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Hearing and Gate

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*A flower's life is to bloom,
but to scatter and fall is also its destiny.*

Ōgi Gan'ei (1895–1969)





INTERVIEW 01.

Thomas Siebert

Tour leader / Guide

I work as a full time tour leader and guide for a travel company in Tokyo. What I love about my job is that I have the opportunity to meet many different people from different backgrounds and share with them my love for Japanese culture.

From a young age, I was fascinated with East Asian culture. As a teenager, I started practising Japanese martial arts and through this became more and more interested in Japanese history of thought. I read some books about Buddhism and was fascinated with Buddhist ideas. The teachings made so much sense to me and it felt as if I finally got the answer to fundamental questions about life that I have had for a long time. I wanted to learn more about Buddhism, so I kept reading. In university, I wrote my Bachelor thesis in Japanese Studies on a Buddhist topic and did a Master in Buddhist Studies, to learn more about this vast and fascinating religion. Although I was intellectually very interested in Buddhism, I didn't see myself as a religious person and felt not very drawn to difficult ascetic practices. During my studies, I encountered Pure Land Buddhism. At first, I was put off by its superficial resemblance to theistic religions, but the more I learned about it the more intrigued I became by its philosophical depth. The main practice is to mindfully call the name of Amida Buddha. After some time you are able let go of your ego-self bit by bit and

realize oneness with the enlightened mind of Amida Buddha. I went to Kyoto to study at one of the Buddhist universities and after finishing my Master, I came back to Japan and worked as an assistant editor for The Eastern Buddhist Journal. I am very grateful for the chance to learn so much during this time and for the opportunity to meet so many wonderful people.

Many great texts were written in the long history of Buddhism. One text that I like is the Tannishō, written by Yuien-bō, a direct disciple of Shinran Shōnin. In this text, Yuien-bō documented anecdotes and sayings of Shinran, which give us a good insight into his humble character and his way of thinking. Especially chapter 13 left a lasting impression on me. In this chapter, Shinran asked Yuien-bō if he would kill a thousand people to be born into the Pure Land, but Yuien-bō replies that even though he wishes to be born in the Pure Land, it is not in his power to kill even a single person. Shinran explains that this is because we cannot always act as we wish. Yuien-bō cannot kill a single person, because he lacks the karmic causes to

kill people, not because he has a good heart. In the same way, a person who may not wish to harm anyone might end up killing many people, because of their circumstances.

This chapter made me reflect on how we often judge other people without considering their circumstances and how we like to see ourselves as good people, because we do good things, although we might have done the same bad things if we would have been born at another place in a different time.

My encounter with the Buddhist teachings had a huge influence on me and to this day Buddhism is a big part of my daily life. I still read a lot of books about Buddhism and try to recite Buddhist texts in front of my home altar every evening. Buddhism influenced the way I see the world and how I interact with other people. I think it made me a calmer and happier person. I don't want to say that Buddhism is the right way for everyone. Some people might find that other religions or worldviews work better for them, but for me, I can say without a doubt that my encounter with Buddhism changed my life for the better.



What is Namu Amida Butsu?

When you visit the Higashi Honganji, you will often see worshippers gathered together with hands together as if in prayer. They are quietly saying something to themselves over and over again. It sounds like, “Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu.” What does it mean?

“Namu” is an ancient Indian word that means “to take refuge in, to respect, to believe, to follow.” “Amida” means “that which cannot be measured.” “Amida” is also expressed as “immeasurable light” and “immeasurable life.” Taken together, “Namu Amida Butsu” means “O Light that knows no bounds, O Life that knows no bounds, in thee I take refuge.”

But to say “I take refuge in the Life that knows no bounds”— what does that mean? It might be clearer to ask, what kind of wish has the Buddha put in the words “Namu Amida Butsu” ?

What do you say when someone asks you, “Are you happy?” You might think you are not that happy altogether, but when compared to someone else, you

might think you are at least better than them. You evaluate yourself in terms of others. The way of thinking comes into play where you rank yourself relative to others as better or worse than yourself.

In this material world it is easy to compare ourselves with others in terms of what we have. There are various indices of power, such as annual income and assets, that can be analyzed and compared. Quantifying them is useful for knowing relative social status and makes it easy for us to compare ourselves with others. But it cannot measure the value of human beings. Here “quantification,” which is a big concern for us everyday, has no meaning or value. More specifically, the Buddha throws us into a world that should not be quantified.

“I earn more money than that person.”
“I have a higher job title than that person.” If that is all you can come up with, well, you have not come up with much. The number of friends you have has probably decreased compared to the past.

We always want to compare ourselves with something. We want to compare ourselves with others. We want to compare ourselves now with who we were in the past. Such thinking leads to a mind that is addicted to “numbers.” In our lives, however, there is actually only a small part that we can quantify numerically and compare with others.

And that number does not represent all of a person’s value and happiness. What you must know is there is a vast world that cannot be expressed by numbers, a world that goes far beyond numbers. It is this single living person I am that cannot be measured by numbers.

“Namu Amida Butsu” is the Buddha calling to you to “wake up to that life that cannot be measured.”



A Pilgrimage to Historic Sites Related to Shinran's Life


Shinran was born in the Hino area of Kyoto in 1173. However, there are no surviving records relating to him until he reached the age of about 29. According to traditions passed down by his many disciples and descendants, his childhood name was Matsu-waka-maru. It is said that he was separated from his parents in his youth and he and four younger brothers were taken custody of by their uncle.


The Hōkaiji in Hino has a close relationship with Shinran's parental home. An image of Amida Nyorai has been preserved carefully in the temple from the

age of Shinran's birth up to the present day. We can imagine the sight of the young Shinran praying before Amida Nyorai.

The age when Shinran was born was an age of transition, when the warriors began to take power in place of the court aristocrats. It is said that corpses from disasters such as warfare, earthquakes, and famine filled the capital. The age itself caused Shinran to ask why people were born and lived their lives. What were his thoughts as he prayed?

Hōkaiji

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