

## MY PATH

With Saint Shinran

By Yehan Numata

I consider myself an extremely fortunate person. Every moment of the day I feel grateful from the bottom of my heart for my present blessed situation. Early every morning, I chant Buddhist sutras in front of our small family altar with my young grandchild, who will soon enter elementary school. After sutra-chanting, we recite earnestly and with gratitude:

“Thanks to the protection of the Lord Buddha and the support of my fellow human beings, I am blessed have awakened from a peaceful sleep that has given me renewed strength to devote myself wholeheartedly to my chosen work, and I promise to make up for the Four Gratuities the Buddha has shown me.”

These words have been very familiar and popular in the Shin Sect, even from its early days. I am filled with wonder when I chant this aloud with my total being. Renewed energy is given to me, and I am able to move more actively, even if I had not been feeling well or had been low-spirited up until that moment. It may be some sort of autohypnosis.

I was born in 1897 and am now 78 years old [passed away at the age of 97 in May 1994] and people around me are constantly telling me, “You are about 80 so you’d better retire from your active life and live more leisurely. Take it easy.” Indeed, it’s one way to live and it carries some significance. But, I still have too many things to do and accomplish. “Don’t put off till tomorrow what you can do today, because nobody knows what may happen tomorrow.” As this saying implies, one cannot possibly know what his condition will be tomorrow, or for that matter even tonight. I must, therefore, as long as I live, be active so that I may realize the ambitions that I have had since my younger days.

I have spent much time and energy managing my micrometer company, the Mitutoyo Corporation, which I started in 1934. However, this company was in fact only a means for attaining my original objective, which is to enable more people to understand the wonders of Buddhism; not just the Japanese, but people all over the world. My greatest desire is to share with others the limitless benefits found in the teachings of the Buddha. Despite the many hardships that I had to endure in establishing and managing my company, the foundation gradually became secure. With this accomplished, I started to put forth my entire efforts to realize my deeper purpose.

During the past ten years, I have, by means of the Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism), distributed about 300,000 free copies of “The Teaching of Buddha” to hotels throughout the world [as of March 31, 2023, about 9,940,000 copies have been distributed to hotels, hospitals, etc.]. This is only a trifling number, when you count the total number of rooms in all the hotels of the world.

This is just one of the many ways to introduce Buddhism to others. Nevertheless, I fear that I

have not done enough. From now on, I must make greater efforts, as there are still various things I wish to do.

Perhaps you wonder how I came to have such hopes and ambitions. To have you understand, it is necessary to tell you some experiences I had in my younger days. To tell you the truth, I ought to have been a priest and not a businessman. I was born the third son in a Jodo Shin Sect temple family living in the mountains in Hiroshima Prefecture. The Jodo Shin Sect has many followers and every person in my family was a very devoted follower. Everyone around me recommended that I become a priest. In fact, I myself believed that I would do so. My mother was especially a devoted follower. She taught me that it was a natural duty to thank and serve the Buddha because we were living due to his charity. After attending an elementary school in my village, I entered a junior high school belonging to the Hongwanji of the Jodo Shin faction. Of course, I wanted to go to a senior high school, but there were too many children in my family and we were not rich enough for all of us to get a higher education. I understood perfectly well where I stood and planned on living independently and working my way through school. It was at this time that fortunately and quite suddenly I was given a chance to go to the United States after graduating from junior high school.

I decided to go abroad then and to study on my own in the United States. In those days, there were no commercial airplanes, so I made the 17-day journey across the Pacific Ocean by ship. It was a time when an anti-Japanese sentiment prevailed in America; and so many Japanese were despised and ill-treated.

I went to Los Angeles, California and stayed with a family living in the city of Hollywood. In the mornings, I had to cook and wash the dishes before going to school. When I returned at night, I had to help prepare dinner and again do the dishes. After these chores were done, I was free to study and do as I liked. On Saturdays and Sundays, I had to help with the housekeeping the whole day. For my work, I was able to earn 2 dollars a week, which just barely covered all of my expenses.

I worked extremely hard for two years. But, due to my very tight schedule I soon became ill. When I consulted a doctor, he said, "You seem to have tuberculosis." I was thrown into despair; for in those days, consumption was considered a fatal disease. In a foreign country with no friends or money, living poorly as an animal, I imagined that if I should die of consumption that nobody would pay attention to me, and my body would be left lying in the fields somewhere.

It grieved me deeply to think of this. But, the words of Saint Shinran saved me when I was in such a miserable and sad state.

"When you are one, think that you are two. When you are two, remember that you are really three. For Shinran is always with you."

When I was a child, I often heard my mother say these words. Driven to the verge of desperation, I happened to recall my mother's words. When I left Japan for the U.S., my mother had given me a book of Shin Sect sutras and prayer beads; my father gave me a sheet of paper on

which he had written the words “Namu Amida Butsu.” I decided to recite this every day, beads in hand, sitting in front of my father’s handwritten scroll, which hung on the wall of my dimly lit basement room. This became my new task and also my only mental support. I thought that even if I should drop dead here, I would never really be alone. The thought that Saint Shinran would surely watch over me gave me the greatest consolation.

To my surprise, my health began to improve as I continued this daily routine of reciting the Nembutsu. My doctor tells me that even now there is a trace of consumption in my lungs. There is no doubt in my mind that I would have ended my life there if I did not have the support of Saint Shinran.

I miraculously recovered my health and worked my way through college and graduated when I was 29 years old, one year earlier than I had expected. I had been saved from death solely because of the doctrine of the Shin Sect. I believe that I would have never made it if I had never heard the teachings of the Buddha. To repay what had been given to me, I wanted to do some service for society as a whole.

At the time it occurred to me that I could introduce this wonderful Buddhism to the American people. I couldn’t materially repay the kindness I had received but I could repay spiritually in this way, which I felt was the best way. However, the anti-Japanese sentiment was growing stronger, and it was almost impossible to teach Buddhism directly. So, at first, I tried to introduce Oriental culture in general. I took the lead in publishing an English magazine called, “The Pacific World,” in collaboration with some students from Stanford University and the University of California. Oriental culture, such as the tea ceremony and the martial arts, has been greatly influenced by Buddhism. In giving the outline of Oriental culture, I meant to propagate Buddhism indirectly. I decided to publish about 4,000 copies of this periodical bimonthly, sending it to all of the major universities and libraries in the United States. We started our project in June 1925.

We were able to continue for two years with the support of some professors and occasional donations made by a few bankers. But, at the end of the second year, we were faced with financial difficulties. These copies were mostly distributed free of charge, and certainly were not best sellers. I returned to Japan with some friends, hoping to find some solution. We were fortunate enough to receive a large contribution and encouragement from Mr. Eiichi Shibusawa, a grand old man in the financial world in those days and a strong supporter of the Hongwanji Temple. At the same time, we heard of Professor Junjiro Takakusu of Tokyo University, who was publishing a Buddhist mission magazine but was also plagued with lack of funds. His purpose was the same as ours, so we got together and began to publish the same periodical, using both magazine covers, “The Young East” and “The Pacific World” respectively.

I went back to the United States and did the best that I could for two more years. But again, the lack of sufficient and regular funds put the project to an end. What a pity that I had to fail after all the effort I put into my work. I was already 33 years old. Thinking over the various reasons I came to the realization that in this economic world one had to have money to accomplish anything. I made a firm decision that I would not depend on others’ funds, but only on my own income. I would never again annoy anyone financially. I returned to Japan firm in my determination. This was in the year 1930.

When I returned to Japan this time, I found the Japanese financial world in the depths of a depression caused by the lifting of the gold embargo by the Hamaguchi Cabinet. Though it was difficult finding employment, I was fortunate enough to find a job in a public office, the Resources Agency of the Cabinet, as I had studied the statistics of economic fluctuations while I was in the United States. This job enabled me to live independently.

But I couldn't bear to be a civil servant all my life. I couldn't fit myself into a salaried man's lifestyle pattern, even though I knew that it would be a stable job with perhaps even a bright future. Nevertheless, in order to start over again and do what I had failed at before, I had to earn money. I had no savings; but I certainly didn't want to earn money by worrying or troubling others. Such an income wouldn't have true value, even if it were used for a good cause. After a while, however, I came to feel that I had to serve society more directly at the same time as I was earning money. But how? This problem weighed heavily on me. Then, by luck, I happened to hit upon the idea of manufacturing something which had never been produced in Japan before, something which hitherto had to be imported at great costs. It had to be something that people would be glad to have and would market well. It took a lot of time for me to arrive at the final concept of my idea.

The automobile and airplane industries were not yet overcrowded and too competitive. "A crab makes his house according to his ability." As in this saying, I considered myself a crab and I looked for an industry in which I could start with a small factory and gradually expand its business.

After much pondering, wavering and questioning, I finally decided to go ahead with my plans to produce a Japanese made micrometer. My friends tried to stop me by saying, "You have a family and children, but no money. You are taking a big risk." They warned me that I would cause my family trouble. "Don't give up your job as a public employee." The solution to my problem was to provide the funds for the business somehow, and to employ someone else to do the actual designing and tooling. In this way, in 1934, I began my business, small-scale as it was. It looked more like a side job, and actually it was a blind drive in the dark.

I established a small laboratory and employed a few people to do research work for two years. To my disappointment, we could not obtain any good results. Soon I was falling deeper and deeper in debt. My seniors and colleagues at the statistics office advised me to stop the business. My juniors laughed with scorn at me. I was forced to stand at the crossroads of my life and make a very important decision. Should I continue being a civil servant and clear up my debts or should I strive to accomplish my purpose?

This period led, so to speak, to my second rebirth. My mind was going around in a circle of indecision. I often spent hours looking at the stars by a pond near my house. I was only getting more confused and ended up wishing that I would be fired from my government post so that everyone would think that I had to begin my private business due to being discharged.

One night, I happened to remember a story from Aesop's Fables. A farmer who had always

employed a field-hand to harvest his crops once began to work the fields by himself and soon all the grain-eating birds flew away, abandoning their nests. I interpreted the moral of this story to mean that troubles were in safekeeping when one depends on others to do his work, but they disappear when he does the work himself. The whole harvest is his. This was the enlightenment I had wanted. I suddenly felt light at heart. I woke up from my delusional state, and it was not so long after this that I readily resigned from my position disregarding the advice of my friends.

I rented a small barn in Kamata, outside Tokyo, making it into my factory. I devoted myself wholeheartedly to my new project and I even put a bed in one corner of the factory, where I slept when I was too busy to return home. During the day, I employed some engineers and guided their work. At night, I myself worked on the lathe or operated the drill. I swore that nothing would hinder me from accomplishing my purpose. I worked for my very life. But again, no good results could be obtained. Everyone around me called me crazy, but no matter what happened to me, I always remembered the words of Saint Shinran, realizing that he was always with me. I never mentioned this to others, however, because of my foolish pride. It was not until four years later that I finally produced a workable and reliable micrometer. The next problem, in some ways greater than the first, was marketing my product.

It was very difficult to find someone who would put their trust into an unknown company when the familiar, time-tested foreign brands could already be found on the market. In the end, however, after making harder efforts, I was able to gain not only all the markets in Japan, but also export my product to compete successfully in other countries. Of course, the period of confusion after World War II was a time when each day, I had to strive to make a living. I think that it was my strong will that enabled me to get over such difficulties and being supported by this will, my business as well as myself were saved. I was able to gain enough courage by remembering that I was working not for my own interests but for everyone in society. I found pride in realizing that my money would be for the propagation of Buddhism.

In this way, when I had saved up sufficient funds, I established the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism, an organization which years ago I had not even imagined. The Society was started in 1965. I now had a new vehicle for promoting Buddhism through the profits of my private business.

In my company, we have a unique monthly event. It is an ancestral rite and has been carried on for over 40 years since the establishment of my company. It is a ceremony in which every worker, assembled in front of the factory altar, thanks his ancestors. This ceremony has been held without missing a single month. I never force attendance to this rite. All of the employees attend it with joy, even if they believe in a different religion, doctrine or thought.

The reason why I began this tradition is as follows: When I started my business, Japan was in an acute depression. The world was drifting into the wild tide of eroticism, grotesquery and nonsense. Even the serious young workers from the countryside were tempted to follow easy-going and sometimes foolish ways. They often forgot their parents back home and their original intentions for coming to the big city. I remembered the peacefulness of mind that I had when I sat in that basement room facing the paper my father had handwritten for me. I made a place in

my factory where the workers could assemble with the spirits of their ancestors. The workers could burn incense in memory of a lost one, especially when a worker could not be with his loved ones. I had hoped that the burning of incense and the recitation of “Namu Amida Butsu” or a moment of meditation would bring comfort and peace to my workers, just as I had felt comforted when I was in America. The beneficial effects of this rite came to increase gradually. The employees’ faces became peaceful, and the number of people who quit decreased. Manufacturing micrometers is a very precise task, so a worker could easily omit some necessary but tiresome step if he wanted to. It is difficult to detect such careless work. Such careless and lazy workers would be the cause for losing public confidence and gaining a bad reputation for our products. Through this ancestral rite, I could succeed not only in reforming some bad characters but also assure my products’ value and achievement. I believed that making fine characters and fine products are the same.

Another important point is to realize that a pure-minded person needs to have beautiful working conditions. I have made efforts to plant as many trees and flowers as possible around the buildings of my company. Though I have very few things to be proud of, I can say with pride that the Mitutoyo Corporation has received first prize in a national contest for having the most beautiful landscape and the most flowers surrounding its buildings.

In this way, I have always walked with Saint Shinran at my side. I have been able to live a long, safe life, and to have a chance to do as I wanted. Therefore, I can’t help thanking the Lord Buddha. Although I was born into a temple family and I had many chances to learn Buddhism, I didn’t have any special studies or unique virtues that could have enabled me to become a priest.

I cannot be like the wonderful King Ashoka, who had protected Buddhism in India many centuries ago. Nevertheless, I would like to try to follow his good example and to do as much as possible. As a non-clerical “protector” of Buddhism, I would like to continue my work in serving society. I will endeavor to do my best as long as I live.

This poem by Lady Takeko Kujo shows my present state of mind.

“The blossoms which will soon be gone are at their most beautiful at this moment.”

Thank you very much.

(Transcript from the Buddhist Culture Lecture Series – Sensoji Temple, October 1975)