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"An Ugly Duckling finally sees himself on the Lake of Amida"

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Minister of the Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple of Los Angeles





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Frederick Brenion provides service for the Higashi Honganji Temples and members of our North American District. Active as a Jōdo Shinshū (Shin Buddhism) priest, he is brought close to people. From his book-lined room, wearing his priest's garb, he good-naturedly related to us through the online screen his encounter with Buddhism and our Shin Buddhism. He began to chat this way: "When I share my story, I start with another story called *The Ugly Duckling*." So saying, Frederick began with Hans Christian Andersen's classic story.

"Once upon a time, a chick hatched from an egg in a mother duck's nest who looked and acted differently from the mother and other chicks. This duck could not quack, waddle, or swim like the others, always failing. So "ugly" to their duck beauty. Then the "Ugly Duckling" left the flock. Wherever it went it was bullied for being so ugly. Time passed, and alone, the duckling endured winter. Yet spring arrived and the ice on the lake melted. Soon a flock of swans flew onto the lake. Amazed at their graceful appearance would the swans ridicule the duckling? "Why?," they said, "You are one of us!" Feeling they were just mocking, all that could now be done was to bow in humility to

them. As this happened the duckling's glance saw itself reflected back from the lake's surface. Realization! The duckling's appearance was the same as that of the beautiful swans! All along the duckling had been a swan just like them! The duckling's true self was made clear. Flying off with the other swans, now it could be seen the duck family. The former Ugly Duckling saw their beauty. They were wonderful as they are! And the duckling, who had always been a swan, had found completion. Discovering its true face, its true self, the Ugly Duckling found a place to belong as a Swan within a flock of Swans."

Readers and listeners to this story may have various interpretations. Concerning this story Frederick says, "I find this story to be a lens to see my own story." As an infant he was raised Christian and embraced it whole-heartedly. Being insatiably curious as a young teen, he became interested in the sacred books and scriptures of the world's religions. He had questions such as "What is truth?, Who am I?, Why am I?" Entering university, he majored in religious studies and philosophy, studying many books in those fields. He also came to realize that the best work for him would be as a librarian where he

would then have access to all the great stories and thoughts that might help him on his way, and as a way for him to help others to discover their questions and answers.

In time, he was employed as a librarian at a state mental hospital for the criminally insane. He recreated their library, introduced new books, answered questions, and listened to their troubles. In doing so he discovered his own humanity with them and realized that he too was a foolish human being in so many ways. What we in Shin Buddhism call our *bombu* nature.

During all this, Frederick continued to probe, examining his own beliefs. While it took much time he found the growing weight of his problems and difficulties led eventually to a complete collapse of belief. It all dissolved, leading him to enter into having "no-views" on so many things. He did not know this would be so important in truly seeing the Buddhist path. He had studied and learned things through "Christian Eyes" but now he was beginning to see with "naked eyes," without filters. But he was not fully there yet.

One day later, his daughter rode with him on an errand. She turned and said, "Dad, you would be a very



good Buddhist!" For him this was so much like the situation when the "ugly duckling" saw with surprise his form as a swan reflected in the lake. At that moment he finally saw Buddhism with "naked eyes" and he realized that that was what Buddhism was really all about to see his true face, and it was a Buddhist face! Then a momentary vision of walking in peace through a gigantic grove of trees...dressed in Buddhist robes! After this drive his world had altered.

So Frederick threw himself into the study of Buddhism. He read, researched, and if you saw the books behind him, you will see that he went to great extent! In time he realized that reading was not enough. He needed to live all this in the context of a Sangha to truly test it out. And so he turned his attention to find a Sangha.

At first he searched for Zen, Tibetan, and Theravada groups. All he knew about Shin, according to many of his books, was that it was a kind of Christianity for Buddhists! Say a prayer to Amida and go to Buddha Heaven! Why would he want that? He had left Christianity behind. Failing to find a temple he could fit in at, he eventually found a listing for the West Covina Buddhist Temple, 55 miles away! But he wanted the Dharma

badly! Researching first he discovered it was a Pure Land group! What else could he do? So he went to see.

He sat in the last row to observe the activities with a mixture of "curiosity and some dread," ready to slip out quietly if need be. But at the start he was greeted by one of their wonderful members, Joanie Martinez. He was relieved that some of the service would be in English! Shown the service book, he followed along. He read the Shoshin-ge translation during the service and was utterly astonished. There were passages that simply leapt out at him. Above all, he met Reverend Kawawata, who was then the temple minister at West Covina. Frederick said of Rev. Kawawata, "His English was not great but his heart shined openly with joy in his talks!" Frederick kept coming back. He was won over!

What really grabbed Frederick was the discussions after each talk. His own words just poured out. Too many big words at times, but that happens when a librarian comes to the Dharma! Above all he found, that like the Ugly Duckling, he really fitted in for the first time ever. He also found the true import of Jōdo Shinshū. That at the center of his being he was not that bright of a chap but very much a fool-

ish person, a *bombu*. That he was accepted as he was and to rely on the *nenbutsu* whose import met his deepest needs. An answer behind all his questions. Here he could continue to truly see himself as he is and everyone as they are.

In 2011 Frederick became a Jōdo Shinshū priest, a member of our North American District. He said that when he visited the Shinshū Honbyō (Higashi Honganji) in Kyoto, he came to appreciate Jōdo Shinshū's struggles and his own helplessness. "But that is where we all must begin!" He is active as a helper for the other ministers and temples as needed throughout the District. As for his future prospects, "When I first visited I was warmly welcomed. I want to welcome warmly all who come, just as I was. Having the skills of a librarian, I think I might be helpful in helping others with their questions!" He also knows quite a few books that he can recommend as well! Also, he added that he would perhaps like to write a book too someday, at least while all that he has studied is still in his head!



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The Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple of Los Angeles

Los Angeles Betsuin (The Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple of Los Angeles) began with the “Los Angeles Buddhist Mission,” founded in 1904 by Reverend Junjō Izumida, at that time a missionary of the Shin Buddhism Ōtani-ha (branch), in response to the entreaties of concerned Japanese living in Los Angeles. As the first Buddhist temple in this area, the Los Angeles Buddhist Mission started as a mutual mission organization of all Buddhist sects, but in 1920 it became a Ōtani-ha propagation facility at Reverend Izumida’s urging, and was newly established the following year as the Los Angeles Betsuin. Afterwards, it enlarged its area of activities as the Japanese-American community grew, through the devoted missionary work of the first Rinban (head minister) Izumida.

However, with the outbreak of World War II, more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans were sent to concentration camps that had been established in ten places throughout the country, but even so, members sent contributions from the camps to maintain the Betsuin’s operations. Just after the war ended, the Betsuin was active in offering help, for example by opening the temple as a place to stay for those returning from the camps, and made a great contribution to the revival of the Japanese-American

community. Before long, the lives of Japanese-Americans stabilized, and then opportunities increased for the Betsuin to serve as a full-fledged ashram for missionary activities conducted by Buddhist missionaries. At that time, by a generational shift, the second- and third-generations gradually became the core of the Japanese-American community. Unlike the first generation, who had been educated in Japan, they had been born and raised in the United States, and English was their mother tongue. This marked the arrival of the age of full-scale missionary work in English to convey the teachings of the *nenbutsu* to them.

Then, in 1976, the Los Angeles Betsuin moved to its present location with the redevelopment of Little Tokyo. In addition to weekly Sunday services and a variety of study groups, the temple holds annual observances such as the Hōonkō and the New Year’s service, and also Bon festival memorial services accompanied by a bazaar. The Los Angeles Betsuin is the only Ōtani-ha Betsuin on the North American continent, and as such plays an important role in presenting the teachings of the *nenbutsu* of the Original Vow to American society, which is diversifying more and more as time goes on.

