



movement of aiming for the *Ondobo Society* was set as a goal for the next 50 years.

Buddhism reminds us to live the middle way. There is no single way to reach a goal. There is no absolute right or wrong. By making mistakes, we as humans grow and advance in our daily lives. The history of our Jodo Shinshu shows how difficult it is to maintain the original spirit and philosophy. However, our Jodo Shinshu strives to hold *Ondobo* as an essential philosophy for all sentient beings.

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# Ondobo: Nembutsu Fellows, Equal and Free

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“I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” (United States Code, Title 4, Chapter 1, Section 4)

As Americans, you may hear or recite this pledge on various occasions at various places. If you have a Christian background, you might imagine a one God nation. It is natural to do so since the pledge was based on Christian ideology. How about people of other faiths? Allāh is the greatest God in Islam, as Muslims recite Allāhu akbar. Hindus believe in multiple gods such as Brahmā and Śiva. Atheists do not believe in any gods.

Buddhism neither accepts nor refuses to be under God. Metaphysically, there is no basis for such a concept. As Buddhists, we believe that we are able to maintain one Nation, whether we are under a God or not, as long as we are humble and do our best. One of the early discourses of the Buddha, Majjhima Nikāya, says that people should be treated equally, based on their words and deeds, not their origin or current status. In Buddhism, it matters not what one believes or does not believe, but the way one lives, that is the basis for equality.

Our Jodo Shinshu founder, Shinran Shonin, expressed his understanding on equality in *A Record in Lament of Divergences*. It says, “for all sentient beings, without exception, have been our parents and brothers and sisters in the course of countless lives in many states of existence.” (C.W.S. 664) He did not

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see boundaries of discrimination based on belief, ethnicity, culture or social status. His understanding is known as *Ondobo*. It is the one of the core philosophies of our teaching, and he emphasized it in various writings.

Although he was an ordained priest at Mt. Hiei under the Tendai Buddhist order, he realized that he was not able to control his human desires. He deeply sensed that there should not be any distinction between priest and lay. Hence, his understanding of Jodo Shinshu led him to believe in true equality. Later in life, he commented that he did not have a single disciple, because he was simply a follower of the Nembutsu teachings. In his understanding, *Ondobo* in Jodo Shinshu was a key word to denote transcending *the typical homage relationship between priest and adherent in an organization*. This was a very unique concept. Many religious leaders talk about equality and no distinction between leaders and followers, but these leaders do not behave as ordinary members of the group, and their followers regard them as special beings.

Although Shinran Shonin did not have any intention of forming his own Buddhist school, his great-grandson, Kakunyo Shonin (3rd Monshu), organized the Hongwanji, as the head temple for Jodo Shinshu followers in 1321, and it became the center of the Jodo Shinshu Sect. The spirit of *Ondobo* had been maintained by descendants of Shinran and his adherents for many centuries, enjoying an equal way of living.

An organization can be a useful solution for gathering people, but on the other hand, it often creates divisions. In Jodo Shinshu, a separation between ministers and members arose, and later an organizational hierarchy became entrenched. As a result, Shinran Shonin’s spirit of *Ondobo* was gradually weakened.

A Buddhist can be identified as a lifelong learner. Our Jodo Shinshu teachings encourage learning and continue Shinran Shonin’s spirit. In 1971, when Shonyo Shonin (23rd Monshu) conducted Shinran Shonin’s 700th memorial service, he referenced a letter on the *Ondobo* movement. In the letter, he mentioned a sense of impending crisis caused by basing the institution on a mere shell, and suggested that all Jodo Shinshu followers (both ministers and members) become listeners of the Buddha-Dharma to propagate the teachings of Jodo Shinshu. In April of 2012 at the Hongwanji Temple, there was a discussion about how Shinran Shonin’s spirit could be effectively transmitted by the time of his 800th Memorial in 2062, and ‘the