

MON



聞・門
Hearing and Gate

Free
Vol.20

2020 Spring

"To live" means to live and suffer for it.

—Fujimoto Masaki, Shinshū priest (1929-2000)





INTERVIEW 04

Rev. Steven Toyoshima

Missionary of the Higashi Honganji Hawaii Betsuin

"I am serving as a missionary at the Higashi Honganji Hawaii Betsuin. While working here, and during my two years of study abroad in Japan, I have met and learned much from many wonderful people."

Steven grew up outside of Los Angeles as a Japanese American. As a kid, he used to listen to Japanese TV shows and music with his grandparents, but he had no chance to learn more about Japanese culture, and his daily family conversations were in English. One day, he was taken by his grandmother to attend a funeral held at the Higashi Honganji temple in Los Angeles. For him, this funeral was the first opportunity to experience Buddhism. After that, Steven entered the university's department of architecture and was given the research theme of inspecting places where people interacted. "At that time, I remembered the funeral that my grandmother took me to when I was a child. And so I decided to visit the temple once again after several years. At the temple, I spoke with a priest Noriaki Ito and heard from him that Shinran said, 'After I die please throw my corpse into the Kamo river.' Shinran was the founder of Shin Buddhism. This statement so interested me, since I had been

searching for my own roots ever since my grandparents died. They were my only connection to Japan. This statement was my turning point as it sparked my desire to learn more about Japan and Shinran's teachings. I started to participate in the Sunday service at this temple, and eventually became a semi-regular member."

In 2011, he visited Takayama Betsuin at Higashi Honganji Temple in Gifu Prefecture, and he was impressed with an exhibition he saw on Nakamura Hisako (1897–1968). She lost her limbs due to frostbite in the severe cold of Hida Takayama. She endured suffered great hardship as a child but was saved by the teachings of Shinran.

In 2018, Steven was studying abroad in Japan to learn more about Shin Buddhism. He had a homestay arrangement with a Shinshū family temple in Takayama City, Gifu Prefecture. Remembering the Nakamura Hisako exhibition from his previous visit to Takayama Betsuin, he was able to find and read her autobiography at a local library during this stay there and learn more about her life. Having a difficult life with a disability, she was saved by encountering Shinran's teaching of "accepting ourselves as we are."

"Buddhism gives us the power to face ourselves. Sometimes it is quite painful to do, but I think that is true salvation." Hisako Nakamura taught him this lesson, and Steven too said, "I was saved."

After that, Steven entered the Shinshū Ōtani-ha Senshū Gakuin seminary in Kyoto and lived in a dormitory. There, not only do you learn the history and teachings of Shin Buddhism, ritual practice, but also cleaning the classrooms and meal preparation are done by the students. "In addition to learning, we also helped each other as friends sharing the same aspirations and learned to live with each other. I think that life living with those aspiring priests was also an important experience for me. It was connected to what I had previously felt during his work with members of the Los Angeles Higashi Honganji Betsuin." Not only did he earn his qualifications as a priest, but it was also a time when he had important encounters in life. After graduating from the seminary, he decided to serve as a priest at the Higashi Honganji Hawaii Betsuin. Steven, who learns the teachings of Shin Buddhism every day, wears an aloha shirt to work and talks with a soft smile.



The Buddha - The Buddha calling to us to awaken

The Buddha statues enshrined in temples of Buddhist schools can be divided into four kinds:

1. Buddha Tathāgatas, such as Śākya-muni, Amida, Mahāvairocana, and Bhaiṣajyaguru
2. Bodhisattvas, such as Maitreya, Avalokitēśvara, and Dharmākara
3. Mahārājas, such as Acalanātha
4. Devas, such as Śakra and Brahmā

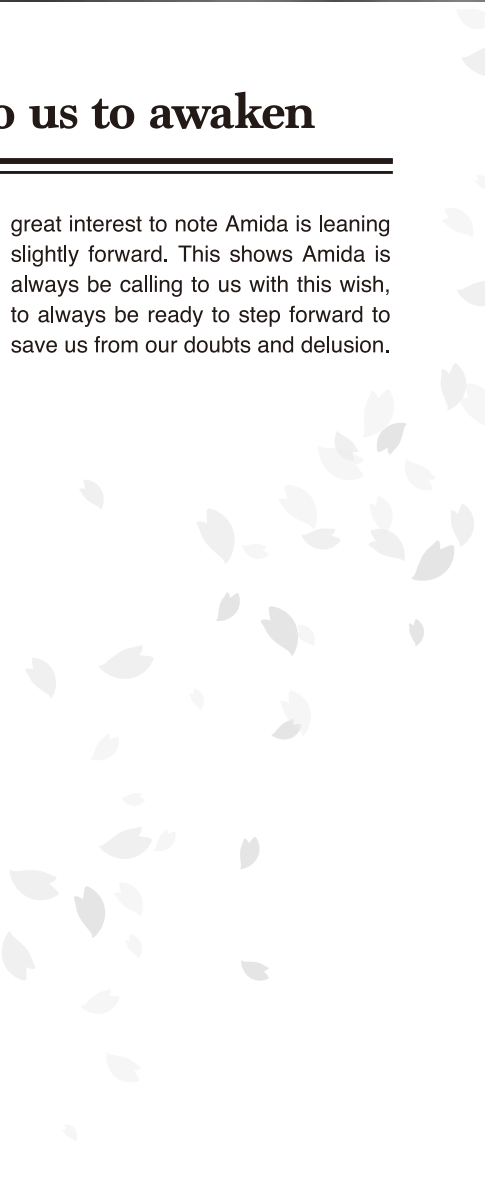
Buddha Tathāgatas, “the awakened ones,” open up the Pure Land, and work to save us from suffering. Bodhisattvas vow to save those in suffering and, while progressing on the path to Buddhahood, guide others to the same goal. Mahārājas are outstanding beings who embody Buddha wisdom and work to convert unbelievers to take refuge in religion, thus their massive, fiery appearance. Devas are deities from Indian mythology that were assimilated into Buddhism as

guardian spirits of the religion.

The Sanskrit word “Buddha,” the awakened one, was translated phonetically into Japanese as “Butsu” and also read “Hotoke.” It means someone who has awakened to the truth. Gautama Siddhārtha was an historical person who actually achieved enlightenment. He became known as Śākya-muni Buddha. Of the many Buddhas that appear in the sutras expounded by him, one is the Amida Buddha enshrined in Higashi Honganji’s Amida Hall.

According to the sutras, before Amida Buddha was enlightened, he was a Bodhisattva known as Dharmākara. At that time he made a wish for us that “when I become Buddha if even a single person who recites my name even once in good faith cannot be saved, I will forego becoming a Buddha.” Consummating this vow, Dharmākara became Amida Buddha. The statue of Amida Buddha enshrined in the Higashi Honganji’s Amida Hall depicts him in a standing position, not sitting or prone. It is of

great interest to note Amida is leaning slightly forward. This shows Amida is always be calling to us with this wish, to always be ready to step forward to save us from our doubts and delusion.





04 Rokkakudō

A Pilgrimage to Historic Sites Related to Shinran's Life

This temple is usually called Rokkakudō (Hexagonal Hall) because of the distinctive shape of its main building. Founded by Prince Shōtoku (574–622), the aristocratic father of Japanese Buddhism, the people of Kyoto are fond of this temple and refer to it politely as “Rokkaku-san,” as if it were a person. The east-west street in front of the temple is called Rokkaku Street.

In 1201, Shinran (1173–1262), then in his twenty-ninth year, had come to a stalemate in his religious training on Mount Hiei. However severe the training he endured, however many books he read, the world was in incessant turmoil, people were suffering helplessly from famine and plague, there was no end to the suffering. He was unable to find a path to save all humanity.


Therefore, Shinran sought the help of Prince Shōtoku, whom he had always respected as a spiritual father, and decided to make a hundred-day pilgrimage to Rokkakudō, which was associated with Prince Shōtoku. Rokka-

kudō was located some fifteen kilometers (about 9.5 miles) distance from Mount Hiei. Day after day he would descend the Mountain in the evening and then return to the Mountain in the morning. He ceaselessly made his inquiry as to the way to save all humanity before the statue of Guze Kannon (Avalokitēśvara) enshrined there, of which Prince Shōtoku was said to be a reincarnation. Tradition has it that at dawn of the ninety-fifth day, Prince Shōtoku in the guise of Kannon appeared to him in a dream vision with a revelation.

Having received that revelation, Shinran resolved to visit Hōnen Shōnin (1133–1212) at Yoshimizu in Kyoto, who was preaching that “anyone, however grievous a sinner he may be, can be saved by chanting Namu Amida-butsu.”

**Chohoji
(Rokkakudō)**

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