

This past July, I had the opportunity to travel to Japan as one of the participants in the Student Exchange Program for the Buddhist Women's Association (BWA). It was truly such an honor to be there, and it beyond exceeded my expectations for the trip. Before going, I had hoped to learn more about Japanese and Buddhist cultures and better understand Jodo Shinshu Buddhism as a whole. This experience did this for me and more, leaving me overcome with emotion, a mix of contentment, sadness, heartache, nostalgia, and inspiration, in the best of ways. I want to start this by thanking everyone who made this possible: Honzan in Japan, the Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii BWA, Headquarters, and all of you, the Sangha. Every moment throughout my life has shaped me into the person I am, making me be able to appreciate this trip as much as I did.



The trip started off in Kyoto at Nishi Hongwanji where we did a joint program with YBICSE. From there we did tours in Hiroshima and Nara. In Hiroshima, we talked to one of the atomic bomb survivors, whose organization recently won the Nobel Peace Prize. Hearing his story and his continued fight for world peace was inspiring, but also heartbreaking. With everything going on in the world, he has not given up hope, but has fought harder for the organization's goal to not have any more atomic weapons on earth. Someone questioned whether he really believes if this goal is attainable, and his answer was straight forward – if it is a goal he believes in, he's going to fight for it until he no longer can. It didn't seem to matter if it was realistic or not, just that he has seen too much violence, and that he has lived through too much death as a result of that violence, that it made no sense to not do anything but to fight for these destructive weapons to no longer exist. That these atomic bomb survivors, for the rest of their lives, have to worry about if they will get a sudden illness as a long term effect from the radiation damage. That each time they get sick, it could be one that is because their bodies are finally giving in to the effects of an atomic bomb. They don't know,

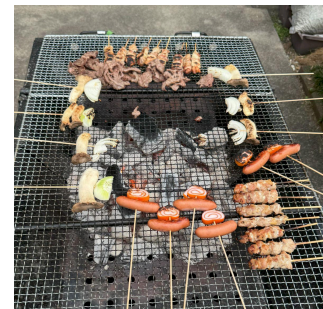


so they have to fight and share their story while they can. I cannot even begin to imagine the pain and emotions he must feel thinking back on this time – how it must not even compare to what I felt walking through the museum on the bombing of Hiroshima. It must be so frustrating to have people not understand why he would want atomic bombs to cease to exist; why the world could not already be unanimously in consent to make this happen.

Before the homestay portion of the trip, I was fortunate enough to talk to Lady Ruzumi Ohtani. We got briefed with the proceedings of our meeting with Lady Ruzumi Ohtani, which were particular on how to stand and introduce ourselves. It was a little stressful because of the strictness, but from the moment she entered the room, her

welcomingness and happiness were evident. Whether talking in English or Japanese, she listened carefully to every word and was so engaged. She is the type of person whose presence alone can make a room feel inviting. I asked her what aspect of Buddhism resonates with her the most and she said that the ability to create these meaningful one on one connections is what she values. Through our faith, we are able to talk to and understand each other on a deeper level. It was such a pleasure to be able to talk to her and spend some time getting to know her a little more.

I wanted to also talk a bit about my homestay. Our homestay mom, Momoyama-san, was amazing and gave us the best experience. The appreciation everyone had for us making the effort to speak Japanese, offer to help, just to hear that we are “ureshii” and that the food is “oishii,” and carry Japanese cultures and traditions on in Hawaii was heartwarming. I always felt so welcome and was met with such kindness with these people. Momoyama-san said we were her first homestay group ever. And when she let people know that we were coming, so many people wanted to meet us, even her grandchildren’s friends! When we thanked her for planning so many activities for us, from wearing a kimono to having a tea ceremony, to go cucumber and tomato picking, and having a Japanese barbecue, she said it was only possible to do because of everyone involved – because of all of her friends and the community members who wanted to also help Chihiro and I have the best Toyama experience. Four Fujinkai ladies also met up with us to do a washi paper making workshop, some coming from hours away by car to be able to spend a few hours with us as exchange students. Their attentiveness when we spoke and genuine interest was incredibly kind. I couldn’t be more grateful for the experience as a whole.



Momoyama-san helped me navigate the train station and waved me off as I boarded my train out of Kyoto at the end of the official student exchange program to head to Kagoshima to visit my relatives. Aboard this train I had some time to reflect, and wrote, “I leave with my heart so full and also so heavy. No other program ever compared to the feeling of bittersweetness of those I have attended as part of the Hongwanji. I don’t know when I will see these people again, I don’t know when I will have the chance to have such a meaningful experience again. This is likely one of the last trips I can go on as a Buddhist youth; where I am simply there to learn and absorb the world around me. Something about these Jodo Shinshu programs touch my heart in a way that nothing else has been able to. Being older now, I think the feeling and meaningfulness has grown a lot for me. Simply being in Japan, a place where Buddhism is so integrated into the

culture, there is a different sense of gratitude. The common and often used phrases of arigatougozaimasu, oiyamashimasu, sumimasen, itadakimasu, and osewaninarimashita are filled with gratitude, and even in this past week of using these words over and over, I naturally become more appreciative of everything and everyone around me and more aware of my actions. These words are said with purpose, and are never really just a passing comment. Japanese culture itself is deeply rooted in having respect and being “arigatai.” Even more so in the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist community this is pronounced. In some ways, it is even more special that even without any superstition in this sect of Buddhism, we are able to have just as, if not more meaningful experiences together because of the shared values of gratitude for all life and things. There is no outwardly being or fear of consequence that makes us be together and follow these teachings, but yet we do because we truly want to live this way and walk the path of Nembutsu. Experiences like this leave an imprint on my heart, one that pushes me to stay involved in the Hongwanji, to want to nurture these connections, to keep the Japanese traditions strong, and to continue to grow the youth’s desire to be a part of the Hongwanji. To



history of every part of the temples, from the artwork to the colors and layout. It is something I realize is unexplainable until you experience it in its entirety.

This trip taught me to live in the present, to take in the world around me in that moment, just as it is. Sitting in Nishi Hongwanji, I can feel a different sense of largeness to Buddhism that I haven’t experienced before. There is some kind of sacred power there that is created by the people there and of the past who made this place with such intentionality. I hope simply by sharing this story, it motivates other youth to go and be able to experience something just as moving. To not just be a participant of the program, but to consciously go with the intent to learn and be changed. To ask questions, make connections, and be open to having a shift in perspective. Being so vulnerable and having an open mind is scary; making these memories and relationships and leaving part of your heart in another country is an

give back so that this program is here for generations to come.” I mentioned this in my application for this program, but sometimes when asked, “What is Buddhism?,” it is a little hard for me to answer. But coming out of this trip, I leave again with more clarity but also with a feeling that it will still be just as difficult to explain to someone who has not had the chance to experience what I have. To feel the gratitude in the people’s actions and words, to hear the chanting, Dharma messages, the thought behind each temple’s structure, the deeply rooted



uncomfortable feeling. But, to me, these are the good discomforts of life, the ones that fills one with gratitude and perspective. The ones that means I have am living life to the fullest.