonin!

In conclusion, to grow our community, I believe that none of us can afford to be in a rut with only the same activities year after year. Although we need to be practical, not overtax our resources, and most importantly help and support one another in trying new endeavors. We are all strongest when we work as a team. But it's also important to open up to new blood, new ideas, add new people to the team. Everyone has something unique to contribute! Lastly, I believe we always need to be thinking creatively, outside of the box, in order to not fall into the rut of "same-old, same-old" activities. It's so easy to do!

Thank you, wishing you and your temple members all the best for 2016 in the Nembutsu!