

# Lanterns and Relic Caskets

## Ritual and the Presence of Buddhahood

*Stephan Baums*

---

The Shinnyo-en has observed a Lantern Lighting ceremony in Hawai'i since 1999, and this was the second year of the New York event. Both are based on the traditional Japanese ceremony of lantern floating (*tōrō nagashi*) carried out during the Bon festival in summer and during the spring and autumn equinox festivals called Higan (literally 'far shore'). During Higan, the abodes of the living and the deceased are close to each other, and it is a time for expressing gratitude to one's ancestors. A central element of Higan is the lighting of a lantern on a wooden float that is released to travel down a river and into the ocean.

The New York Lantern Floating coincided not only with the autumn equinox, but also with the opening of the UN Assembly and with the International Day of Peace. In addition, 21 September had been declared an action day for the protection of the world's climate, with a large demonstration in New York City. In this way, the timing and location of the Lantern Floating meant from the very beginning that it not only looked back in gratitude to those who have come before us, but also forward in loving concern to those who will come after us. The responsibility of the living extends not only to their ancestors, but also to their descendants, and it is global rather than limited to the immediate family.

The invited observers—academic scholars of Buddhism as well as peace workers—first met representatives of the Shinnyo-en and each other during an orientation dinner on 19 September, which admirably brought together different analytical and practical perspectives on the Higan festival and its meaning for the modern world. The next day, the group travelled to the Shinnyo-en head temple in White Plains for the formal Higan ceremony carried out by Her Holiness Shinso Ito for the local congregation. The attendants included a diverse group of Americans of Japanese and other descent, and the officiants consisted of men and women, ordained priests and laypeople in equal parts.

The cross-cultural Buddhist commitment of the Shinnyo-en was evident already in the opening of the ceremony, which included two Pali chants—the taking of refuge and the five moral commandments—emphasizing the continuity of the tradition going back

to India. The Shinnyo-en ritual is further anchored in the teaching of the Buddha Śākyamuni through its use of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra, a Mahāyāna account of his last teachings prior to entering nirvāṇa. The interfaith commitment of the Shinnyo-en, on the other hand, remained implicit in the ceremony, which used Buddhist forms throughout. A felicitous innovation of this year's ceremony—particularly noticeable to those familiar with traditional Shingon fire rituals—was that Her Holiness chose to face the audience during much of the proceedings. In this way, the focus turned from the cosmic Buddha worshipped through the fire to the Buddha nature (*shinnyo*) within each of the members of the audience, in harmony with a central tenet of the Shinnyo-en and its tradition going back to India.

The next day was devoted to the public and interfaith counterpart of the temple ritual, the Lantern Floating in the mirroring pool in front of Lincoln Center (a change of location from the first New York Lantern Floating, which had been held in Central Park). Throughout the day, all New Yorkers were invited to come to the pool, receive a lantern, and write down their well-wishes for those close to them and for the world at large on the outside of the lantern. The timing of the ceremony meant that on the way to the pool, more likely than not one would have encountered International Day of Peace demonstrators and be made aware of the global dimension of our lives and actions. Lantern Floating participants would then light their lantern and set it free on the pool. In contrast to traditional Japanese *higan* and to the Hawai'i Lantern Floating, at Lincoln Center the lanterns could not float away with their wishes, but would accumulate throughout the course of the day and thus serve as a further reminder of the anchoring of our wishes and aspirations in this world.

In the evening after sunset, a public ceremony at Lincoln Center was presided over by Her Holiness. The combination of the lit lanterns, now shining brightly, and the water of the pool stood for the Buddhist values of wisdom and compassion as the guiding theme. In clear and meaningful contrast to the White Plains temple ritual, the Lincoln Center ceremony was a vivid mixture of traditional Japanese Buddhist elements and contemporary artistic expression. For its musical framing, the ceremony drew on jazz and song and ballet performances by prominent New York artists. On the other hand, very soon after introductory addresses by representatives of the City, the audience was invited to participate in a chanting of the *namu shinnyo* mantra and a rite to bring forth their innate wisdom that included chants from the Indian *Nyāyasūtra*. An address and sermon by Her Holiness emphasized the symbolism of water as the continuity of past,

present and future, and of the lanterns as carrying our hopes for the future across this continuity. In concluding the ceremony, Her Holiness floated her own lantern with a *namu shinnyo* benediction on it, and invited everybody present to join in floating the lanterns with their own messages, joining those already in the pool from earlier in the day. Later in the night, when the ceremony was over and the event organizers were removing the lanterns from the pool, we asked where they were headed. The lamps and boards of the lanterns will be reused next year, while the shades with all contributed wishes will be archived in the White Plains temple—a post-ritual connection between the two events.

My own academic specialization is not in the history and practice of Japanese Buddhism, but in the early Buddhist literature and inscriptions from India and especially the northwestern region of Gandhāra. Buddhism was brought to Gandhāra under the Indian emperor Aśoka in the 3rd century BCE, where it flourished under a succession of Central Asian and Iranian local rulers, eventually to travel along the Silk Road to China and Japan and become a true world religion. One of the most important practices of Gandhāran Buddhism—which the Lantern Floating vividly reminded me of in its aspirations and its ritual and textual practice—was the installation of relics of the Buddha in inscribed containers placed within stūpas.

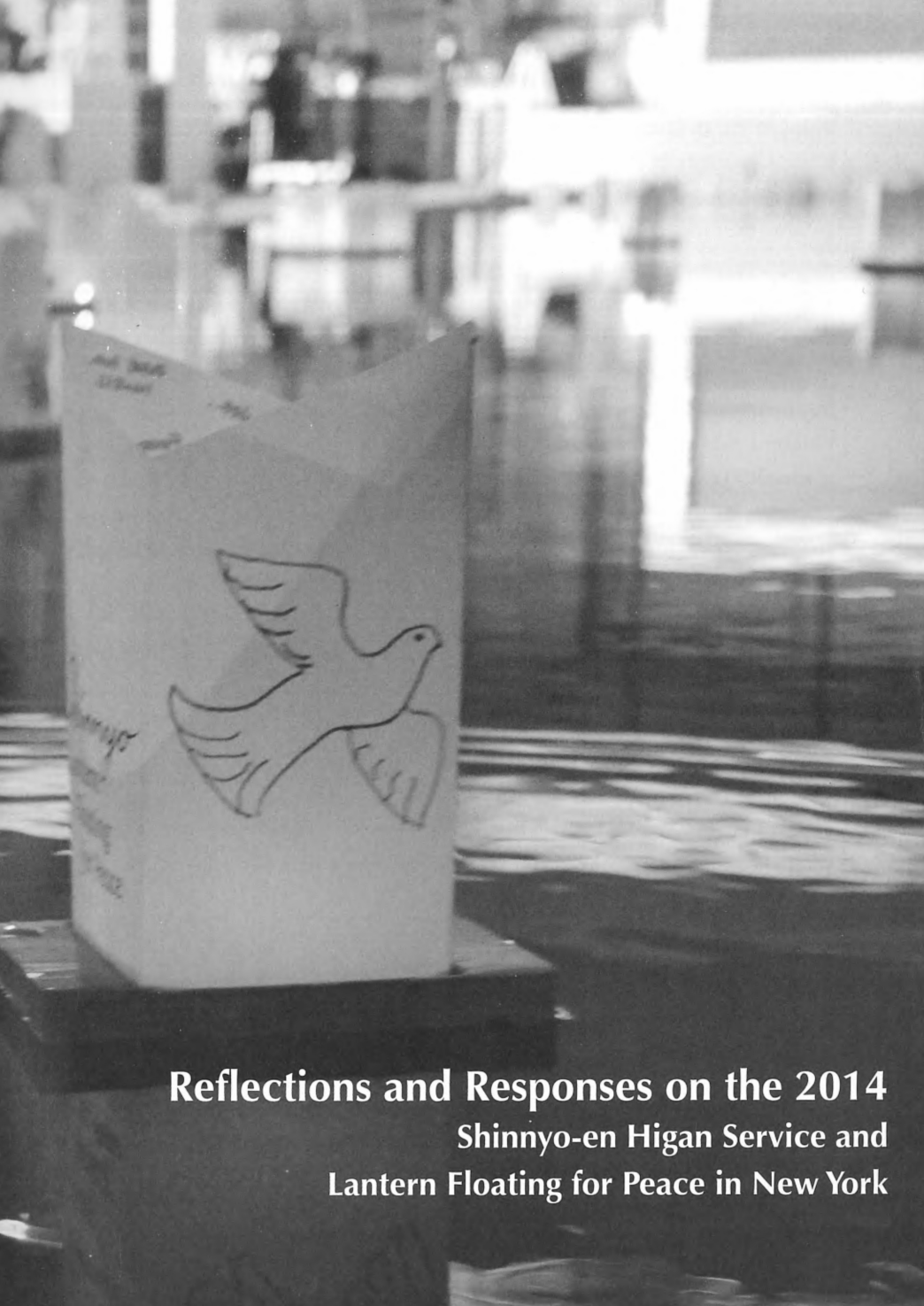
The inscriptions can be placed on the gold or silver leaves or on any of the containers, and they contain a wealth of information about their donors and their hopes and intentions. About half of them were monastics—both monks and nuns—and the other half were local rulers or rich householders. They would date their inscriptions, and so we know that—like the Higan ceremony—relic donations occurred on particularly auspicious dates, in this case preferably on the full-moon day and during the rainy-season retreat. Often they would quote passages from Buddhist scripture that were of particular significance to them, just as scriptural quotation played a central role in the Shinnyo-en Higan service



and Lantern Floating ceremony. Just as the lanterns of contemporary New Yorkers, the ancient Gandhāran relic containers honor family members that have passed on, and wish for the wellbeing and happiness of the entire world. And finally, many Gandhāran relic inscriptions express the aspiration to help all beings attain full buddhahood.

Both observances, separated by two thousand years and transposed between continents, have much in common then. They are carried out jointly by members of a Buddhist order and laypeople, coming together on a special day in the ritual calendar. Both involve festive, day-long ceremonies that people travelled far to attend, for the ancient Indian relic cult most vividly described in the Sri Lankan chronicle *Mahāvamsa*. Both involve portable objects that become vehicles for the textual expression of the participants' aspiration, and that ultimately become invisible when they are enshrined (in a stūpa and in a temple), but continue to be active through their mere presence. A significant difference lies in the core around which the practice crystalizes: bodily relics of the Buddha Shakyamanuni are replaced by a light and the *namu shinnyo* mantra. But the family resemblance between the ceremonies allows us to conceptualize the Lantern Floating as something like relic worship without relics—addressing the buddha nature within all beings rather than the enduring physical presence of the buddha Shakyamuni. In this way, mirroring Her Holiness's 'turning of the ritual space' when she addressed the audience in the White Plains temple, the Lantern Floating can be seen as continuing a line of ritual practice stretching all the way back to the when the Buddha entered nirvana, in which physical relics were replaced by textual 'dharma relics' and eventually by a symbol for the innate buddha nature itself.

In parallel to this ritual practice, also the Nirvāṇa Sūtra, the central scripture of the Shinnyo-en revealed by the Buddha Śākyamuni in his final days, has roots reaching back through Gandhāra to India. Fragments of an early version of this text, similar to the one preserved in Pali, have been discovered in Bamiyan, and Central Asian fragments of the Mahāyāna Nirvāṇa Sūtra make it likely that it too was known in Gandhāra. The oldest Chinese translations of this text were prepared by Faxian, Buddhahadra and Dharmakṣema, in the fifth century CE, and it is in this form that the teaching of the Nirvāṇa Sūtra reached Japan and is now used in the Lantern Floating and Shinnyo-en ceremonies worldwide.



**Reflections and Responses on the 2014  
Shinnyo-en Higan Service and  
Lantern Floating for Peace in New York**

Some of the pictures used in this publication are accessible,  
along with a video recording of the Lantern Floating,  
at Shinnyo-en's official website (<http://www.bealightforpeace.org/>).

Disclaimer: The views and opinions contained in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the official views of Shinnyo-en or the Center for Information on Religion. The essays have, in some cases, been edited for the sake of clarity, but the general opinions and contents of the following articles have been otherwise preserved.

Copyright © 2015 by the Center for Information on Religion. All rights reserved.

No part of this booklet may be reproduced or translated in any form or  
by any means, electronic or other, without written permission from the publisher.



5-1-7 Fujimi-cho, Tachikawa, Tokyo 190-0013, Japan.

**[www.circam.jp](http://www.circam.jp)**

**e-mail: [letter@circam.jp](mailto:letter@circam.jp)**



**[www.sef.org](http://www.sef.org)**