



# Hōnen

A Collection of Dharma Messages by Jodo Shu Priests from around the World

## The Okinawan Noble Golden Words Etched in My Heart

By Rev. Gensho Hara  
Lahaina Jodo Mission

One evening, almost thirty years ago, my wife and I had taken supper at our temple pavilion, watching the beautiful sunset. A gentleman, who looked to be in his fifties, approached us. He told us that he was visiting from Okinawa and had made a reservation in a hotel in Kaanapali but something went wrong and his reservation could not be found. The hotel was holding a large convention and had no vacancy. He hoped that he could find some help at the temple and asked if there was anywhere on the temple grounds that he could stay.

My wife responded, “I am very sorry this happened. We don’t have much but please join us for supper.” The gentleman joined us and that night, he slept on a corner bed in the pavilion.

The next morning during our breakfast, this gentleman taught me two Okinawan phrases, which I had never heard before. The first was



Sunset from Lahaina Jodo Mission pavilion



Lahaina Jodo Mission temple and pagoda

*Ichariba chode* (行遅りば兄弟), which he explained means, “Once we meet, we are all brothers and sisters.” This phrase *Ichariba chode* impressed me as it sounded full of the love and compassion of the Okinawan people. It expresses the same spirit of Buddhism. In a sutra passage, it says, “I am the friend of all people, the friend of all. I feel compassion for all sentient beings.” The essential spirit of the Buddha Dharma is “open-mindedness and compassion.” To me, *Ichariba chode* conveyed this spirit of the Ryukyu islands (name of the former Okinawan kingdom), where people live collectively as a community.

The second phrase the gentleman taught me was *Chimuguri san* (肝苦りさん). He explained that when someone passes in mainland Japan, people say “*Goshushosama desu*” (“My sincere condolences”) but in Okinawa, they say “*Chimu-*

*guri san.*” *Chimu* means “heart”, “*Chimuguri san*” means “My heart hurts.” In Okinawa, the sympathizers are not considered the third party but rather they are one with the deceased’s family and with the deceased themselves. I was deeply impressed and moved by these words and the deep compassion and empathy of the island people. In these words, I hear the voice of the islanders’ spirit.

Even now, after all these years, I fondly recall this wonderful gift of *kugani kutouba* (黄金言葉), the noble golden words of Ryukyu that this visitor had given to me.



Front gate of Lahaina Jodo Mission

\* For more essays or sermons by Jodo Shu ministers in Hawaii, please visit the Hawaii Council of Jodo Missions’ website, [www.hawaiijodo.net](http://www.hawaiijodo.net).

## We Are Connected to Each Other, Always.

By Bishop Ryoho Sasaki  
Jodo Shu South America Missions

There is a little story that I was told by one of the missionaries stationed in Sao Paulo. When he was a little kid, he barely could wait the end of the year holiday season because the parishioners would bring things he liked to be offered at the altar for the Amida Buddha. As the story goes, one day a lady brought a box of grapes as an offering and his father, who was the priest at the temple, ordered him to display it at the altar. Since it looked so delicious, the little kid took it to the altar, made the offering, put the hands together and prayed calling the Name, *Namu Amida Butsu*. Usually we leave the offering at the altar for a while, but the grapes seemed so delicious that

he actually bowed again and took it in order to wash and eat at the kitchen. After the lady left, his father noticed that the kid was actually eating the grapes and said: “Are you eating the grapes without having offered at the altar for our Lord Amida Buddha”? And he said: “Well, I did offer to the Buddha and the lady was with me all the time. She smiled at me and told me I could have the grapes right after. And I did!” The father, as many grown ups do, kept a serious face but inside he was happy that the little boy kept the rules, although he thought the “offering time” was a bit too short.

We know this story because we actually met this lady and the whole point is about the symbolic greatness of her smile. She came up to the temple and paid respects to the Lord Amida Buddha, family ancestors and friends that passed away. In her intentions, though they weren’t mentioned, she wished luck and good health to herself and all beings around her. As a custom, she bowed in sign of respect and humility when she came to the temple, was welcomed by the monk, entered the prayer’s hall and was standing before the Buddha. Uttering *Namu Amida Butsu*, the *Nenbutsu*, she bows to all things, great and small, expressing gratitude.



Your head bows down to your parents who have held you under their thumb up to now. As she got older, her prayer also includes the truth of impermanence and she hopes her children, in a supreme act of filial piety, will take care of her with dignity until her last day. The same time that this simple gesture seems egotistic, the deep-hearing transforms from an ego-self to an open self, and that bowing becomes a natural expression of true and real life that flows through a person.

The lady's Monalisa smile displays a myriad of meanings, history and wisdom. Despite the doctrinal formalities of the procedures, there is a pure happiness and satisfaction in seeing the kid excited about the fruit being offered. She could turn her head back and notice that all celestial beings, along with ancestors' spirits were joyful in witnessing this moment. Who knows when she was a little child she badly wanted to eat

grapes but for some reason she couldn't, but she is truly happy a kid around her lives in times that can afford to have and enjoy it. And who knows, after she passes away and when this kid grows up, he might remember heartfeltdly that moment, to which would lead him to perceive that everything, somehow, is interconnected in time and space and beyond. Every single action, good or bad, becomes a memory in the future as a source of wisdom, therefore we go forward in life, and from time to time we take a look in the past to check if we have a missing lesson to learn from.

The little kid grew up, and when the days come, he offers prayers to the memory of the grape lady with fond memories. His father? Got older and only remembers his son as a kid. He no longer recognizes who is this young priest is standing before him.

Namu Amida Butsu

< Portuguese >

## Estamos Todos Interligados. Sempre

**E**ssa é uma pequena história contada por um antigo missionário aqui em São Paulo.

Quando pequeno, ele mal podia esperar a época de festas de fim de ano porque muitos frequentadores do templo traziam coisas que ele adorava como oferendas ao altar do Buda Amida. De acordo com a história, um dia uma senhora trouxe uma caixa de uvas para o altar, e seu pai, que era o monge do templo, mandou-o oferecer e ornar no altar. Uma vez que as uvas estavam lindas e maduras, o menino levou a caixa ao altar, fez a oferenda, postou as mãos juntas em reverência e orou recutando o Nome, Namuamidabutsu. Normalmente, se deixa a oferenda ao menos por um tempo, mas as uvas estavam tão convidativas que ele postou-se de novo em reverência para peder lavá-las e comer. Depois que a senhora foi embora, seu pai percebeu que o menino estava comendo as uvas e disse: "Você está já comendo as uvas sem ao

menos ter oferecido ao Senhor Buda Amida?" E o menino respondeu: "Bom, ofereci, sim, ao Senhor Buda e a senhora lá estava comigo o tempo todo. Ela sorriu e me disse que eu podia comer as uvas imediatamente. E foi o que eu fiz!" O pai, como todo adulto faria, manteve a cara de sério, mas dentro dele mesmo ela estava feliz que o menino não havia desobedecido nada, apesar de achar que o "tempo" da oferenda tenha sido rápida demais.

Sabemos desta história porque conhecemos esta senhora. E o ponto aqui desta história é a grandeza simbólica de seu sorriso. Ela veio nesse dia ao templo rezar ao Buda Amida, seus antepassados e amigos falecidos. Apesar de não terem sido mencionados, em suas intenções e orações haviam pedidos de saúde e boa sorte a ela mesma e a todos ao seu redor. Como de costume, ela fez a reverência em sinal de respeito e humildade quando chegou, foi recebida pelo monge, entrou no salão principal do templo e ficou de frente ao Buda. Ao recitar Namuamidabutsu, o Nenbutsu, ela reverencia a tudo e a todos, grandes ou

pequenos, expressando gratidão. Sua cabeça, em reverência, se abaixa aos seus pais, que lhe cuidaram até então. Ao envelhecer, em suas orações ela incluiu também a verdade da impermanência, onde tudo é passageiro, tendo a esperança, em suprema expressão de piedade e respeito aos pais, que seja cuidada pelos seus filhos com carinho e dignidade até o último de seus dias. Ao mesmo tempo que este simples gesto possa parecer egoísta, escutá-lo em sua profundidade o transforma de algo egocêntrico num eu de coração aberto, e o gesto de reverência se torna uma expressão natural e verdadeira que passa por suas veias.

O sorriso de Monalisa dessa senhora aponta uma infinidade de significados, história e sabedoria. Apesar das formalidades doutrinárias e de seus gestos, o que se nota é pura felicidade e satisfação em ver uma criança contente com uma fruta sendo oferecida. Talvez, ao se virar, ela possa notar todos os seres celestiais, junto com os espíritos de seus antepassados testemunhando a felicidade daquele momento. A gente não sabe se, quando pequena, ela queria mas não podia comer uvas, mas estava realmente feliz que as crianças hoje ao seu



redor podiam saborear essa delícia de fruta. E quem sabe, depois se sua partida, aquela criança cresça e se lembre com carinho este momento e que o faça perceber que tudo, de algum jeito, está interrelacionado no tempo, espaço e além. Cada gesto, seja bom ou mal, se torna uma lembrança no futuro como fonte de sabedoria. Portanto, ao lidar com a vida, de tempos em tempos damos uma olhadinha no passado para ver se deixamos de observar alguma lição que passou despercebida.

O menino, ao final, cresceu, e quando chegou o dia, ele reza em memória da senhora das uvas com todo o carinho. O seu pai? Ficou mais velho e hoje só se lembra de seu filho de quando era pequenininho. Ele mal sabe quem é esse jovem monge que está na sua frente.

Namu Amida Butsu

## The Music of Nenbutsu

By Kônen Büttgen  
Jodo Shu European Buddhism Center

In his short speech at the end of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra's New Year Concert in 2021, the famous conductor Ricardo Muti said: "Musicians have in their weapons flowers, not things that kill.... Please consider culture always as one of the primary elements to have a better society in the future."

His words immediately reminded me of one passage in the Amida-Sutra, where Shakyamuni Buddha describes the Land of Ultimate Beatitude of Amida Buddha to his disciple Sariputra: "... in that Buddha's land, there is a constant playing of celestial music" \* . Buddha continues

that "there is a constant variety of exotic birds of brilliant coloring, such as white egrets, peacocks, parrots, sarikas, kalavinkas, and jivamjivakas. The birds sing six times day and night with sounds of harmonious elegance."

However, not only does the music made by these manifold birdsongs sound beautiful, they also "expound the Five Roots of Goodness, the Five Powers, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and the Noble Eightfold Path." This is because „Amida Buddha manifested all these birds through transformation so that they would transmit the sounds of the dharma through their songs." So Amida Buddha is using the music of

many colorful birds to teach the universal truths of the dharma as a method to become a better human being.

Some of the above-mentioned mythological birds found their embodiment in Japanese arts. The Kalavinka bird appears in a dance in vermilion costume with colorful feathers in traditional Japanese gagaku music. So even in our world, the dharma comes to us visually by music and dance.

While the Pure Land of Amida Buddha is already perfect and peaceful, we in our world of today are much more in need of music and culture to remind us how a better world can look like. Therefore, musicians and artists all over the world deserve our support especially in this difficult pandemic situation – not only top-orchestras like the Vienna Philharmonies, but all the “colorful birds” that tell us of the universal truths by singing, dancing, painting, performing or any other cultural activities.

But this does not only concern the professionals. Everyone can make music. If you cannot play any instrument, just use your voice to express yourself. If you cannot use your voice, express yourself by writing, painting or sign language. If you don't know „what“ to express, how about gratitude? In our society of today, it sometimes seems that we lost the ability to express our gratitude. The Japanese medical doctor and inventor of “Sôtai therapy” Dr. Keizô Hashimoto wrote already in the last century that our loss of a calm mind and reasonable judgement has to do with the loss of our feeling of gratitude. We human beings exist by the



After chanting Nenbutsu together during Kikyoshiki in Germany

support that we receive from the gifts of nature and love of the people surrounding us. If we focus our mind on this love, we should express our gratitude into words. This will brighten up our mind, we feel happier, behave more friendly towards others, and can face other people with affection.

As Jodo Buddhists, we can express our gratitude to Amida Buddha in a beautiful way by reciting the Nenbutsu. We can speak it, sing it, write it down or make a dance performance with it. As Honen said, the Nenbutsu contains the whole teaching of Buddha. We can also sing the “Tsukikage“-song, recite a Sutra with a singing voice or speak one of Honen's wonderful poems.

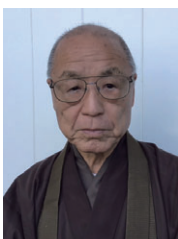
So when you miss going to concerts or watching live music performances, whenever you feel dark and sometimes bored by every-day life, you can add some color to it by the music of the Nenbutsu. Just express your gratitude for life. It can really contribute to a better society.

(\*all quotes of Amida Sutra from: “The Three Pure Land Sutras”, Jodo Shu Press: p. 197f.)

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- Birth place  
Iida, Naganoken,  
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- Motto  
Okagesamade;  
live with  
gratitude

### Ryoho Sasaki

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Life, as it is  
(A Vida, Como  
Ela É)

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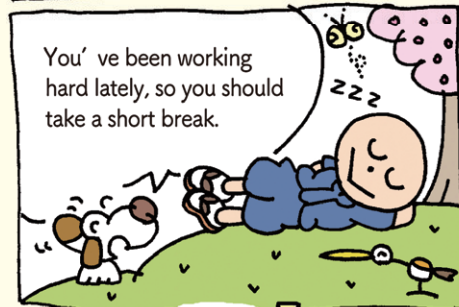
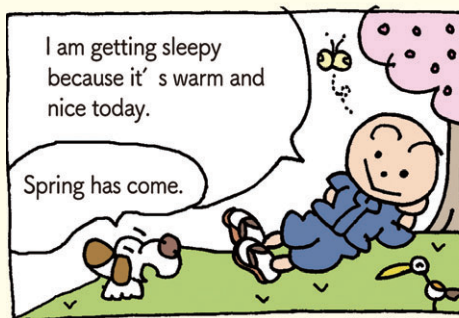
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Come as you are

## Hello! NamuChan ③

A Shigeyuki Shiki




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Hōnen Shōnin (1133-1212)

Courtesy of Saishoin Temple, Tokyo

## The Founder of Jodo Shu

Hōnen studied and practiced Buddhism at Mt. Hiei, the center of Buddhist study at the time.

He read through all of the Buddhist scriptures available and it was Master Shantao's commentary on the Meditation Sutra which inspired him to put aside all practices other than Nenbutsu. He had the conviction that only the Nenbutsu was the right activity that would lead to salvation without fail, for it accorded with the essential vow of Amida Buddha.

This religious conviction occurred when he was 43 years old. After realizing the truth of Nenbutsu, Hōnen left Mt. Hiei for Kyoto and began to spread the teaching of Nenbutsu. In the spring of 1175, he founded Jodo Shu.