Reflections on My Experiences Working as a Death Row Chaplain in Japan

Hirano Shunkō
Death Row Chaplain at Tokyo Jail
Translated by Beth Cary and Adam J. Lyons

Editors' note: Rev. Hirano Shunkō has served as a prison chaplain among death row inmates at Tokyo Detention House for more than forty years. He is a priest of the Jōdo Shinshū Honganji sect and the former abbot of Chūgenji temple in Ichikawa, Chiba. He is also the former chairperson of the National Prison Chaplain's Union of Japan. While prefacing his workshop remarks upon which this essay is based, Rev. Hirano shared with characteristic humility that he "felt a great deal of pressure" being asked to speak in an international venue. He added, "I must ask for your forgiveness for my extremely limited comprehension of the proceedings and for my relative inability to speak formally about the day's topic" of bringing Japanese and American approaches into dialogue.

Modesty notwithstanding, the descriptions and reflections below are drawn from Rev. Hirano's unique, pioneering, and widely respected role integrating death row chaplaincy with Buddhist teachings and practices in Japan.[1] The author identifies social isolation as a central challenge that impacts inmates' emotional stability as well as the possibility of a dignified farewell. At a basic level, key aspects of his approach are shared with general chaplaincy practice in America, including speaking from lived experience rather than religious dogma, building rapport, and attending to the emotional well-being of care seekers. Yet as careful reading yields, these are based on his integration of Mahāyāna and specifically Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist elements into chaplaincy practice, in which human connection, radical equality, and the potential for social and personal transformation are based on teachings such as karmic connections (gōen 業縁), the shared

1. For an extensive study on prison chaplaincy in Japan that includes an interview with Rev. Hirano, see Adam J. Lyons, *Karma and Punishment: Prison Chaplaincy in Japan* (Harvard University Press, 2021).

condition of being ordinary people (bonbu 凡夫), collective karma (gūgō 共業), introspection (naisei 内省), and the quality of heart that arises through the realization of faith (shinjin 信心). In the course of discussion, Rev. Hirano raises compelling issues regarding human rights, moral injury, and social justice. Given the limited practice of and reflection on death row and prison chaplaincy by American Buddhists to date, this essay offers a distinctive perspective with implications for spiritual care at large.[2]

I have been entrusted with presenting my experiences as a death-row prison chaplain in Japan. This includes the legal basis for this work, as well as the actual conditions, future prospects, and expectations for prison chaplaincy work with death row inmates.

THE LEGAL BASIS FOR DEATH ROW CHAPLAINCY

Article 32 of the "Act on Penal Detention Facilities and the Treatment of Inmates and Detainees," which came into effect in May 2005 in Japan, states, "Inmates sentenced to death shall be given advice, lectures, and other measures deemed to contribute to their emotional stability, and the cooperation of private volunteers shall be sought accordingly." The prison chaplain is a religious professional who, based on a recommendation from a legally recognized religious organization, is appointed by the National Prison Chaplains' Union to fulfill this role [as a private volunteer tasked with contributing to the emotional stability of inmates; the work is voluntary and unpaid]. This regulation means that chaplaincy is performed in accordance with the wishes of inmates who have been sentenced to death. More fundamentally, the whole system of Japanese prison chaplaincy operates based on the legal principle of religious freedom guaranteed by the 1947 Constitution of Japan. Thus, incarcerated people (not just people on death row) may meet with a chaplain representing the religion of their choice. In Tokyo Detention House, where I work, we have two "chapels" or "chaplaincy rooms": one is a Japanese-style room, and the other is a Western-style room.

2. The former abbot of Honganji, Ōtani Kōshin, recently published a Buddhist critique of the death penalty in Japanese. Ōtani's perspective is broadly aligned with the views Hirano sets forth in this essay. See Ōtani Kōshin, *Shikei seido wo tou: Bukkyō, Jōdo Shinshū no shiten kara* (Shunjūsha, 2024).

Buddhist chaplaincy sessions take place in the Japanese-style chaplaincy room where there is a Buddhist altar.

THE STRUCTURE OF CHAPLAINCY SESSIONS

Currently, I offer chaplaincy services to four inmates (three men and one woman). I meet with each of them once a month for about one hour. The program differs for each person, but the chaplaincy meetings generally follow a course that begins with a sutra reading and veneration before the Buddhist altar to create an entry point into the religious space. The texts I use are typically the *Jūseige* (重誓偈), the *Shōshinge* (正信偈), and the *Amida sūtra* (阿弥陀経), and we always recite the three refuges (三帰依文). After these rites, the rest of our time in the chaplaincy session is devoted to one-on-one conversation, and the conversation typically lasts for about forty-five minutes.

CLIENTS' EXPECTATIONS FOR THE CHAPLAIN

Two things form the backbone for my conversations with my clients on death row. These two considerations are based on what clients have said to me over the years. The first is a request: "Sensei, please speak with your own words." The second is a question: "What are priests and religious organizations doing to tackle social problems like injustice, poverty, human rights issues, and discrimination?"

Regarding the first item, I think this request indicates that those who seek my services as a chaplain do not want me to speak dogmatically by imposing a religious perspective ("first and foremost, there is religious truth"). Rather, they desire to hear me speak directly based on my own life experiences. They do not want me to explain the words passed down from some absolute authority or from the founder of the religious tradition. They are asking to hear about the chaplain's lived experience. As for the second item, I think this question indicates that there is distrust toward religion and religious organizations and a sense of dissatisfaction with religious professionals, who are perceived to be doing nothing to rectify social problems. In my experience, then, we may say that these two demands—the request for me to speak in my own words, and the request for religions, religious organizations, and religious professionals to demonstrate their commitment to the resolution of social ills that have impacted people on death row—represent

the expectations that people on death row have for the chaplains who serve them.

THE CHALLENGES OF SUPPORTING EMOTIONAL STABILITY FOR SOCIALLY ISOLATED PEOPLE ON DEATH ROW

I began my chaplaincy work at Tokyo Detention House in January of 1981. (Before I knew it, forty-three years had passed.) Tokyo Detention House contains the largest death row in Japan. I hear that there are some 110 inmates sentenced to death in Japan, and about half of them are housed in the Tokyo Detention House. My chaplaincy work primarily entails conducting one-on-one chaplaincy sessions for those death row inmates. Unlike chaplaincy work for ordinary prisoners who will eventually reenter society, death row chaplaincy is for those who have been denied the possibility of social reintegration. For this reason, the central aims of death row chaplaincy are oriented towards encouraging the "emotional stability" of the client up until their execution.

I have a sense that, during my tenure as chaplain, those on death row have become increasingly isolated in ways that impact their emotional stability. In 2006, Tokyo Detention House was rebuilt as a twelve-story, fifty-meter-high building. This renovation changed the living environment for inmates. The previous building allowed them to have views of the outside world of nature around the prison, and those who have been incarcerated for a long time sometimes complain about the increased sense of separation from nature in the new facility. Some of the inmates who remember the old building fondly recall that they used to be able to see out of the windows of their cells and thus enjoy a bit of interaction with the birds and cats that played outside. It may be that it was inevitable to modernize the building as a structural security measure, but for me, tasked as I am with promoting emotional stability among the inmates, I wonder if the reconstruction was for the best. It is also possible to note a tendency of increasing social isolation. In the early days of my chaplaincy, once a month the death row inmates, chaplains, and staff from the prison's education department would have a lunch meeting, and this occasion allowed the people on death row to meet face to face with each other and with some of the staff. These lunch meetings do not happen anymore. From the perspective of the prison facility, I can understand that the physical safety of the prisoners is most important. However, the increasing social isolation of death row, and the current physical environment that only allows

prisoners to see a section of the sky outside of their windows, cannot be said to have taken into consideration the prisoners' human rights.

CHALLENGES TO A DIGNIFIED FAREWELL

The same tendency of increasing social isolation of those on death row is also manifest in recent executions. The chaplain is no longer permitted to be present with inmates in their last moments. The new facility has a specialized chapel for death row inmates. This chapel is located next to the execution chamber. Inmates are brought to the chapel to receive their last rites from a chaplain representing their chosen religion. Nowadays, we chaplains are told not to spend too much time administering the last rites. In the current procedure, the guards rather quickly remove the prisoner from the chapel and take the person to the execution chamber. Personally, I object to this practice. I understand the procedure to be a matter left to the discretion of the warden, and I have stated my view that the chaplain should be in attendance with the death row inmate until the very end.

The chaplain's role in the prison is to serve as the representative of religion. [In traditional Japanese Buddhism, it is the role of the priest to mediate the passage from life to death]. When the last moments of a person's life are attended only by the prison staff responsible for conducting the execution, I fear that the staff members may feel burdened by their responsibility for taking life. I believe that it is we chaplains who are better prepared to take on the duty of accompanying a precious human life until its end. I wonder what American prison chaplains might think about this way of treating the inmates [i.e., about structural limitations to the chaplain's capacity to offer last rites].

So far, I have explained the legal basis for chaplaincy, the structure of death row chaplaincy sessions, the expectations inmates bring to chaplains, the challenges surrounding chaplaincy work aimed at encouraging the emotional stability of death row inmates, the trend of increasing isolation facing those on death row, and the way that institutional prerogatives threaten to reduce the chaplains' capacity to try to give those going to their execution as dignified a farewell as is

possible under the circumstances. Next, I will turn to the practice of death row chaplaincy.

THE PLACE OF PRACTICE AND DOCTRINE IN JAPANESE DEATH ROW CHAPLAINCY

Although the principle of religious freedom guaranteed by the Constitution means that prison chaplaincy cannot be conducted without the expressed wishes of the incarcerated client, even those incarcerated people who do opt to meet with chaplains do not necessarily have much desire for religious guidance. In my view, it may be that the low number of requests from incarcerated people for chaplaincy services of late is a result of a broader loss of interest in religion in Japanese society today. I understand that some inmates even request chaplaincy services simply to find someone to speak with so that they can escape from their daily life of solitary confinement. In such cases, if we start off by talking about Buddhism, then the distance between the chaplain and the inmate can only increase. [Creating distance is counterproductive.]

It is important to start by listening attentively to whatever the inmate wants to talk about. This can even be casual conversation. The point is, at times, I have found that by talking about my own experiences of failure and sadness, it has been possible to establish common ground with my clients. The idea is to build the relationship based on the understanding that, under different circumstances, it could be me standing in the position where my client is now. The role of the chaplain is to relate to the client as an equal.

In Buddhism, this way of seeing things can be understood in terms of "karmic connections" (*gōen* 業縁) or "dependent origination" (*engi* 縁起). The founder of the Shin sect, Shinran, teaches that "if the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act."[3] Human destiny is fundamentally unpredictable; this condition is shared by all people. Then again, Prince Shōtoku's Seventeen-Article Constitution says, "And there is no guarantee that we are the sages and that they are

3. さるべき業縁のもよおせば、いかなるふるまいもすべし. Translated in *Tannishō*, in *The Collected Works of Shinran,* vol. 1, Shin Buddhism Translation Series (Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), 671.

the fools. We are all just ordinary people (*bonbu* 凡夫)."[4] These teachings can surely inspire some introspection.

We also speak of the term *collective karma* (*gūgō* 共業). This idea implies that no act is done by one person in isolation, and that everything is implicated in each action, in ways great and small, whether an action is for good or for ill. By becoming aware of the complex web of relationships connecting events and actions in the world, I think people have the potential to achieve a personal moral transformation. I say this because I have felt that my clients on death row have developed themselves over the course of my interactions with them as their understandings of life have deepened. It is my belief that gradually a change occurs in the attitudes and orientations of the clients who engage with religious chaplaincy. It happens a little at a time, but we might say that their mind's eye, which had been focused outward, gradually turns inward.

In the life guidance portion of correctional education in juvenile detention facilities, the term "introspection" (*naisei* 内省) refers to a teaching method that aims to promote the transformation of thought patterns, attitudes, and behavior by encouraging detainees to look inside themselves. In the same way, it is true that studying Buddhism through engagement with chaplaincy services can naturally open a path toward self-transformation. For example, the well-known methods of contemplative meditation and *zazen* aim towards this path of deepening insight. In my own sect, Jōdo Shinshū, we learn about the absolute mercy of Amida Buddha; we learn the meaning of calling on the name of Amida Buddha in the *nenbutsu* prayer ("*Namu Amida Butsu*"). Thus we may awaken to the wondrous power of Amida Buddha to save all sentient beings just as they are. Through this dawning awareness, we bring about a sense of remorse for our own self-centered ways of thinking and acting. Shinran exemplified this awakening to the limits of the ego [i.e., the limits of egocentrism] by adopting the humble nickname "Gutoku (愚禿)," which means roughly "foolish person." Self-transformation arises when one sees oneself in light of [and as the

4. われかならずしも聖にあらず、かれかならずしも愚にあらず、ともにこれ凡夫. Translated in "The Shōtoku Constitution," *Japanese Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, ed. James W. Heisig, Thomas P. Kasulis, and John C. Maraldo (University of Hawai'i Press, 2011), 38.

recipient of] the absolute mercy of Amida Buddha, who says "I will save you," thus planting seeds of both remorse and gratitude in the heart.

Of course, the dawning of this newfound self-awareness is a process of growth and not something instantaneous. There is a struggle in the mind. Nonetheless, I believe that the destination can be reached naturally in the course of chaplaincy if and when certain conditions prevail: The chaplain and the client meet as equals; the chaplain shares the story of their own life experiences; the client shares their story about the path that brought them to commit a crime; and both of them reflect together on the Buddhist teachings as a way to make sense of their lives in an open and honest conversation.

In the Shin Buddhist tradition to which I belong, the key term faith or *shinjin* (信心) does not mean that it is enough to blindly believe in some core teaching in order to achieve salvation. This term, based on the Sanskrit word *cittaprasāda,* is better understood to refer to the quality of the clear and pure heart that arises through the realization of faith, and this quality of heart in turn can be understood as the state of enlightenment (*satori* さとり). In sum, to have *shinjin* means to take in all phenomena just as they are such that the heart of the Buddha can enter straightforwardly into one's own self. It is not a matter of cultivating a blind belief and bowing one's head to some mysterious force. Shinran refers to *shinjin* as a matter of "entering the wisdom of *shinjin,*" "realizing the *nembutsu* that is wisdom," and "I entrust the *nembutsu* of wisdom."[5]

REFLECTIONS ON BUDDHISM, EQUALITY, AND THE DEATH PENALTY

Once a year an exhibit of works by inmates sentenced to death is held in Tokyo, and I try my best to see it. Their works, in paintings, haiku, and waka poetry, can only be described as amazing, and I am truly stunned at their expressive abilities. Just so, we chaplains can and should cultivate the understanding that everyone has something good inside and possesses some hidden talents. We must also cultivate our capacities to truly love other people and to build trust with them.

In my understanding of the Shin teaching, the Buddhist interpretation of life relies on the ideal of equality. This ideal provides the basis for conducting death row chaplaincy because it enables us to see that

5. 信心の智慧に入る, 智慧の念仏を得る, 智慧の念仏さずけしむ. Translated in *Hymns of the Dharma-Ages,* in *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 1:407, 406.

people on death row are human beings like us. This ideal also encourages us to understand that our own destinies are precarious and reliant on forces beyond our control. For example, we may consider again the concept of collective karma. This idea implies that our lives are precarious because our fortunes could change at any time based on the vicissitudes of karmic destiny beyond our control. Thus, in chapter 13 of the *Tannishō*, we find a profound idea: The fact that one has not committed a murder is not because one's heart is good; for surely there are those who have committed murders without intending it. I think this expression conveys a deep insight into the human condition. For this reason, in relating to people on death row, I try to place myself on the same level as my clients and to see myself as a fellow human being sharing the burden of suffering.

The Buddhist ideal of equality entails profound hope for the future, but at the same time, there is a tension between this ideal and the way of the world. On the one hand, the Dharma holds that anyone who awakens to the fundamental truth can become a buddha and be given eternal life so that they may work to save others who are lost. On the other hand, as long as the world is centered on ideas and thoughts rooted in human ignorance, then society will continue to reproduce the logic of confrontation and exclusion. I would like to conclude by thinking about how the tension between Buddhist ideals and political realities relates to the role of Buddhist death row chaplaincy.

We may consider two fundamental Buddhist teachings about the human condition. First, the Buddha teaches: "All people are afraid of violence, and all people are afraid of death. Having compared others to oneself, do not kill or cause another to kill." Second, the Buddha also teaches: "Truly, in this world, hatred never ceases by hatred. Through non-hatred it ceases. This is an eternal truth."[6] Bearing in mind this truth (*shinri* 真理), I confess to feeling confusion when faced with polling data showing that more than 80 percent of the Japanese public continues to support the death penalty despite a longstanding trend of decline in the rate of violent crime. I sense a gap here.

In Japan, those who support the death penalty give the following reasons: It is necessary to bring peace to victims and their families; those who commit the worst crimes must atone at the price of their lives; there is a danger that the most violent criminals will repeat

6. *Dhammapada* 129; *Dhammapada* 5.

similar offenses. I think that it is absolutely true that there is no way to understand the feelings of bereaved families of victims of crime without having experienced similar victimization oneself. And this is to say nothing of the psychology underlying motivations for recent well-known crimes wherein offenders have deliberately attacked random strangers so that they themselves may be sentenced to die for their crimes. Such actions are utterly incomprehensible.

That being said, if one, like the chaplain, encounters an offender before one's very eyes, should one then say to such a person, "You should pay for your crimes with your life"? That is not the logic of the Buddhist teaching. Here, then, is the chaplain's struggle.

SALVATION, THE ORIGINAL VOW, AND LAST RITES

How should a Buddhist chaplain relate to people on death row? As one who lives by the Shin teaching, the only course of action is to say that I must take my position not according to worldly standards but according to the Buddha's standard, rooted in the vast land (*daichi* 大地) of life within the Vow of Amida Buddha. Of course it takes time [to arrive at such a way of thinking]. A heart cannot be transformed in a single day. How can both offenders and victims overcome their suffering? Through karmic connections to Amida Buddha, surely, in time, they will come to see reliance on Amida's Primal Vow (*hongan* 本願) as the path out of suffering.

To take one's stand in the vast land of the Original Vow does not mean to take a stand in the position of individual human beings. In the end, it means this: Just as my shadow follows me wherever I may go, so too with the Vow; nothing is thrown away; no one is abandoned. Such is the path to grasp, emotionally (*kantoku* 感得), the meaning of the Buddha's true and vast land.

Each person on death row is different, but I tell them all that surely death is not the end. I teach that in all times and in all places, life and death are together as one. Our conventional way of thinking is to introduce relative distinctions and to settle our minds on one side or another of a matter, but Buddhism teaches that things are not originally divided but rather unified as a whole. All sentient beings will be saved in the Pure Land according to the Original Vow of Amida, which does not operate according to the arbitrary distinctions that prevail

in worldly affairs. It is for this reason that the Vow is described as mysterious.

A settled mind (*anshin*/*anjin* 安心) is the ultimate goal of Buddhism, and we Buddhists pray daily for birth into the land of peace and ease (*ōjō anrakkoku* 往生安楽國). Death is the birth. It is to be born into the world of truth by the power of Amida's Vow. This is not to say that to attain birth in the Pure Land is akin to arriving at my final destination based on my own wishes being granted. Rather, to be born into the Pure Land is to receive the life of the Buddha (*hotoke* 仏) so as to return again to this world of confusion and samsara in order to lead other people out of suffering—it is to live by and to share in the great life (*daiseimei* 大生命) of the Buddha.

When the time comes for me to perform the last rites for my clients, we always have the same conversation. I say to them: "Now you will become a buddha, and you will lead me to salvation." And they say: "Thank you for your efforts on my behalf." I think that what is most important in my work as a chaplain is to build the relationship with the client through the accumulation of time spent together, one meeting at a time, so that, at the very end, we may exchange our final farewell with words of gratitude.