

Okagesama de: Lessons of Gratitude from the BWA Exchange

In July, I was honored to participate in the Buddhist Women’s Association Exchange Program, a ten-day excursion to Japan that included a special audience with O-Urakata-sama, as well as a homestay experience. I applied with the hope of expressing my gratitude to the many members of the BWA who have supported and influenced me throughout my journey in the temple. Their dedication and kindness have shaped me as both a youth and a leader, and I felt that representing them abroad was a way to give back.

Although I had been to Japan before, most recently as a participant in YBICSE the previous year, I was eager to return with a fresh perspective. I felt that this trip was an opportunity to deepen my appreciation for Jodo Shinshu, to learn more about the historical and cultural roots of our tradition, and to discover how women’s contributions have sustained our sangha across generations.

The first leg of the trip brought us together with the YBICSE group. After arriving late in Kansai Airport, we took the Haruka Express to Kyoto Station where we would head to the Monbou Kaikan. As we headed there, I was struck by the city’s vibrant blend of tradition and modernity: the lantern-lit streets and calm nightlife felt like a warm welcome back. Our stay was brief, and soon we boarded the Shinkansen for Hiroshima. There, we visited the Hiroshima Peace Museum, the Children’s Memorial, and the Genbaku Dome. Though I have visited Hiroshima and the museum before, each experience feels new and profound. I left once again in tears, my heart aching from the unimaginable and immense suffering caused by the atomic bomb. Yet, alongside the grief, I felt a deep sense of hope for peace, understanding, and a future free from such tragedies.



This visit was especially meaningful because we had the rare opportunity to attend a seminar led by Mr. Toshiyuki Mimaki at the Hiroshima Betsuin. Mr. Mimaki is a Hibakusha whose organization, Nihon Hidankyo, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2024 for its tireless

efforts toward the elimination of nuclear weapons. Hearing his testimony firsthand reminded me that the work of peace is not abstract. It is carried forward by individuals whose lives embody both the tragedy of war and the resilience of the human spirit. His story and philosophy were deeply inspiring. Despite the pain and hardships that he and so many other Hibakusha have endured, he has transformed that suffering into motivation to share their testimonials of the atrocious damage and loss caused by the use of nuclear weapons so that future generations will never have to deal with the horror of innocent people being killed due to political conflict.

Returning from Hiroshima with a sense of hope, we spent the next few days touring sites in Kyoto and Nara. In Kyoto, we visited Kyoto Women’s University, founded by Lady Takeko Kujo, the same visionary who established the BWA. Learning about her role in both education and the Hongwanji reminded me of how women’s leadership has shaped our tradition in lasting ways. We also trekked up Mount Hiei to learn about the origins of our founders and paid our respects at the Ōtani Mausoleum. Alongside these visits, we were able to bond with Jodo Shinshu youth from around the world, creating connections that reminded me we are part of a living, global sangha.



On the fifth day, we said our goodbyes to the YBICSE group as they continued to Tokyo for the rest of their exchange. Their departure marked a shift in our journey as well, as we now faced a much larger task: our formal meeting with O-Urakata-sama. Dressed in our most formal attire, a sense of nervous anticipation filled the warm, humid air as we left the Monbou Kaikan and made our way to her residence.

Before entering, we received a briefing on the proper protocols, procedures, and how the meeting would proceed, minute by minute. I felt especially nervous because I had the opportunity to offer a short solo musical performance on the shinobue. I chose three gathas that I felt represented Hawai‘i, the BWA, and the Hongwanji: *Seiya*, *Asoka no Sono*, and *Ondokusan*. As we sat waiting, I quietly opened my case, shuffled through my notes, and rehearsed the melodies one last time in my head.

When the time came, our worries quickly melted away as Lady Ruzumi Ōtani entered the room. Her warm smile and gracious presence immediately put us at ease. Compared to the audience I had with Gomonshu-sama during YBICSE, which reflected the dignity and formality of his position, I was especially grateful to have a conversation in person with O-Urakata-sama, which also reflected the same positions, but she expressed it with a warmth and gentleness that made our interaction feel more personal and approachable

Whether I was performing on the shinobue or trying to communicate in my inexperienced Japanese, she responded with a gentle smile and kind words. I was also deeply thankful to Kana and the interpreter, whose support helped us express ourselves more clearly. Even though Kana and I both were nervous and unsure in our attempts to speak, O-Urakata-sama embraced our efforts with warmth and encouragement, reminding us that sincerity is more important than perfection. This moment reminded me that even traditions and formalities can be held with warmth and humanity. Performing for Lady Ōtani was not only an honor but also a way to share Hawai‘i’s spirit and the BWA’s nurturing presence through music.

Our conversation with O-Urakata-sama lasted about half an hour. It began with light, casual exchanges that helped us get to know each other better, but gradually shifted into more meaningful discussions. We shared about our involvement within the Hongwanji, especially with Jr. YBA, and how BWA continues to support us as youth. From there, we also asked about her perspective on Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, where she offered a very thoughtful reflection. Before parting, we also expressed our excitement for the 2027 BWA World Convention, which will take place in Honolulu, and shared our hope that she would be able to attend.

The final part of the BWA Exchange Experience culminated in an unforgettable homestay. After the audience with O-Urakata-sama, we changed out of our formal attire. We were soon greeted by our host mother, Momoyama-san, who welcomed us with open arms and helped us navigate the Shinkansen ride from Kyoto to Toyama.

For me, the homestay with Momoyama-san and her family was one of the most memorable parts of the exchange. From the moment she welcomed us into her home, I was struck by her generosity and warmth. She treated us not as visitors, but as part of the family, sharing her time with such openness. Although I had some difficulty communicating in Japanese, they were patient and kind. I was especially grateful to Kana, whose help with translation and encouragement made it possible for me to connect more closely with the family.

I was reminded of the Japanese concept of “Okagesama de,” which I like to interpret as “I am who I am because of the efforts of others.” Our unforgettable experience was only possible because of the hard work, generosity, and meticulous planning of Momoyama-san and the many members of the community, who welcomed us so warmly. Each activity arranged and each moment shared reflected how everyone’s unique contributions, whether big or small, came together to create a meaningful experience for both of us.

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On the first morning, we were dressed in yukatas and were invited to participate in a tea ceremony. Later that night, a temple family welcomed us into their home for a Japanese barbecue, fireworks, and fellowship. I also had the chance to play my shinobue alongside the minister, who played the ryuteki. We played a rendition of Ondokusan. The harmonious sounds of the flutes filled the night air.



On our final day, we traveled to Echizen, where we met up with several BWA members. Together, we shared lunch, designed sheets of washi paper, and even visited one member’s house to create a large sheet of washi paper by hand. As I watched the fibers press together into a single piece, I reflected on our sangha: many strands of effort and talent woven into something both strong and beautiful.



Throughout all of this, I was grateful to share my music with the communities we visited. I played Hongwanji gathas, Okinawan melodies, and enka songs on the shinobue, and was touched to see people smile, hum along, or recognize familiar tunes. For me, it was my way of sharing my gratitude for the opportunities we had.

Beyond these scheduled activities, some of my most cherished memories came from simple moments spent with Momoyama-san and her family. Times included: bonding with her daughter at an arcade, where we celebrated winning a Cinnamoroll plushie; riding the Ferris wheel at an amusement park with her grandchildren; and helping to pick vegetables from the

garden. These lighthearted experiences reminded me that community is built not only through ceremonies or cultural traditions, but also through laughter, play, and the small joys of daily life.



The generosity and kindness of Momoyama-san did not end with the exchange itself. After the program concluded, I extended my stay to explore more of Kyoto and Tokyo with my mom. Since her daughter lived in Tokyo, we had the chance to meet once again for a final meal before our departure. I was deeply touched that they wanted to spend more time with us, and that Momoyama-san made the trip out just to share one last moment.

Looking back on this exchange, I feel that my hopes in applying for this program were truly fulfilled and even surpassed. Through visits to places of deep historical significance and through the guidance and hospitality of the BWA, I gained a deeper appreciation for the roots of Jodo Shinshu and for the members whose dedication continues to sustain our sangha. Meeting O-Urakata-sama, learning about Lady Takeko Kujo's vision, and experiencing the generosity of BWA members reminded me that our tradition is carried forward not only through teachings but also through the humble strength and bold leadership of women who embody them in their daily lives. One conversation that stood out to me during our audience with O-Urakata-sama was when she shared that one aspect of Jodo Shinshu she cherished was the meaningful connections made with one another, and this trip truly brought that perspective to life. The countless acts of kindness, encouragement, and gratitude we encountered showed me values I may have once taken for granted, but now see as the heart of the BWA. This trip also encouraged me to reflect on my own identity and path. The various activities showed me that sincerity and interconnectedness are at the heart of Buddhism. These experiences have inspired me to draw

strength from examples of resilience and compassion, and to continue building a character guided by gratitude and inclusivity.



Coming out of this exchange, I hope to become more active with the BWA and to help inspire the next generation. With the Federation of Buddhist Women’s Associations preparing to host the next World Convention, I look forward to seeing many of these members again. Just as they gave me an unforgettable experience, I hope to help ensure that future participants are welcomed with the same generosity, kindness, and warmth.

Going forward, I also hope to carry these lessons into my service to the temple and the broader Hongwanji. By strengthening my engagement, I hope to advocate for the next generation of youth and encourage members to take on leadership roles within our sangha as previous members have helped me achieve. My wish is to help foster a community that reflects the wisdom and compassion of the Nembutsu. One that embraces diversity, nurtures each person’s unique talents, and reminds us that, truly, *okagesama de*: we are who we are because of the efforts of others.

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