



Rape blossoms 菜の花

## No birth, no death, only transformation

When we take a walk outside during springtime, we can see how nature is coming back to life after a cold winter. Trees become green again, flowers start blooming, and insects are flying through the air. Then in autumn, nature prepares for the cold winter again. Leaves change their colours and fall off the trees, migratory birds leave for warmer climates, squirrels prepare for hibernation, and most insects die because of the cold.

This is the natural circle of life. Beings are born, live their lives, and when their lives come to an end they die. In this respect humans are not any different from a flower. We are born, grow up, we bloom in our youth, wither when we become old, and finally die when our time has come, just like the flower. But we humans tend to see ourselves as something special, so it is hard for us to accept this

simple reality.

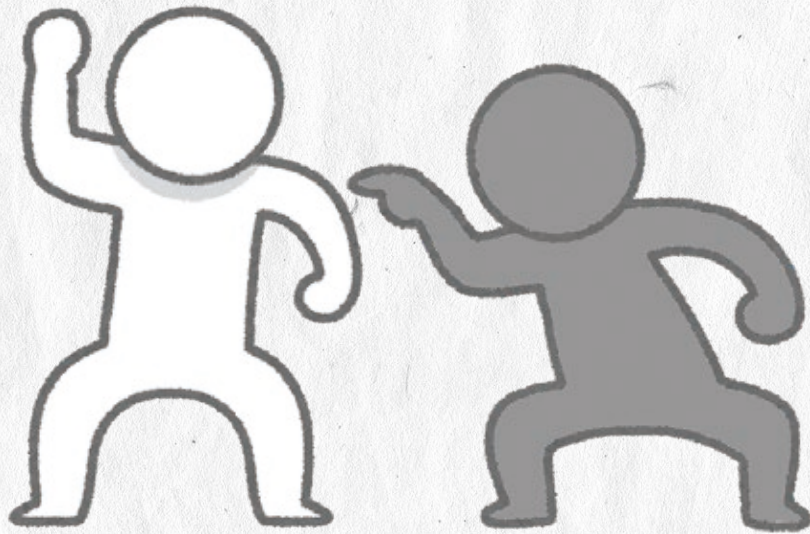
Buddhism teaches us to accept birth and death as an inevitable and necessary part of our lives. But this is only a provisional understanding of birth and death. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is to go beyond our egocentric point of view, where we realize that there is actually no birth and no death.

Our body is made up of trillions of living cells, which again are made up of countless atoms that form different molecules. The atoms in our body are usually absorbed through the food that we eat. After we die our body starts to decay. The molecules in our cells break up and the atoms of these molecules become part of new molecules. From the viewpoint of these atoms, our death is not the end, only a transformation. Given enough time, the same atoms will eventually become part of

the body of another living being.

According to the law of conservation of energy, the amount of energy in our universe stays always the same. Energy is never lost or gained, just transformed. So what we usually perceive as the beginning and end of things is actually just a link in the endless process of transformation that is constantly taking place in the universe of which we are merely a part.

From our own perspective, birth and death are of course very real, and thinking about our own death can be quite frightening, but if we step out of this narrow point of view and try to see the whole, we realize that there is no birth, no death, only transformation.



**“Humans are truly awkward creatures, for they cannot understand either happiness or misery without comparing themselves to others.”**

— Hirano Keiko

We measure various things, such as loss or gain, victory or defeat, by means of the “ruler” we have made based on our own arbitrary notions of what is right and wrong. “I am happier than him,” “I am worse than him”: when we try to compare ourselves to

others, we unconsciously apply to it our own merits and demerits. From such a comparison, wouldn't we be happy out of a feeling of superiority, and unhappy out of a feeling of inferiority? I wonder if this is where the confusion of humans truly lies.

The teachings of the Buddha illuminate this attitude of ours, and shows us the way to live our life as we are, without any need of comparison. I would like to ask the teachings of the Buddha, “What is happiness?”

(Minamimidō, April 2017. Osaka: Shinshū Ōtani-ha Nanbabetuin)



## Incense

Originally incense was a part of daily life in ancient India. It was used to fragrantly refresh the body and mind. This was then incorporated into Buddhism for adorning the Buddha altar.

Incense is used in two ways in the Ōtani School of Shin Buddhism. Burning incense made from the resin and wood chips of aromatic trees in a charcoal-containing burner is called shōkō, whereas lighting the top of a stick of incense is called nenkō. In everyday services one finds the latter, and in more formal settings, such as funerals and memorial services, one

finds the former, or both.

For shōkō, you first look up at the statue or scroll on the altar, place your left hand on the table, and then put incense in the burner twice with your right hand. Afterwards, you join your hands together reverently in front of you. For nenkō, you break the stick of incense into an appropriate length, light one of its ends, and, with the lit end to the left, lay it down flat in the incense burner.

The practice of “adorning the Buddha altar” expresses the world of the Pure Land opened by Amida Nyorai’s Vow. Like offering flowers and

lighting candles, making the Buddha altar complete with fragrant burning incense has been passed down to the present day as an important way of adorning the Buddha altar. Shinran Shōnin said that being given the light of wisdom by reciting the nenbutsu and bringing to mind the Buddha is to become “adorned with fragrant light,” just like a person’s body becomes sweet-smelling after being enveloped in a fragrance. In this way, incense has an important meaning as an expression of the world of the nenbutsu.

## Walking around Monzen-machi

It is said that the Monzen-machi (literally, “the district in front of the gate”) has its origins in the area formed by the likes of merchants, Honganji retainers, and supporting temples in front of Higashi Honganji’s Goeidō-mon Gate after the Honganji temple was split into east and west branches by the government in 1602. After entering the Meiji period (1868–1912), temple-related businesses gathered in the area, creating the basis for the modern-day Monzen-machi.

Today, in response to the demand provided by temples and visitors, many shops are found near Higashi Honganji. Many of their products, such as rosary beads, Buddhist altar implements, candles, priests’ robes, incense, fans, and lanterns come from designated “traditional industries” with certified histories and techniques. One can purchase a variety of goods, from items of intangible value that far exceed their price to gifts and souvenirs with a local flavor for people back at home. There are some shops where you can watch items being made, and even experience making them yourself.

Monzen-machi also has a lot of nature. The area in front of the Goeidō Hall is a visual delight for passersby, tourists, and temple visitors. It is a beautiful fresh green in the spring and early summer, and enveloped in the pretty gold of ginkgo trees during the fall. Also, by heading east along Shōmen-dōri Street with the Goeidō-mon Gate at one’s back, one will soon arrive at Shōsei-en Garden (Kikoku-tei), a detached part of Higashi Honganji’s grounds. There, one can enjoy the beautiful colors of nature’s four seasons all year round.

