



Onrin-dō Hall 園林堂

## Light of Wisdom

In winter the days are shorter and we have fewer hours of sunlight. Sunlight is essential for all life on earth, though. Not only do plants need sunlight for photosynthesis, but also the human body needs sunlight to create vitamin D and to increase the brain's release of serotonin, a hormone that boosts our mood and helps with reducing depression.

Just as our physical bodies are nurtured by sunlight, our minds are nurtured by the Buddha's light of wisdom. A Buddha is a fully enlightened being who has actualized perfect compassion and perfect wisdom. Both are equally important. Only being compassionate and determined to save all beings is not enough if one lacks the wisdom to know how to save them. The other way around, perfect wisdom is wasted if it is not used to compassionately help other beings. Amida

Buddha's name is the Japanese form of two Sanskrit names, Amitabha and Amitayus. Amitabha means infinite light and Amitayus means infinite life. Infinite light stands for the wisdom aspect of the Buddha and infinite life stands for his compassion aspect. Light as a symbol of Buddha wisdom is very common in Buddhist scriptures. We can often find references to the light of wisdom shining in all corners of the universe and destroying the darkness of our delusions.

We ordinary beings lack the wisdom of the Buddha and constantly create our own sufferings by judging the world around us based on what we like and what we dislike. On a rainy day, we can be in a bad mood and we think, "Why does it have to rain today? I had plans to do a picnic with my friends." We are angry because the rain ruined our plans for the day and things are

not going the way we wanted them to. But maybe it has not been raining for several days and the plants really needed water, so for them, it is a good day. The weather does not make a day a good or a bad one, it is our own judgment that does that.

Our ego is so strong that it is difficult to get rid of our attachments and delusions. But the Buddha's light of wisdom continuously shines throughout the universe and its light also touches us ordinary beings all the time. We have to let go of our discriminatory thinking and trust in the Buddha's teaching to experience the Buddha's wisdom and compassion working in our lives. Let go of your calculating mind and just say Namu Amida Butsu.

(Thomas Siebert)

今年こそよ  
思う心に  
今はな—

## “This is going to be the year when I really....”

Now that 2019 has dawned, we are greeting the beginning of a new year. There are probably many of us who each year at this time make new resolutions and embrace new aspirations. Nevertheless, is it not true that, far from learning those lessons to be garnered from our mistakes of the past year, we simply dismiss from memory the things that went wrong? At the beginning of this new year, and before we prepare to dive into the

new one, assuring ourselves that “This is going to be the year when I really....,” is it not also vital that we should, in a spirit of humility, cast our minds back over the year that has now finished? As for when to engage in such reflection, there is no time but the present moment. If we put off this assessment of the past to some unfixed future date, come next New Year’s, we shall only find ourselves yet again assuring ourselves, “This is going to be the year

when I really....”

So I invite us all to reflect, in this very moment of greeting a new year, upon those family members and close friends who so generously accept us for who we are, and also upon the people that, during this past year, we have newly encountered, and all that they have left us with to think about.



## Votive Lights: Candles and Lanterns

In Buddhist services, candles and other votive lights are used. What significance do they have?

### Candles

There are many kinds of candles. The typical one is white, with a uniform thickness, but the one used in Buddhist services is an “anchor-shaped” Japanese-style candle, thick and broad at the top and gradually tapering towards the base. Normally, vermilion-colored sumac wax candles are set out, but when services are held, they are replaced by standard Japanese candles and lit.

The candles come in various colors. White ones are typically used for ordinary Buddhist services, but for especially important rites, such as the Hō-on-kō (Memorial Service for Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism), the vermilion-colored candles are used. Further, gold-colored candles are used for felicitous events and silver ones for inauspicious occasions such as funerals.

### Lanterns

In Buddhist temples there are lanterns called *rintō* (round hanging lanterns) and *kintōrō* (hanging altar lanterns). Like the candles, they serve as votive lights when services are held.

At first glance they may appear to be used simply for illumination, but in fact the hall's interior represents the world of the Pure Land as revealed by Amida Buddha's vow. The votive lights too represent the light of Buddha's wisdom shining on us who are in the dark and ignorant (we whose lives are but an illusion). However, they are not intended to be gorgeous decorations. Their true meaning is that through their light we can perceive the wish for our lives in Amida Buddha's heart.

## The Hair Ropes and Large Sleighs

Until today, Higashi Honganji (Shinshū Honbyō [While this name literally means “The Principal Mausoleum of the True Pure Land Teaching”]) has been struck by fire four times. In 1864, the fourth of these fires destroyed the Founder’s Hall (Goeidō) and the Amida Hall (Amidadō), which were rebuilt over a period of 16 years from 1879.

For that effort, a large quantity of huge pieces of timber were required; however, the towropes used in those days to transport and unload those beams were weak and frequently broke. Given this situation, the idea of a hair rope was devised: making hemp ropes interwoven with women’s hair resulted in stronger towropes. Women followers from all over Japan contributed their hair to the rebuilding of the two halls, so a total of 53 hair ropes could be made. The largest one was 110 m (361 ft) in length, 40 cm (16 in) in diameter, and weighed roughly one ton.

Further, large sleighs played an important role in carrying the cut timber from deep in the mountains to level ground. The transport work in the mountains was dangerous, however. On March 12, 1883, followers who were transporting timber in Ogamidake in Niigata Prefecture met with an avalanche. Twenty-seven people died and more than 50 were injured, including women and small children.

We must not forget that, despite the occurrence of such serious accidents, the reconstruction of the two halls could only be carried out because of the powerful wish of each and every follower and monk to convey to later generations the teachings of the nenbutsu.

\*The woven hair rope presently on display in the temple precincts was donated by followers from Niigata Prefecture. It is 69 m (226ft) in length, 30 cm (12 in) in diameter, and weighs approximately 375 kg (827 lb).

