

MON



聞・門 ———
Hearing and Gate

Free
Vol. 24

2021 Spring

*We are born alone, and we die alone.
Alone we arrive and alone we depart.*

Sākyamuni (The Buddha)



INTERVIEW 08

Michael Conway

Associate Professor at Ōtani University
Shinshū Ōtani-ha priest

“How joyous I am that my heart is rooted in the Buddha ground of the original vow, that my thoughts flow throughout the dharma sea, which is beyond my understanding!” — these words of Shinran Shōnin are constantly on the mind of Michael Conway, as he goes about his busy life teaching Shin studies at Ōtani University as an associate professor on the faculty and an ordained priest of the Shinshū Ōtani-ha. He says, “On any given day our thoughts are constantly jumping about here and there. And we are always trapped in deluded thoughts centering around ourselves. On rare occasions, we put our lives in the hands of Amida Buddha’s original vow. When we do so, our deluded thoughts and selfish desires are washed away by the teaching of the buddha-dharma. To be able to take this stance is a very important guideline for living.”

Born in the suburbs of Chicago, Michael was the youngest of fourteen children. His parents were devout Catholics who sent their children to Catholic school from elementary to junior high school and attended

church every Sunday. When he was thirteen, he heard his brother say, “I’m a little skeptical about the existence of God,” and he thought to himself, “I see. So we can’t prove God exists.” And he became an atheist in his boyish heart. Just around that time, his parents divorced and Michael stayed with his mother. The fourteen children all lived in different ways, some were healthy and went on to college, some had a normal family life, while others had problems and could not leave their mother’s care. Michael himself the youngest was forced to live in a house with his siblings who had problems. For him the biggest problem was his sister’s alcoholism. It was sheer hell for him to watch his mother get angry at his sister who was getting drunk every day. Unable to cope with this unstable family situation, with parents divorced and an alcoholic sister, it came to the point he could no longer stand the stress of this tense environment and gradually turned to alcohol himself.

Later, Michael left his mother’s house to go to college. When he was out of sight of his mother, he became

even more drunk. His only light was the presence of the girlfriend he was dating at the time. She was like a mother to him and put a stop to his drinking. But in his last year of college, she left him. Only two days later, his estranged father died. Breaking up with his girlfriend and his father’s death caused Michael to have a sense of loss and confusion, and he became increasingly dependent on alcohol. After that, he could hardly concentrate on his studies. Half a year after his father’s death, another tragedy befell Michael. Alcohol killed his sister. His sister’s death shocked Michael. He thought he would end up like his sister if he didn’t stop drinking and change his way of life. And although he managed to graduate from college, he couldn’t get a job and ended up living off a part-time work. Even in that difficult situation, contrary to what his mind wanted, his body craved alcohol and he was eventually forced to be admitted to a psychiatric ward. After being treated at the hospital, he was finally able to break the alcohol habit and was “determined to go in a different direction

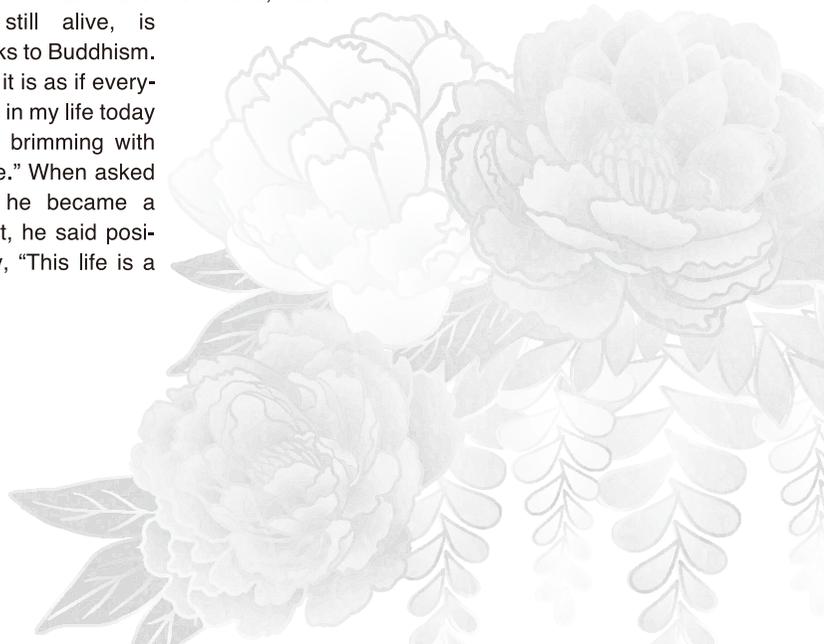


from such self-destruction by any means." One day he decided to go back to the Buddhist temple he went to as part of his high school Japanese class to try zazen. But he couldn't remember the name of the place or where it was, and so he searched under "B" in the telephone book to find the Buddhist Temple of Chicago (BTC), which is related to the Shinshū Ōtani-ha, and decided to attend the Sunday service.

At the Sunday service, a memorial service was being held to commemorate Reverend Akegarasu Haya, the teacher of the founder of BTC. At that service, he encountered Rev. Akegarasu's words, "I am the most evil person in the world," and when Michael heard them he said to himself, "Oh, there's a way for this evil me to be saved without quitting my evil self. This is truly the path I want to walk!" His true encounter with Buddhism in August 1998 was the starting point of his inquiry into Shin Buddhism. After that, for the next six years, he attended BTC and studied by reading English translations of Akegarasu Haya and Kiyozawa Manshi under the guid-

ance of the North American Shin missionary Reverend Patti Nakai. In 2003, with the introduction of Patti, he enrolled as a student at Ōtani University in Kyoto to study Buddhism and Shinshū teachings more deeply. Now an associate professor at Ōtani University, he reiterated his encounter with Buddhism, saying, "It was Buddhism that came out to find me, who suffered from alcoholism and was in a terrible state. If I hadn't encountered Buddhism, I am sure I might have died. The fact that I'm still here, that I am still alive, is thanks to Buddhism. Now it is as if everything in my life today were brimming with virtue." When asked why he became a priest, he said positively, "This life is a

gift of the buddha-dharma. I chose to become a priest because I wished to devote my life to studying this and live in the message of the Nenbutsu." Michael continues to listen to the teachings of Shin Buddhism here in Kyoto as a university faculty member and as a Shin priest.





A Pilgrimage to Historic Sites Related to Shinran's Life

After Shinran's death on January 9, 1263, his body was brought to Toribeno in Higashiyama and cremated. It is said that his cremated bones were gathered up by his disciples and interred in Ōtaninochi at the western foot of Higashiyama. Ten years later, in 1272, his youngest daughter Kakushinni obtained his disciples' cooperation and reburied his remains to the north of the Yoshimizu hermitage, where Shinran had met his teacher Hōnen. A mausoleum was built and Shinran's image enshrined there, and that was the origin of the Ōtani Mausoleum and the beginning of the Honganji. Afterwards, the Honganji went through many transformations, and the present-day Ōtani Mausoleum was built near the site of the former grave.

In India, where Śākyamuni was born, there are no graves holding remains. Followers of both Hinduism and Buddhism set the cremated bones and ashes adrift down the Ganges River. For Hindus, the Ganges River is an incarnation of Shiva, so setting the cremated remains down the Ganges River means to merge them with Shiva. In spite of that custom, in Śākyamuni's case, a struggle

over his bones occurred when they were collected, and people vied with each other to build large stupas in many places to hold his ashes and bones. Thus, as Buddhism spread, stupas and five-story pagodas were built in South-east Asia, China, and Japan as well. These testify to Śākyamuni's eminence, and how his illustrious memory inspired people. These also express the gratitude that people who greatly esteem Śākyamuni feel. Shinran said, "When I die, cast my body into the Kamo River and feed it to the fish." However, it is certainly true that it was the support of people who admired Shinran's illustrious memory, just as they admired Śākyamuni's, that such a splendid mausoleum was built and that worshippers never cease to visit it.

In addition to Shinran's, the remains of successive generations of chief priests of the Honganji, priests of temples from throughout Japan, and believers are interred in the Ōtani Mausoleum. The Mausoleum is supported by many followers who revere the image of Shinran, who followed Buddhist teachings together with all humanity, whose fate is to suffer.

Ōtani Mausoleum

 **Address / Location**
477 Maruyama-chō, Higashiyama-ku, Kyoto

 **Phone number**
075-561-0777

