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Amada Yoshimasa

“Finally I was able to see all around me.”

▶▶▶ <http://www.tjf.or.jp/takarabako/index.htm>



Four pages of *Takarabako* will be devoted to introducing and providing a wide variety of resources and information, mainly about the lives and culture of Japanese young people. Three pages will present various ideas and teaching plans for using these materials in the classroom. This issue features Amada Yoshimasa, the model of prize winning work of the seventh TJF “Lives of Japanese High School Students: Photo and Message Contest.”



1 My name is Amada Yoshimasa. I am 18 years old. I live in a temple (*tera*¹) in Shizuoka prefecture where my father is a priest. I spent three years at Minobusan High School,² a boarding school located in Yamanashi prefecture run by the Nichiren sect of Buddhism,³ in order to study to become a priest. This spring I entered the Rissho University Faculty of Buddhist Studies in Tokyo.



2 My family. When the temple parishioners (*danka*⁴) gather for a temple function, my father does a lot more than just conduct the service.⁵ He tries to get everyone to have a good time by singing songs with them and serving them food he cooks himself. My older brother says, “Father’s services are just like Johnny’s pop star concerts.⁶ He’s all for the audience participation-type of event and he gets right down there with everyone else.” I think my admiration for my father is what made me decide to become a priest.

3 During class. Minobusan High School was established over seven hundred years ago by Kuonji, a temple with a long and distinguished history that stands at the head of all the temples belonging to the Nichiren sect of Buddhism. The school is small and has only about twenty students per year. Future priests from all over Japan attend classes here while boarding and training at Kuonji or other temples nearby. Aside from the regular high school curriculum, we also take classes on Buddhism. We learn about things we will need to know in the future such as how to conduct funeral ceremonies and various other services.





4 Morning prayers.⁷ We must sit in formal kneeling position (*seiza*⁸) for the hour and a half to two hours the service lasts. At first none of us could stay in this position for even five minutes, but we slowly got accustomed to sitting for longer and longer periods of time. It takes over a month to be able to sit correctly through the whole service.



6 At the convenience store. We had one or two days off every one to two months. On those days we went out to do things like buying CDs, going bowling or singing karaoke. At karaoke I often sing songs by bands like TUBE¹² or The Trabryu.¹³ Since I had very little chance to go out, I always made sure to look nice whenever I went shopping or for karaoke.



5 Playing the *ryuteki*.⁹ At school I joined the tea ceremony, dance, and basketball clubs. I also studied *gagaku*¹⁰ music, since it is a required part of Buddhist temple ceremonies, and played instruments including the *sho*¹¹ and *ryuteki*.

Evaluations of Yoshimasa by those around him



Father: As a parent I am of course sometimes compelled to scold him. Usually when a parent scolds a child, the parent is himself feeling irritated and inevitably acts somewhat unreasonable. But even when he knows I am being unfair Yoshimasa just looks a little wistful and puts up with it.



Mother: He's just like his father. I have never seen him get angry.



Older brother: He really wants to become a priest and he is very eager to learn. I think he is better than I am at attracting and leading others, probably because he is gentle and open-minded.



A junior student at high school: During services Amada-senpai knows how to perform the required movements very gracefully. He also has good leadership skills and is very understanding. Once, when I was so discouraged by the harshness of the training that I wanted to quit, he was sympathetic and listened attentively to what I had to say. I was quite impressed to realize that he was the kind of person who tries to guide others by caring about them and making the effort to see things from their point of view.

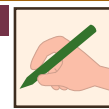
7 During services. In the future, I want to be able to do things for my temple like entertaining the parishioners with my own cooking whenever there is a service and arranging the flowers myself. I want the temple to be an enjoyable gathering place for the whole community and a force from which citizens can work together for world peace. Though Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam all differ in terms of their historical background, social environment, and teachings, the spirit of their prayers is still the same. I think that the important thing is to try to understand each other and to transcend our ethnic and religious differences so we can be tolerant of each other as human beings, just the same as we would be tolerant of our own children.



Photos: Yoshida Tadamasa (1, 2, 3, 4), Kurihara Hirofumi (5, 6, 7)

Yoshimasa's Essay

Finally I was able to see all around me.



Right after the entrance ceremony on the first day of high school we attended a welcoming ceremony for new boarders held at the temple where we were to stay. That night the older students shaved our heads with barber's clippers. Our training for the priesthood started the next day. Every morning we got up at five and attended prayers for about an hour and a half to two hours. After prayers were over we had breakfast and then cleaned the temple halls before going to school. After school we came back to do another round of cleaning, followed by dinner, baths, and evening prayers. There was no time at all to rest. During our first year the second-year students taught us in great detail how to clean, how to speak respectfully to our elders, how to serve food at mealtimes, and the like. I found cleaning the hardest task. We had to work very quickly to get the job done in time and sometimes I would get cramps in my legs. My hands got red and chapped from rinsing the mops in icy cold water in the winter.

Every day we all wanted to go to school as soon as possible, as school was the only place we could get any sort of break. Some students were emotionally unable to go on because they couldn't adjust to the new life and became unbearably homesick. Others had to leave because their knees



Photo: Yoshida Tadamasa

become inflamed from sitting in the *seiza* position too long. There were twelve boarders at the temple including myself when we started out, but only six, or half, were able to graduate.

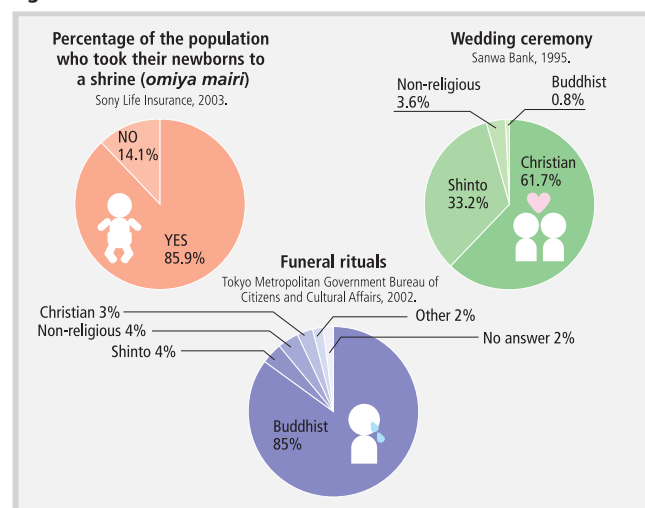
I felt like quitting many times as well. The first year was very hard physically, since I was on the move the whole day through. I don't know whether I could do it again if I had to. But I was able to get through it all right as long as I did what the older students said so I would not get scolded. My second year was psychologically hard, since I had to instruct and take care of the younger students while at the same time continuing to learn from the older students. During this year I experienced firsthand how hard it is to teach others. If you cannot teach well your efforts are wasted, since the younger students get confused and soon stop listening to you. I learned that you have to adjust your approach according to each student and pay attention to their individual feelings. During my third year I was made one of the leaders of the student body. As I did this work I became aware of how difficult it is to be at the head of a group. If those in the lead do not set a good example, those who are following them will become careless and sloppy. You also cannot lead others if you do not have firm ideas and convictions of your own.

During my first year I could only see one way: ahead. In my second year I became able to look back at the way I had come as well as to see what was coming up. Finally, in my third year I was able to see all 360 degrees around me. I think it was the experience with leadership that made this new perspective possible.

- 1 Tera (寺):** A Buddhist temple. A place enshrining images of the Buddha and used as a setting for ascetic training and religious services.
- 2 Minobusan High School:** Religious schools make up 27% of all privately run high schools in Japan. Of these schools, 60% are Christian, 33% Buddhist, 2% Shinto, and 5% other. Out of 120 Buddhist high schools, only about five schools offer programs enabling students to attain the priesthood upon graduation. (From *Shukyo kyoiku shiryō shū* [Source Materials on Religious Education], Kokugakuin University Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, ed., Suzuki Shuppan, 1993).
- 3 Buddhism:** Historical accounts say that Buddhism was introduced to Japan from India via China and the Korean Peninsula in 538 A.D. The Nichiren sect was founded in the mid-thirteenth century by the Japanese priest Nichiren (1222-82) and is one of the largest of the 157 Buddhist sects registered with the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. There is no single standard course for attaining priesthood in Japan, candidates must instead work to fulfill the conditions established by the individual sect to which they belong. Buddhist priests in Japan may marry.

According to the *Nihonjin no kokuminsei chosa* [Study of the Japanese National Character] (1998) conducted by the Institute of Statistical Mathematics, the proportion of Japanese who say they belong to a religion or have some sort of religious faith stands at 33 percent, a figure which has remained nearly unchanged for the past forty years. The 2003 *Shukyo nenkan* [Religion Yearbook], issued by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the total number of followers of various religious organizations in Japan is approximately 216 million (note: the total population of Japan is 120 million). Of this figure, 49.9 percent are Shinto, 44.2 percent Buddhist, 0.9 percent Christian, and 5.0 percent other faiths including Muslim and Hindu. Some Japanese consider themselves affiliated with a Shinto shrine and a parishioner of a Buddhist temple simultaneously. Although Shinto celebrations and rituals such as *omiya mairi* (the first visit made to a shrine after the birth of a baby), *shichigosan* (ceremonies held for three- and five-year-old boys and three- and seven-year old girls in order to celebrate their health and growth), and *hatsumode* (the first visit made to a shrine at New Year's) are a familiar part of Japanese life, a majority of people also observe Buddhist traditions such as O-Higan and O-Bon and choose funerals conducted in Buddhist style, an indication of how firmly Buddhism is entrenched in daily life.

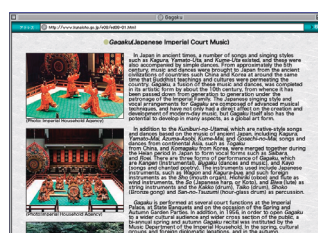
Figures



- 4 Danka (檀家):** Parishioners/lay members of a particular temple who attend its services and participate in its administration and management.
- 5 Buddhist memorial services in honor of the dead:** Services held every seven days during a forty-nine day period immediately following a person's death and on designated anniversaries thereafter.
- 6 Johnny's (ジャニーズ事務所):** A talent agency that manages SMAP as well as many other popular male performers and singing groups.
- 7 Prayers:** The act of praying and chanting sutras while sitting formally in front of a Buddhist image or altar, usually performed in the morning and at night.
- 8 Seiza (正座):** Literally, "the proper way to sit." Ways of sitting formally vary from culture to culture. In Japan, when assuming a formal sitting posture, for example while in a Japanese-style room or during Buddhist services, one sits in the manner as shown in the photo.
- 9 Ryuteki (竜笛):** See photo 5. A horizontal flute made of bamboo. A *gagaku* instrument.
- 10 Gagaku (雅楽):** The name given to the style of traditional music handed down within the Japanese imperial court, often performed at the beginning and end of Buddhist memorial services.
- 11 Sho (笙):** A woodwind instrument made of wood and bamboo. One of the most commonly seen of the *gagaku* instruments.



For details on the content of notes 9 to 11, see the following web sites.



<http://www.kunaicho.go.jp/e08/ed08-01.html>
(Imperial Household Agency web site)



<http://www.nihongagakukai.gr.jp/instruments-j.html>

- 12 TUBE (チューブ):** A four-member band that made its debut in 1985. Most of their songs, including the hit *Season in the Sun*, are set in summer.



<http://www.tube.gr.jp/>

- 13 The Trabryu (虎舞竜):** A four-member hard rock band that made its debut in 1982.



<http://www.trabryu.com/>