



Shōsei-en 涉成園

Your Own New Year

For people living today, winter is the time when the old year departs and a new one arrives. For the Japanese, too, December is the busy year-end period and January 1st is the first day of a new phase in life. This is just something we have come to accept as a given wherever we go in the world – just like free wi-fi or ATMs that gladly accept any credit card.

It didn't always use to be like this, though. Up until 1872 Japan used a combined lunar and solar calendar, in which the year started at the point of transition between winter and spring. In certain traditional contexts this calendar is still observed, with New Year's Day falling on or around February 4th. This is why in Japan the new year is traditionally associated not with winter

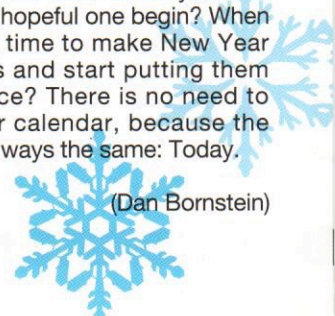
but with the coming of the spring – regardless of the mismatch created by the adoption of the modern solar calendar during the Meiji period.

This association with spring has resulted in yet another important date that serves as a virtual New Year's Day, April 1st, which usually overlaps with the blossoming of cherry trees. This is when the school year begins, new recruits enter companies, and many other occasions occur that symbolize a new beginning officially taking place.

Japan, then, has at least three different starting points for the new year, depending on how you look at it; and all of them coexist, each serving a different purpose. Rather than a single day, Japanese people have a whole series of such cutoffs and renewals.

There is something valuable that we can learn from this: we can start anew any day we choose. Spring can come even in the middle of winter if we decide to welcome it then and there. While it is always nice to have official dates to help us out and give us motivation, we don't have to wait for them to move from one chapter to another. Where does an old year end and a new, hopeful one begin? When is the right time to make New Year resolutions and start putting them into practice? There is no need to check your calendar, because the answer is always the same: Today.

(Dan Bornstein)





Leaves of Scripture

“Self-power” characterizes those who have full confidence in themselves, trusting in their own hearts and minds, striving with their own powers, and relying on their own various roots of good.

(The Collected Works of Shinran, vol. 1, translated by Dennis Hirota, et al. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997, p. 484)

“Devils (Goblins) out! Good luck in!”

People throw roasted soybeans inside and outside their houses while shouting this phrase. This is called Setsubun 節分, which literally means a division of seasons and signals the end of winter. According to a folk belief, picking up as many beans as your age plus one and eating them brings you health and good fortune.

It is one of the seasonal events in Japan. However, it is much more meaningful than simply an event, but something which deeply takes root in our daily lives. It refers to how our “minds separate between good and bad,” which has formed our religious consciousness. We try to get rid of those things we label as

bad, while we willingly take in goodness or things which are convenient to us.

If Buddhist activities were to be conducted from such a dualistic standpoint, these activities would just foment the idea of “minds of good and bad.” It might imply that the most important thing is to pursue goodness and eliminate the bad or the evil in our daily lives. However, if we think in such a way, we would gradually separate ourselves from others based on the same standards, and eventually lose sight of ourselves. For us human beings, it is not easy to distinguish between what is good and bad in a true sense. Things that seem to be good at first some-

times turn out to be bad, and vice versa. If we try to judge everything from our limited point of view, we will inevitably make mistakes in our judgment and cause suffering for others and ourselves. Shinran clarifies that trusting in our minds that try to distinguish between good and bad is called “Self-power.”





Things Worth Knowing about Shin Buddhism

Gasshō and Nenju

If you have visited a Buddhist temple, you might have seen people holding prayer beads and putting their hands together in front of a Buddha statue. But what is the meaning of such things?

The meaning of gasshō

When we meet someone we usually shake hands and when we depart we wave our hands to say goodbye. We use our hands in different ways to greet other people. In order to greet the Buddha, or more precisely to show respect toward him, we place our palms together in front of our chest. This is what we call gasshō 合掌.

Gasshō is a gesture that has been

a part of everyday life in India for ages and it was transferred to Japan together with Buddhism in the 6th century. It is still used in India as a way to greet each other. When Indian people do gasshō, they say namaste, which literally means “bow to you” and is meant to express mutual respect. In this way, gasshō has been used in India even before the advent of Buddhism and was later naturally

adopted by Buddhists in India.

We Shin Buddhists do gasshō in front of Amida Buddha and say the nenbutsu, “Namu Amida Butsu.” It is fair to say that the daily lives of Shin Buddhists start with gasshō. It is not only a way to venerate the Buddha, but also an outer expression of the heart that answers to the Buddha’s call by saying the nenbutsu.

The meaning of nenju

Buddhist prayer beads are called nenju 念珠 in Japanese and are used when doing gasshō in front of a Buddha. There are different theories about their origin. Nenju originally

have one or two loops, consisting of 108 beads, symbolizing the 108 worldly desires we possess. If we divide this number in half we get 54 beads, and dividing this number in half again, we

get 27 beads, which is the number of beads of the nenju that are normally used have.

How to do gasshō while holding a nenju

Put both of your hands through the nenju and place your palms together. Your wrists should be in front of your solar plexus. Don’t raise your

elbows. Extend your fingers without creating any space between them. When you look from the side, your upper arms should be at about a 45°

angle to your body. Then say “Namu Amida Butsu.”

About the Renovation

The Founder's Hall Gate (Goeidō-mon) was rebuilt in 1911 following the reconstruction of the Founder's Hall (Goeidō) and Amida Hall (Amidadō). It is the main gate to the temple grounds and has had many people pass through it to encounter the teaching of Jōdo Shinshū. On March 31, 2016, the commemorative ceremony of the returning of the Amida Buddha statue from the temporary altar in the Founder's Hall to the newly restored Amida Hall will be held. This will complete the renovation of the hall and it will be open to the public from April 1, 2016.

Later in November, the completion of the entire renovation project of both halls and the gate will be commemorated. As we draw near to the end of the project, we wish to take this opportunity to express to the generations of members and followers our utmost gratitude for the tremendous support of our temple extended over so many years. We wish that the newly renovated temple will continue to be the place to encounter the teaching and to meet fellow sangha members for many generations to come. We ask for your continued support of our temple.

Thank you for visiting Higashi Honganji. We hope your visit to our temple is a meaningful experience in encountering the teaching of Jōdo Shinshū. We look forward to your next visit.

