

Reflections on the 75th Anniversary of the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

This month will be the 75th anniversary of the atomic bombs that were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on August 6th and August 9th, 1945.

At the Orange County Buddhist Church, we have several survivors of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. I have had very moving conversations with them about their experience that fateful day 75 years ago.

One of our members, Junji Sarashina, described to me that the blast knocked him completely flat on the ground on his face. Because his back was turned to the blast he wasn't burned as badly as he could have been. He said that people didn't even know what had hit them. No one knew what an atomic bomb was or how powerful it could be. People didn't know the effects of radiation or anything. Parents who had missing children lost in the blast, went daily to the city trying to find their lost child. Every day that they went into the city, they became exposed to the radiation, and in a few days became sick and died.

Junji recalls coming to a river, where many people had gone into, because they were burned, but could not climb out of the river. A man reached out with his arms to ask for help, and when Junji tried to pull the man out of the river, the man's skin came off of his arms instead. It was just unbelievable, all the devastation and suffering. In Junji's own words, "I saw hell with my own eyes."

Junji shared with me, "You know Sensei, I don't believe in a hell in the afterlife, because I saw hell with my own eyes, that day in Hiroshima. There can be no greater hell than what I saw that day of the atomic bomb."

Isn't that true? Isn't the hell of various religions, the construct of man, saying that these people or those people fall into hell. It is a reflection of the unenlightened man that discriminates and judges others.

For someone like Junji, such talk is absurd. Only someone who has seen hell with their own eyes, can say something like that.

In contrast to that, Junji also shared something very profound with me. He said, "You know Sensei, I also feel the same about the Pure Land. I don't think of the Pure Land as a place I will go after I die. Sometimes I am having an enjoyable dinner with my family, with my grandkids, and I feel like, isn't the Pure Land right here and now? If I can see hell with my own eyes, why can't I also see the Pure Land?"

I thought that was a very profound statement by Junji. The issue of whether the Pure Land is something we can know in this life or not is a highly debated issue in Jodo Shinshu, but I tend to side with the viewpoint of Junji. Actually, there are numerous great Shin Buddhists who have that same sentiment. The Myokonin, Saichi, in his poems, writes,

I cannot fall into hell.
Hell is right here.
This place is hell,

And hell is where we dwell.

Where is Saichi's Pure Land?
Saichi's Pure Land is right here.
Where is the borderline of the Pure Land in this world?
The eyes are the borderline of the Pure Land in this world

Where is Saichi's Pure Land?
Saichi's Pure Land is in my heart.
It is, it is,
Namu Amida Butsu.

This floating world is wretched,
But this floating world becomes the Pure Land.
I'm joyful
Namu Amida Butsu.

In this world I enjoy the Pure Land.
This world transforms into the Pure Land.
I'm joyful
Namu Amida Butsu.

As we pause to reflect on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 75 years ago, may the experiences and memories of those who survived that day, be the words of wisdom to the whole world, as they implore all of humanity to live in peace and harmony.

Shinran Shonin said, "May the Buddha Dharma spread, and may the world be at peace." 750 years ago, Shinran Shonin aspired for a world of peace and harmony. 75 years ago, after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, those survivors aspired for a world of peace and harmony. And still today, in 2020, we too aspire for a world of peace and harmony.