MI: Today is August 23, 2019 and we’re again in the conference room of the Japanese Cultural Center to continue our interview with Dr. George Tanabe. Last time, we learned about his family and his growing up in Waialua. Today we’re going to focus on his adult life, his education, his academic career culminating with his receiving the Order of the Rising Sun award from the government of Japan. We ended up last time, just starting to talk about his education, so we’ll start there. Why don’t you start with your education in Waialua and we’ll move forward from there?

GT: I was born and raised in Waialua and I always wanted to go back and live in Waialua, which I am doing now... It was a great place. Waialua Elementary School was a wonderful experience. It’s interesting to me to observe now that the schools are filled with many Japanese American teachers. When I was in high school, I didn’t have a single Japanese American teacher. They were all Caucasian women from the mainland, usually single. And Hawaiian women.

MI: You’re talking about the 1950s?

GT: Yes, I’m talking about the 1950s. All my teachers were either haole or Hawaiian in elementary school. Then I went to Waialua Intermediate and High School and there, again, I had a very wide mix of teachers. But the great thing about Waialua High School and the great thing about Waialua in general, was that it was kind of like how, last time, I was talking about growing up pretty free and open, without much supervision by our parents or anyone else. Waialua High School was just a lot of fun. I’m not sure how much I learned. The one thing I did learn really, really well was grammar. English grammar.

MI: Because of your teacher?

GT: Because of our teacher, yes. Now, we never spoke good English. It was all heavy pidgin, but the teachers really emphasized grammar, diagramming sentences and all of that, so I
learned my English grammar very well. But mostly I had a great time. I had a great bunch of friends. We had good times. I never read much. I don’t think I read a single book, cover to cover, all the time I was at Waialua High School.

Then in my junior year, I had a chance … my sister was at the University of Hawaii and she was boarding with a woman who was the librarian at University High School, the Lab School here. Mrs. Geyser told my sister, “Oh, doesn’t your brother,” me, “want to go to University High School? Because I could probably talk to the principal and arrange it.” This was an offer made while I was going to the eleventh grade and I told my sister, “Are you crazy? Why would I want to leave Waialua High School? I’m having such a great time.” The offer was repeated at the end of my junior year and to this day, I’m not exactly sure why I decided to leave Waialua High School but I did. I had an auntie living in Manoa. I would stay at her house throughout the week and I went to University High School.

MI: One year.

GT: That one year, my senior year, totally changed my life. It was one teacher—one of these stories about teachers that can change your life. The one teacher was Mr. Niederholzer. The University High Lab School was for training of teachers, who were students in the College of Education at UH. You had a supervising teacher and then you had student teachers. The student teachers were all UH students. Mr. Niederholzer was the supervising teacher and he was there for only one year, the very same year and the only year that I was at University High School.

Now, back in those days, the whole cultural, social difference between Waialua in the country, and Honolulu, was huge. To us, the Honolulu kids were fast, sophisticated, smart and we were slow, not that bright, but we know how to have a good time. (Chuckles) Even Wahiawa we saw it as, “Oh, boy, those kids are just like … they’re beyond our league.” The whole idea of driving, in Honolulu, that was the mark of sophistication. You ask someone, “Hey, you know how to drive in Honolulu?” (Chuckles) “No, I don’t know how to drive in Honolulu.”

LG: You mean, just to drive in Honolulu?

GT: Yes.

LG: Not to drive to Honolulu?

GT: In Honolulu, right. Because that was city traffic. And we had country traffic. Very different. And so … there were stoplights here. We never had stoplights. And the whole cultural difference between growing up in the country as opposed to Honolulu, was major. And then, anybody who went to private school—and a lot of Waialua kids did go, the better students—of which I was not one—went to MPI [Mid-Pacific Institute], went to Iolani, went to Punahou.

MI: What kind of student were you, at Waialua?

GT: Average. Average.

MI: Underperforming?

GT: Ah, yes. (Chuckles)

LG: So, you weren’t getting all As.
GT: I’m not sure what my grades were. Probably in the B range, maybe. But, my two sisters were very good at school. And they always made it clear to me that I was the slow one in the family. (Chuckles) Which was fine with me. It didn’t bother me at all. As I said, I don’t think I read a book from cover to cover.

MI: Somebody recognized something in you, whoever recommended that you come to University High School.

GT: Well, Mrs. Geyser, the woman who was the librarian at University High School, and with whom my sister was living, she didn’t know me at all. I think she was just doing a favor to my sister, saying, “Hey, does your brother want to go?” I’m not sure why, at the end of my junior year … and I think about it a lot, [but] I must have felt a certain amount of dissatisfaction with being a country boy and wanting something more. I think a lot of people have that. We’re not sure what we’re looking for, but we go out and we start looking for it. I did. So I said, “Okay.” I came to University High School, here in Honolulu, and again, I was terrified. I just had lunch with my some of my University High School classmates three days ago and it always amazes me to think back to that time, because these kids spoke good English, they were socially sophisticated, they knew how to drive in town, (Chuckles) all the things that I didn’t know. I was terrified, coming to University High School.

MI: Were you academically prepared to compete?

GT: No, not really. Um, except, I knew my English grammar. Maybe that helped.

LG: So, most of the other students there at the time, they were from Honolulu?

GT: They’re from Honolulu, right. And, they’ve been together from … the UH Lab School starts from elementary school.

LG: So, they’re together since …

GT: And it’s a small group. My class had sixty students. That’s the other thing. Those kids had known each other from pretty much kindergarten. It’s a tight social group and now, I’m an outsider, coming in the classroom, with Mr. Niederholzer and the student teacher. All my classmates I just saw as light years ahead of me, in terms of their academic abilities, their intellectual abilities and their social abilities were probably more frightening to me than the other sides. I did the best I could! But it was really, really hard. My supervising teacher, Mr. Niederholzer—about maybe three months into my senior year—he called me into his office one day and I thought, “Oh, I’m in real trouble. The teacher’s calling me to his office.” He said, “I notice that you don’t speak up in class.” I said, “Yes, I don’t know what to say.” He said, “You’ve got to break that habit. Tomorrow, I want to see your hand go up.” That was an order. He forced me to participate and so, I started doing that.

Now, Mr. Niederholzer was really concerned about the class as a whole, not just me. He felt that we didn’t know how to write. He felt that we weren’t reading enough. And so, all the things that I didn’t do in Waialua, he was now emphasizing. He had us on a reading schedule that was quite amazing. We were reading all kinds of books, very quickly. I read more books [during] that senior year than I had read in my entire life before that. And writing, he really emphasized writing. To this day, when I think back that I made my career out of reading and writing, it all goes back to Mr. Niederholzer.
LG: This was an English class? Or literature?
GT: Well, the way it was set up, there's a homeroom class and Mr. Niederholzer’s [class] was a homeroom class. Yes, it handled English and history. We had other teachers for science, math, and so on. But, yes, he was doing the social studies and English. My science teacher was Will Kyselka. He taught physics and he also used to do the lectures at the Bishop Museum Planetarium. He was the guy who worked with Nainoa Thompson when they were getting ready to do the Hokulea voyage. He was also a very influential teacher. The two of them, Kyselka and Niederholzer, basically changed my life.

MI: I would guess, maybe six months into your career there, you’re starting to have to think about college, right?
GT: Yes.
MI: Who’s giving you advice?
GT: Yes, and I thought I wanted to become an aeronautical engineer.
MI: Where did that come from?
GT: I just thought it would be great to fly. (Chuckles) I wanted to be a pilot. But then I thought, maybe it’d be fun to design airplanes, and become an aeronautical engineer.
MI: Let’s back up. Prior to that, in Waialua, were you going to church there?
GT: My parents, my family were members of the local Hongwanji Buddhist church. But my parents sent us to Sunday School at the local Congregational Christian church. I think they felt that as part of our acculturation, we should be exposed to Christianity.
MI: And let you choose or find which one?
GT: In the end, yes. They didn’t say you had to be this or you had to be that. I think they just thought that we needed to be more functional in an American society to go to a Christian church rather than a Buddhist temple, although, for all the family rituals, memorial services, funerals, that was all done at the Buddhist temple. But my Sunday School teachers were just like us, students at Waialua High School. We would sneak out and go have a picnic at the beach and then come back. The teachers and us, we’d crawl out through the window. She didn’t want the minister to see that we weren’t going to be in the classroom. She had sandwiches prepared and we’d go, then come out saying that we’d finished our Sunday School class. (Laughter) Typical Waialua academic situation. But, again, very different at University High School. These kids were serious.
MI: Okay, why don’t you get to the university [education]?
GT: So, now I’m wanting to become an aeronautical engineer. I don’t know, I must have just picked that out of the hat. And Mr. Niederholzer called my parents in one night for a conference. I wasn’t in that meeting, just my parents. He told them that if they could not afford to send me to college, he would pay for my education.
LG: Wow.
MI: He saw something in you.
GT: Yes. That was the first time some teacher or anybody, for that matter, had seen any academic talent that I might have had and my parents were just flabbergasted. When he
told me, I couldn’t really believe it. He said, “Yup, I’ll pay for it because he should go on to college.”
Well... I applied to Purdue University, in engineering, and got accepted. I even had my dorm room. Now... it’s about February or March, [I’m] going to graduate in May or June. I had another sort of major change of heart. I decided that I didn’t want to go to Purdue, that I didn’t want to become an engineer, what I really wanted to do was to be with my girlfriend at the college where she was going to. My girlfriend at the time was Gail McElrath. I think you’re familiar with the McElraths, Bob and Ah Quon McElrath. Bob McElrath was at ILWU, very radical [labor leader]. He had a radio program and was always pushing for very progressive labor causes. Ah Quon McElrath was a social worker there, later on became a UH Regent. Very powerful couple in the labor community.

MI: Her daughter was a classmate of yours.

GT: Her daughter was a classmate of mine, right. At University High School we were a couple, in time. As we’re moving towards graduation, she is going off to this private school called Willamette University in Salem, Oregon, and I’m headed to Purdue. So now, I had a real existential crisis. Did I want to become an aeronautical engineer or did I want to be with Gail? I decided I wanted to be with Gail. I quickly sent off an application to Willamette, I got accepted, and I went off to Willamette University, which has no engineering program. It’s just a liberal arts college, a small liberal arts college, Methodist-related historically, in Salem, Oregon. One of these really good liberal arts colleges. You read, you write, study history.

LG: A lot of Hawaii kids went there.

GT: A lot of Hawaii kids went there. It was a very popular place, like a lot of the West Coast colleges. There’re a lot of Hawaii kids there and so I went there and I wound up majoring in history, just really the humanities. After the first year there, Gail and I split up (Chuckles) but we still remain good friends, till this day. She lives on the mainland but she comes back once a year. We always get together. That was really a big influence on my life, going to Willamette University.
At Willamette University, I’m not sure what I want to major in and I majored ultimately in history because it was kind of open, not too many requirements and I liked studying history. I fell in with a group of students who were actually my co-workers. At that time, the state of Oregon had the Oregon School for the Blind right next to the campus. The state school for the blind hired Willamette students to live there at the boys’ dorm and the girls’ dorm. We lived in the basement of the boys’ dorm and we did a variety of jobs, working in the kitchen, working with the kids. My job was working with severely, multiple handicapped kids who had difficulties not just with their sight but emotionally and so on. I put myself through Willamette working there.
There were five Willamette students who were there. It turned out that these five students were from church backgrounds, mostly Methodists, it turned out. They’d grown up in the church, they had done the church camps and all of this, and I got to be really interested in the whole church worldview, which was quite liberal. They weren’t worried about whether they were going to be saved or not. What they were worried about was social justice. Through that, I got involved with the civil rights movement going on at the time, ban the bomb movement. My first trip to Portland, Oregon was a ban the bomb protest
parade. I got involved with politico-social issues through my friends and they were all involved because they associated with these churches with very liberal, progressive views about social justice. That, what it meant to be a Christian is to go out and work for social justice. That was totally new to me because I thought it was all about heaven and hell. They’re saying, “No, no, no, it’s about equality. It’s about justice.”

LG: These other five students, they were from all different parts of the U.S.?
GT: No, they’re all from Oregon.

LG: So, they had a common bond, already. They had a commonalty from Oregon.
GT: Right. And they were great guys. I mean, they were my best friends there. Willamette had a very strong fraternity-sorority system and then, after your first year, everybody pledged, went into a fraternity or a sorority. Several of the fraternities had race clauses. If you weren’t white, you couldn’t go in. And, my blind school friends, they’re just totally incensed at that. We always used to say we formed our own fraternity at the blind school.

MI: This emphasis on social justice. Is that unique for the churches, unique to that period of time or is that historical?

GT: Well, the churches have always been involved in social issues. The church was involved with the abolition movement. At this time, it’s a civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, he’s coming out of the church. The churches are all heavily involved with the civil rights movement. From the top, all the way down. Yes, Christian churches were heavily invested in causes like civil rights and also the peace movement and then pretty soon, Vietnam comes along, and then the anti-Vietnam protests. A lot of that was church-based. Suddenly, I’m exposed to a kind of Christianity that was really surprising to me because I thought church was about piety and prayer and salvation. Now, it’s all about social justice. It’s about going down to the South and the churches were very involved with the civil rights movement. Even though Salem is far away from the South, still that whole issue, that whole concern is very much alive there. The ministers were young ministers that these guys knew and that I got to know through them.

There was also a social side. These young Methodist ministers were hikers and campers. We used to go hiking and in Oregon, you’ve got Mt. Hood, you’ve got Mt. St. Helens, you got all these wonderful places. We took such wonderful hiking trips. And at a lot of these trips that we took, there’s a lot of conversation and talk going on. Right away, it became clear where their concern for social justice was coming from. It was coming from theologians, Christian theologians, like Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Carl Barth, all these people. These major theologians. I’d never heard of them but we started reading their books. We started having private study groups, not part of the university. What does Reinhold Niebuhr have to say about Christianity and social justice? I found it really impressive, that religion could be such a force for social justice. Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr had taught, of the many places they taught, at Union Theological Seminary, which is in New York. When it was time to graduate and figure out what I wanted to do, I decided to go to Union Theological Seminary to study Christian theology. I wanted to know more about it. What was behind this whole philosophical intellectual worldview that was not just up there in some ideal place, but translated down into the streets.

LG: Was there any thought on your part about going into the ministry?
GT: No, never. Union was so liberal, when I applied, I said, “I’m not interested in the ministry.” Now a seminary’s objective is to train ministers but Union was so liberal, they said, “Come.” So I went. And, it was another one of these really great experiences. New York City, Union Theological Seminary, the Vietnam War is raging.

LG: What year was this?

GT: This is 1966. I was there for three years, sixty-six to sixty-nine. I went to New York and again, just like going to University High School, all by myself. I remember taking a cab from the airport to Union Seminary. We’re passing through Harlem and the guy says—we stop at a stoplight—he said, “Roll up your window.” This was a hot summer day. I said, “Why?” He said, “Well, the kids might come and reach in and steal whatever they can take from you.” “Okay.” I rolled up the window. We get to Union, the fare was six dollars or something. I heard of this thing called tipping but I’d never done it before. It was five ninety so I give the guy six dollars and I said, “Keep the change.” Boy, I thought I was going to get killed. That guy railed after me: “Ten cents! That’s not a tip.” “Okay, okay.” Anyway it was a whole education.

MI: You’re growing at each step.

GT: Yes, at each step. And, it’s not just intellectually but socially as well. I’m going from Waialua to Honolulu. That was a big social move. Going to Oregon, that was another big social move. And meeting the kind of people that are very different from the people I know. So, my Waialua High School friends, very different from my University High School friends. Very different from Willamette University friends.

MI: No Buddhism while you’re at Willamette?

GT: No, it’s all Christianity. I go to Union Seminary and there was also the issue of the draft. Because of my friends, we’re talking about social justice and we’re talking about what is a proper religious response. It’s in a Christian context but more broadly, what is the proper religious response to the problem of war? Now, this is not a theoretical question because it’s Vietnam. We’re getting draft notices. I got my draft notice. And, we struggled with that. My one friend became a conscientious objector. I thought I would become a conscientious objector. I came home one summer—I came home every summer while I was Willamette—I told my mother, I said, “I don’t know about Vietnam. I don’t think I can go. I’m thinking of becoming a conscientious objector.” This is a family that had everybody go to the 100th Battalion, 442nd, fight for America and now, I’m saying, “I don’t want to go into the American military and I’m going to exempt myself by being a conscientious objector.” My mother was totally devastated. Of course, in her limited worldview, she thought I had become a communist. “What, you became a communist?” “No, no, no.” But again, the fifties, the Red Scare. In fact, the McElraths by the way, were accused of being communists. Anyway, it’s a huge crisis in my family. Typically, my father, he didn’t care: “You want to be a conscientious objector, well, okay.” My mother was just like, “No, no, no. No way. No way you’re going to be. If you get drafted, you go.” That’s it. Loyalty. Patriotism. And, to do anything else would be treasonous. So, you must be a communist if you want to be a conscientious objector.

LG: She didn’t say, “See, you hang around that Gail girl, that’s why.”

GT: Yes, they knew about the McElraths. My mother loved Gail, and they had a great
relationship. Although, you know how it is when you have a prejudice about something and [then] you actually get to know somebody face to face. You can ask my wife about this, but the same thing happened between my wife and my grandmother. My grandmother used to tell me, “You Japanese, you only marry Japanese.” “Okay Grandma, okay Grandma.” The year before my wife and I got married, she came to Hawaii to meet the family and all of this. My sister was getting married and one evening we had the rehearsal for her wedding. My girlfriend at the time, soon to be my wife, *haole* girl from Oregon, sitting down there and my grandmother comes in. She sits down. They have nothing to do with the wedding so they’re just sitting there. They can’t communicate because she only speaks Japanese. There are a lot of mosquitoes and they start slapping mosquitoes, and I said, “Oh-h.” After the rehearsal is over, my grandmother comes and she says, “Who that girl I was sitting next to?” and I said, “Grandma, that’s my girlfriend. I might marry her.” “Oh, nice girl.” (Laughter) The old Japanese thing was gone. Again, so much prejudice is some idea in your head. You meet somebody and, you know.

Anyway, my mother thought I was going to be a communist. I really didn’t know what to do. I get my draft notice. Now I have to go through my physical [exam]. I’m back in Oregon, I have to go for my physical in …

MI: Where is this when you get your draft notice? Still at Willamette?

GT: I’m still in Oregon.

LG: Did they classify you as II-S exemption?

GT: I didn’t have an exemption.

LG: Oh? Normally, if you’re a full time college student, you would get a II-S.

GT: Oh, well what happened was I had graduated from Willamette and I spent one year working at the blind school. I was out of school. I get my draft notice. I thought, “What am I going to do? Should I do like my friend did and just apply for conscientious objector status?” The problem I had with the Vietnam War was two-fold. One was politically. I thought it made no sense for us to be there. Secondly, it was the whole moral issue. Like, kill people? That’s coming from this religious circle that I’m in. They’re talking about the issue not just in terms of politics but also as a moral issue, as well. I don’t know what to do. My mother, patriotism, morality, politics. All of this is getting all mixed up. I decide that I would go and take it just step by step at a time. I would go and get my physical. If I got drafted, I would go into the Army but I would refuse certain kinds of training. Now, that was really idealistic. I think I would have been destroyed, they would have crushed me if I did that: “I’m sorry, I don’t want to shoot this gun.” (Pause) It was very idealistic but it was a reflection of my total confusion and quandary about what am I going to do? I go for my physical and many of us being called up. They were really ramping up Vietnam. This was 1966. They brought a bus down to Salem, loaded all us guys to bus us to Portland. There were so many of us going through the physical that they had to bring in civilian doctors. It was just a mess. Anyway, I had to have my blood pulled. I wound up being with this civilian doctor. He’s looking at all the needles in his rack and they’re all crooked and he says, “Ah, this is the military. They don’t have a straight needle. Let me pick the straightest one I can find.” He picks the straightest. While drawing the blood, he says, “Ah, what do you really want to do?” I said, “Well, I’d love to go to graduate school.” He said, “Well, too bad. It looks like the war’s going to intervene in your plans.”
Anyway, I go through all the tests. I go to my hearing test, which consists of earphones and tones and I wasn’t trying to throw the test. They had warned us, “Don’t try to throw the test ’cause once we even suspect that you’re trying to throw the test, you’re in.” But, I have tinnitus, ringing in my ears, from a body surfing accident I had a long time ago. Even right now, if I listen to it, I can hear it. Now I clamp the earphones on, it’s like “Eeeeeeh!” It’s really loud! I really couldn’t tell the tones. I come out. The technician looks at my card and he says, “Oh, you’re borderline. I don’t know. You’d better go take it to a doctor.” So I see this civilian doctor who had drawn my blood. I go to him and I said, “There’s a question about whether I passed the hearing test or not. I’m supposed to show it to you.” He looks at it and he goes, “Nah, you flunk.” He signs it off, he gives it to me, he says, “Good luck in graduate school.”

LG: Wow.

GT: Oh, my gosh.

LG: What luck.

GT: Yes, luck. He solved my problem, so I went to Union [Theological] Seminary. And, there, again, I met the most amazing people. My classmates were mostly from East Coast schools. My roommate was a guy from Harvard. Next door was a guy from Stanford. Once again, I’m in with a group of really incredible people, Union Seminary being the progressive liberal place, just like with my Oregon friends and ministers. Christianity is not just about salvation. It’s about social justice. Union is in New York City, Morningside Heights. Across the street is Columbia University. Next door is Barnard—Teachers’ College—Jewish Theological Seminary, at that time. Julliard School of Music, right there. I thought, oh my gosh, the richness of all this culture and education. Also, it’s Harlem, right over there. At Union my first year, everybody had to do field work and I was assigned to do field work at the second largest church in Harlem, a black church in Harlem. There were two other guys with me. One was an African American student who grew up in Roxbury, in Boston, the slums of Boston. Then, this southern Texan from Fort Worth, who went to Yale. And this Hawaii local boy… the three of us. It was one of the most amazing experiences I’ve had in my life, working at a black church in the middle of Harlem and experiencing that whole inner city black culture situation and once again, what is the church doing? It’s social justice, all kinds of programs. I really got involved with that. In fact, next month, I’m going to Union for the fiftieth class reunion so I’m going to see some of these people.

LG: This Harlem church, was it a Baptist church?

GT: It was Methodist. The largest church was Abyssinian Baptist Church, which was Adam Clayton Powell’s church. This was Salem Methodist Church, number two big church. Huge church. Amazing church. The choir was huge. The lead soprano sang in the Metropolitan Opera. That was really fascinating about Harlem. You have abject poverty, you’ve got crime, you’ve got all of this, and at the same time, particularly in the churches, you have some amazing bastions of culture, music. The minister there was a guy named Roy Nichols. Amazing preacher. It was like listening to Martin Luther King. So eloquent. So much presence. So much charisma. He’d get up there and people get up, “Hallelujah, Amen.” Then the choir would sing. Sunday services were like this emotional high. Not like Buddhists. (Chuckles) I used to sit in the mezzanine—this church was
huge, all of the time—and it was a kind of a religious, spiritual, aesthetic experience. The music was great, the sermons were always inspiring, and the people’s responses, you know, were so enthusiastic.

I was not just attending the church. I was a part-time staff member, and my job was working with the junior high kids. There were two other college students, African American women. The three of us ran this junior high group, take them on excursions, organize dances. At the first dance, they were doing this dance called the bump and grind. These are seventh and eighth graders. One of the African American girls comes up to me and she says, “Ah, George, you’ve never seen the bump and grind, huh?” I said, “No, this is my first time.” She said, “What do you think of it?” The kids are actually bumping and grinding. I go, “Ah, it’s okay.” She says, “Then, why are you standing there with your mouth open?” (Laughter) “Oh, okay.” Again, new experience, you know.

MI: Are you beginning to think about the ministry, at this point?

GT: You know, at one point I did. I thought, oh my gosh, the commitment to social justice is … how much higher an ideal can you aspire to? That was the big discovery for me, about what Christianity was, ’cause I always thought it was about piety. Now, it’s about social activism. It’s being out there in Harlem. It’s being out there anti-Vietnam. I was at Union in 1966 and the whole anti-war movement is really ramping up. Sixty-eight was when the police came into the Columbia campus and beat up our students. Huge protest going on. We occupied the building and shut the place down. Allard Lowenstein, who was a congressman from California at that time, came and we had this secret meeting. Just a small group of us. Allard Lowenstein, he says, “We’re going to dump [President Lyndon] Johnson. We’re going to keep him from running again.” And I’m … “This guy is nuts. How’re we going to do that?” And what happens, lo and behold, Johnson, because of the anti-war movement, decided not to seek re-election. (Pounds the table) Power to the people, it works.

MI: So you were at Columbia at the time when they had …

GT: No, I was still at Union—but Columbia is just across the street—while all of this is going on, burning the draft card, marching, all of this, coming out of a Christian seminary. My classmates, they’re not sitting there praying, they’re out there organizing. They’re out there protesting. I find out that in terms of their attitudes about religion, it’s kind of like mine. They could care less about their salvation. What they cared about was justice. And, this made total sense to me, so I was deeply, deeply impressed.

LG: Was there any concern regarding … because for religious institutions to maintain their tax exempt status, you have to have that divide, not get involved in politics, so to speak.

GT: Yes.

LG: So, how did they get around that? When you start talking about individual political candidates, you’re crossing that line already.

GT: Yes, but look at Abyssinian Baptist Church. It’s Adam Clayton Powell, a U.S. Congressman, is there. I don’t know how they got around their whole non-profit status. I think, in the case of … I mean, if JCCH as a non-profit, got heavily involved in politics, that would be an issue. But if a church does, then that also comes under this crazy banner called religious freedom. And you can’t come down to Salem Methodist Church and say,
“Hey, you can’t do the social … you can’t protest John Lindsey’s, Mayor Lindsey’s policy about this or that.” I think because it was a religious institution, there was more leeway, in terms of …

MI: It was protected.

GT: So there was all of this going on. By that time, I’d gotten married and my wife and I were living in New York. I was going to Union and she was working as a secretary at Teachers College. I had a scholarship at Union but when my wife came, they took away my scholarship. I go to see the financial aid director and he looks at me and says, “Your wife is your scholarship.” (Laughter) These were the old days. “Oh, okay.” She goes to work at a secretary and yes, she’s supporting us, so she was my scholarship. She was very interested in Chinese art, actually, and Japanese art. She started taking Japanese language lessons.

LG: So, she had her degree from Willamette?

GT: No, we met at Willamette but then she transferred to the University of Oregon. She graduated from the University of Oregon. The first year that I was at Union, I was by myself. Then that summer, we got married and for the next two years at Union, we were together. She says, “Well, my interest is in Asian art so that’s what I want to study. I want to study Japanese language.” And there’s so many universities in New York and the New School for Social Research had a Japanese language class that fit our schedule. Both of us started going to that class. Her thing was, “I’m going to take Japanese language classes. You can come with me or not.” (Chuckles) “Okay.”

I had gone to Japanese language school at Waialua Hongwanji for seven years. I count it as one of my greatest academic successes because my objective was not to learn. I worked really hard and I achieved my objective. (Chuckles) Seven years. If we could make the sensei cry, that was a good day and we had many good days. Poor sensei. We just gave him such a hard, hard time. But we hated it. We all hated it. What, after English school, all our other friends, they’re playing baseball, going to the beach. And we gotta go for one hour of Japanese language school? Terrible. Seven years I did that, seven years I worked really hard not to learn. I didn’t learn anything.

My mother said, “You’re going to regret it,” when I finally convinced her that I could quit, in the ninth grade. And sure enough I find myself sitting in the New School for Social Research, studying Japanese and thinking, you know what, Mom was right. I regret not having studied back at the Hongwanji. (Laughs) That started with the whole Japanese side.

So, I’m still at Union, I don’t know what I wanted to do. I thought about the ministry but I really didn’t want to do that. But now, I’m studying Japanese and then the kind of whole roots thing kicks in. Like, what’s Japan, anyway? What was Grandpa all about? You know, he only spoke Japanese, he was totally Japanese. And the temple, what was that all about? I’m suddenly beginning to feel this whole thing about identity. What’s my identity?

MI: Was that coming from your wife?

GT: Yes, because she’s the one who’s interested in Asian art. I’m protesting the war. (Chuckles)
LG: What an interesting couple, Japanese American boy and *hakujin* wife, and yet she’s the one that’s into this East Asian culture.

GT: Um-hmm. Yes, into this East Asian thing. Now I’m studying Japanese language with her and beginning to think about my interest in religion. I’m still interested in the study of religion. I’ve done quite a bit in terms of Christianity. I can read Greek and Hebrew. I graduate from Union Theological Seminary, with a specialty in New Testament Studies. I won one of their major prizes which was the Hudnut Award, which was for the most promising preacher. They had a really good speech program. I mean, they really taught you how to give a sermon. I remember the first time. You go in there and you’re supposed to read a passage and then they record it, they videotape it. Then, after you finish the whole speech program, you do the same thing and you’re supposed to see the difference between the beginning and the end. I go for my first session, I read the passage. The speech teacher, Mr. Swander, I still remember him sitting up there. He looks at me and he says, “Mr. Tanabe, what language did you speak before you learned English?” I got a little bit offended by that. (Chuckles) I said, “I spoke perfect pidgin.” He said, “Well, it shows.”

MI: Do you by chance have a copy of that? Copy of that video?

GT: I wonder, but I don’t know. Hey, I’m going in October. Maybe I’ll ask. (Laughs)

MI: Before and after.

GT: Before and after, yes. And I had a great … you know, it’s such a great important part, unlike, say, if you train to become a Buddhist minister. They don’t teach you at all, about how to give a Dharma talk. But in seminary, they teach you how to preach. And, it’s a whole sub-specialty, it’s called homiletics. And my homiletics professor was a great guy. He was really a wonderful professor. I learned so much from him. They actually teach you how to do it. From there, you take it any which way you want. Anyway, I graduated from Union. By that time, it's become clear that I want to study is Buddhism.

MI: Why?

GT: Because of the whole roots thing. Because I’m curious about what this Hongwanji thing is all about, that I grew up with.

MI: Do you think it was more intellectual?

GT: It’s more intellectual, yes. But I have no idea about what it was. Here’s this part of my growing up: going to memorial services and funerals and New Years and pounding mochi and all of that. I had no idea what that’s all about. It just seemed kind of odd that I didn’t know anything about who I was and my upbringing and my family, particularly about my grandfather, as I thought about him. On both sides, my grandparents. Very devout Buddhists, very important part of their lives. I have no idea what that’s all about.

MI: Your emphasis or your interests seemed to be social justice.

GT: Yes.

MI: Did you see that, in Buddhism?

GT: No. No. That was kind of the big difference that I saw between Christianity and Buddhism. I apply to Columbia and I get in and now I’m in the Department of East Asian
Languages and Culture. It’s not a Buddhist studies program, it’s East Asian. My courses were in Chinese history, Chinese literature, Chinese religion and same thing, Japanese history, Japanese literature and Japanese religion. The religion part was just one part. My advisor was a guy named Yoshito Hakeda. Professor Hakeda was an ordained Shingon Buddhist Priest. He’d gotten his Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at Yale and was now teaching at Columbia. This is an old tradition in Japan, of academics who were also ordained ministers. Professor Hakeda happens to be one of those scholar-priests working in America [rather] than in Japan. He’s not only a scholar of Buddhism but he’s also a priest. He knows all the inside of how the temples work, he knows all the rituals, he knows what they mean. He can read it in Sanskrit. He can read it in Chinese. Of course, he can read it in Japanese. So he knows it. This is what I’m looking for. I want to understand what this thing is all about. What is this religion that I’ve grown up with, [but] in any substantive way had no understanding of what it was? I’m really immersed in the study, not just of Buddhism but the study of Japan, of China, and to a lesser degree, Korea. It’s an East Asian Studies program. By this time, my wife has stopped being a secretary and she gets into the art history program at Columbia, a very good program in Chinese and Japanese art history. Now she’s doing what she wants to do. We both have fellowships from Columbia so we can support ourselves, both of us being full-time students at Columbia. She’s doing the art history thing, I’m doing the whole East Asian thing with emphasis on Buddhism. It was a great time, really fun to be students together in closely-related fields, having in a lot of cases, the same professors. We had great professors there. It was like the second generation of Asian Studies in America: Donald Keene, who just passed away not too long ago, the great scholar translator of literature, Burton Watson, Yoshito Hakeda, Paul Varley who was at UH after he left Columbia. Great scholars, really great teachers. It was a great time to be in Asian Studies at Columbia at that time. By that time, the Vietnam War was beginning to wind down, eventually it ends. I thought it never would. And then we went to Japan. I was a Special Foreign Student Researcher at Tokyo University and some top Japanese Buddhist scholars were there. I studied with them. I wrote my dissertation on a thirteenth-century Buddhist monk and translated some of his works, and then got a job at UH teaching Japanese literature.

MI: At that point, you had learned Japanese, to speak and to read?
GT: Yes, by that time, and it was all pretty much learned at Columbia because my Japanese language school didn’t do me any good. (Chuckles) I pretty much learned at Columbia.

MI: So then you come back to Hawaii.
GT: I come back to Hawaii.
LG: Did you learn all that? That’s not easy. You say, you learned Japanese at Columbia, but that’s not that easy. Especially to be able to do research in early Japanese history. That kanji is tough.
GT: It’s really hard. It still is, always is. Yes.
LG: I mean, even scholars have difficulty. I mean even Japanese grown up in Japan have difficulty translating.
GT: It’s a highly technical language and most Japanese cannot read Buddhist texts because
the vocabulary, the terms are very, very specific to Buddhism. Not to the Japanese language or even to the Chinese language, but to Buddhism. There's a lot of terms that are special. They’re Buddhist terms and unless you’re trained to read that kind of language, even ordinary Japanese cannot pick up a Buddhist text and read it and say, “Oh yes, I get this.” You need somebody like Professor Hakeda to train you to read this.

LG: That’s amazing.

GT: And then, I spent two years at Tokyo University doing my dissertation research, reading the works and translating the works of this thirteenth-century monk. It’s an amazing experience to be able to enter into the mind of a person, who happens to be a monk from the thirteenth century, that long ago. The miracle of writing, the wonders of writing. How you can preserve the feelings and thoughts.

LG: What was his name?

GT: Myoe Shonin. So I did my dissertation. I published it. It came out from Harvard University Press. It’s called *Myoe the Dream Keeper*, because what I translated was his diary of dreams. For forty years of his life, he kept a diary of his dreams. He would have these dreams. Hard to tell whether he’s meditating or he’s actually sleeping. It’s kind of like both, going back and forth. They’re amazing dreams. To be able to go in the mind of a person through his dreams from hundreds of years ago is quite amazing. I get totally sucked into this. Here’s the dream, what does it mean?

Now if you’re reading a piece of philosophy or piece of history, there’s context that can help you figure out what this sentence means. You’re looking at the mind of a monk who is either in meditation or sleeping, and he tells you—the sentence seems to be saying, “I was walking on a path and there was a pile of dogshit and so I stuck a stick into it.” Wait, wait, wait. Is that what this sentence says? Because, there’s no context that you can use to try to figure out if you’re reading the sentence right? It turns out, that’s what the sentence was saying. That’s what he did, in his dream. It became a question of what does all that mean? And, talking it over with other students and faculty, everybody said, “Oh, so you’re translating Myoe’s dream diary. It’s a very famous piece of work. Are you going to interpret it?” I thought, “No, I’m not a psychoanalyst. I don’t know how to interpret dreams and I’m not sure any interpretation of dreams is accurate.” I can say, “Oh, I know what it means to poke a stick in a pile of dogshit,” but that’s my interpretation. I don’t know what he meant by it.

I wasn’t sure how to approach the analysis of his dreams. Then I read this great book about dreams. What the guy said was, there’s no thought, there’s no idea in dreams. What dreams tell you are feelings. You can have a dream, say, about this huge bird that’s flying at you and it has blood dripping down its teeth and its wings are spread out and it’s going to come and it’s going to attack you. There’s no such kind of a bird in reality. If you’re going to try to figure out what this bird means, what kind of bird is it, you can come up with anything you want to. But what that dream is telling you is that you’re scared. You have fear about something and that bird represents fear. So you read the dreams for feelings. And boom, it cracked it open.

I started reading his dreams for feelings. This was even more important to me because I was really getting, not the mind of the man, but the heart of the man. I’m looking at his feelings. I’m looking at his sentiment. And, it turns out that he’s struggling with feelings like sexual temptation, he struggling with feelings about anger. All of a sudden, he’s a
human being! Not just a thirteenth-century monk that we revere but he’s a human being. The key to it was through his dreams. It was a great exercise and also it was a great way to approach the subject academically.

MI: No one had attempted to translate it before?
GT: No one had done a complete translation before. In fact, the original text of his dream diaries had been cut up and part of it had been published in Japanese. I put it all together so the Japanese text was the first complete, as complete as it can be, collection of all of his dreams. There’s a famous psychoanalyst in Japan, Kawai [Hayao], and he wrote a book about Myoe. He was looking at Myoe’s dreams and psychoanalyzing his dreams. Now, he can, he’s a psychoanalyst. I’m not. He can say whatever he wants about what Myoe’s dreams meant. In his book, he says, “Well, I had a hard time figuring out what these dreams said, but fortunately there was this translation by George Tanabe.” (Laughter) Oh, that’s a big compliment, a psychoanalyst himself can’t figure out what it meant.

Of course, I had a lot of help from Professor Hakeda. I couldn’t have done it myself. I would meet with him regularly and we would go over and we’d try to figure out what the heck these dreams meant. That was my academic work, in terms of my dissertation. My specialty is medieval Japanese Buddhism. At the University of Hawaii, I became interested in modern Japanese Buddhism so I did research and published books on modern Buddhism in Japan as well as medieval stuff.

MI: So that’s where it starts, your academic interest in Buddhism, American Buddhism …
GT: Yes, that’s right.
MI: Why did it start?
GT: You know, the great thing about teaching Buddhism or Asian Studies in general in Hawaii is that it’s not just an academic matter. It’s a community matter. There are ninety Buddhist temples in the state. All of the stuff that I’m studying in terms of the doctrine and the history. If I were in Iowa, it would just stay there. I’d be teaching my students and I would say, “Okay, here’s the history, here’s the doctrine, here’s the ideas, this is what this ritual means and so on and so on and so on.” It would be compartmentalized, apart from what their community life is.

MI: You became sensitized to what was around you.
GT: Yes, it’s all around. All around. The other great thing about being at the University of Hawaii was Alfred Bloom. Professor Bloom was a specialist like me, of medieval Japanese Buddhism. He was teaching here. Professor Bloom was an amazing guy. Even though he’s a haole UH professor—and UH professors tend not to be involved with the community unless they’re involved politically—Professor Bloom had been working with temples in Hawaii for a long time. When I came to the university, I knew a lot about Buddhism in Japan but I didn’t know anything about Buddhism in Hawaii. That had always been on the back burner. That’s part of my motivation for starting it—what was Grandpa—what was the Hongwanji all about and so on. Well, now I knew a lot about the history, the doctrine and the rituals of Hongwanji but I didn’t know about Waialua Hongwanji. I didn’t know about the temples here in the community. Professor Bloom had been working with the temples and he says, “I’m doing a workshop with the Higashi
Hongwanji people. Why don’t you come?” I go with Professor Bloom and beginning to learn about the situation locally, in the community, what these temples are all about. It adds a new dimension to what I know about Japan. Now it’s my backyard. Now it’s my home. Now the picture is becoming more complete… I didn’t learn about my own home backyard until I came to the University of Hawaii.

I was really happy that I got a job here. Academic life is pretty nomadic. You move all around. Here… my wife comes into the picture because she has her degree in art history. She gets a full-time job at the UH Art Department. I didn't. We were facing this situation where I was going to go to Brown [University] and she was going to be here in Hawaii. We hoped that at some point, we can be in the same place. Well, it turns out that one of the professors at the Department of Religion here was going to go on leave and they needed somebody to just cover him. “Wait, I got a job at Brown,” and Al Bloom said, “Well, take your pick. Brown or Hawaii?” The Hawaii thing was only for one year. But the only place I ever want to live was Hawaii, so I turned Brown down… and the department was really great. They supported me so they pieced together … sometimes I got half time, three-quarter time, sometimes quarter-time, until Mits Aoki, the legendary professor at UH in religion, retired. His job opened up and then, I got his job. It took a little while… until I was able to become a full-time tenure track and then eventually get tenure.

MI: Tell us what you saw around you, in terms of Buddhism in Hawaii?
GT: It was really fascinating because from Al Bloom—I learned very, very quickly—it was very obvious just by visiting these temples that basically, Buddhism was dying. You look at the demographics, it’s all older people. You look at the Dharma School, they’re all dwindling. You talk to people and it’s very clear that they’re there because of family tradition and habit. “Why are you Buddhist?” “Oh, my parents were Buddhist.” “What denomination are you?” “Oh, yes, we’re Jodo.” “What do they teach?” “I don’t know what they teach.”

MI: So, why was that happening?
GT: Because Buddhism, even in Japan, and this is the kind of Buddhism that our grandparents brought, was a form of Japanese culture. If you die, you have a Buddhist funeral. What does the Buddhist funeral mean? Had no idea. But does it matter? If you go to the temple and you chant, Nam-myoo-ho-ren-ge-kyoo or Namu Daishi Henjo Kongo or whatever, you have no idea what that means. That’s what you do. And, all the chants are done in this style of language that is not any recognizable language. The chants and the scriptures are written in classical Chinese. If you chant the sutra, you follow the kanji according to that Chinese word order. You’re not chanting Japanese, you’re chanting Chinese grammar. However, the pronunciation of each character is not Chinese pronunciation, it’s the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese characters. You’re pronouncing Japanese kanji in Chinese word order. If you’re Chinese, and you listen to that, you have no idea what they’re saying. If you’re Japanese, you listen to that, you have no idea what they’re saying because it’s not Japanese. It’s neither Chinese nor Japanese. It’s just this Buddhist ritual language.

MI: So, you recognized that. Did other people recognize that?
GT: No. This is all new, to people, even today. I still find people surprised to find out about
what the meaning is of these chants that they’ve been chanting for so long. To go back to
your question, why is this sort of massive lack of understanding? It’s because even the
people in Japan … it’s not a Hawaii problem. It’s a Japanese Buddhist problem, if it’s a
problem at all. The thing about the practice of Buddhism is that you just submit yourself
to the ritual, you chant what little you can chant, the priest is going to chant long texts.
You have no idea what he’s saying. If somebody dies, that’s the chant that has to be
chanted in order to properly bury the person. It’s a matter of tradition and habit and
culture that that’s what you do…. For my grandfather, he’s perfectly happy to just do the
chant, sit there and listen, and not understand [it].

MI: Is this something that Alfred Bloom recognized, also?

GT: Absolutely. He’s telling me, “They don’t have the foggiest idea what’s going on in the
temple.” I thought, “Wow, that’s really weird,” coming out of the seminary experience,
having worked in churches where they know exactly what their Christianity means,
particularly in terms of social justice and the programs that they’re putting on. It’s all in
English, it’s all understandable. The minister gets up there, he prays, everybody
understands the prayer, they sing the hymns, they understand the hymns, all of that. You
come to the Buddhist temple and nobody understands what the minister is saying.
Sometimes, his English is so bad that you can’t get it, but it’s not so much the minister’s
fault, it’s mostly the structure of the religion itself where you have an emphasis upon
ritual and chanting texts, in a language that’s not a recognizable language.

MI: So why did you choose this, instead of Christianity?

GT: Good question, Mel. I’m not really sure, in terms of the whole social justice thing. I
mean, to me it’s still very important. I’m really happy to see somebody like Duncan
Williams protesting at Fort Sill, as a Buddhist.

MI: He was there.

GT: As a Buddhist, yes. I think Buddhists need to do more of this. I was reading about this in
today’s New York Times, the Rohingya in Myanmar and how they’re just being horribly
persecuted by whom? By Buddhists. The Buddhist community, we should just stand up
and say, “This is wrong. This is wrong.” Take away her [Aung San Suu Kyi] Nobel
Peace Prize. She doesn’t deserve it. I still have that sense of social justice and
righteousness.
But what I’m seeing here in temples in Hawaii… you have this kind of rote, ritualistic,
habitual, traditional practice without understanding. The temples are all dying. Al Bloom
points this out, thirty, forty years ago. So I start writing articles about how Buddhism is
going to die. I get invited to give talks and workshops, sometimes with Al Bloom and
more and more, by myself, saying things like, “You know, Buddhism is dying and if it
doesn’t die fast enough, we ought to kill it. Because it’s useless.” And people go, “Oh
you radical.” I say, “No, no, no. I’m not a radical. We have to change it to fit Hawaii.”
Buddhism goes from India to China, it becomes Chinese Buddhism. It goes to Japan, it
becomes Japanese Buddhism. It comes to Hawaii, it’s still Japanese Buddhism. We need
Hawaiian Buddhism. We need to do it in English. We need to interpret it. The great thing
about the Buddhist tradition, historically speaking, is how open and liberal it was.
If you just look at the scriptures, New Testament, it’s fixed. You cannot add or take away
anything from it. Hebrew Bible, fixed. Koran is fixed. You cannot add anything to it. The
Buddhist canon, in Chinese, is one hundred volumes. Each volume a thousand pages, all of them written five hundred years after the Buddha died. By whom? Hundreds of anonymous writers who sat down, “This is what I think the Buddha said.” These are sutras. Sutras are the scriptures that are the preachings of the historical Buddha, but historically speaking, none of those scriptures were ever uttered by the historical Buddha. They’re all made up. I said, “Look, we’ve inherited a tradition where you make up your own teaching. We’re in Hawaii. Why are we mouthing what was made up in Japan? And they’re mouthing what was made up in China.”

MI: What is the response to your effort?

GT: Everybody goes, “Yes, yes, yes. You know, we have to do that.” But then the conservatism kicks in. Too radical. You know, I’m still giving talks like this. (Chuckles)

LG: Can you talk about … we had a meeting about a year ago, I think it was, regarding this sort of kernel of rebellion that started happening in Hawaii, before the war, and what happened with that?

GT: That’s a really fascinating story. History doesn’t proceed in a linear fashion, from say, conservative to liberal or anything like that. It’s all mixed up. Before the war, in the twenties and thirties, Buddhism was really booming because you have all first generation people. You look at the photographs. Hundreds of people in front of the temple. Unthinkable now. Many people were Buddhists by habit, first generation. Second generation, Nisei come around and now, they’re speaking English and they want to understand the religion: “Oh, can’t we do this in English? Can’t somebody explain it to us?” So in the 1920s, late twenties, this guy who shows up in Hawaii. His name is Ernest Hunt. He used to be a British merchant marine seaman. In his travels throughout Asia, he studied Buddhism in Burma. He actually got a degree in Buddhism. He’s working as a bookkeeper at a sugar plantation on Kauai—his personal faith is Buddhism—he comes to Honolulu, he meets Bishop Imamura, the head of the Honpa Hongwanji, who is progressive, because he was a graduate of Keio University. Keio University is founded by Fukuzawa Yukichi, who was the great westernizer in Japan. Now we need to remember that Japan in the Meiji Period went through this cultural revolution where they westernized. That’s what modernization meant. The army is built on the Prussian army and they’re studying western industry and everything. I mean, that’s how Japan became the country that it is today. It was open to all kinds of ideas coming from all parts of the world, especially the west. Imamura is a disciple of Fukuzawa Yukichi, who is saying Japan either modernizes by westernizing or it will not be able to compete with the West.

Look at the Honpa Hongwanji temple on Pali Highway, the big white building. Doesn’t look like a Japanese Buddhist temple. Imamura designed that. He said: “I don’t want my temple to look like a typical Japanese Buddhist temple because this is not Japan.” How progressive is that? He designed it in what we now call the “International Style.” It’s kind of British colonial architectural style. On the top are stupas which represent Indian Buddhism. The columns are classical Greco-Roman columns. The shape of the windows and the fencing, it’s Islamic, because the Mughal empire in India was Islamic and a lot of Mughal art made its way and influenced Buddhist art. It’s got western British colonial administrative architectural style and then it’s got Islamic influence. Then you walk inside and you see pews. That’s the Christian influence. A pulpit, an organ. It’s this
wonderful, typically Hawaiian, typically local putting together of so many different elements. It is totally unique, unlike any other temple you’re going to see anywhere else. Certainly not in Japan. You’re not going to see something like this.

Soto Mission does the same thing. Go on Nuuanu Avenue and look at the Soto Mission. It’s the same thing. Indian Buddhist stupas on the top, classical western columns in the front and then this great Islamic arch as their main doorway. The pink building off the freeway, Jodo Mission, that one was built in the thirties. And Jodo Mission people are saying to the architect, “We want a building that follows the same idea that Hongwanji has, that Soto Mission has.” In other words, it’s sort of Indian style. And Imamura made it clear. He said, “I want people to understand when they just look at the building, they will say, ‘Buddhism is not just a Japanese religion. It’s an Indian religion. It’s an international religion.’” And so the Jodo Mission, the architect, once he got his orders, designed a building that will evoke India. He goes, “India, India, what’s the most important building in India … ah, Taj Mahal.” It’s almost a replica of the Taj Mahal. There are minarets, the scalloped entryway. We have this photo of the Taj Mahal and the Jodo Mission, side by side. The minarets.

MI: With this change in the architecture, was there a change in the church?

GT: Well, see, again, this is the interesting thing. This is pre-war, so this is in the thirties. The twenties and thirties, all this progressive … we have to make sure that Buddhism is an international religion, not just a Japanese religion. Imamura meets Hunt. He says, “Work for me.” He sets up the [Hongwanji] Department of English. He ordains Hunt. He doesn’t send … like now, we send everybody to Japan to get ordained. Imamura doesn’t do that. He ordains them here in Hawaii. So, now Reverend Hunt is now the head of the English Department and he starts writing books in English to explain to Nisei. I met an old Nisei once, he said, “Oh, I love when Reverend Hunt used to come to the temple because when we listen to the sensei we don’t know what he’s saying, but Reverend Hunt, he makes total sense.” So, he’s going around.

Dorothy Hunt, his wife, establishes what they call Sunday Schools. We call them Dharma Schools now. Sunday Schools. You got to teach the kids. That’s not something that was done in Japan. Again, that’s a total Hawaii innovation, following the pattern of Christian influence. Sunday school, teach the kids. You gotta start them young, so they understand what this religion is all about.

The other thing that the Hunts do is they say, “We gotta change the service because all this mumbo-jumbo stuff doesn’t make sense. We gotta sing hymns in English.” Again, another Christian influence. They wrote these hymns and published a book in 1924, the Vade Mecum, which is Latin for “Come With Me,” a title for books, like a handbook that you carry with you. The Vade Mecum has an outline of English Buddhist services: what you say during a funeral, what you say for weddings, what you say for Sunday Service, all in English. Then, they have these hymns that they wrote in English that are still being sung, every Sunday, in temples across denominations. Even on the mainland, when I visit temples there, I pick up their service book, I look in: “Ah, yes. D. Hunt. She wrote this one.” One of her most popular songs was “Onward Buddhist Soldiers.” (Chuckles)

In 1930, Hunt and Imamura established the International Buddhist Institute, IBI. This was a branch of the International Buddhist Institute that was founded by a Chinese Buddhist priest named Tai Hsu. Tai Hsu had this vision of modernizing, internationalizing Buddhism. Tai Hsu comes to Hawaii, he meets with Hunt and Imamura, and they say,
“We’re going to establish a branch of the IBI, right here at Honpa Hongwanji.” They start publishing books, going around and giving talks and giving sermons, and it’s all in English. In the preface to the IBI, their motto is “Buddhism shall not die in these islands.” See, in 1930, they already saw what was happening. It’s going to die if you don’t transform it and make something that fits Hawaii, not Japan. They’re producing all this stuff: new liturgy, hymns, Sunday School, books, [that] explains Buddhism in English, in understandable terms.

In 1930, the IBI sponsors an international conference [Pan-Pacific Y.B.A. Conference]. A hundred thirty or a hundred forty young kids from all over Asia, from the United States, from Europe, come to Hawaii. Imagine a conference like that today. They all come together and their purpose is to establish a new form of Buddhism that is suitable for western societies—actually, international societies, because it includes Asia as well. There are kids coming from Burma, from Japan, from China joining up with kids from Canada, Germany, the U.S. and from Hawaii. They’re all sitting there and planning out a new form of Buddhism that is going to be non-sectarian. No more Nichiren and Shu. No more Hongwanji. No more Shingon. Non-sectarian. We’re going to go back to the original teaching of the Buddha, which is different from the sectarian teachings. The Buddha never heard of the Lotus Sutra. The Buddha never heard of all those other sutras that were written later. The inspiration was, “We’re starting a movement and Hawaii is at the center. From here, it’s going to spread to the rest of the world.” I mean, they were really big thinkers.

MI: Has that happened?
GT: Nope.
MI: Why?
GT: Well, first of all, Imamura dies in 1934 [correction: 1932]. If you don’t have support from the top, there’s not much you can do. Then Imamura was replaced by a bishop coming straight from Japan, a total Japanese nationalist. And he said, “English Department? We don’t need to have this. We don’t need to explain Buddhism in English.” He shut the English Department down. Hunt moves to the Soto Mission because Honpa Hongwanji now shuts down the [its] English Department. Then the war breaks out. The whole situation changes. That 1920s, 1930s movement to internationalize Buddhism, to create a western Buddhism, a non-sectarian Buddhism, died because of the death of Imamura and that was followed by the war. So everything changed.

MI: I don’t want to interrupt this part, but could you come back one more time and about other things? I want you to finish what you’re doing.
GT: Sure.
MI: I’m sure Les has some questions [in our remaining time].
LG: Maybe you can touch upon other things you shared with me previously, regarding some local people on the neighbor islands where some of the membership were vigorously protesting about the current state of affairs in Buddhist churches, that it was just intolerable because they couldn’t understand anything. I guess that was part of that movement, too, at that time. How did it not just get squashed and revert back to this malaise?
GT: Yes, Hunt and the International Buddhist Institute for about three years, published a book called the *Hawaiian Buddhist Annual*. In it, they had articles written by Buddhists from all over the world. The international character of what was happening at that time, how they were trying to internationalize, if you look at the hymns, the hymns are written by Ernest Hunt, Dorothy Hunt, they’re written by all kinds of Caucasian-named people. Paul Caras, who was a very famous spiritualist leader in Illinois, wrote some hymns. And then, the music was put together by a guy whose name escapes me for the moment but he was the organist at St. Andrews Cathedral [R.R. Bode]. So you had this mix of Christians, Buddhists. This organist from the St. Andrews Cathedral was the choirmaster of the first Hongwanji choir. He’s writing the music for the lyrics that are being written by people like Paul Caras, Dorothy Hunt and Ernest Hunt. It was a remarkable situation, here in Hawaii, where you had this cross feeding between Buddhism, Christianity, internationalism, getting away from all of that. And in the *Hawaiian Buddhist Annual*, there’s all kinds of articles written by Buddhists from all over the world, but including Buddhists from Hawaii. And, there’s this really remarkable little essay written by a guy named K. Yamasaki from Kauai, in which he just … you thought Al Bloom and I were radical, this guy was radical too. He said, “What we’re hearing in the temples, they’re pure fairy tales. You couldn’t believe all that stuff. It doesn’t make sense at all. And then, all this business about *bushido*, about how we gotta be like *samurai*,” he said, “That’s so much garbage.”

MI: So where is the repository for all of those 1930s academic things, writings and what not?

GT: We’ve been talking a lot about it. I’ve been having conversations with all kinds of different people but a lot of it is in temples, storerooms. And, as temples try to clean up, they throw the stuff away, so, it’s being lost. The two researchers from Louisiana, I took them to Haleiwa Jodo Mission because Buntetsu Miyamoto was the minister there. Reverend Ezaki, the current minister brought out all their stuff and photographs. Every time I see stuff like that, I say to myself, “There has to be a systematic effort to collect and preserve the stuff.”

MI: The university doesn’t have those kind of resources?

GT: No, they don’t have. I think I mentioned that Brian Niiya and I had this conversation—so much work, it’s being lost or neglected and forgotten. Three days ago I met with a woman. She had a book published by her grandfather. The preface was written by Bishop Imamura. This book was published in Japanese in nineteen twenty something. He’s just a lay person but he’s writing about all kinds of different topics, about being in Hawaii. Really interesting stuff. Some of it has to do with Buddhism. She said, “I have this book. I don’t know what to do with it. Would you like it?” I met with her… said that BDK [*Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai*]—we’ll keep it—we have a little library. I’m collecting these books. I have that now in our BDK Library.

We have a remarkable story, different from Buddhism in Japan and Buddhism on the mainland. It’s really a Hawaii story. Just look at our architecture. It’s incredibly unique. Nowhere else you’ll find this. Look at Ernest Hunt. Dorothy Hunt, Imamura, all these people and what they were trying to do in the twenties and thirties. Nobody knows these stories. Now we sit around and go, what are we going to do? The temple’s dying. Everybody getting old. Young people not there. The question was asked in the thirties. They knew the temples were dying in the thirties and what to do about it, but for all kinds
of different reasons, [it] came to a stop. It’s not that we don’t have any ideas from our own history, locally, here in Hawaii. If we look back to the twenties and thirties, there are all kinds of ideas about what to do to reverse this trend of just having Buddhism die. It’s a fantastic history that we have and it’s just sort of neglected.

MI: I’m going to let you continue with this next time. We have to vacate the room. If you don’t mind, we can continue and we can finish up next time.