The Great East Japan Earthquake and Reconsidering "Buddhism": Do Our Lives Come to Nothing After Death?

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Editors' note: Professor Kigoshi teaches at Ōtani University, a private university in Kyoto, Japan, with an emphasis on Shin Buddhist studies. In addition to being an alumni of the university, Professor Kigoshi served as president from 2016 to 2022. Unique among the Japanese authors contributing to this edited volume, Professor Kigoshi has lived in the United States for short periods of time. He was visiting scholar at the University of California, Berkeley 2022–2023, and he also spent part of his childhood in Berkeley while his father served as a Jōdo Shinshū minister for the Berkeley Higashi Honganji temple. Professor Kigsohi is well respected in the emerging field of chaplaincy in Japan for his compassionate and innovative leadership, taking Ōtani University student volunteers to disaster-stricken areas affected by the 2011 earthquake and tsunami. In this way, he is one of the pioneers in initiating theological field education (contextual education) in Japanese Buddhist higher education.[1]

In this article, Professor Kigoshi argues that Japanese Buddhism today is out of touch with the deeper spiritual needs of contemporary society. The

1. Theological field education, sometimes called "contextual education" or "supervised ministry," has been a component of master's of divinity training in North American Christian seminaries since the 1960s when a gap was identified between the theoretical knowledge taught in seminaries and the practical skills needed to serve in a parish. See Robert T. O'Gorman, Kathleen Talvacchia, and W. Michael Smith, "Teaching from a Community Context: The Role of the Field Educator in Theological Education," *Theological Education* 37, no. 2 (2001): 1–57. Scholarship has been dominated almost exclusively by Christian voices, and North American seminary educators are only just beginning to think about how to approach field education for students from other religious traditions. See Christine J. Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lexington Books, 2021).

current approach to Buddhist studies, with its emphasis on rationality and textual exegesis, is "cut off from actual lives" and no longer has "the power to liberate human suffering." Professor Kigoshi calls for a new form of experiential engagement in Buddhism, arguing that this is how the Buddha and Shinran formulated their doctrines: by meeting people "on the ground" and responding to "people's basic emotions." This orientation evokes the concept of "living human documents" used in North American clinical pastoral education wherein chaplains approach real-life encounters with those they serve as valuable "documents" that can be examined, like canonical religious texts, as a source of spiritual reflection.[2]

This article presents the case study of Mrs. Tanno, who shares with Professor Kigoshi her grief surrounding the loss of her adolescent son. As Mrs. Tanno recalls the circumstances of her son's death, the words she expresses in a make-shift memorial constructed at the site of his school—"Do our lives come to nothing after death?"—becomes an object of contemplation for Professor Kigoshi. He senses that "this is a message from something even deeper that came out as the mother's words." As Professor Kigoshi embarks on theological reflection around how to respond to Mrs. Tanno, he realizes that the modern Japanese interpretation of Shin Buddhism—which has become de-mythologized and focused on rationality—is flawed and falls short of addressing her suffering. What is truly healing for Mrs. Tanno involves retrieving the "religious reality" or "religious aspect" of Buddhism.

It is through this encounter with Mrs. Tanno and other disaster victims that Professor Kigoshi was led to establish a new field of study at his university he calls rinshō Bukkyō, or "clinical Buddhism."[3] *The program teaches clinical skills for interacting with people who are facing devastating loss and emphasizes fieldwork visiting "the actual sites of people's suffering." This article is valuable for demonstrating how the wide-scale impact of the 2011 natural disasters created an urgent call for chaplaincy services in Japan and a reorientation to Buddhist studies.*

2. See Charles V. Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Abingdon Press, 1984). See also Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Revisiting the Living Human Web: Theological Eeducation and the Role of Clinical Pastoral Eeducation," *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 62, nos. 1–2 (2008): 3–18.

3. For a longer discussion of *rinshō Bukkyō* see Jonathan S. Watts, "Is Buddhist Chaplaincy a Form of Socially Engaged Buddhism? Reflections on a Japan-US Dialogue," Japan Network of Engaged Buddhists (JNEB), https://jneb.net/is-buddhist-chaplaincy-a-form-of-socially-engaged-buddhism/, accessed November 3, 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Japanese Buddhism has a history of not engaging with social issues, including chaplaincy. As I've written elsewhere,[4] Buddhism, as a renunciant tradition, has had from its inception a relationship with societal involvement that has not been straightforward, tending instead toward self-cultivation over relationships with others. Mahāyāna developments attempted to address this neglect of social concerns through an emphasis on bodhisattvas and compassion. Yet even in Mahāyāna Buddhist practice in Japan, there has been little social engagement via Buddhist institutions. Japanese Buddhists since the Edo period have been bound with individual temples and specific affiliations, resulting in a lack of involvement beyond their temple confines. Further limiting their activities was the focus on so-called "funeral Buddhism." Although there have been individuals in Japan interested in chaplaincy, Buddhist sects were largely absent in societal engagement until about ten years ago.[5] The Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 prompted the previously unengaged Buddhist community to engage in a variety of social activities:

> Temporary relationships that transcended affiliation and sect were formed between disaster victims and monks, and funeral ceremonies, etc., were conducted for those who lost their lives. Temple facilities were also opened to the public as evacuation centers, and Buddhists engaged in various support activities, even providing food and taking personal care of victims. The sects also gave organizational backup for these efforts and provided manpower, funds, and resources to the individuals and facilities working on the frontlines.[6]

My expertise is in the study of Pure Land Buddhism. As a specialist in Japanese Buddhism, I experienced these changes firsthand. Not only did this disaster change the behavior of Japanese Buddhists, but it also changed the understanding of Buddhism within Japan.[7] It additionally

4. Kigoshi Yasushi, "Recent Trends Concerning the Issue of 'Buddhism and Practice' in Contemporary Japan," *Journal of East Asian Cultures* (2023): 59–71.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 67.
7. Kigoshi Yasushi, *Borantia wa Shinran no oshie ni hansuru no ka: Tariki rikai no sōkoku* ボランティアは親鸞の教えに反するのか: 他力理解の相克 (Hozokan, 2016).

presaged the development of chaplaincy studies in Japan, which was a direct result of the disaster.[8]

In the last two hundred years, the encounter between Asian Buddhism and Western colonialism, secularism, and science resulted in changes in Buddhist doctrines and practices that made them more consonant with Western modernity, resulting in what has been termed "Buddhist modernism" or "modern Buddhism."[9] In Japan, Pure Land beliefs were altered, with the presence of the Pure Land of Amida becoming a site of skeptical inquiry as well. Studies of Buddhist thought in the past century generally have been conducted within the context of philosophy and other modern scholarly methods, and Pure Land Buddhist thought also developed within this methodological framework. In that context, Amida Buddha (阿弥陀仏) and the Pure Land (浄土) have been demythologized and reinterpreted in an existential manner. Michael Conway writes:

> The unequal nature of [the encounter between Western nations and Japan] meant that Buddhist schools were forced to prove their legitimacy as genuine religions in accord with the standards of civilization set by the intellectual trends in the dominant Western nations and to argue against the idea that they were relics of backward superstition that would obstruct the Japanese nation's march of progress toward recognition as an equal in international politics and the reestablishment of self-determination and domestic political affairs.[10]

In keeping with these changes, the physical existence of the Western Pure Land was no longer taken as fact. The result was a demythologized Shin Buddhism in which the Pure Land was seen as having "a primarily symbolic meaning" rather than a real, physical existence.[11]

I do not have space here to discuss how these concepts were originally understood in the Indian Buddhist scriptures, nor how Shinran, the most famous monk of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, understood them. However, after Buddhism was institutionalized and established

8. For more on the development of chaplaincy studies in Japan, see, for example, Nathaniel Michon, "Awakening to Care: Formation of Contemporary Japanese Buddhist Chaplaincy" (Graduate Theological Union, 2020).
9. See, for example, David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
10. Michael Conway, "Modern Reinterpretations of Amida and the Pure Land Introduction," *Eastern Buddhist*, 3rd ser., vol. 1, no. 2 (2021): 1.
11. Ibid., 2.

in Japan, ordinary Japanese people believed in the Pure Land as a world where one would be reborn after death, and they believed in Amida Buddha as a real buddha who welcomes us into that world. This belief was then influenced by modernization in the late 1800s and came to be demythologized and understood in a more philosophical and rational way. However, the Great East Japan Earthquake brought the efficacy of this rational Buddhism as a religious worldview into question.

In this paper, I would like to introduce a change that has occurred in Japan through the words of one woman, which I think symbolize a shift that needed to occur—a return to a more traditional view of Shin Buddhism, or perhaps a reenchantment, that makes it relevant to our daily lives, including moments of great suffering. She posed an important question that opened the door to this significant change: "Do our lives come to nothing after death?" (*Shindara owari desu ka?*) These are the words of a mother who lost her son in the tsunami following the Great Earthquake. After discussing my interactions with this mother, I consider the "wall" that research on Buddhism in Japan has encountered. I end by introducing a small experiment in Buddhist studies that I call *rinshō Bukkyō*, or "contemporary Buddhism," that addresses this lacunae in Buddhist studies. While *rinshō Bukkyō* is normally translated as "clinical Buddhism," I use the English phrase "contemporary Buddhism" or "co-existent Buddhism" to emphasize the importance of being present with and listening to the suffering and joy that arises amidst people's everyday lives.[12]

THE GREAT EAST JAPAN EARTHQUAKE AND YURIAGE JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

In the Yuriage area of Natori city, Miyagi prefecture, I met the woman—a resident of the area and a grieving mother—whose words I offered in the introduction. Before the Great Earthquake, this area was known for its thriving agriculture and fishing industries. At one time, it had a population of over seven thousand. Since its residences were concentrated in a small area, it was a very close-knit and peaceful community. On March 11, 2011, the greatest earthquake on record struck this town. The disaster changed the residents' lives forever. About eight hundred

12. Kigoshi Yasushi, "Rinshō bukkyō to shite no Shinran shisō" 臨床仏教としての親鸞思想, *Shinran kyōgaku* 親鸞教学 104 (2015): 47–78.

people in the town lost their lives or went missing due to the tsunami that followed the quake.

The details of the disaster are particularly sad. There was approximately a one-hour window for evacuation after the earthquake before the tsunami's arrival. However, because of false or conflicting information, many residents fled in the wrong direction and were subsequently killed in the tsunami. Fourteen Yuriage Junior High School students were among those who lost their lives in the disaster. Despite having enough time to evacuate, they were unable to avoid this tragic fate.

Five years after the earthquake, the school building was demolished as part of the town's reconstruction. Before the demolition, a black memorial monument and two classroom desks were set up in front of the school building. The black memorial monument, made of stone, is shaped like a waist-high table, and the flat top is inscribed with the names of the fourteen young victims:

[First-year Students]
Arai Kazumi Tanno Kōta
Hamada Rui Henmi Juna
[Second-year Students]
Ōkawa Shun Kikuchi Nanami
Sakurai Ayaka Sasaki Kazumi
Takahashi Masashi (or Shōji?) Numata Ryōko
Higuchi Asuka
[Third-year Students]
Arakawa Takayoshi Endō Issei
Numata Kaori
In memory of the students of Yuriage Junior High School
who lost their lives in the tsunami
caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake
on March 11, 2011 at 2:46 p.m.

Two classroom desks were placed next to the monument. On one of them is the following message:

> May our dearest fourteen friends rest in peace.
> We may forget about the tsunami,
> But will never forget about you all.
> We are always together. Forever.

The message is surrounded by handwritten names of the victims. The two desks were placed there by Tanno Yūko, the mother of one of the victims, Tanno Kōta.[13]

MEETING MRS. TANNO

Mrs. Tanno set up the desks six months after the disaster. At first, she wanted to create a stand for offering flowers in memory of the victims. She shared with me the story of how she decided to place the desks and why she wrote the message:

> When I saw the heap of debris being cleared away from the town, I felt that our memories of many people's lives in this town were also being wiped out. That made me so sad that I was compelled to set up a stand for flower offerings using a classroom desk. It was in September of the year when the earthquake occurred. I put a plastic bottle on the desk for flowers. As I visited this stand every day, I gradually came to want people to remember what happened here. Then I wrote down

13. Permission was granted from Mrs. Tanno to use her name and personal details in this publication.

> the names of the fourteen students who lost their lives in the disaster on the desk.[14]

There is another desk next to it, which Mrs. Tanno also placed there. On the desktop, a message is written with a bold marker:

> That day, so many people ran toward Yuriage Junior High School from the tsunami.
> The reconstruction of the town is very important.
> But please do not forget that the victims' lives are still here.
> Do our lives come to nothing after death?
> I will continue to think of what we the survivors can do for them.

These are the words of the mother who lost many of her friends, and above all, her beloved son.

I might not be the only one who, as if led by Mrs. Tanno's words, visits the memorial monument in Yuriage over and over again. It may be strange, but I wonder whose message it is on this monument and to whom it is addressed. Of course, it is obvious that it is a message of a mother who lost her child. However, I also have the sense that this is a message from something even deeper that came out as the mother's words. Having visited this town many times, I feel this message might be an embodiment of the fourteen students' unspoken voices.

Mrs. Tanno told me about the experience she had when she set up the classroom desk:

> When I set up the desk, I think Yuriage had very few visitors. Probably I was the only frequent visitor. That's because the town was completely ruined and there was nothing to visit. Even my friends asked me, "What are you going there for?" It is true that everything was completely destroyed in Yuriage. But, for me, it was the only place I could meet my son. I thought I could possibly find memories of my son here. That's why I came here almost every day without any particular purpose. It was natural for me to visit here. There was no special meaning in my doing so. Before long, I came to think of what I

14. Tanno Yuko 丹野裕子, interview by Kigoshi Yasushi in *Shisha/seija-ron — keichō chinkon honyaku* 〈死者/生者〉論 — 傾聴・鎮魂・翻訳, ed. Suzuki Iwayumi 鈴木 岩弓, Isomae Junichi 磯前 順一, and Satō Hiroo 佐藤 弘夫 (Perikan-sha, 2018), 120.

> could do to remind people that the fourteen children were still living here. Then I began writing the messages on the desks.[15]

In an unexpected turn of events, her message then spread among a large number of people:

> One day, I found another plastic bottle placed on the desk. It encouraged me greatly because there was someone with whom I could share my thoughts. Then I felt a strong urge to create a "goal" there for the children, to create evidence of the fact that they had been alive.[16]

Mrs. Tanno's idea of creating a "goal" was later embodied in the memorial monument. But why does she call the memorial a "goal"? The answer lies in the second desk message she wrote: "That day, so many people ran toward Yuriage Junior High School from the tsunami." Their goal was to reach safety at the school.

CHILDREN ON THE DAY OF THE EARTHQUAKE

On March 11, the day the earthquake struck the town, a graduation ceremony was held at Yuriage Junior High School. After the ceremony finished in the morning, current students left the school and graduates went to a community hall, which was located about two hundred meters (219 yards) away, to attend a graduation party held there. There was also a party for a local preschool at the hall, and about one hundred residents were gathered. The earthquake occurred during the party. There was also a series of aftershocks, so the students and residents had evacuated the hall and were waiting outside when they received a warning of an imminent tsunami. The community hall was a two-storied, concrete building that was designated as an official shelter in the town. However, the residents unfortunately received an evacuation order to take shelter at Yuriage Junior High School. They were told that the school building was much safer because it was three-storied. Many of them, including students and children, ran desperately toward the school. Right at this moment, the massive tsunami hit the area. Those who remained in the community hall survived, but many of those running toward the school were killed by the tsunami. That is

15. Ibid., 125–126.
16. Ibid., 127.

why Mrs. Tanno wanted to call this monument "the goal." It stands as a goal for the students who could not get there before.

Mrs. Tanno told me:

> There was more than one hour between the quake and tsunami. There was ample time to escape, and all the residents could have survived. But we were too optimistic and doubted the possibility of a tsunami. As a result, many residents fell victim to the disaster. I should have taught our children that an earthquake is always followed by a tsunami. I should have learned more about disaster prevention. I was always nagging at my son about studying hard or doing his homework. But the most important thing I should have taught him was that it is bad to die before his parents. I have now realized that doing well at school is not important. I just wish he were living. I was such a stupid mother that I thought doing homework was most important. But I don't want other parents to make the same mistake as I did. Now I want everyone to understand that the best thing you can do for your parents is to live. As long as you are living, you can fulfill any wishes.[17]

A PHOTO OF TULIPS

The "goal" for the children now serves as evidence of their lives. But it is not simply a memorial of their lives in the past. For Mrs. Tanno, it is evidence of the fact that their lives are "still" here. They are together with their friends, having reached their goal. Mrs. Tanno is certain of their presence. She told me how she came to believe this, which I will now share.

At present, the memorial monument and desks have been moved to the grounds of Memory of Yuriage, a museum of the disaster in the town. At the museum, a photo of tulips is displayed. It is discreetly placed on the museum floor together with other mementos found in the school building.

At first, Mrs. Tanno didn't bring up the subject of the tulips. Though I had learned briefly about the background of the tulips, I asked her about the meaning of them. She replied with a smile.

> One day, someone from Tochigi who is always supporting me gave me a bagful of tulip bulbs in a plastic bag. I planted all of them behind the memorial monument last September. I just planted them randomly.

17. Ibid., 128–129.

> Since this area doesn't belong to anyone, there are some people who occasionally pull up the weeds or level the ground. Sometimes they accidentally dug up the bulbs without knowing that I had planted them. Anyway, winter came and went.
>
> In the spring, the bulbs were beginning to sprout. When they were in full bloom, I took pictures of them. I emailed the photos to the person who gave me the bulbs. Then the person sent a message back to me, saying, "Hey, look closely at the flowers." I looked intently at the flowers. Suddenly I noticed that there were fourteen flowers! Out of the bagful of bulbs I planted, fourteen tulips blossomed! It is exactly the same number of the children who passed away. This cannot be mere coincidence. Even though I planted many more, just fourteen of them blossomed. It made me so happy. I don't think it was a miracle. But I do believe that the children were trying to tell me through the flowers that they are "still" here. The fourteen tulips convinced me of their presence.[18]

She continued:

> Every year on March 11, we hold an event called "Message Pigeons" where we release pigeon-shaped balloons with our messages attached to their legs. This year, we had rough and snowy weather before the event, but the sky cleared up on the event day. In another year, we held the event amidst strong wind. But when we tried to toss the balloons, the wind died down and a perfect wind blew toward the ocean. Somehow, we have always had perfect weather whenever we released the balloons, as if we were protected by something. I thought the children were watching over us and steering things in a positive direction. When I thought about that, I wanted people to understand that our lives don't come to nothing after we die.
>
> I'm working on some projects with people here. During those activities, there are many occasions where we feel protected.[19]

Even though she has regretted not being able to protect the children, she feels she is protected by them now. Even though she found herself powerless to save the children, she feels saved by them now. They have

18. Ibid., 134–135.
19. Ibid., 137.

no physical form, but she fully realizes their presence. She feels their protection in every aspect of her everyday life.

CONCLUSION

"Our lives come to nothing after death." This is a modern, rational understanding of life. It is also a common and sensible understanding. Ever since the Meiji period, when Japan opened to the outside world, Japanese Pure Land Buddhism—which traditionally taught that there is a world and a soul after death—has been re-interpreted using modern reason. Japan's modernization was basically Westernization. Therefore, the re-interpretations of Buddhism that appeared amidst its modernization have been greatly influenced by Western empirical science and philosophy. The Buddhism that emerged through such work is generally called "modern Buddhism."[20] Buddhism was originally based on rational, philosophical thinking; we could say that Japanese Buddhism's modernization was also the work of scraping away, as one would do with impurities, the Japanese customs and simple religious emotions that had been attached to it. In their place, awakening to the truths of impermanence and dependent arising, leading a precepts-based life to abandon desire, and so on, were presented as the original form of Buddhism.

In terms of the modernization of Pure Land thought, believing that Amida actually exists, as well as "naive religious beliefs" such as hope for rebirth in the Pure Land after death, were criticized as pre-modern and mythological. Instead, de-mythologized interpretations of Pure Land thought and education were advanced.[21]

This is particularly true of the Pure Land thought of Shin Buddhism's Ōtani school. A number of scholars of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan

20. Paul B. Watt and Richard K. Payne, *Demythologizing Pure Land Buddhism: Yasuda Rijin and the Shin Buddhist Tradition* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2016); Kashiwahara Yūsen 柏原祐泉, "Changes in the Conception of the Pure Land in Modern Japan," trans. Robert F. Rhodes, *The Eastern Buddhist*, 3rd. ser., nos. 1–2 (2021): 7–30; Jeff Schroeder, *The Revolution of Buddhist Modernism* (University of Hawaii Press, 2022); Mark L. Blum and Michael Conway, eds., *Adding Flesh to Bones: Kiyozawa Manshi's Seishinshugi in Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2022).

21. Kigoshi Yasushi, "Nonomura Naotarō: The Man Who Would Destroy the Pure Land," *The Eastern Buddhist,* 3rd ser., vol. 1, no. 2 (2021): 31–48. Nonomura Naotarō 野々村直太郎 (1871–1946), who was strongly influenced by Western

in the twentieth century used methods to interpret scriptures similar to those of the theologian Rudolf Carl Bultmann (1884–1976), who attempted to understand the Bible in a non-mythical way, reinterpreting the stories presented there existentially.[22] Pure Land Buddhist scholars modernized the field of doctrinal studies, focusing on the question of how to live the Buddhist teachings consciously in this life, rather than in the next. Shinran's thought, which sometimes preached a Pure Land after death, was reinterpreted accordingly, and discussions began to focus on how to purify our minds or how to make the real world in which we now live a pure land.[23]

However, what kind of answers can a de-mythologized modern Buddhism or modern Shin Buddhism offer a mother who asks if our lives come to nothing after death? They would probably try to have the mother accept her son's death by preaching Śākyamuni's truth of impermanence. Or, criticizing the mother's mindset that seeks the restoration of her lost child's soul as "desire," they might try to persuade her to overcome it. Yet these Buddhist truths acquired by modern reason cannot provide a clear answer to this mother's question, which arose out of deep sadness as well as joy at a new encounter with her son. Even without being presented the truth of impermanence, the mother knows from her experience that a lost life is not going to return. She is fully aware that the feeling that her son is still alive is nothing more than her own desire. Having accepted this, she is asking the religious question of whether or not our lives come to nothing after death.

Ever since the beginning of this modernization project, Japanese Buddhism has lost sight of the spirit of the Buddha and of Shinran, who tried to respond to people's basic religious emotions. The Buddha and Shinran encountered people who revealed their straightforward feelings from their suffering-filled lives. Their words, which are found in scriptures and elsewhere, were expressed on the ground, so to speak, amidst actual suffering. Scholarship on Buddhist thought engages in research on the exegetical tradition as simply records that are cut off

philosophy, attempted to reconstruct Pure Land Buddhist thought by reinterpreting the existence of the Pure Land and Amida Buddha in the form of demythologization.

22. See, for example, Rudolf Carl Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (Scribner, 1958).

23. See especially Schroeder, *The Revolution of Buddhist Modernism*; and Watt, *Demythologizing Pure Land Buddhism*.

from actual lives. However, this research has lost the religious aspect that was originally contained in these discourses.

Mrs. Tanno told me:

> We should have protected the children. But we are protected by them even though we couldn't protect them from disaster. We all have close ties with each other, strengthened by the children.

The children that parents were unable to protect are now protecting them. The children are, without a doubt, still living today. It is not a historical fact. Nor is it a scientific reality. It is a so-called "religious reality." We Japanese Buddhist scholars must retrieve this perspective. I call this newly emergent (but actually old) form of Buddhism "clinical Buddhism," or "co-existent Buddhism."

This term "clinical" is intended to contain a critique of the humanities, which has up to now tended to focus primarily on texts, excised from the real lives of human beings and society. The term "clinical" is primarily used in fields such as medicine and nursing. However, especially in Japan, it has also come to be used in other academic fields including psychology, pedagogy, and sociology. However, what I call clinical Buddhism in particular is influenced by "clinical philosophy."[24] This means a "stance focused on the situation at hand."[25] It was born out of a strong sense of crisis over the fact that research in various fields has become highly specialized and somehow ended up in discussions that are detached from the contemporary situation, failing to consider the actual problems in society today, such as psychological distress, bullying in schools, and all the other concrete social problems which should have been the original focus of research in the humanities. Even in Buddhist studies, human suffering and its relief are discussed as events in the texts and unfortunately are not discussed directly with people suffering in the real world. Because of this, the solutions derived from the texts no longer have the power to liberate human suffering.

In response, my colleagues and I have created a new course in the Faculty of Letters at our university. The official English translation of

24. Kimura Bin 木村敏 and Noe Keiichi 野家哲一, *Rinshō tetsugaku toha nanika* 臨床哲学とは何か (Kawaikyouikubunka-kennkyuusyo, 2014); Washida Seiichi 鷲田清一, *Kiku kotono chikara–Rinshō tetugaku sironn* 聴くことの力ー臨床哲学試論ー (Chikuma-Bunko, 2015).

25. See Washida, *Kiku kotono chikara*, 51.

the course name is "Contemporary Shin Buddhist Studies," but the term that is translated here as "contemporary" is actually "clinical" in Japanese. The course was designed to give students the opportunity to study Buddhism not only from the texts, but also clinically, that is, in light of the real suffering of people in contemporary society. For example, we discuss how to talk to and interact clinically with people like the mother in the story I presented here. We also visit the actual sites of people's suffering. This Buddhist approach is now six years old, having been established as a course within the Shin Buddhist Studies Department at Ōtani University, one which emphasizes fieldwork away from the classroom. I, along with many of my students, have traveled to the disaster-stricken areas of Tohoku and Noto to share time with survivors, listen to their voices, and attempt to deepen our study of Buddhism.