

NEW YEAR'S EVE

(Joya-E)

At the end of each year it is a custom to attend the Year End Service (*Joya-E* in Japanese) to bring the year to a close. It provides us with an opportunity to quietly contemplate on the events of the past year and to rejoice in gratitude for the many blessings we were able to enjoy.

In keeping with the Buddhist tradition of ringing the temple bells 108 times to wipe out the 108 passions of human beings on New Year's Eve, we will begin the New Year with a clean slate and look forward to better things during the coming year. The 108 passions originate in the five feelings of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch plus consciousness. These six multiplied by three (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings) total 18. Each of the pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings are either attached to pleasure or detached from pleasure. So 18 times two equals 36. These 36 are the passions of man manifested in the past, present and future. Thus, 36 multiplied by three gives us a total of 108 passions. There is also the Japanese custom of eating *toshikoshi soba* on New Year's Eve. It is said that if you are able to pick a long strand of *soba* out of the bowl with chopsticks without it breaking, then you will have good fortune during the coming year. If it breaks and is very short, then the coming year will not be too prosperous. Both of the above can be traced back to the superstitious nature of man.

However, the fact does remain that all of us welcome every new year with the fervent desire that it will be much better than the preceding year. We have the tendency as human beings to ignore our past if there are no fond memories remaining. Instead of using the past as a part of our learning experience, we place the past on a bookshelf like a book we don't like, only to discard it later on.

Although man's environment and living conditions have improved vastly within the last 100 years, the nature of man has not changed for hundreds of years. We rely on our five sense organs to provide us pleasure. Unpleasant sources are removed or avoided. Since nobody is able to be 100% satisfied, our wants and needs are never satisfied, and we continue in an endless cycle of suffering and frustration.

In spite of the material wealth we enjoy today, one has to wonder whether the people of today are as happy as they could be if materialism was not the gage of success. Materially we are wealthy, but lacking in the spiritual or religious side of life. Material wealth comes first and spiritual peace and happiness are put off until we feel we are ready for the grave.

Even time is thought of as being concrete, something that we can control. As long as we have our watches and calendars to help us keep track of the passing of time we do not worry about how long we may have to live. Maybe it's a good idea that we do not worry too much about time, because we would certainly not be able to get anything done otherwise.

One day while Sakyamuni Buddha was sitting in meditation with some of His disciples, He suddenly asked them, "What is the span of human life?" To this question many of His disciples responded. The answers ranged from periods of hours, days, weeks, years, etc. Then one of his foremost disciples answered that it was the short time between one's inhaling and exhaling. The Buddha instructed, "Indeed, human life is that critical" and encouraged the rest of His disciples to devote themselves to the pursuit of Truth.

Since man has devised a means of dividing time into seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years as well as the past, present and future, we are able to look back and at the same time look ahead. As we come to the close of the present year, we can look back and reflect on whether the past year was a good year or not. If not, then we can expectantly hope that the coming new year will be a year worth remembering. We must realize, however, that hoping alone will not make it so. Whether the past year was good or not, we can all be thankful that we are able to be alive and, thus, be able to have even greater expectations for the coming year. There were thousands of people who will not be able to do this, because they are no longer with us. Thus, we have a reason for reciting "Namo Amida Butsu". But, then do we really need a reason?