

## OBITUARY

Yasutomi Shin'ya (1944–2017)



Yasutomi Shin'ya 安富信哉, the secretary-general of the Eastern Buddhist Society and long-time professor of Shin Buddhist Studies at Otani University, passed away in the early hours of March 31, 2017, in his official residence in Kyoto. He was seventy-three years old, and remained active to his very last day as the head of this Society. All of us who were fortunate enough to have known him were deeply saddened and shocked by his unexpected passing due to heart failure. His warmth of spirit, unfailing kindness, and tireless service to the religious understanding of human life will be greatly missed.

Professor Yasutomi was born on February 14, 1944, in the city of Murakami, Niigata prefecture, as the eldest son of the resident minister of Kōsaiji 光濟寺, a Jōdo Shinshū temple. In 1967, he graduated from Waseda University in Tokyo with a major in British literature, writing his graduation thesis on Thomas Hardy (1840–1928), after which he studied Shin Buddhism at the graduate school of Otani University in Kyoto. During his formative years as a Shin Buddhist scholar, he had the valuable opportunity of attending seminars given by leading thinkers of the Shinshū Ōtani-ha, such as Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971), Kaneko Daiei 金子大榮 (1881–1976), and Yasuda Rijin 安田理深 (1900–1982). The influence of Suzuki Daisetsu 鈴木大拙 (1870–1966), who had translated Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō* into English, was still strongly felt at Otani University in those days, especially

as his final draft was still being edited by members of the Eastern Buddhist Society. In 1973, the year in which Suzuki's translation was finally published, Yasutomi completed the course requirements for a doctorate under the guidance of Matsubara Yūzen 松原祐善 (1906–1980).

Yasutomi became a lecturer in the department of Shin Buddhist Studies at Otani University in 1980 and spent a semester in 1985 as a visiting researcher, teaching Japanese Buddhism at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He was given the post of associate professor at Otani in 1987, and became a full professor in 1993. He received his DLit in 1998. After retiring in 2009, he served as a specially-appointed professor until March 2013, when he became professor emeritus. In the course of his tenure, Professor Yasutomi served as advisor to over five hundred undergraduate and graduate students. In 2012, he was awarded the title of “lecturer” (*kōshi* 講師), the highest academic rank in the Shinshū Ōtani-ha, and in the following year, assumed the position of director of the denomination's Research Institute for Doctrinal Studies. He was truly one of the leading scholars of contemporary Shin Buddhist Studies, contributing greatly to the deepening of our understanding of Shinran's thought, as well as opening it up to the broader global audience of today.

Throughout his academic career, the focus of Yasutomi's study was on the significance of *shin* 信 (faith or entrusting) in human life. He considered genuine faith the essential foundation of all human beings, enabling them to realize their true subjectivity in the midst of various existential crises. His early essay, entitled “Pasukaru no kaishin o megutte” パスカルの回心をめぐって (On Pascal's Conversion Experience, 1970; reprinted as an appendix to his *Shinran: shin no kōzō* 親鸞・信の構造 [Shinran: The Structure of Faith], 2004), examined such a critical moment in the spiritual life of Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). Professor Yasutomi's first major publication, entitled *Shinran to kiki ishiki* 親鸞と危機意識 (Shinran and the Consciousness of Crisis, 1991), traced the life of Shinran from such a perspective and demonstrated that his profound consciousness of existential crisis was the decisive factor in his attainment of other-power faith. Yasutomi's second major work, *Kiyozawa Manshi to ko no shisō* 清沢満之と個の思想 (Kiyozawa Manshi and the Philosophy of the Individual, 1999), approached modern Shin thinker Kiyozawa from the viewpoint of “crisis” and “spiritual awareness.” Professor Yasutomi's deep and expansive understanding of faith can also be found in his principal exegetical research on Shinran, entitled *Shinjitsu shin no kaiken*: Kyōgyōshinshō “*Shin no maki*” *kōkyū* 真実信の開頭: 『教行信証』「信巻」講究 (The Unfolding of True Faith: Research into the “Chapter on Faith”

of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, 2007), and *Shinran: shin no kyōsō* 親鸞・信の教相 (Shinran: The Systematization of the Teaching of Faith, 2012), among others.<sup>1</sup>

He was always very conscious of the significance of methodologies in studying Buddhism. Since his undergraduate major was English literature, young Yasutomi had to struggle in graduate school to familiarize himself with the tools and methods used in Shin Buddhist Studies. Being a sincere intellectual, he seems to have felt difficulty in merely following the conventional style of doctrinal studies, while having great respect for it. Following Kaneko Daiei's thesis in his *Shinshūgaku josetsu* 真宗学序説 (Prolegomena to Shin Buddhist Studies, 1923), Yasutomi tried to "study the way Shinran had studied (Buddhism)," which led him to an existential approach that pays adequate attention to historical contexts. Like his predecessors in the Ōtani denomination's *kindai kyōgaku* 近代教学 (modern doctrinal studies), Yasutomi was well-acquainted with Western philosophy, theology and psychology, and was ready to refer to such theories and concepts when beneficial in the study of Shinran's thought. His focus on "crisis consciousness," for example, was inspired partly by "Theologie der Krisis" advocated by Emil Brunner (1889–1966) and Karl Barth (1886–1968) after the First World War, as well as "identity crisis" in the ego psychology of Erik Erikson (1902–1994). In his lectures, Yasutomi repeatedly emphasized the importance of examining one's own faith from different perspectives—adopting appropriate viewpoints and methods from other disciplines, such as philosophy, history, sociology, religious studies, and Buddhist studies.

Standing firmly on the foothold of other-power faith, he was always open to dialogue with people from various traditions and backgrounds. He enjoyed talking in English with students and scholars from overseas in his office, as well as at a café or beer garden in Kawaramachi Street in Kyoto. For more than twenty years, he was an active member of the International Association of Shin Buddhist Studies, and participated regularly in its biennial conferences. He took part in the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1993, and was impressed by the powerful presentations by the leaders of "engaged Buddhism." In recent years, he had the opportunity to

<sup>1</sup> A fuller appreciation of Yasutomi's academic work, including a list of his English publications, is found in Yasutomi Shin'ya Hakase Koki Kinen Ronshū Kankōkai 安富信哉博士古稀記念論集刊行会 (The Committee for the Publication of a *Festschrift* in Honor of Yasutomi Shin'ya) ed., *Bukkyōteki dentō to ningen no sei: Shinran shisō kenkyū e no shiza* 仏教的伝統と人間の生：親鸞思想研究への視座 (Buddhist Tradition and Human Life: Perspectives toward Research on Shinran's Thought; Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2014).

attend the meeting of the Oxford Round Table, and maintained his interest in comparative studies of Shin Buddhist and Islamic traditions. His natural and sensitive responses in such dialogues resembled a cool jazz player's improvisations in spontaneous jam sessions. In fact, Yasutomi was a good jazz pianist, and was once a member of Waseda University's modern jazz club and especially enjoyed playing in a combo. He cherished, as the highlight of his musical career, the memory of an impromptu duo with the legendary jazz bassist Richard Davis (1930–), which happened when he paid a courtesy visit to Prof. Davis at his office in the School of Music at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1985.<sup>2</sup>

Yasutomi's interdisciplinary vision and dialogical approach contributed significantly to his leadership roles in the Eastern Buddhist Society. With his competence in the English language and his broad intellectual perspective, he participated in the activities of the EBS for many years. In 1998, he joined the editorial board of *The Eastern Buddhist* and from 2006 served as the secretary-general of the EBS for more than a decade. As a member of the editorial board, he played a key role in the preparation of various special editions of the journal, such as the Kiyozawa Manshi centennial in Vol. 35, Nos. 1&2 (2003), which featured his signature piece, "The Way of Introspection: Kiyozawa Manshi's Methodology." From 2007, he offered a monthly EBS seminar on D. T. Suzuki's English translation of the "Chapter on Faith" of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, which attracted a wide variety of people interested in reading Shinran's *magnum opus* through Suzuki's interpretation. In recent years, as secretary-general, he took the initiative in transferring the administration of the EBS from the Shinshū Ōtani-ha to Otani University, thereby invigorating its academic role in a rapidly changing global world. The official transfer was finally accomplished on April 1, 2017, the day after Professor Yasutomi's unexpected passing. His vision for the Eastern Buddhist Society, which goes far beyond its forthcoming centennial in 2021, remains alive in all of us who remember him with great respect and deep affection.

Inoue Takami

<sup>2</sup> Richard Davis is an American jazz bassist and Professor of Bass, Jazz History, and Combo Improvisation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Down Beat International Critics Poll named him "Best Bassist" from 1967–74 (which coincided with Yasutomi-sensei's graduate student days). Among Japanese jazz aficionados, Richard Davis is especially well known for his performances with Eric Dolphy (1928–1964) in such historic recordings as *At the Five Spot* (1961) and *Out to Lunch!* (1964).