

EcoSangha -- Past, Present and Future -- Is Theme of 22nd Annual Nembutsu Seminar

... we should be mindful to act compassionately toward the other living things with whom we share this world.

– Lady Takeko Kujo, *“Leaves of My Heart,”* Page 56

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About 70 people gathered for the 22nd Annual Nembutsu Seminar at the San Mateo Buddhist Temple on Feb. 9 for an interactive discussion of the theme “EcoSangha: Jodo Shinshu Buddhism and Ecology.”

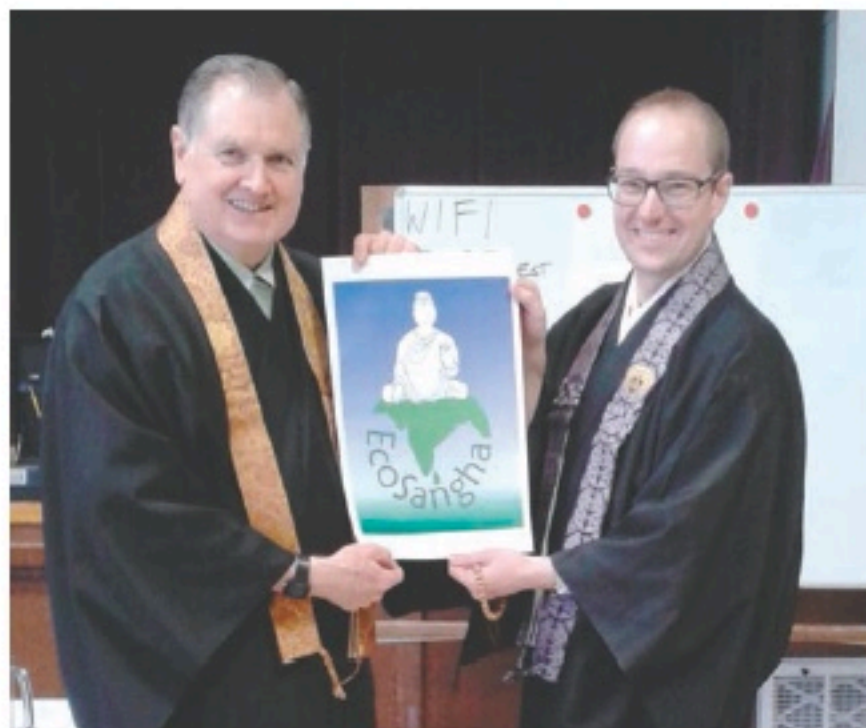
The speaker, Rev. Donald Castro, is Rimban Emeritus of the Seattle Betsuin Buddhist Temple. He founded of the EcoSangha Movement in the Buddhist Churches of America (BCA) back in the late 1970s.

“To be a Buddhist is automatically to be both an ecologist and a conservationist,” he said. “Buddhism is not just ecology, however. Ecology is science and Buddhism goes beyond science. Being based on a medical model (the Four Noble Truths), Buddhists are always working for a cure. Ecologists tell us the world is in peril from many sources; conservationists seek a cure. This is why Buddhists are both ecologists and conservationists.”

The Past

After a brief service led by Rev. Henry Adams, Rev. Castro explained how the connection between Buddhism and ecology started the moment Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment and touched Mother Earth, declaring her to be his witness. Rev. Castro then shared a story illustrating how the early sangha practiced a “model recycling program”:

Ananda was so pleased when Queen Syamavati offered him 500 robes for the Buddha’s sangha that King Udyana questioned his honesty. He asked Ananda what he was going to do with the new garments. “Distribute them among those who are in rags.” And the old garments? “Make bedcovers out of them.” And the old bedcovers? “Make them into pillowcases.” And the old pillowcases into floor covers; the old floor covers into foot towels; the old foot



Rev. Don Castro, left, and Rev. Henry Adams display the EcoSangha logo showing the enlightened Shakyamuni Buddha in the Earth-touching posture.

towels into floor mops; and finally, they would tear the old floor mops into pieces, mix them with mud, and use the mud to plaster the house walls.

Rev. Castro said that Rennyo Shonin would have been a strong environmentalist. Rennyo once found a scrap of paper on the floor, raised the paper to his head and said, “Who could waste this paper? It also comes from Amida Buddha.” Similarly, the famous Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh has commented that everything in the universe which is not paper is in a sheet of paper. All the elements, causes, and conditions needed to make a piece of paper are contained within it.

The Present

Many Japanese Americans may recall their grandmother using the word “mottainai” as she picked up every grain of rice that spilled out of the wash water. The basic meaning is “it’s a shame to waste.” However, mottainai goes beyond that. For example, if you throw away the lunch your mother made for you, you are also throwing away the love with which she made it.

The mottainai concept was promoted interna-

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tionally by the late Professor Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan politician and environmental activist who was awarded the 2004 Nobel Prize for Peace, the first black African woman to win a Nobel Prize. Professor Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement to reduce plastic pollution in Kenya. She visited Japan in February 2005, and mottainai resonated with her.

Rev. Castro lamented the lack of connection between practice and enlightenment in Jodo Shinshu Buddhism. "Interdependence means we have a personal responsibility to take care of everyone and everything," he said. "When one understands the fragile nature of life, one treats things differently." Compassionate acts represent the working of Amida's power. Practice is the

best way to live and minimize suffering. Practice can't bring enlightenment, but it can express gratitude for being accepted "just as we are."

Ideas for the Future

By practicing care for our world, we are following our principles, preserving resources, and serving as a model for our children. People might complain that it costs more, but what is the real cost?

Rev. Castro challenged the participants to imagine this scenario: It's Obon in the future. Our adult grandchildren are dancing in 116-degree weather. They are telling each other, "Our grandparents had a chance to do something about this, but they didn't." Will we do something, or will we squander our children's inheritance? He added, "Looking back, I would never have believed that climate change deniers would be calling the shots today."

Originally, Rev. Castro had wanted to start an EcoSangha

at every temple in the BCA and beyond (and he did succeed in helping to start an EcoSangha at Seattle University). Now he would be happy just to see more ecological practices put into place at more temples. In particular, the huge amount of

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-- Rev. Donald Castro

waste at our bazaars is an issue needing to be addressed.

Rev. Castro would like to see Earth Day on April 22 be acknowledged as the common holiday for Buddhists, the way Christmas is for Christians. The shared symbol would be Shakyamuni Buddha in the Earth-touching posture. He also suggests we practice Naikan self-reflection for Mother Earth by asking ourselves these

questions daily: What have I done for Mother Earth? What have I done to Mother Earth? What has Mother Earth done for me?

Many other ideas were shared by participants. Several mentioned that they save the

cold water before the shower and use it to flush the toilet or to water plants. Others bring their own utensils when eating out instead of using disposable ones.

A Dharma school teacher tells her students, "Before you start to throw something away, think about where it came from and where it is going." Another teacher noted that the BCA Dharma School 6th

Grade Teachers' Guide has two chapters on interconnectedness in nature and with nature. Rev. Adams, who is on the Federation of Dharma School Teachers' Leagues board, encouraged teachers to send their eco-friendly ideas to him at sanmateo.buddhist@gmail.com.

The San Jose Betsuin's EcoSangha was started on Earth Day 10 years ago. Its members think up eco-friendly tips every month to share with their sangha so people can keep these ideas in mind and use them, rather than doing things in a quick and convenient but wasteful manner. And Glenn Kameda of Palo Alto Buddhist Temple suggested we share ideas and create a template for an EcoSangha Workshop, which could then be used by all the temples.

Please try to do something for our world every day and especially this Earth Day on April 22!