



## Devotional practices

An American student once saw a postcard of Japanese cherry blossoms but couldn't understand why they were so beloved. After coming to Japan, he saw how after the winter cold fades, cherry trees began blooming with colorful pink petals. He saw their brilliant beauty along rivers and walkways, and in parks and gardens. He saw people picnicking under their branches, joyfully singing songs. After a short time, he saw their petals fall gently to the ground like snowflakes. Now he truly understood and appreciated them.

In Buddhism, cherry blossoms represent the universal truth of impermanence—all things are constantly changing. As winter comes to an end, we anxiously await cherry blossoms, announcing Spring has arrived. Cherry trees gloriously bloom, only to shed their beauty after a few short days. Impermanence at once is both wonderful and heartbreaking.

Such too is the essence of human existence. We are born, our lives bloom, and ultimately wither and fade away. Buddhist teachers have written extensively about impermanence, including Rennyō, revered teacher in our Shin

Buddhist tradition, who over 500 years ago wrote: "As fall and spring slip away, the months and years go by; yesterday is spent, and today draws to a close. Little did I know I would grow old before I was aware of it, with the unnoticed passage of the years."

Impermanence seems easy to understand and common sense, yet it's a fundamental Buddhist teaching. The reason why is that we don't live life based on this truth. Rather, we do the opposite—we base our lives on seeking permanence. And this denial of truth leads to suffering.

Think about it: Our happiness is based on our desires for never-ending love, everlasting wealth, unchanging good health, permanent youth, and even, eternal life. As the Buddha pointed out, life is impermanent and ever-changing. How can our lives stay the same? Moreover, our desires constantly flow and change, which means we can never be happy pursuing never-ending desires.

The Buddha's teachings encourage us to flip our perception to see the preciousness of our lives here and now. Impermanence is all around us—in the passing years, in the seasons, and in our faces each day. We are given this life cre-

ated by innumerable karmic causes and conditions—connected to all things and everyone around us—by a power greater than ourselves. We are not living this life based on our desires. Rather, Life is living us. Our lives are wonderful and precious.

By understanding this universal Truth, we can live with gratitude. We may not like change, but we can still appreciate our lives.

Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism, acknowledged this conundrum and what it means to be a person filled with desires and passions. Late in life, he wrote how he still struggled with thoughts of desire and ego, never able to escape them. He ultimately felt this was the meaning of being human. Despite our shortcomings and weaknesses, we may awaken to the great Oneness of Life.

He wrote, "Though I cannot see the light that enfolds me, my eyes being blinded by self-centered desires, the heart of true compassion constantly, endlessly, illuminates and nurtures my body and mind."

今日の  
実行こそが  
人生の  
すべて

## “What We Do Today Affects the Entirety of Our Lives”

— Hirasawa Kō

How have I spent today? When I reflect upon it, can I be genuinely satisfied, to the depths of my being, that it was a day well spent? While engrossed in self-centered plans for the future, buried in grumbling about things that didn't go according to plan, the present moment, my “today,” becomes the past in no time

at all. Nothing can come from this past. It was nothing but moments spent in vain. Without taking a second look at the past that we have each accumulated, I feel that we can never be fully content in the present.

Now, when I reflect upon the fact that our actions in the present invariably have an effect upon our future, we

ought naturally to perform these actions more conscientiously, and they should become more important. The way we live today determines everything in our lives. These words ask us to take responsibility to live in the present moment.



## Ornaments at the Higashi Honganji

The Founder's Hall and the Amida Hall are decorated with a variety of metal fittings generally called "metal ornaments." Besides being decorative, they also have a supportive function. Each hall is furnished with more than 80 different types, for a total of more than 5,000 such items. These have been made using traditional techniques. Some were made by hammering the metal to form its shape. The chasing method used specialized chisels to emboss and engrave the metal. Another method was to attach gold leaf to the metal using Japanese lacquer as the adhesive. We can recognize the excellence of these

technologies when we see at close hand the ornaments decorating the large doors and the ornamental nail head covers that hide the nails, each with a variety of finely detailed designs.

Further, decorative metalwork is affixed to the base of each of the ten pillars of the Goeidō-mon, the gate of the Founder's Hall, to prevent the wood from rotting. Thirty-two vigorous lions are depicted on the metalwork. However, one lion among them seems to be taking a nap. Please try to find that one. You will be surprised not only by the high degree of skill possessed by the artisans of those days but also by their playful spirit.



# The Buddhist Flag

What is the five-color Buddhist flag and why is it displayed?

The Buddhist flag is displayed at the entrance to the main hall and at the gate of a temple when important Buddhist services are being held. It signifies that this place is a Buddhist temple and that the Buddha's teachings are being expounded on this very occasion.

What do the five colors signify?

The five colors—green, yellow, red, white, and purple (black)—have been used from long ago. The Shinshu Shinshū Ōtani branch (Higashi Honganji) of Shin Buddhism also uses a Buddhist flag with these five colors. However, in the flag adopted as the “International Buddhist flag” in 1950, some colors were changed: green to blue, and purple to reddish yellow. The flag now uses these five colors: blue (green), yellow, red, white, and reddish yellow (purple). Each of these colors has a meaning.

Blue (green) is the color of the Buddha's hair and represents meditation, the power to endure calmly and forcefully.

Yellow shows the radiance and brilliance of the Buddha's body. It represents strength, displaying a powerful appearance and a resolute, unwavering nature.

Red is the color of blood, showing the Buddha's passion surging. It represents the zeal of his immensely compassionate heart to work unceasingly for the salvation of living beings.

White is the color of the Buddha's teeth as he preaches. It represents the purity of his heart through which he purges us of our suffering from manifold wicked deeds and carnal passions.

Reddish yellow (purple) is the color of the robe that covers the Buddha's sacred body. It represents the patience to endure without anger every humiliation, persecution, and temptation.

In this way, the colors of the Buddhist flag represent the Buddha's works. It is an important banner that signifies that the Buddha is preaching to us even now.

