

Focusing Back on the Deep Wish Given to Us
—Turning a Crisis into an Opportunity to Restore Our Humanity

March 25, 2020

We cannot predict what will happen to the world due to the recent outbreak and rapid spread of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19). Having taken this situation very seriously, we have decided to conduct our annual Spring Service at the Shinshū Honbyō (our mother temple) as scheduled. However, attendance will be limited to the headquarters office staff only. In addition, in consideration of public health, we have suspended all of the volunteer programs (Hōshidan) at the Dōbō Retreat Center since March 1.

We offer our sincerest apology to our temple members who were looking forward to participating in the retreat center programs. Our apologies are also extended to our members in our overseas districts who were planning to participate in the 13th World Dōbō Gathering, and also to the head priests and church administrators from throughout Japan who were preparing for a group tour to the Shinshū Honbyō. All of those events and activities have been postponed or cancelled.

As of today, more than 400,000 people throughout the world have become ill from the virus and nearly 18,000 people have died from COVID-19. We offer our deepest condolences to the families of those who have passed away and extend our best wishes to the countless people who have contracted the virus and wish for their speedy recovery. Also, we express our deepest gratitude and respect to the healthcare professionals who have been striving to treat people during this unprecedented situation. We hope that our combined wisdom and care will bring an end to this crisis as soon as possible.

In retrospect, we human beings have suffered from numerous infectious diseases of unknown origin throughout our history. Despite the uncertainty of what must be done in such difficult situations, we have courageously faced and overcome those crises. At such a time, what is important is that we not socially and emotionally isolate those who are ill and their families. Unfortunately, there seems to be the deplorable trend of blaming those who are suffering from the disease. At such times, it is even more crucial for us to learn from the wisdom of the Buddha who vows to always bear our anxieties and suffering together with us. Even though we must eradicate this virus, we should never separate those who are suffering from our society.

It is natural for us to wish that we and our loved ones can be spared from misfortune. However, this pandemic of the coronavirus has reminded us of the fundamental truth that no one in this world can be free of suffering. Therefore, we should try as best we can to understand the anxieties and the feeling of isolation that those who have contracted the disease must have. We believe that this is the attitude we must have as human beings.

In times of crisis in history, our ancestors took on these opportunities to show the spirit of the *nenbutsu* sangha that regards every one of us as companions living together instead of enduring the impermanence of life alone. At this moment, all of our districts, subdistricts, local temples, and chapels across the globe are having no choice but to cancel or suspend

their services, study sessions and other gatherings. In light of our ancestors' spirit, it is important for us to realize that this crisis is an opportunity to reflect on how we should live rather than remaining pessimistic regarding the situation. Because of the restrictions put in place regarding interacting with other people, we should focus even more on deepening and cultivating the relationships we have with each other as encouraged by the Buddha's wisdom. By returning our focus to the deep wish the Buddha made for us, we should regard this crisis as an opportunity to work together toward restoring true humanity among us.

With expectations that this situation will be resolved in the near future, we hope to resume our normal activities such as welcoming visitors and restoring our volunteer programs. All of the staff at the headquarters offices are striving to maintain services and other events so that you can visit the Shinshū Honbyō again soon to listen to the Dharma together.

Even though we are in the midst of uncertainty, it is our sincerest wish that every one of us can find an opportunity to return our focus to the wish of the Buddha.

Bishop Hiroshi Tajima
Chief Administrator,
Shinshū Ōtani-ha (Higashi Honganji)