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Teaching About Asian Religions

Looking at the Daihou-ji Buddhist* Temple in West Japan

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*Jōdo sect (Pure Land Buddhism)

At Look at One Japanese Temple

Background to the Temple of Great Treasure, Daihou-ji

By Guven Witteveen

Buddhism in Japan takes many forms according to the sect and the point in history when it emerged on the islands. This story features one real-life example from an ethnographic point of view to show the daily life and annual cycle of one parish and its priest. Located in Echizen-city, Fukui-prefecture, the details of Daihou-ji ("ji" means temple) provide a good point of comparison to monastic Buddhism as practiced elsewhere.

Buddhism traveled from India by way of China, then Korea, and at last to Japan in the sixth century CE. Like so many other social institutions in Japan, factions developed around different practices and interpretations of the religion. By some estimates today, there are 157 distinct varieties of Buddhism in Japan. But 1999 government statistics reckon the top three sects (varieties of Pure Land, Nichiren, Shingon) to account for fifty-eight percent of the population. The *Pure Land* sect (Jōdo-shu) began with the founding figure, Hōnen (1133–1212), who diverged from his Tendai training in order to emphasize the loving grace and saving mercy of the Amida Buddha (not the historical figure) that is accessible simply and directly to all. A person needs only call the name, *namu Amida Butsu*, where *namu* is Praise and *Amida Butsu* is this form of the Buddha. Because of the emphasis on salvation, Pure Land Buddhism is often compared to Protestant Christianity.

Hōnen's student, Shinran (d. 1263), simplified the practice further by saying that even one call to the Amida Buddha made in true faith was sufficient for one's salvation. This greatly appealed to the many farming families of west Japan. Today the *Jōdo-Shin-Shu* (*True Pure Land*) sect has

one of the largest followings, including in the Japan Sea prefectures, where Daihou-ji is located. For several generations after the deaths of these founding figures, the temple life and social functions continued without major expansion or other changes. But with the national unification under the Tokugawa family in Edo (today's Tokyo), many sects took on new administrative roles: recording parishioners (all households were required to affiliate with a nearby temple) and teaching reading and math (the *tera-koya* basic education) are examples. The time of national unification is also when Daihou-ji was founded (1603) under the patronage of Lord Honda Tomimasa, kinsman to the Tokugawas, who moved there from the Pacific side (Aichi prefecture). Very little except location, relics, and a few family grave markers remain from the 1600s. The fire of 1852 destroyed most of the wooden architecture. The scrap metal drives during the Pacific War took away most metal art.

The head temple for Daihou-ji and all temples of Pure Land (Jōdo-shu) Buddhism is the Chion-in, located in Kyoto. *True* Pure Land (Jōdo Shin-shu) also has headquarters in Kyoto at the Nishi-Hongan-ji. Historical relations, finances, training, expertise, and parishioner memorials connect the Chion-in to its branches all around the Japanese islands, including also the temples that served emigrants to Hawai'i and the US west coast, the colonial territories of Japan, and the postwar migrations to Brazil and Peru.

Since the 1600s, there have been several important changes in temple life at Daihou-ji. Over the years the temple prospered and expanded to serve parishioners who moved further away from the main location in Echizen-city. Today the temple's priests will visit the homes of those descendants now living sometimes even an hour away. There are a few small, satellite temple buildings in villages south and west of the main temple. When the temple had numerous apprentice priests, they had a closer correspondence to these more distant parishioners. Today home visits are made during the Obon period (August 13–15), during New Years, and at individual death-day anniversaries.

Another change that happened toward the end of the Tokugawa days concerned the generations of mutual accommodation between Buddhism and the native traditions of Shinto. These were abruptly threatened by the *shinbutsu bunri* (Shinto-Buddhism Separation) demands from the central government. This was part of the effort to raise the status and the national (ethnic) significance of Shinto as a state religion beginning in 1868. Here in the countryside, though, the fission was not always so absolute or virulent. At Daihou-ji today there is a Shinto *kamidana* (god shelf) in the living quarters and also a small building for the Inari tradition (Shinto, native gods in the form of trickster foxes).

The practice of priests taking wives, eating meat, and doing paid secular work, for example, in local government or in the schools is relatively recent in the Jōdo-shu Pure Land sect. Each Pure Land temple's parishioners made its own decision on these matters. By contrast, the *True* Pure Land priests lived this way from their Medieval beginning. However, for the older Pure Land sect of Hōnen, the normal path to priesthood was not through one's parents but through apprenticeship after having been adopted by the temple as an orphan or pledged to the temple by one's family. In the 1920s, Daihou-ji had five apprentices living there. The head priest today is the twenty-seventh and follows his father and his grandfather, who in the 1920s was the

first priest there to take a wife. In fact, this grandfather was preparing for assignment to serve Japanese in Hawai'i and colonial Korea when his governing parishioners decided it would be all right for him to marry before departing Japan. From this marriage his daughter grew up and married one of the apprentices, who then succeeded to the position of twenty-sixth head priest. In 2007 their eldest son, Mr. Yoshida, succeeded to head the temple, and around this time Mr. Yoshida's son had recently finished priestly training in time to take part in the installation ceremony as well.



Temple Grounds with Priest at Bell Tower ringing each morning at 7 a.m.

Looking Around the Temple

Before the age of rapid telecommunication, factory time scheduling, and personal automobiles the parishioners filled the temple grounds for festivals, ceremonies, lectures, yard work, and other annual events for a family, for the neighborhood, or for all parishioners. Some occasions involved several days of eating and sleeping there, so the living spaces, the worship halls, and other spaces had to accommodate a lot of people. Today most people travel by car, so the limited parking is a constraint on the size of gatherings like the Installation Ceremony for Mr. Yoshida in spring 2007. Besides the room for parking, other prominent features are the main hall (*hōndo*), the grave yard (*bōchi*), the living area and meeting spaces (*kuri*), the bell platform (*shōrō*) and the relics building (*sōko*).

Every morning at seven a.m., Mr. Yoshida rings the bell, chanting prayers between each strike of the bell. His mother normally offers the day's fresh rice at the main worship hall and does the morning chanting there. The day's and month's activities are a mix of scheduled and unscheduled activities, since parishioners, neighboring priests, and other visitors may drop in for business or social calls. Funeral and anniversary memorial services punctuate the year, and besides attending to one's own parishioners, there are requests for priests to attend services for colleague's families, too, since a full reading of sutras often consists of three or five priests from several Pure Land (Jōdo-shu) temples. Anniversary (day of death) memorials take place after death on years one, three, seven, thirteen, seventeen, thirty-three, less commonly fifty, and very occasionally beyond this. Daihou-ji has at least one individual whose 300th anniversary is commemorated by descendants.

The annual events begin with New Year's greetings taken to some parishioners' homes in person. Exchanging New Year's cards with all the people connected to the temple takes a little time, as well. Here is a list of the annual cycle for 2009:



Recent Memorial Tablets

January 1	Parishioners nearest the temple come to visit.
January 2	Parishioners from the wider vicinity come to visit.
January 4	Mr. Yoshida and his son pay visits to area parishioners.
March, first Sunday	<i>Butsumyōe</i> commemorates the founder of Pure Land Buddhism, <i>Hōnen Shōnin</i> .
March 21 (or 20, depending on the year)	<i>Higan</i> and <i>Mizufuki Jizō Matsuri</i> is the spring Equinox and an historical event of this temple (the story of the 'water throwing Jizō' figurine that helped to douse a fire on the temple grounds). Note: the Bodhissatva O-jizō-san is thought to aid all that suffer, and in Japan has been associated with travelers and children especially.
April 8	The Buddha's birthday celebration; not a lot is done in the case of Daihou-ji.
June, last Sunday	<i>Eitai Kyō</i> annual commemoration of the dead collectively. Bereaved families offer a donation to the temple for its commemoration.
August 10	<i>Sōhaka Mairi</i> all grave visit. Before the mid-August Obon season starts, people come to the temple to memorialize their ancestors. Since 1915, a lion dance (Shinto) has been performed at the end of the (Buddhist) service due to the death of the master of the itinerant troupe at the time whose funeral was held at Daihou-ji. This is one example of the syncretism that prevailed until the 1860s all over Japan.
August 12 to 15	The Obon season of family, home-based memorializing the ancestors. Priests visit all the households for this <i>tana gyo</i> ; literally, "shelves service." The name comes from the temporary altar and display of flowers, fruits, and vegetables built next to the permanent memorial cabinet. The belief is that one's ancestors annually return to be with their descendents at this time. Older generations may still prepare three meals for the ancestors during each of the three days.
September 21	Grave visits, the same as for the spring Equinox.
November 14 to 15	<i>Jūya</i> . Literally, ten nights. Preparations for the coming winter hardship used to be common. Shopkeepers had special sales called the <i>ebisu-kō</i> . Parishioners would attend religious services, and if they came from a distance, they would overnight in the main hall of the temple while doing their errands in town. The name refers to the Amida Buddha and comes from <i>The Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life</i> , which teaches that there is nothing more precious than to do good works for ten days.
December, mid-month Sunday	<i>Butsumyōe</i> . Literally, calling the Buddha's name Service. At some temples this consists of rising and kneeling 3,000 times to cleanse sins that block one's path to the Pure Land; literally, the Jōdo, or Western Paradise). But at Daihou-ji they repeat the mantra, <i>namu-Amida-Butsu</i> instead.
December 31	<i>Jōya no kane</i> , ringing the bell through the night. Neighbors and parishioners take turns ringing the temple bell before midnight until just after the New Year for a total of 108 times, once for each of the worldly desires that afflict mortals.



Entryway for Temple

Serving One's Parishioners

Relationships with parishioners range from close friendships to the minimal functions of a religious specialist at the appointed moments in the life of a person's household. Major decisions are made by a board of governors representing some of the most active and invested households. Other groups of parishioners help to prepare and set up for seasonal and other events at the temple. Some will volunteer to cook or tidy the grounds. Some temples may hold a study group or meditation gathering regularly, but at present Daihou-ji does not. Seen in terms of its roughly 350 households, Mr. Yoshida considers Daihou-ji to be middle sized among the 7,000 Pure Land temples nationwide.

The number of people served does not change rapidly since a few households may die out (no descendants), transfer their patronage, or move away. But other households prosper and produce branch households to parallel the main line of descent and these may comprise a new, independent membership on the temple roster.

The roles of the priest, beyond his place in his own family, are many. He may well work during business hours for the local government or in the schools. For example, Mr. Yoshida was a well-known teacher of English for twenty-five years in area high schools. But looking at just the temple-related work, he and his family, and possibly the volunteer or paid staff, must conduct the temple work—receiving visitors, as well as communicating by phone, letter, fax, email, and in person. Like any small business, he must keep track of inventory and supplies, handle insurance and payroll, and keep records for tax reporting. There are neighborhood and city obligations to respond to, as well. Matters concerning the building and grounds have to be managed through the seasonal changes. [The temple Web site](#) and newsletter need to be attended to, as do communications and visits to or from the head temple in Kyoto, and with peer temples. Relationships with each household have their own histories to remember or record, and sometimes reminders for contributions need to be sent out. Special projects may call for additional fund-raising.

The actual work of reading sutras, studying about a practical point of history or doctrine, and the one-on-one counseling or small group mediation is maybe the most vivid and rewarding part of the religious work, but it occupies only a fraction of the total effort. With regard to the topics that parishioners seek advice from Mr. Yoshida, most conversations fit into the heading of anxieties or *kokoro no nayami* (matters distressing one's heart): about relationships

at home or work, about money problems, and infrequently about Buddhist understanding of life's purpose, merit-making, or how to respond to an ethical challenge.



Temple Interior Spaces

Usually Buddhism in present-day Japan is characterized by outsiders as dwelling on services for bereaved families at the time of funerals and subsequent anniversaries to memorialize the deceased. But the example of Daihou-ji shows that there is more than reading sutras. Although less prominent in the social life of Japanese than one hundred years ago, temples still bind parishioners together during the year and over the life course of each person. As one grows older the questions of life and death become more prominent and the transition between the former and the latter unfolds before one's eyes through the activities and discussions related to the temple. As others have pointed out, knowing death is the start to knowing life. So to varying degrees of interest and ability, the parishioners are repeating the practices of generations before in order to honor those who have died and to grasp something of the Buddhist view of human society and the spirit that fills it.

Photos, panoramic interiors, and video about this temple are at <http://tinyurl.com/daihouji>.

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