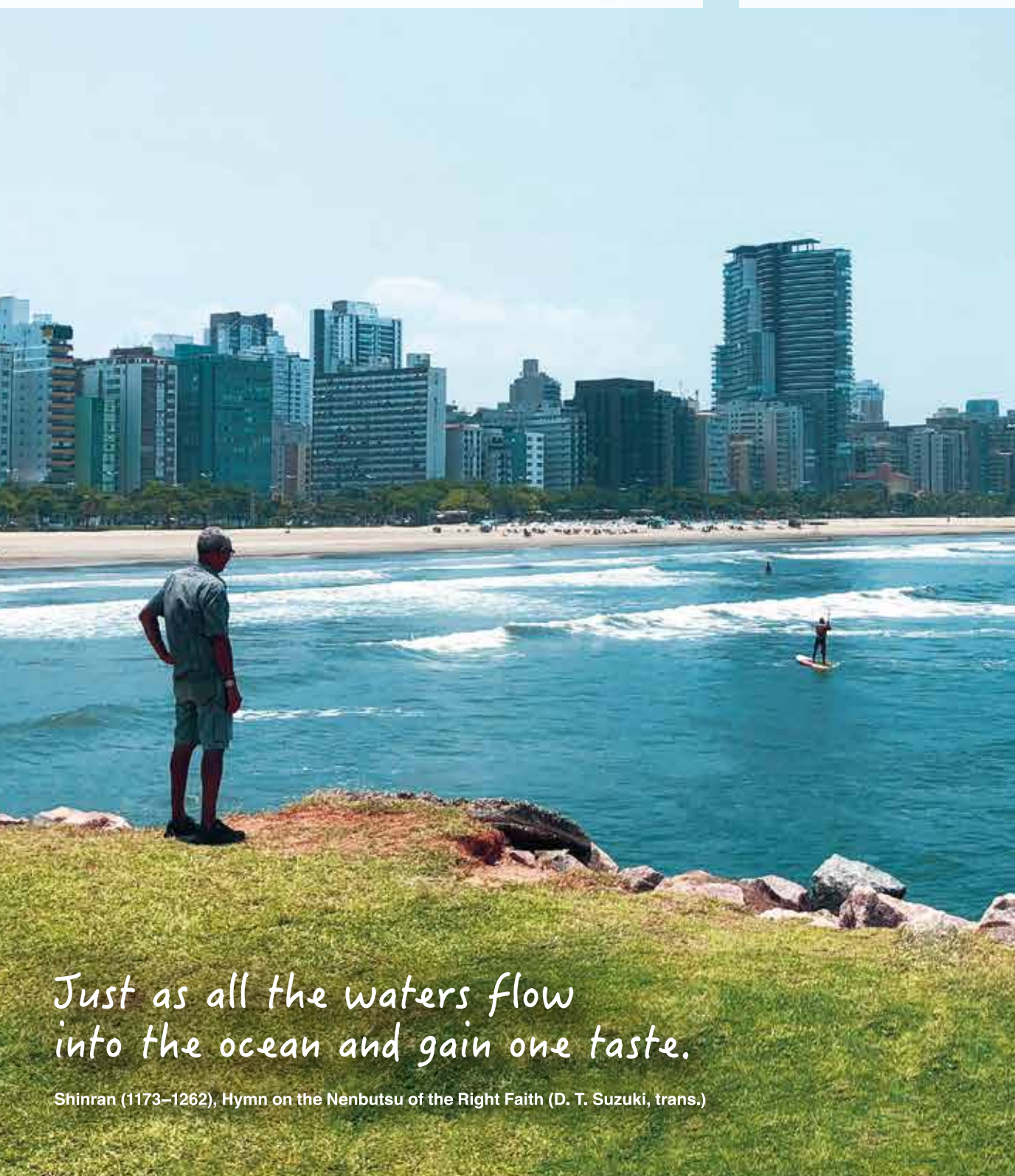




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*Just as all the waters flow
into the ocean and gain one taste.*

Shinran (1173–1262), Hymn on the Nenbutsu of the Right Faith (D. T. Suzuki, trans.)



INTERVIEW 09

Rev. Emilia Emy Urabe Kajimoto

Missionary of the Nambei Honganji Brasil Betsuin

“Just as all the waters flow into the ocean and gain one taste.”

This line of verse from Shinran's Hymn on the Nenbutsu of the Right Faith is treasured by Emilia, who is working as a missionary at the Shinshū Ōtani-ha's Temple in São Paulo, Brazil. Overcoming the barriers of culture and language, she fills her days seeking how to convey and propagate widely the teachings of Buddhism and Shinshū to the people of Brazil.

Rev. Emilia Emy Urabe Kajimoto is a third-generation Brazilian of Japanese descent, born and raised in São Paulo, Brazil. Her father, who was from Kumamoto Prefecture in Japan, was posted to the São Paulo Nambei Honganji (Temple) as a Shinshū Ōtani-ha missionary in 1955. She says about her father, “He was sent to Manchuria as an engineer near the end of the war. There he saw with his own eyes the harsh suffering caused by war, and experienced the worst suffering of human existence. From that bitter experience, father thought to himself, ‘I want to study life to see what I can do.’” So her father became a licensed Shinshū Ōtani-ha Buddhist priest and went to Brazil by himself as a missionary. On the other hand, her mother was a second-generation Brazilian of Japanese descent. At the time her parents met, her family's home was close to the Temple, where they operated a guest house. Her father met her mother when he visited there with other Temple priests. Her

family members were devoted Shin Buddhist followers who frequently worshiped at the Temple. They were married three months after they met, and Emilia was born as their child.

Emilia grew up exposed to the teachings of Buddhism and Shinshū at the São Paulo Nambei Honganji (Temple), where her father worked as a missionary. She says that from about the age of five she had memorized and could chant the Hymn on the Nenbutsu of the Right Faith. Soon she began to attend a local elementary school while living at the Temple. She said that it was difficult to explain Buddhist words such as “temple” and “priest” in Brazil, where there were many Catholics. Therefore, she borrowed Catholic terms to explain to her friends that she was the daughter of a priest and was living in a temple. Concerning that time she said, “I told my school friends that I lived in a church and that my father was a priest, even though I felt it was somewhat different.” She recalled that even as a child she felt uncomfortable using these inappropriate words. Her father, in addition to conducting Shinshū memorial services and events at the Temple, opened a Sunday school for children. By participating in that and also helping out, she became interested in teaching. Thinking that she wanted to become a teacher, she enrolled in the Education Department at a university, and also studied music. One year before she was to graduate, she met

someone who would be a turning point in her life. She would later marry him and give birth to their first child.

The man Emilia married was Hideyassu Kajimoto, a second-generation Brazilian of Japanese descent who also was born and raised in Brazil. He was from Araçatuba, a town located about 500 km northwest of São Paulo. To attend university, he left his hometown and moved to São Paulo. He joined the Temple's chorus group and participated together with Emilia's uncle. It was at that time he met Emilia. She said, “My husband does not sing very well but his main reason for joining the chorus was because young people of the second and third generations gathered there.” Eight years passed before they were married. After marriage, Emilia lived near the Temple and while engaged in child rearing and housework participated in the Temple's women's group and chorus. Afterwards, she moved with her husband and children to Araçatuba, where her husband and his brother started a footwear factory. For 20 years she worked as a Japanese language instructor at a Japanese language school operated by the Japan Culture Association. During that time, she also attended a nearby temple and immersed herself in Buddhist and Shinshū teachings while leading the chorus.

In 2012, a service was held at the São Paulo Nambei Honganji (Temple) to commemorate the 60th anniversary



of the founding of the Shinshū Ōtani-ha's South American mission. On that occasion Emilia assisted with interpretation and translation of Japanese and Portuguese. She said that she had been brought up at a temple and attended one after her marriage as well, but when doing this interpretation and translation she felt again the difficulty of transmitting the teachings of Buddhism and Shinshū, and although she disliked study, she felt that she had to study properly. Then she began to think that she wanted to study in earnest, saying "What can I do for Shinshū at my age?" At that very time, her second son died at the young age of 28. Concerning that time she said that she wondered "whether the Namu Amida Butsu that I thought I understood was the real Namu Amida Butsu" and began to doubt the Jōdo Shinshū teachings that she herself had believed. This sad event aroused in Emilia the thought that she must study Shinshū further. Thanks to the Shinshū teachings and the passage of time, she came to think more positively of various things, and finally became to speak about her son's death. Then Emilia realized, "I have been supported by Namu Amida Butsu all along," and made up her mind to go to Kyoto, Japan to study to become a full-fledged Shinshū priest.

What Emilia thought most important during her one-year stay in Kyoto studying at the Ōtani Senshū Semi-

nary was that "Shinran's teachings must be learned corporally and put to good use in daily life." Most students at the Senshū Seminary were Japanese, and only three were from overseas, including her. She noticed that their way of looking at and reacting to things was very different, although they also were Japanese, and she felt too that they all were suffering from similar problems. One year later, Emilia finished her studies in Kyoto, was ordained as a priest, and returned to Brazil. At present, she is engaged in instructing people in the teachings of Shinshū as a missionary at the Temple. Concerning her missionary activities in Brazil, she said, "The most difficult thing is that the concepts of Brazilian culture, Western ways of thinking, and Buddhist modes of thought are completely different. One has to think of religion's spirituality within daily life and customs that are completely different." Thus, when she conveys the teachings, she said that to deepen the followers' understanding it is most important that one first deal with cultural differences before explaining religion: "One can explain Shinran's teachings only after explaining that Brazilian culture is this, and Japanese culture is that."

Formerly, the followers at the Temple were immigrants from Japan, and most of them came to the temple to conduct the memorial services that they were familiar with rather than to learn the teachings. However, from

about 15 years ago, the number of people not of Japanese descent who were interested in Buddhism, as well as students, etc., slowly increased. At that point Emilia strongly felt the need to translate Buddhist teachings into Portuguese, and was searching for ways to respond to people interested in Buddhism. Her new activities increased further. From April 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic began to spread, the Temple began to conduct memorial services online. Emilia said about this, "Being online, many young people too began to participate in the services, and I heard that many of them were joining for the first time." About 70% of the participants in the memorial services were the children and grandchildren from all over the world beyond Brazil, including Japan, the United States, France, Italy, Australia, and New Zealand. Further, she is continuing to engage proactively in streaming the weekly Sunday services and the study of Buddhism and Shinshū on Facebook and YouTube. At present, the number of listeners from Peru, Columbia, and other countries is increasing, as are mutual exchanges through messages and question and answer sessions. Treasuring Shinran's words cited above, Emilia is beginning to steadily expand the circle of Buddhism and Shinshū teachings throughout Brazil and South America through her own activities.



01 Temple in foreign country

Nambei Honganji Brasil Betsuin

The history of Buddhism in Brazil began with the first Japanese immigrants in 1908. There was unofficial missionary activity by the various sects of Japanese Buddhism from the first stage of Japanese immigration, and Buddhist temples were built in the state of São Paulo in the areas where Japanese immigrants lived. However, diplomatic relations between Japan and Brazil were severed with the Second World War, and missionary activity had to stop.

Immediately after the war, strife erupted within the Brazilian Japanese diaspora between those who accepted Japan's defeat and those who still believed in Japan's victory, and even cases of homicide occurred. To bring an end to this strife, Ōtani Kōchō, the abbot of the Ōtani sect at that time, together with his wife, went to São Paulo in August 1952 at the request of the Japanese-Brazilian community. He proclaimed the opening of the Shinshū Ōtani-ha's South American mission, and travelled all over South America for four months. This was the beginning of the South American missionary district, which has since then developed with the formation of Buddhist organizations and the construction of temples in each area.

Nambei Honganji Brasil Betsuin began in 1955 as the São Paulo Nambei Honganji. The land where it is now

located was purchased, a temporary main hall was built, the main hall was completed in 1962, and in 1972 it was raised in status to that of Betsuin. After that a bell tower, assembly hall, etc. were added, and a Japanese language classroom was added to the kindergarten, which had opened in 1979. Many children are studying there now. Further, the Buddhist Institute of Missionary Studies, established at the Betsuin in 1980, is the only research center in South America specializing in Buddhism. It is a cornerstone of missionary activity in Portuguese, focusing on translations of sutras and sacred texts, producing audio books and educational pamphlets in Portuguese, hosting Buddhist schools, sponsoring lectures on Buddhism for the public, and publishing transcripts of those lectures.

As the only Ōtani-ha temple in São Paulo, South America's largest city, the temple plays an important role as the Brazil Betsuin, developing Buddhist instruction relevant to the region. Thus, now, the Betsuin's new history is beginning, not only concentrating on South American missionary activities for the followers dispersed throughout the continent, but also responding to the prayers of people whose hearts go out to Shinshū, beyond the differences of nations and ethnic groups.

