

Remembering the Twenty Wonderful Years at Musashino University

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Remembering the Twenty Wonderful Years at Musashino University

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I hope to jot down some of the memorable events of my nearly twenty years of work at Musashino University, which began in 1998. Obviously, there are so many memories worthy of mention here, but I shall focus on just four of them: 1) a humorous happening (ユーモラスな出来ごと) in my primary course, 2) American Study Tour (アメリカ研修), 3) Buddhist-Psychology study sessions (仏教心理学勉強会), and 4) my receiving The 27th Nakamura Hajime Eastern Study Prize (第27回中村元東方学術賞の受賞).

I wish to begin with a humorous encounter with one of my students in my primary course, “The Principle of Co-existence: Buddhist Theory of Co-dependent Origination” (共生原理—仏教縁起論)

1. Humorous happening

It was about seven years ago that I asked a female student sitting in the very front row of the class how to reach the Buddhist teaching of the “Four Sufferings,” (四苦) which are birth (shō), aging (rō), illness (byō) and death (shi). A week earlier I had explained that in the Buddhist context we pronounce the character for birth (生) as “shō” not “sei,” which is the more common way of reading this character. So, I called on this female student to read the character for “birth.” She seemed a bit unsure and stared intensely at the character that I had written on the black board. It would be about 15 seconds before she opened her mouth, and what came out was totally unexpected. It was so unexpected that I had to mentally digest what she said for a few seconds. However, when I did recover from the shock, I laughed out loud as never before in my 20 years of teaching at Musashino.

Her answer was not “sei” as one might expect, but it was … “nama”! Yes, you can read the character as “nama,” but it is usually used in such case as to mean “draft” in “draft beer” (生ビール)! In all the years of being involved with talking about this basic teaching, it never entered my mind (or probably anybody’s mind) to read it “nama.” I felt badly for the female student for my burst of laughter caught the entire class by surprise and probably embarrassed her. Well, by the time I “recovered” from the shock from what I had heard, I asked her “Do you like it?” I was, of course, referring to “draft beer,” especially since it was in mid-July. She energetically and innocently nodded her head in the affirmative, as if she had forgotten all about why this professor had laughed so loudly.

Well, it turns out that she was absent from the class in the previous week, which

accounted for why she could not read it correctly (shō), but it still did not answer why she went so far out to read it “nama.”

2. American Study Tour

The second memory is centered on the American Study Tour, which Prof. Yasuo Fukuda and I started in 2001. It was a way for us to energize the students as one of the means to bring more substance to the newly established faculty, the Faculty of Contemporary Society (現代社会学部). In looking back to that early period, I appreciate the sense of unity and camaraderie that the entire faculty felt and the desire to create a great program for the students. And it was within such sense of optimism that we started the three and a half-week trip centered on an English language and American cultural programs at Mills College, our sister school in Northern California.

We averaged about 25 students on each of the five tours that we made, starting in 2001 and ending in 2007 (2002 trip was cancelled due to the 9/11 terrorist attack). The first 3 weeks were spent in English classes in the morning followed in the afternoon with field trips to such places as senior center, nursery school, church, and city social service department. The students spent other afternoons and evenings with their Mills College “conversation partners” (会話パートナー) to take part in their daily lives or to go on outings to places of mutual interest, which invariably included shopping in San Francisco and other nearby towns. On weekends, we took fun excursion trips to such places as the Old Town in Sacramento or to the scenic Carmel-Monterey area. At the conclusion of our 3-week stay at Mills College, we took a plane down to Los Angeles to enjoy a relaxing and fun final weekend at Disneyland.

The American Study Tour was a learning experience for the students, since for many it was their first international trip and the longest time spent away from their family. Also, forging relationship with Americans (conversation partners, language teachers, senior citizens at rest home, etc.) was their first experience of getting to know people other than Japanese. Needless to say, our students faced many challenges as they had to communicate with them in English, but I was very proud to see them take on and overcome those challenges by actively engaging with Americans in their language.

The students were not the only ones who learned, for the study tour gave me a great opportunity to get to know the Japanese students in ways that were not possible in the classrooms. The relatively formal environment in the Japanese university classrooms changed to a much more relaxed and casual setting during these trips; this informal environment allowed me to associate more meaningfully with the students during our meals, trips and while merely “hanging out” together in the dormitory lounge. Those were rare opportunities for this 50-plus year old man to share experiences and to get know the 18-22 year old Japanese students.

The American Study Tour most symbolized the tumultuous (激動) yet meaningful years of the Faculty of Contemporary Society, which unfortunately (in my view) ceased to exist in 2008 to make way for the social science departments as the university wanted to attract more male students. I used the word “tumultuous” since as a new department we had to create and innovate, which also brought conflicts due to differences of opinion. For example, we debated whether or not to hold overnight “orientation” trips at the beginning of the academic year. I personally enjoyed and have fond memories of those trips to the National Women’s Center in Saitama and later to the hotels in Nagano Prefecture with the scenes of Mount Fuji and the Japanese Alps. Further the faculty meetings were long, sometimes lasting 3 hours, all because we had much to create and build.

The other reasons for the “tumultuous” conditions stemmed from a number of faculty members abruptly quitting from reasons that were not desirable and would be better left unexplained. Further, the events that contributed to the tumultuous condition had to do with the sudden deaths of two of our dear colleagues, Prof. Masao Uchikawa and Prof. Satoshi Hayashi. Their untimely deaths due to illness are still clearly etched in my memory with an inexpressible sense of loss and sadness.

The above are just some of the examples for the reasons why this period turned out to be so tumultuous, but I wish to close this section with why it was meaningful. As mentioned above, despite the turbulence there was a sense of unity and camaraderie working for a common goal of making the new Faculty (学部) faculty. We met often in the Faculty Chair’s office to not only to discuss work-related matters but also to socialize. This also led to us going out to “drink” often after work to Mitaka and Kichijoji. We, therefore, got to know each other on a personal basis. And this environment was exactly what I had envisioned as a working situation in Japan. It was, in a sense, a dream come true for me.

3. Buddhist-Psychology study session

The third memory has to do with the Buddhist-Psychology study session, which I started in the year 2000. Even though Buddhism was my area of specialization, I have always had an interest in Psychology as a way to understand and to explain Buddhism. Further, I saw Psychology, especially Humanistic Psychology (人間性心理学), as another way of tapping into a similar object of study as that of Buddhism.

We called the gatherings, “A Study Session for Pursuing the Interface of Buddhism and Psychology” (仏教と心理学の接点を追求する勉強会) and began to meet on Saturday afternoons in classrooms at the university on a monthly basis. We drew a crowd of 10 to 20 people each time. Sometimes, the numbers reached 30 people. Most of the presenters were members of the study session, mostly graduate students in Buddhism and Psychology. Occasionally, we were able to enjoy invited guests from outside our circle.

In 2004, I helped to set up a symposium on the topic of the interface of Buddhism and Psychology on the occasion of the celebration of the 80th Anniversary of the founding of Musashino University. I invited Okano Moriya and Inoue Vimala as two of the panelists. And four years later in November of 2008, these two joined hands with me to co-found an academic association, the Japanese Association for the Study of Buddhism and Psychology (日本仏教心理学会) at an inaugural gathering at Musashino University. This association now has a membership of approximately 200 and has held 8 annual academic meetings at Musashino, Rissho, Ryukoku, Minobu, Atomi Women's, Koya and Bunkyo Universities. I have served as its 2nd president for the past 6 years, which involved a lot of work but has proven helpful in giving me a new way of talking about Buddhism.

The point I wish to emphasize is that the founding of this academic association could not and would not have been possible without the existence and support of the study session that had been functioning actively for 8 years prior to 2008. And one of the key persons who served as the main administrative supporter was Ms. Hiroko Ushida, who herself was a graduate of Musashino Women's University and one of the first graduate students that I advised. Ms. Ushida was the drive behind the study sessions for she sent out the monthly email invitations and managed the actual running of the meetings. One day I found out that she was sending out the email announcements to the monthly meeting *one by one on an individual basis* because she did not know how to send out in "bulk" or as groups! It symbolized here dedication.

Unfortunately and sadly, Ms. Usida passed away in 2010 as her chronic health condition suddenly deteriorated to its worst level. For all of us involved in the study session, it was a huge shock and left a gaping hole in our hearts as well as in the organization. We owe a huge debt of gratitude for her contributions, for without her, the study session probably would not have continued, and without the study session the Japanese Association for the Study of Buddhism and Psychology would not have been established. This is why I sometimes put up a photo of her when we hold our study session. And thanks to Ms. Uchida's effort, the latest study session was the 130th since its inception in 2000!

4. The 27th Nakamura Hajime Eastern Study Prize

The fourth memory is the most recent and one that took place in the very month of completing this essay. It has to do with my receiving The 27th Nakamura Hajime Eastern Study Prize, which is given out by the Nakamura Hajime Eastern Institute; it was started by a Professor Emeritus of the University of Tokyo, an eminent Buddhist and Indian studies scholar, and a recipient of the Culture Award (文化勲章).

The Nakamura Hajime Eastern Study Prize is given once a year to a scholar who is determined to have made a significant contribution to the study and dissemination of

Eastern thought, primarily Buddhism and Indian philosophy. When I learned that I had been selected for this award for 2017, I was utterly surprised for I considered this award to be reserved for those who have probed deeply into one major area of specialization. I, on the other hand, have focused on Pure Land Buddhism (in particular, Jodo Shinshu) to some extent but also had a number of other areas that I worked in, in the style of “Jack of all trades and master of none.” They included American Buddhism, Buddhism and psychology and Buddhist-Christian dialogue. Well, it appears that the selection committee liked the fact I had worked in *multiple* areas and, most of all, in the *international* arena.

I am mentioning the award as the last of the four memories, not only because I am elated to receive it but also because of the profound gratitude that I feel toward Musashino University. The award represents a public acknowledgment of what I was able to accomplish precisely because Musashino University provided the superb environment for me to grow and thrive as a scholar and educator. So, the award is actually a testament to the university’s openness and magnanimity for permitting me to pursue my interests on a wide range of fronts, from Buddhist psychology to American Buddhism to Jodo Shinshu Buddhist doctrinal studies.

In my acceptance speech on October 10th at the award ceremony that took place at the Indian Embassy, I shared some of the numerous difficulties or challenges that I faced especially in my younger years. Allow me to mention two of them here, but before I do, the important message is this: whenever I encountered a difficulty, there soon arose what I am calling “compassionate condition” (慈悲のご縁) that helped me to overcome the difficulty.

The first was when I was ten years old living in Japan, my family suddenly decided to move back to the U.S. (my mother was an American citizen). So, before I could be sufficiently ready to adjust to the change, I found myself in a new country even though I was unable to speak a word of English. However, my 5th grade teacher and students at the new school in California welcomed me with open arms. Mr. McGuiness, the teacher, even spent extra time after school to give me individual lessons for me to learn English.

There was one event I cannot forget that symbolized this sense of welcome that I felt. It was the election of the classroom officers on the very first day of the new school year. The fifth grade classmates had to elect the President, the Vice-President, Secretary, and Sergeant at Arms (守衛官). Well, they elected me as the new Sergeant at Arms! Till this day, I still don’t know what its responsibilities were or recall doing anything related to it. So, they had elected a newcomer who couldn’t speak a word of English as the class Sergeant at Arms. It was my classmates’ way of welcoming me, and for me it was a “compassionate condition” that helped me to overcome the difficulties of starting a whole new life in a new country.

The second challenge was when I started college. Due to my family situation, I decided to be on my own which meant that I had to work to pay for much of my tuition and living

expenses. It was not easy balancing work and studies, but somehow the “challenging” conditions ignited an enormous burst of energy and aspiration to study vigorously as I had never done. In looking back to that period in my life, I am grateful and amazed that this “compassionate condition” emerged from within and presented itself to help me to generate the energy and the aspiration to study hard and to eventually to find “my voice” through my life-long work, Buddhist Studies. Another example of this “compassionate condition” turned out to be that of Stanford University accepting me as a transfer student, despite the enormous odds against someone like me: an “immigrant” and a racial minority. Attending Stanford gave me the chance to eventually go back to Japan to do graduate studies at the University of Tokyo, which opened the door for me to work at Musashino University.

I would like to believe that the magnanimous and open-hearted spirit that Stanford University showed in admitting me and others who are less privileged than the average person is what makes America exceptional. I believe that this quality—acknowledging one’s abilities regardless of their racial, ethnic, economic or religious background—still lies at the foundation of American culture and society. Thus, I believe the current Donald Trump administration’s policy of “America First” and the implicit support of the white supremacist attitude represent only a temporary phenomenon supported by a relatively small minority.

5. In Closing

As I bring this essay to a close, allow me to “selfishly” mention two of my tangible “contributions” that will live on after I retire from the university. The first is the installment of the after-hour book return box (本の返却箱) at the library. It was an answer to the problem of there not being a place to return the books when the library was closed. This probably ended up being the only significant accomplishment of my tenure as the Head of the Library (図書館長)! The other is the adding of the word “peace” to the English version of the university’s current brand slogan (世界の幸せをカタチにする。). I felt that “Creating Happiness for the World” was insufficient, so suggested that we add “peace” to read “Creating *Peace* & Happiness for the World.”

It is ironic that these two “tangible” contributions did not require hardly any effort on my part, compared to the many other projects for which I expended an enormous amount of energy and effort but will never be noticed much by others. They include the work for the American Study tours, the English Education Committee, the work on the numerous committees, and in my leadership capacity as the Head of the Library (2004-2006), and Dean of the Buddhist Education (仏教教育部長) (2014-2016), and Director of the Institute of Buddhist Culture (仏教文化研究所所長) (2008-2018). Of course, the other primary effort had to do with the numerous classes that I taught; I hope that the students gained something worthwhile through them to assist them in the lives and careers.

In the end, it does not matter much whether people remember them or not, for what is important when all is said and done is that it has meant so much to *me*! It was a wonderful ride, and I feel immensely lucky to be able to close this segment of my life with a profound sense of gratitude to the students, the faculty, the administrative staff and the supporters of Musashino University. Thank you all from the bottom of my heart!