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*"Let those born before guide those born after.  
Let those born after call upon those born before."*

Dōshaku (562–645), *Anrakushū*





## INTERVIEW 11

### Reverend. Marcos J. Sawada

Kaneohe Higashi Hongwanji Mission, Oahu, Hawaii, USA

During an online interview conducted in the early afternoon in Hawaii, here in Kyoto we could occasionally hear the pleasant sounds of birds chirping in the background. The interviewee was Rev. Marcos J. Sawada, who presently serving as a missionary at Kaneohe Higashi Hongwanji Mission on Oahu, Hawaii, USA. He is a second-generation Japanese-Brazilian, born in São Paulo.

His father served as a Shin Buddhist priest in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan, but in 1962 he moved with his family to Brazil as a missionary. Rev. Sawada was born in Brazil in 1964, the fourth of five siblings. His father, while residing at a Buddhist temple in São Paulo as a Buddhist priest, traveled throughout Brazil, fervently conducting missionary activities.

Rev. Sawada recalled his father's situation at that time: "My father traveled by car 1,000 km over unpaved roads through the jungle. At times he was away from home for three days at a time. Sometimes his car would break down. And he didn't even speak Portuguese. I really think that

what he did was amazing." Also, his mother took care of the temple and was a teacher at a Japanese language school, all while raising five children. Seeing how hard his parents worked in Brazil, at first he thought that he did not want to become a Buddhist priest.

Rev. Sawada soon entered the University of São Paulo Physical Education and Sport College. After graduating in 1986, he engaged in work related to athletic instruction and sports event planning. At that time, he had a girlfriend (presently his wife), a third-generation Japanese-Brazilian whom he met in Japanese language school and dated for two years. She received an invitation from Aichi Prefecture in Japan to study and train there as a hospital dietitian, so she decided to go to Japan. After her assignments, she received an invitation to work for the Aichi Prefecture International Office. She decided to take this opportunity to go to Japan.

Six months later, Rev. Sawada, not yet 30 years old, decided to give up everything to follow her to Japan.

After arriving in Japan, he found work at a Brazilian consulate, but he thought constantly that he wanted to engage in an occupation where he could make use of his knowledge of physical education that he had learned in Brazil. Just then the consulate was contacted by a Japanese professional football team about recruiting a person who was familiar with football and who could interpret Portuguese. He took a test and obtained a job with a certain team coaching and interpreting Portuguese. Afterwards, Rev. Sawada married his girlfriend and engaged in work for Japanese professional football teams and at the city hall information desk for workers in Japan whose native language was Spanish or Portuguese.

Even while living in Japan, he thought of his father who was working with all of his might as a Shin Buddhist missionary in faraway Brazil, and of his mother who supported him. He also felt his parents' deep desire that one of their five children would become a Buddhist priest. Seeing his





parents' struggles as a child, he felt strongly that he did not want to become a priest, but meeting a variety of people in different spheres of activity through his work he became interested in Buddhism. Also, he said that the book about Buddhism that he read when he was 14, *Everyday Suchness* by Gyomay M. Kubose, had made a strong impression on him. Thus, he entered a university to learn more about Shin Buddhism and obtained qualifications as a Shin Buddhist teacher. He met with many teachers of Shin Buddhism and was influenced by them, and decided to become a missionary like his father.

In 2012 Rev. Sawada took his family with him to his new post as a missionary at the Hilo Higashi Hongwanji Mission in Hilo on the island of Hawaii. His parents were very pleased that he had become a missionary, and he also got much advice from them, who were his seniors as missionaries. Then, he said, by working as a missionary himself he came to understand his parents' hardships and came to respect them even more.

It is now the second year since his transfer to his present post at the Kaneohe Higashi Hongwanji Mission on Oahu Island. Concerning the temple's present situation, he said, "Now there is no preaching to the immigrants of Japanese descent. We have to preach to the Americans." Now the majority of those attending the Sunday services at the Kaneohe Higashi Hongwanji are not ethnic Japanese. The temple has become a place for local people to attend, drink tea, and chat with each other. A hospital for people with intellectual disabilities is nearby, so patients from there visit the temple. Rev. Sawada talks to them and donates the glutinous rice used for the rice cake pounding event. Also, homeless people and occasionally LGBT people come for counseling. Among them are some young people who become temple members and participate in its functions. Rev. Sawada said, "We accept everyone as the same human beings, without discrimination. I don't teach them but rather I learn from them."

In the future Rev. Sawada wants to

join with nearby temples regardless of denomination to hold a big event like the Flower Festival. He said also that he wants to begin classes for teaching Buddhism. Further, his latest endeavor is to open the first International Dialogue. This will connect Brazil, Hawaii, and Japan online to exchange opinions in three languages concerning their respective temples' present information sharing and teaching principles. The method of holding this in the future is still under consideration.

Rev. Sawada has been active as a missionary in Hawaii, USA, for more than ten years. What left a very strong impression in his gentle speech was these words: "Buddhism is necessary to individualistic America." Rev. Sawada has gained a variety of experiences in Brazil, Japan, and Hawaii, so we want to pay attention to his future missionary activities.



## 03 Temples Overseas Higashi Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii

Missionary activity in Hawaii by the Shinshū Ōtani-ha goes back to 1899, when the Shin Buddhist ministers Rev. Kenryū Yamada from Aichi Prefecture and Rev. Shizuka Sazanami began missionary work in Waimea and Makaweli on Kaua'i. They were soon joined by Rev. Kankai Izuhara of Hiroshima, and others. The Hawaii Betsuin was established in 1916 with the construction of the Higashi Hongwanji Temporary Betsuin in Honolulu. A new temple building was built and recognized in 1922 as the Shinshū Ōtani-ha Higashi Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin. Rev. Izuhara was installed as the first Rinban (Head Minister). Many of the followers who gathered at the Hawaii Betsuin services were Japanese immigrants who had been arriving since 1868. Some of them had become unemployed because of the post-Seinan war inflationary recession in Japan and came to Hawaii seeking work. The living conditions for those working in the sugarcane plantations were very harsh. They were forced to work long hours and had to live in shared living quarters. It was unavoidable that they sometimes went on strike. Given the unstable situation at that time, the Hawaii Betsuin was an indispensable anchor for the lives of the immigrants.

However, war's dark shadow fell on Hawaii because of the attack on Pearl Harbor. All the ministers were forcibly

placed in concentration camps on the American mainland and all religious activities terminated until 1945. For six years the people of Hawaii continued to maintain the Betsuin in the absence of any Buddhist ministers. Then, much later when it became necessary to move the Betsuin and rebuild the aging building, a new Betsuin was completed in 1983 at the present location through the efforts not only of the Rinban and the followers but also of a variety of people. A Buddhist completion ceremony was conducted, and the Betsuin continues there to this day.

A small number of elderly second-generation Japanese Americans and the third to fifth English-speaking generations, together with people who are not ethnically Japanese, assemble at the present Betsuin. It has been very difficult for the missionaries sent from Japan to convey the teachings of Buddhism to English-speaking people. Shin Buddhism has continued to be propagated in Hawaii for more than 100 years, but the present day has been called the arrival of a turning point accompanying the change of generations and the transformation of regional societies, so the temples and Betsuin are seeking the ideal way for themselves in this new age and environment.

