

MON



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Hearing and Gate

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*"When you can feel the pain of your own existence, it opens your heart to the pain of others."*

Miyagi Shizuka, Shin Buddhist Priest (1931–2008)



## INTERVIEW 07

Peter Lait

Shinshū Ōtani-ha priest

Rev. Peter Lait is a Shinshū Ōtani-ha priest, ordained over 30 years ago in Kyoto. He started out in his youth, trying to discover the “truth” about himself and the world around him after becoming handicapped at a very early age, which drove him to India 50 years ago to discover what Buddhism was all about. However, after 7 years there, studying Tibetan Buddhism, he realised that he could not find the simplicity of the Buddha’s teachings, centred around the Dharma as it was too wrapped up in that culture and hence, part of his expectations evaporated, leaving him empty. However, he never regretted returning to England, the country of his birth, as this insight had given him an opportunity to really understand what he was searching for.

Peter ended up in Japan 40 years ago, despairing of and even despising the Dharma. However one day, he just happened to come across Jōdo Shinshū in a book in Tokyo. He said, “it was like love at first sight.” It gave him a Buddhist perspective in simple terms. According to the teachings of Shin Buddhism, the power of Amida Buddha’s Original Vow is said to be a way of “letting things sort themselves

out for themselves.” That power goes far beyond our own calculating ways of problem-solving. This was a very important hint for him when it came to truly understand what the Buddhist teachings really meant. He realised that deep down inside, at the root of each of our lives, there is a great activity at work, allowing us to live, just as we are. He came to realise that he had, in fact, been living in the Dharma all his life, which is the natural flow of life (jinen hōni 自然法爾), constantly moving each one of us whether we know it or not, like waves on an ocean. It is our life’s spring. This is what Jōdo Shinshū has shown him. Hence, one phrase which is constantly present in his life now is “meant to be” (shukugō 宿業). It does not mean fate but rather that everything exists as it should be. Nothing is out of place. One does not necessarily have to strive to do good in order to be accepted by the Buddha. His words do not deal directly with whether one is good or bad but rather they take us beyond this dichotomy, asking us what exactly life is and what we are doing in it right now.

“Life is complicated if we try to take charge of it as I attempted to do in

India through self-practice but through this vanity, I came to realise that this was also ‘meant to be,’” Peter said. He had to go through this in order to come to this conclusion. It could not be avoided. Just letting things take its natural course, allows the heart to feel at peace with itself (anjin 安心) like the stillness and silence in the depth of space or at the bottom of a deep ocean.

Jōdo Shinshū has allowed him to “taste” the workings of the Dharma simply and live his life as it is “meant to be lived.” Peter said, “though I have had my ups and downs over the years, looking back, living in the Dharma, just as I am, has given me the confidence to see that who I am right now, is the only person I can be, where I am, is the only place I can be and what I am doing, is the only thing I can be doing, for which I have no regrets, just living the way I am.”



## Repaying Our Debt of Gratitude (Hōon)

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What should we do to experience happiness? For example, should we get the things we desire, have everything go as we wish, or resolve unpleasant problems we are facing? In any case, we think of happiness as attaining what best suits ourselves and having things go as we wish. That is, we believe that we will be satisfied when our demands are met.

Accordingly, we try to get around whatever barriers are preventing our plans from proceeding as we wish. We demand that things go efficiently according to plan in both our work and private life, and we do not tolerate any obstacles. In other words, we always are concerned only with how conveniently we can satisfy ourselves and want to eliminate any impediments to that satisfaction.

However, if we consider carefully, can we find anything that we have accomplished just by ourselves? In fact, we have been helped by someone and supported by something in every aspect, allowing us to be born and live until today. Various factors beyond

our imagination are interrelated in every single thing that we have done, and none of those factors are independent.

The nenbutsu, “Namu Amida Butsu,” is also called “the act of repaying the debt of gratitude” (Hōonkō). This is not simply repayment of a debt (on), but rather a Buddhist ritual in which we turn our thoughts to the fundamental things that support and establish our lives, and verify our wish to engage in the act of repaying the debt of gratitude. Shinran devoted his life to clarifying that the self is an existence that is owed to the Buddha, always and in every circumstance, and this functions to awaken us. For that reason, we reconfirm the teachings and carry out the Hōonkō (Gathering to Repay the Debt of Gratitude) on Shinran’s memorial day.

The “on” of hōon is a translation of the Pali word *kataññū*, meaning “acknowledging what has been done for me.” It is our realization that the Buddha (Amitābha Tathāgata; Amida

Nyorai) brings the light “for me,” strives for me, and is concerned about me. Isn’t it crucial that we take this opportunity to give heartfelt thanks to the entirety of connections and relationships that support us who live here and now, confirming the significance of being born and the joy of living, enduring conscientiously without deception a life that does not proceed as we wish (adversity), relying on the teachings?





## 07 Enninji – The Site of Shinran’s Cremation

### A Pilgrimage to Historic Sites Related to Shinran’s Life

Shinran (1173–1263) died on January 9, 1263 (the 28th day of the 11th month in the second year of the Kōchō era), at the Zenpōin temple in Kyoto, where his brother Jin’u was living, attended by Jin’u and his daughter Kakushinni (1224–1283). The situation at that time was recorded as follows in the Godenshō (The Biography, 1295), written 33 years later by his great-grandson Kakunyo (1271–1351).

“Shinran came to feel slightly indisposed from late in the 11th month of Kōchō 2 (1262). From that time on, he chanted the nenbutsu ceaselessly and spoke of nothing else. At noon of the 28th, he lay down on his right side with his head to the north and died facing west with the nenbutsu on his last breath. He was 90 years old. As the hermitage where he lived was south of Oshikōji and east of Madenokōji, his coffin was carried far to the east over the Kamo River. He was cremated at the Enninji, located south of Toribeno, in the foothills of Higashiyama.”

The first cremation in Japan was that of the monk Dōsō (629–700), who traveled to Tang China on an official mission, and studied directly under the famous Buddhist

pilgrim Xuanzang (602–664). The custom of cremation did not originate from Buddhist doctrine but just happened to be brought to Japan together with Buddhism. In fact, it was a custom in India from before Shakyamuni’s birth.

It takes time to perform a cremation by building a funeral pyre at the burial site, placing the body on top of it, covering the body with firewood, and then setting it on fire. Modern made-to-purpose crematories in Japan today use fuel oil to reduce the body to ashes in only 90 minutes, controlling the heat by computer. But for cremations in the olden days, the fire was lit at sunset and the ashes could not be gathered until the next morning. When done by people with no experience at cremations, the body might not be completely reduced to ashes, the fire might go out midway, or parts of the body might remain intact.

The Enninji mentioned in the Godenshō disappeared from history for a time, but reappeared again after many vicissitudes. The present-day Enninji lies midway on a sloping road in Yamashina. Shinran’s cremation site lies surrounded by a stone fence deep within a forest at the highest point of the slope that borders the Enninji graveyard, a vivid reminder of the past.

**Enninji**



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