



Having a Heartwarming Obon Festival

It was in 1981 that I had the good fortune to encounter the poetry of the poet and teacher Shinmin Sakamura. It has been forty-four years since then. Having grown up in Shingu City, Wakayama Prefecture, I was in my second year of high school when I happened to stop by a bookstore and picked up a book titled 'When We Lose the Strength to Live On.' I was drawn to the title of this book.

Although I wasn't born into a temple family, I had been practicing zazen since elementary school, and in middle school, I was fortunate to meet Reverend Taïdo Matsubara and was studying Buddhism and Zen with keen interest. It was in my first year in high school that I met Roshi Mumon Yamada. For someone like me, I found myself unable to fit in with the prevailing atmosphere of intense academic competition for college entrance exams, what was then called the 'examination war.' Feeling an indescribable difficulty in living, I was drawn to this book by its title.

I was deeply moved upon reading it. I felt encouraged to learn that even a teacher capable of writing such a book had experienced a loss of strength to live on.

Back then, books still included the author's address in the publication details, so I wrote to him in Tobe-cho, Ehime Prefecture, which was how I was blessed with this connection.

Promptly replying, he sent me a shikishi (calligraphy board) with the words 'Nenzureba hana hiraku' (If you pray, flowers will open) and a book titled "'Ippen Shōnin Goroku: Sute-hatete" (The Sayings of Saint Ippen: Cast Everything Away).

From then on, he kindly sent me monthly issues of 'Shikoku' (Land of Poetry), his personal poetry journal. For six years until I graduated from university, he sent me 'Shikoku' every month, and we exchanged letters in which I shared my thoughts and impressions.

Upon graduating, I went straight to a Zen training monastery. I informed Shinmin Sensei of this, and our correspondence paused for some time. After more than a decade of monastic training, I assumed the role of training master at Engaku-ji Monastery, guiding monks in their practice, while also becoming the abbot of Ōbai-in, a subtemple within the Engaku-ji complex.

At that time, I considered writing to Shinmin Sensei, but hesitated, thinking that it would be inconsiderate to trouble him at such a venerable age of ninety. Instead, as a way of repaying his kindness over the many years, I began writing one of Shinmin's poems on the Ōbai-in temple board every month. For the past twenty years, month after month, I have opened his Complete Poetry Collection, selecting and writing out one of Shinmin's poems.

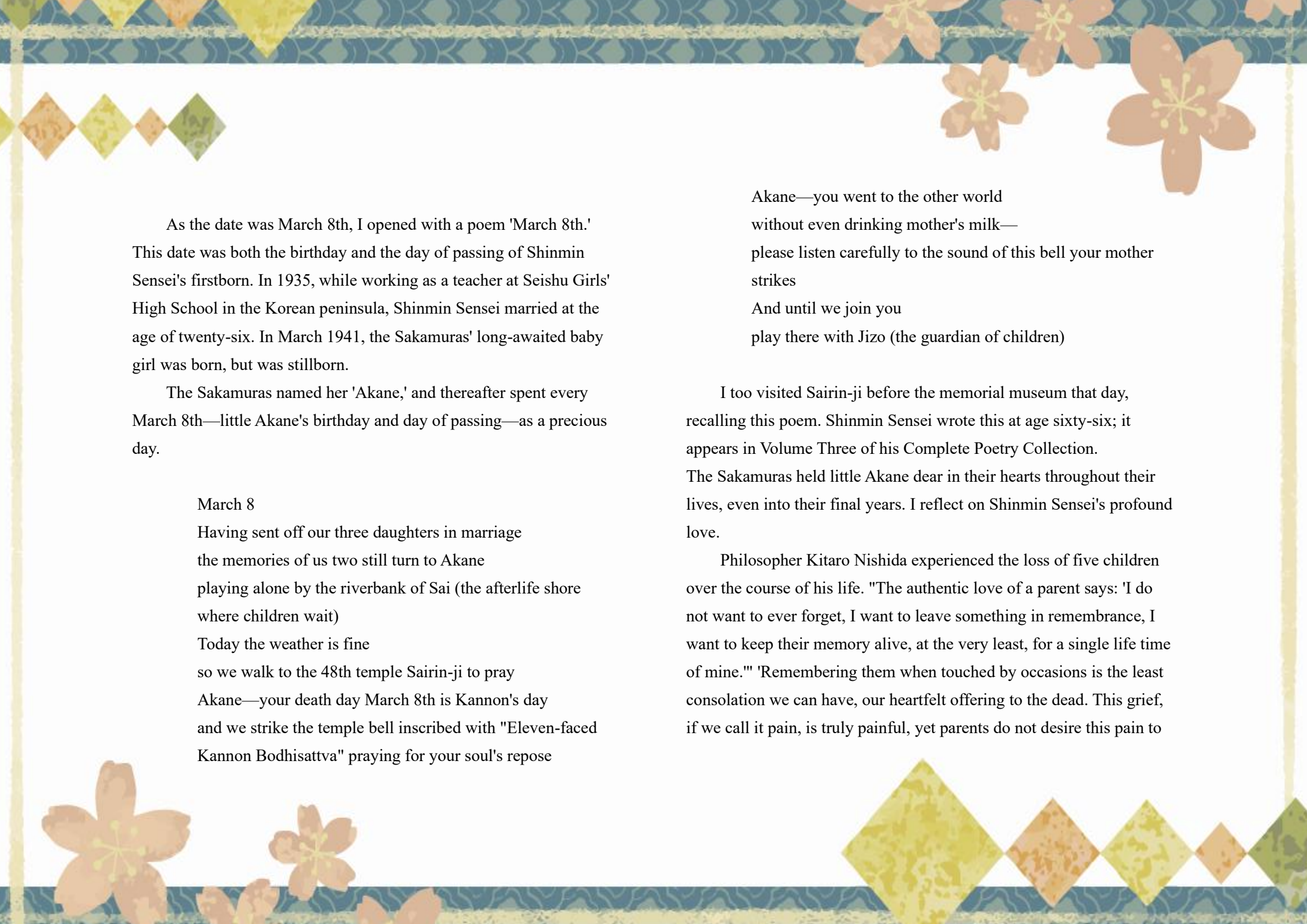
Shinmin Sensei later passed away at the age of ninety-seven. In 2012, the Shinmin Sakamura Memorial Museum was built in Tobe-cho. At that time, I received a letter from Ms. Mamiko Nishizawa, Shinmin Sensei's third daughter, which led to a connection with Mr. Koichi Nishizawa, director of the Shinmin Sakamura Memorial Museum.

In 2020, five years ago, a special exhibition was held for the museum's eighth anniversary entitled 'Poems on the Ōbai-in Temple Board at Engaku-ji in Kamakura: The Heart-to-Heart Exchange between Roshi Nanrei Yokota and Shinmin Sakamura. What extraordinary fortune! I am filled with wonder at the mysterious encounters that have unfolded. From March 2019, I started writing out Shinmin's poems not only at Ōbai-in but also at the foot of Engaku-ji's main gate. Over these twenty-six years, the poems I have selected and written out have remarkably reached three hundred and seventy.

Never in my dreams did I imagine that such a modest practice would turn out to be a special exhibition for the museum's thirteenth anniversary this March, entitled 'A Heart of Compassion and the Joy of Living: The World of Shinmin's Poetry Selected by Roshi Nanrei Yokota.' I deeply feel the mysterious workings of these encounters washing over me.

On March 8th, an opening ceremony was held at the memorial museum, after which I had the honor of giving a lecture. The mayor of Tobe Town, Takahiro Furuya, also attended the opening ceremony and offered words of greeting. I was also given the opportunity to offer words of greeting. I am grateful that the memorial museum, run by Tobe Town, has been lovingly preserved by the people of Tobe.





As the date was March 8th, I opened with a poem 'March 8th.'
This date was both the birthday and the day of passing of Shinmin Sensei's firstborn. In 1935, while working as a teacher at Seishu Girls' High School in the Korean peninsula, Shinmin Sensei married at the age of twenty-six. In March 1941, the Sakamuras' long-awaited baby girl was born, but was stillborn.

The Sakamuras named her 'Akane,' and thereafter spent every March 8th—little Akane's birthday and day of passing—as a precious day.

March 8

Having sent off our three daughters in marriage
the memories of us two still turn to Akane
playing alone by the riverbank of Sai (the afterlife shore
where children wait)

Today the weather is fine
so we walk to the 48th temple Sairin-ji to pray
Akane—your death day March 8th is Kannon's day
and we strike the temple bell inscribed with "Eleven-faced
Kannon Bodhisattva" praying for your soul's repose

Akane—you went to the other world
without even drinking mother's milk—
please listen carefully to the sound of this bell your mother
strikes
And until we join you
play there with Jizo (the guardian of children)

I too visited Sairin-ji before the memorial museum that day,
recalling this poem. Shinmin Sensei wrote this at age sixty-six; it
appears in Volume Three of his Complete Poetry Collection.
The Sakamuras held little Akane dear in their hearts throughout their
lives, even into their final years. I reflect on Shinmin Sensei's profound
love.

Philosopher Kitaro Nishida experienced the loss of five children
over the course of his life. "The authentic love of a parent says: 'I do
not want to ever forget, I want to leave something in remembrance, I
want to keep their memory alive, at the very least, for a single life time
of mine.'" 'Remembering them when touched by occasions is the least
consolation we can have, our heartfelt offering to the dead. This grief,
if we call it pain, is truly painful, yet parents do not desire this pain to

leave them.' (From the Preface to "Lectures on the History of Japanese Literature," in "The Death of My Child") These words capture what parental love truly is.

Once again this year, the Bon Festival arrives. Shinmin Sensei left us poems about the Bon Festival. Here is one of them.



Bon Festival

Let us give heartfelt thanks to Shakyamuni Buddha who
created these days
where we meet those who have passed
Let us make this a joyful Bon Festival
where the departed can gladly come to visit
Let us create a Bon Festival
warm with loving hearts
where the souls who have graciously come are not saddened
or disappointed
nor made to think they would not like to return again
The joy of the welcoming fire
the loneliness of the sending-off fire—
Through this return to our heart's true nature we come to
know the blessing
of living under protection

To remember the departed is in itself a profound way of honoring them. The kindness of many people has enabled us to live to this day. Let us welcome the Bon Festival with gratitude.