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"THE LIFE OF INNER PEACE, BEING HARMONIOUS AND WITHOUT STRESS,
IS THE EASIEST TYPE OF EXISTENCE." - Norman Vincent Peale

REV. KAKEI NAKAGAWA, Rinban



Let's Cross to the Other Shore

"Birth-and-death are this shore, Nirvana is the Other Shore, and Bonno (the Blind Passions) are the swift currents in-between that would be swept away with every worldly effort. The Mahayana Bodhisattvas boarded a Pâramitâ Meditation boat with inconceivable Wisdom from this shore of birth-and-death to the other shore of true-and-real Enlightenment."

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In March, Spring Ohigan is held at the turn of the season. In particular, the spring equinoctial week is an event that announces the arrival of the nicest season, free from the chilly mornings.

Taking this opportunity, our ancestors have worshipped their ancestors since ancient times, and additionally, after the 6th century while learning a whole new insightful Buddha dharma—the universal truth reality—they kept practicing the right way of life-being to follow the rhythm of human-life that suited them.

The national holiday law of Buddhist countries states that the Spring Ohigan is "to praise Nature and care for living things," and the Fall Ohigan is "to respect the ancestors and to honor those who have passed away."

We must celebrate the spring of new life, praise the blessings of Mother Nature, thank all support from between heaven and earth, and offer our gratitude in memory of the great virtues of our predecessors. The lives of those who forget their ancestors and do not think of their parents will be corrupt someday.

Day by day, in the ups and downs of this world of egoistic birth-and-death, if we scold ourselves and stare at one self, and when joined in the true working of the wisdom of the Buddha by validating Nenbutsu, this shore of delusion will be changed to the other shore of true and real Enlightenment.

Let's devote ourselves to living in the world of enlightenment, seriously under the torch of wisdom that shows the route that crosses the Ocean of birth-and-death.

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Our Wisteria Seal adds depth and meaning to the teaching of Interdependence.

Hello, all Central California Sangha friends! Since the stay-at-home order was enacted, we have been experiencing a life of the pandemic. Although many of our activities are limited, as a CC minister, I always try to think of things I can do for you in the current situation, in addition to starting or creating new Education programs and fundraisers for CC since last March. But mainly, what I CAN do is to maintain what I was doing before the pandemic began, as much as possible. We continue to conduct memorial services and weekly Sunday services.

A few weeks ago, I conducted a graveside burial service. After the service, one of the family members pointed to their family grave and asked, "What does this symbol mean and why is it on our family grave?" On their gravestone is the Wisteria seal. So, while keeping socially distanced, I explained.

Have you looked at your family gravestone in detail? Do you remember whether or not the gravestones have the Wisteria engraved? Do you know what the Wisteria seal means on these gravestones?

In this article, I would like to share what it is and its meaning. First, the short answer. The symbol is the seal of Nishi Hongwanji. You might have been able to guess that.

Now, the transition of the seal. Some of you may know that each Japanese family in Japan has a family seal/crest. It is known as "Kamon" or "Mon". Ka means "family, and Mon is "seal". I know some Japanese restaurants in the US are named "Kamon".



Our founder is Shinran Shonin and his family name is Hino. The Hino family seal is "a crane with its wings spread". You may know the story of the thousand cranes. When someone gets sick, people make a thousand cranes out of Origami paper with its message being, "get well and live long".

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Like Fall Ohigan in 2020 in Manzanar, Spring Ohigan in 2021 will be in front of the monument on the site of the Poston Concentration Camp. We CC Ministers will conduct Central California Sangha's 2021 Virtual Spring Ohigan Service on Twitter from Poston. This is one of many places where Americans of Japanese ancestry were detained under discriminatory crackdowns during World War II. During World War II, many people and families suddenly had to spend this unimaginable period of life inside the barbed wire fences at this Poston camp.

There is a Japanese word "Shikata-ga-nai." Nowadays, not only the 3-sei (third) but also the 4-sei (fourth) and 5-sei (fifth) generations know it as a Japanese word that seems to symbolize the experience of the Concentration Camp. And this word is used as a word of "giving up" because Japanese Americans detained in Concentration Camps during World War II were despaired in a difficult reality.

The use of this word is based on a great deal of misunderstanding, but especially such "Lost in Translations" are clearly detrimental to the new generation in shaping their identity as Americans of Japanese ancestry. Because it is a word that emphasizes wrongly the negativeness of Japanese Americans, it is not really true. (I wrote the detailed story in my article in the October newsletters of each Central California Sangha.)

From its conclusion, most of the 1-sei (first) and 2-sei (second) generations of Japanese immigrants at that time did not use and speak the Japanese word "Shikata-ga-nai." The word "Shikata-ga-nai" is a standard word used after the 19th century centered around the Tokyo capital area and is a word found mainly in modern Japanese teaching materials.

Around 100 years ago, most of the large numbers of immigrants to the west coast of the United States were from the western part of the Japanese archipelago, such as Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, Shimane, and Kitakyushu, and the western dialect they spoke was far different from the Tokyo-capital standard. Moreover, people in the western Japan region have kept a strong Buddhist cultural background, since people in those areas encountered Buddhism 1,500 years ago. That is why they absolutely never said "Shikata-ga-nai." "Shikata-ga-nai" is a word of complete resignation, looking up at the sky with both hands up. That pose means "I can't help it" or "There is nothing for it but to accept."

When in trouble, real 1-sei and 2-sei immigrants who handled western Japanese language said "Shô-ga-nai-ken-nô." This word comes out when they looked down, focusing on the point with their arms crossed, recognizing the desperate situation, but thinking about possible ways to solve it. That contrasting pose means "It's a first time with this experience; no data cannot help... well, let me think...."

The unreasonableness of the federal government forced Americans of Japanese ancestry to live in Concentration Camps that violated the Constitution.

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In fact, people in far east Asia, believed a crane can live up to 1,000 years. So, it became a symbol of longevity. If you have Japanese friends, or Japanese origin, you may find a unique seal.



Shinran Shonin lived in the 13th Century. 300 years after his passing, Shonyo was head of Hongwanji temple, the 10th Monshu. He changed the seal to the Wisteria but the shape was different from what we have now. The seal of Wisteria with Eight Vines had been used for three centuries. Some minister robes still have this design on them.



In 1898, Kyonyo, the 22nd Monshu of Nishi Hongwanji married Kazuko Kujo (sister-in-law of the Taisho Emperor), and Kazuko brought the Wisteria seal with two hanging vines to the Hongwanji family. I have seen this hanging Wisteria design on old Issei Service books or other publications, because some of the Japanese Issei immigrants came to the US before marriage.



In 1903, when Kyonyo conducted his accession ceremony to become the Monshu, he designated the (hanging vine) Wisteria as the official seal and as the Hongwanji emblem. Our Monto-Shikisho, or Okesa bears this seal.

As I wrote, Kazuko Kujo brought the hanging vine Wisteria to Hongwanji. Do you know who she is? Her sister-in-law Lady Takeko Kujo is very famous. She is known as the woman who started the Buddhist Women's Association (BWA), but the actual story is that Lady Takeko helped Lady Kazuko establish the BWA. So, as wife of the Monshu, Lady Kazuko was the honorable advisor to the BWA, and Lady Takeko became the leader of the BWA. This means that one of the founding ladies of the BWA introduced the seal of the Wisteria.

I have a Wisteria tree in my front yard. During late spring in May, purple or pink color flowers bloom on the hanging vines. As you know, the Wisteria tree needs supports to grow their vines and show their beautiful flowers. Just like grape vines. it cannot grow without support. Our human life is like that of the Wisteria. Without other's help and support, we are not able to sustain our life. Since the day we were born, we have been receiving help from numerous hands. The wisteria is really a symbol of our fundamental teaching – Interdependence.

At the graveside service, I pointed to the Wisteria seal and said, "it is a symbol of interdependence of our life. When you see it at the graveside, it will remind you that you will always be connected to your loved ones who are buried under the gravestone. But at the same time, their memories are always in your mind and heart, to help you to feel less alone. You are always with them." Gassho.

Our 1-sei and 2-sei immigrants spoke the same words of their ancestors, “Shô-ga-nai-ken-nô—well, let me think...” and concluded, “GO FOR BROKE!” (I won’t discuss here whether it is good or bad for the Buddhists to go to war.) But the same event that had occurred in 16th century Japan, again occurred in 20th century America.

It is a fact that for the sake of their mothers, sisters and for their families left behind in the Concentration Camps, the Nikkei troop, 442nd Regimental Combat Team, continued to perform their duty even when the casualty rate exceeded 300%. They were never to be the descendants of the career Samurai warriors—they were the descendants of the Jodo Shinshu farmers rebel army (Ikkô-Ikki), who almost got established as a republic nation in the 16th century of Japan. It was they who appeared again miraculously in the 20th century United States of America.

Jodo Shinshu Buddhists never despair and never give up. We are the successors to the core of Mahayana Buddhism, which is Sakyamuni Buddha’s most targeted expression. It is a way of life that we have learned from Buddhism from 1,500 years ago in Japan.

Since the incomprehensible Covid-19 pandemic has erupted, we are experiencing a truly unpredictable reality of what will happen in real time. We must try to avoid fiction and uncertainty as much as possible and try to light the torch of wisdom.

Please never say “Shikata-ga-nai” while looking up at the sky with both hands up before you reach the other shore.

It’s always “Shô-ga-nai-ken-nô—well, let us think...” in Jodo Shinshu.

