

# MON

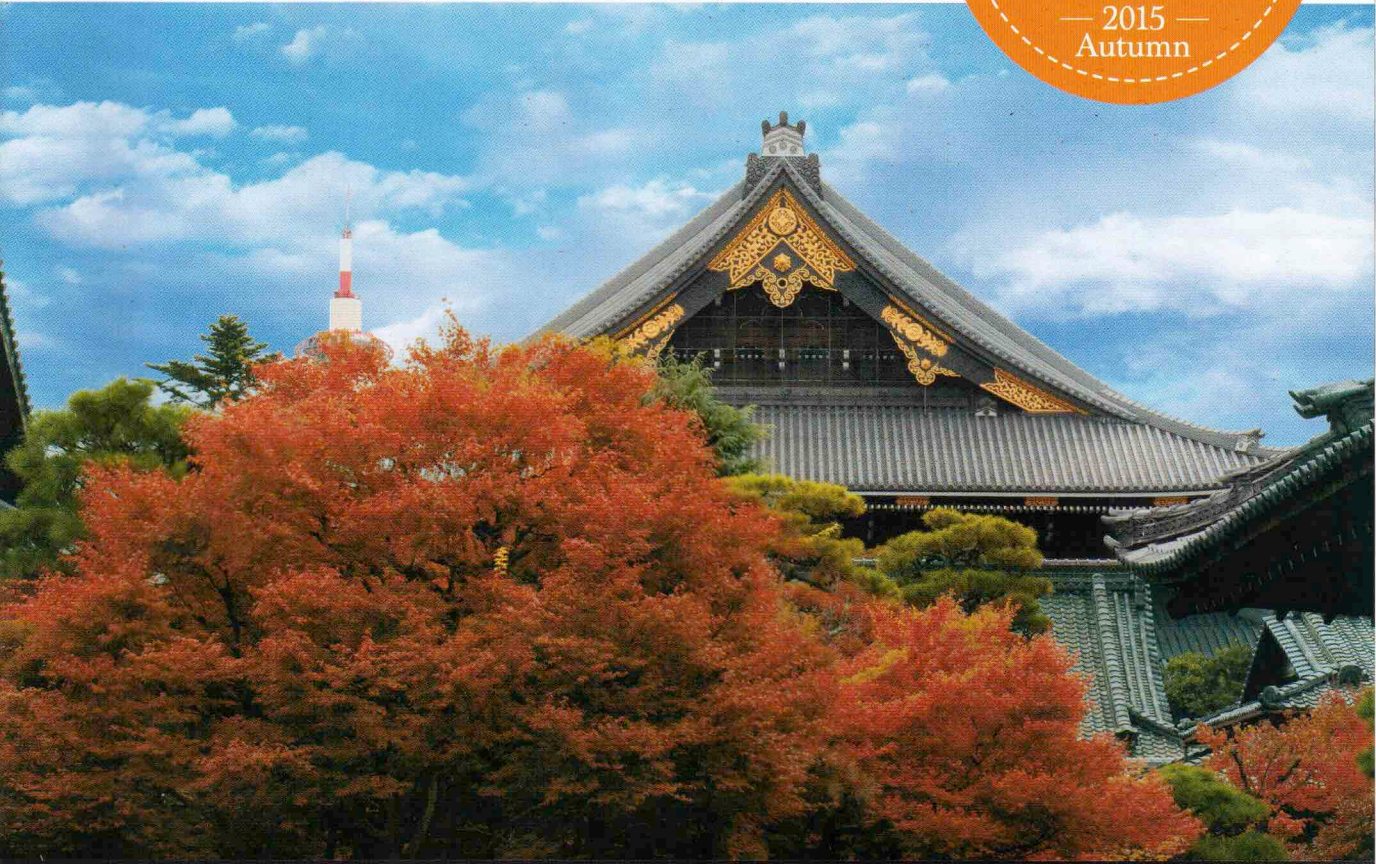


聞・門  
Hearing and Gate

# Free

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Autumn



Goeidō 御影堂

## Looking Beyond Beauty

Traditional Japanese clothing can be seen in Kyoto all year long, but it is only in the autumn that the city itself looks as if it were dressed in a beautiful kimono. The ancient poets of Japan often likened the autumn foliage to a luxurious brocade, and when you walk around the ancient capital amid the red and yellow leaves, you can certainly see the truth in this favorite old metaphor.

However, this time of the year is only special for the colorful trees, while the green, conventional ones are left out of the celebration. No one thinks of taking pictures of them; they seem lost in the eruption of brilliant, attractive colors that surround them.

But when it becomes colder, a few short weeks later, something interest-

ing happens. The streets are gradually covered with fallen leaves; one day, the trees that used to be red and yellow suddenly stand naked, almost invisible. And now the evergreen trees, which had been so casually overlooked up to that moment, stand out once again and easily attract everyone's attention. Quite an impressive transformation—except that those trees never actually change. Only the seasons and people's hearts do.

Beautiful and attractive things have a way of eclipsing everything else around them. But this does not mean that other things cease to exist, or that they become less important. The most powerful and enduring things in life are often the least conspicuous—but like evergreen trees, they are also the ones most

likely to stick around when conditions become harsh.

This also seems to be an apt summary of what Buddhism has to teach us: the importance of seeing past short-lived or superficial attraction in order to find the permanent, reliable core that sustains our souls. Such retraining of our mental eyes does not happen by itself, but in response to important questions that we ask ourselves.

Indeed, when everything goes well we have no incentive, and perhaps no reason, to scratch the surface and look deeper. As in the case of trees, sometimes it takes a cold winter to be able to notice what you could not see during the pleasant autumn.

(Dan Bornstein)



## Leaves of Scripture

### Seeing old age, sickness, and death; awakening to the world's impermanence.

- From the Sutra of the Buddha of Infinite Life \*

About 2,500 years ago, the Indian prince Siddhārtha Gautama—who would later be known as Sākyamuni or simply the Buddha—witnessed a few incidents that brought to his attention the basic causes of uncertainty in human life: old age, sickness, and death. Gautama felt an urge to get to the bottom of this problem, and left his home to become a wandering ascetic. Uncertainty, and the spiritual curiosity that arises from it, are indeed a natural impulse that any person may

experience at some point of his or her life.

Human beings are born into the world with the tendency to feel anxiety about uncertain things. This is the way we are made. But at the same time, uncertainty is also what makes people want to listen to the Buddha's teachings and realize that those teachings are necessary. Feeling uncertain calls into question the way we have been living until now, and this enables us to keep walking and find the right path for us.

The most immediate reaction to uncertainty and anxiety is to want to run away from them. But actually, uncertainty and anxiety are the driving force behind our ability to make progress. We may think that eliminating them is the thing that will save us; but in fact, there is nothing that can make them go away. It is rather the process of looking very closely into the source of these unpleasant feelings that can give us the real power to live.

(Dōbō, July 2014. Kyoto: Higashi Honganji Shuppanbu, p. 33.)

#### \* What is the Sutra of the Buddha of Infinite Life?

This sutra is the basic canonical scripture of Pure Land Buddhism. It explains how Amida Buddha attained Buddhahood and how he saves all sentient beings; it also gives a detailed description of him and his land. (Based on the definition in: Inagaki, Hisao. 1984. *A Dictionary of Japanese Buddhist Terms*. Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, p. 215.)



Bandō-bushi (坂東曲)

## Things Worth Knowing about Shin Buddhism

### Hōonkō

The Hōonkō (報恩講) observance is an important ceremony that is conducted every year at Higashi Honganji. But what kind of event is it, and when does it take place?

Shinran, the founder of Jōdo Shinshū (one of the major schools of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism), passed away on the 28th of November 1262, at the age of 90.

At Higashi Honganji, the head temple of the Shinshū Ōtani branch of this school, Hōonkō is conducted every year from the 21st to the 28th of November in observance of Shinran's memorial day. Hōonkō is about commemorating him, who clarified the teaching of the nenbutsu for the rest of us. The ceremony is a way of repaying our debt of gratitude to him: Hōonkō could be translated as "Gathering to Repay the Debt of Gratitude."

On the occasion of Hōonkō, followers come to the mother temple of Higashi Honganji and assemble in the largest hall of the

temple, the Founder's Hall (Goeidō 御影堂. On page 4 you can read more about this hall).

Hōonkō includes two famous parts: the reading of Shinran's biography (Godenshō 御伝鈔), and the performance of a special style of chant, unique to Higashi Honganji, which is called bandō-bushi (坂東曲).

At Hōonkō, Shinran's life is presented in two ways. One is the hanging scrolls called Goeden (御絵伝), which is displayed in the inner sanctuary of the Founder's Hall, and contains pictorial descriptions of Shinran's life. The other is a manuscript, called Godenshō, in which the story of his life is told. At Hōonkō it is read aloud on November 25th, starting from 5 pm. The bandō-bushi chanting is held on the last day of Hōonkō at 10 am. Around 50 priests forcefully sway their bodies back and forth and from left to right, while chanting Amida's name and hymns written by Shinran. The origin of the Bandō-bushi is still unclear, but one

theory says it symbolizes Shinran's experience when he was sentenced to exile because of his unorthodox teachings and sent on a boat to the Echigo province (present-day Niigata prefecture). The movements emulate his unsteadiness while the boat was being rocked by large waves, and show how he remained steadfast in his faith even in the middle of that difficult episode of his life.

Hōonkō is celebrated not only at the mother temple, but also in the local temples and households of followers all over Japan and in the overseas districts. People gather, have a traditional meal, socialize, and listen to the teachings together. This custom has continued to this day. It is often said by followers of Jōdo Shinshū that the year starts and ends with Hōonkō; this shows just how important this ceremony is in the followers' lives and minds.

## At the Heart of the Temple Precincts: the Founder's Hall

The Founder's Hall (Goeidō) is the most important place in the temple compound of Higashi Honganji. An image of the school's founder, Shinran, is enshrined here and it is also the focus of reverence for the Shinshū Ōtani branch of Shin Buddhism. On either side of Shinran's image there are portraits of the school's former abbots (*monshu* 門首) and two scrolls extolling the virtues of taking refuge in Amida Buddha.

In its long history the temple has been repeatedly destroyed by fire, and the Founder's Hall, too, burned down and underwent complete reconstruction several times. The most recent reconstruction of this hall began in 1879 and was completed in 1895. Another major renovation project was undertaken between 2004 and 2009 as part of the commemorative projects of the 750th Memorial for Shinran Shōnin, when the tiles of the massive roof were completely removed and replaced with new ones, and the damaged building frames were restored and reinforced.

The Founder's Hall is one of the largest wooden structures in the world: 76 meters (250 feet) long, 58 meters (190 feet) wide, and 38 meters (125 feet) tall. It surpasses in its height the Amida Hall next to it. This is because it serves as the gathering place for the activity of *monpō*—that is, "Hearing (*mon*) the Dharma (*hō*)." The size difference between the two halls expresses the importance of passing down Shinran's teachings to the next generations. There, the followers listen to the Buddhist teachings and reflect on their own everyday lives.

