

MON



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*Buddhism is the teaching that asks us to inquire
into the nature of human existence.*

Source: Bukkyogaku jōsetsu 仏教学序説 (An Introduction to the Study of Buddhism) (Heirakuji Shoten, 1961), p. 27.

Author(s): Yamaguchi Susumu 山口益 et al.



INTERVIEW 02.

Jessie Shakuni Hokai

Shinshū Ōtani-ha priest /
Shakuhachi (bamboo flute) master

Jessie has lived in Japan for 15 years. She is married to a Japanese man, lives in Kyoto, has a shakuhachi master's license, and is also a Shinshū Ōtani-ha priest with the priest's name Shakuni Hōkai. She was born and grew up in Maienfeld, Switzerland, and says nostalgically of her tranquil birthplace where goats and cows are raised, "It's just like the village in the Heidi animation!" She had been interested in Japanese culture from her childhood, so with the encouragement of her maternal uncle, who had opened an Aikidō training hall, she studied Japanese martial arts. Then, her desire to study martial arts in earnest in Japan grew stronger, and she came to Japan.

While living in Japan and studying martial arts, Jessie also became actively involved in other aspects of Japanese culture, such as learning to play the shakuhachi, and giving performances as a master. She also spent her days teaching English to high school students as an Assistant Language Teacher. Then an event occurred that influenced Jessie's life. That was the death of her mother, who lived in Switzerland. Growing old and despairing of her future, her mother

chose to die by euthanasia even though she was in good health. Jessie desperately urged her mother not to choose to die, but her mother's will to die was firm. Recalling her mother, Jessie said, "She had nothing to believe in." Because of this sad event, Jessie began to ask herself seriously which direction she should take in her life, and what she should believe in.

Just at that time, she happened to read these words posted on a wall of the Shinshū Honbyō, the headquarters of the Shinshū Ōtani-ha: "Now, life is living you." These words caused her to think deeply. What is life, really? She said that her mother, in choosing euthanasia, had "privatized life." By finding Shin Buddhism, Jessie came to believe that "it is best to be oneself as you are." This encounter with Shin Buddhism was not something that she sought positively on her own accord, but was brought about in her encounters with many people. She says that she was interested in Buddhism from a young age, in part because of the connection to Japanese martial arts. Jessie's strong wish to become a Shinshū Ōtani-ha priest steadily grew, and the person who understood and supported that wish was the Reverend

Hamaguchi, the head priest of a Shinshū Ōtani-ha temple in Kochi Prefecture.

In April 2018, she was ordained and became a Shinshū Ōtani-ha priest. She said that she felt extremely fortunate to start a new path in life as a priest in April, which is the month in which the founder Shinran was ordained. Saying that she wants to be of service to the people around her by becoming a Pure Land priest, she regularly wears her priest's clothes. She told us about this incident. One rainy day, she was waiting at a bus stop when an elderly woman, a total stranger, noticing that the sleeves of her priest's robe were wet with rain, said "You're getting wet" and gently wiped them. Concerning this incident, she said, with her eyes sparkling, "Thanks to the priest's robe, the distance between me, a foreigner, and the elderly lady, who was Japanese, vanished. Wearing a priest's robe guides my heart and has taught me so much." From April 2019, she entered the Osaka Shinshū Gakuin to study Shin Buddhism more deeply with the aim of obtaining qualifications as an instructor. Jessie's inquiry into the nature of life will continue still more.



The Beginnings of Buddhism—What Gautama Sought

We who live in the present age lead lives in which the inconvenience and poverty of the past are hardly imaginable. We eat what we like, wear what we like, and our living conditions are convenient and comfortable. We believe that as long as we have money, we can obtain any service to satisfy our desires. We have come to think that if we can satisfy our desires, we will be happy. However, is that real happiness?

About 2,500 years ago, a people called the Śākya clan lived in the northern part of India. A son was born to the royal family and named Siddhārtha Gautama. He was raised with great care, and lacked nothing. His father the king made every effort to give him a life free of worry and suffering. He had him clothed in the finest silks and fed the most delicious food, and built for him many palaces. Wealth and power were placed into his hands so that he could obtain anything he wanted. Things were arranged so that he never had to endure any privations. That was a life replete with almost

everything, a life that those of us living in the present ardently wish for.

However, one day, he once happened to see an insect being eaten by a small bird, and then that bird being eaten by an eagle. He saw in that the situation of his own country, which would not stand a chance if attacked by a powerful neighbor. Ephemeral luxury, which could change at any moment, is transient, and does not allow us to feel absolute peace of mind. He realized that luxury only masked our insecurity and deflected our eyes.

Further, at other times, he met old, withered people, encountered invalids with no hope of recovery, and saw before his very eyes funeral processions for the dead, who would never again enjoy life. He realized then that however great was one's wealth and power, or however advanced was one's learning and skill, such things could not relieve the fundamental suffering of human beings. He decided then to give up everything he had and leave his home to search for the true

way to live with peace of mind under any conditions, and to obtain an authentic and fundamental peace of mind by living sensibly, and being able to accept even death.

Afterwards, Gautama became the Buddha (one who discerns the truth). However, the things that he forsook are just the things that we today pursue.





02 Shōrenin Monzeki

The room of ordaining

A Pilgrimage to Historic Sites Related to Shinran's Life

In 1181, nine years old, Shinran entered the Buddhist priesthood at the Shōrenin. At that time, he was called Matsu-waka-maru. He visited the Shōrenin in Kyoto's Higashiyama district and requested ordination to the priesthood. However, the messenger from the imperial court that would approve his request did not arrive, and night fell. Because of that, Master Jien (1155–1225), the head priest, thought to postpone his ordination to the next day. Concerning this, Shinran composed a poem for Master Jien.

"The heart that thinks to leave it till the tomorrow is like the fragile cherry blossom hanging on the branch. Who knows whether a storm might visit during the night and scatter it to the winds?"

Some people might think that this poem is too accomplished for a child of nine. However, history shows many examples in which even a nine-year-old can produce works that adults admire, if conditions such as

background, learning, and circumstances are in place.

"No one can know if I will be alive tomorrow, so I want to enter the Buddha's path right now." Shinran's words made such a deep impression on Master Jien that even though it was the dead of night, he lit a candle and by its light he shaved Shinran's head.

In addition to warfare, those were times when natural disasters occurred one after the other and famine and plagues were rampant. The age in which Shinran lived saw people crying out for help; it truly appeared to be the Latter Days of the Law. Therefore, it was only natural that an intelligent young man who had grown up under such conditions would be conscious of life's transience, thinking "I too will certainly die. What will happen then?"

That thought was Shinran's starting point; he spent his life of 90 years as a seeker, continuing to search intently for the path of liberation from the cycle of life and death (samsāra).

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