MI: Today is August 23, 2019. We’re in the BDK [Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai] office for our third interview with Dr. George Tanabe. My name is Mel Inamasu and assisting me with the interview will be Les Goto. We have learned from Dr. Tanabe, his background of growing up in Waialua and his education. Today I would like to spend some time talking about his academic achievements as well as awards and more specifically, in 2013, he was recognized by the government of Japan with the Order of the Rising Sun award. This is the highest recognition award to non-Japanese [citizens] and I would like to learn from Dr. Tanabe about his academic career and how all of this culminated in his being recognized by the Japanese government. I believe part of this happened after he retired, in regards to the EHIME MARU accident that occurred off the shores of Oahu. I’m going to ask Dr. Tanabe to tell us about the highlights of his academic career, what he’s most proud of, some of his publications and then the EHIME MARU incident. Let’s start with your academic career when you made the decision to choose the University of Hawaii as your academic path. As I recall, you had an offer to go somewhere else, on the mainland.

GT: Brown University. Yes.

MI: But you made a decision, even though you didn’t have a permanent position at the University of Hawaii [UH], you chose to stay here.

GT: Yes. My choice to teach at the University of Hawaii is based on something that has really been fundamental to me all my life. That is, that I am a dyed-in-the-wool local boy. (Chuckles) As they say, “You can take the boy out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the boy.” I’ve always been this sort of fanatic Hawaii-conscious-based person and so, as I told my wife when we got married, “There’s only one condition, and that is not only do you have to live in Hawaii, but you have to live in Waialua.” I’m very specific about where my home is. I know where my home is, I know where I grew up, I know what that place did for me, and I would live in no other place except Waialua, (clears throat) which is where I live today.

MI: Why do you think you have that in you?
George Tanabe - Part III

GT: You know, Mel, I’ve often thought of myself as kind of a salmon. You know how the salmon, they go out into the ocean and they come back to the place of their birth. It’s almost instinctual. I’m not sure if I have an obvious rationale that I can explain why I feel the way I do, but one is the land, or as Hawaiians would say, the ‘āina. Mt. Ka’ala, that whole area, I have a deep attachment, connection to the land, the mountain, the ocean. That’s where I grew up. It’s almost as if that whole environment became a part of me. And so, for me to be me, I have to be in that environment, even though, after I left Hawaii, I took many, many years going to the mainland to school, going to Japan. I always knew that I would have to return to Waialua.

MI: You did not have an easy life, actually, growing up in Waialua?

GT: No, we didn’t have much money; my dad always had economic, financial problems. It wasn’t an easy life in that sense, but it was, in another sense, kind of an easy life in that I was totally involved with my friends, totally involved with the community and it was home. It was comfortable that way, very comfortable. I know who I am there. People know who I am and I still maintain a lot of my relationships with classmates, the people I grew up with who took very different paths from the path I took. You know, many people—and this is common—many people rebel against the place where they grew up in. I went out and I saw the wider world but I always knew that I would come back to this hick town, this small town, because that’s where my home is. When I had the offer to go to Brown University—very nice university—to teach, I was ready to go. I had no other place to go, in terms of my academic career. But at the University of Hawaii, one of the faculty in the Department of Religion was going on leave for one year, or maybe just one semester, and I was asked if I would be willing to take his place. I immediately jumped at the chance, even though it was temporary. That was the start, 1977. That was the start of my career at the University of Hawaii.

As things turned out, in the years after that, the department was very kind to me and they created a position, most of it part-time, but it allowed me to stay at the University of Hawaii. Then the legendary founder of the Department of Religion, Mits Aoki, retired. There was a search and I was hired to replace him, although, nobody can replace Mits. Still, that allowed me to start on a tenure-track position and in time, I got tenure. I was fortunate to spend my career at the University of Hawaii, which is where I wanted to be. I didn’t want to go to any other university. That allowed me to not only have an academic career at the University of Hawaii, it also allowed me to work with the community, which was very important to me. I worked with Buddhist temples across all the different denominations.

The Department of Religion was really unique, I think, as far as an academic department, in that it had a very strong sense of working with communities. We had programs working with the Christian churches, with the Buddhist temples. My colleague Al Bloom was very well-known in the local Buddhist community. David Chappell, my other colleague who did Chinese Buddhism, was also very active with the community. Often, the university is seen as a place that’s separated from the community. They do their thing. But the Department of Religion wasn’t that way. We were integrated with the community. I was particularly happy because I could not only pursue my academic career but I could also pursue my interests in working with the community. Hawaii is a great place, plus my field is Japanese religion. What a place to teach Japanese
religion, as opposed to Fargo, North Dakota (Chuckles) or something? I could send my students out to do field research with temples here. Teaching Japanese Buddhism was not just an academic subject divorced from the community that my students were in. I could send them out and they could experience Japanese Buddhism as practiced here in Hawaii—different from what is in Japan but nevertheless still a lot of common elements are there. It was a great place to be teaching about Japanese Buddhism, Japanese religion, here in Hawaii, because it’s almost like a living laboratory of the greater story of how Buddhism has moved from India to China, to Japan, to Hawaii, to America. When you look at the history of Buddhism, Hawaii is a very critical part of that history. So, this was a great place to pursue my academic career.

MI: If I could interrupt, in terms of your students, are there any particular student projects that you can remember that were very important to you in terms of academic contributions?

GT: Yes.

MI: Can you share any of those?

GT: Well, I’ve had several students who have gone out and actually did … we had a Masters’ degree program, where they did their Masters’ project on some local congregation. So they would go out, they would interview temple members and thereby also learn about the greater traditions. Say if it was a Nichiren temple, they would learn about the Nichiren tradition, going all the way back to Japan, but also being able to see how did that religion, how did that tradition transplant itself to Hawaii? What changes did it have to make? That was the really interesting part, to see the changes that took place here in Hawaii.

Overall, the story of Japanese Buddhism in Hawaii is truly, truly unique. Really unique. And that’s not saying much because nothing is more common than being unique.

(Chuckles) We’re all unique. There’s nobody else like me. You’re also unique. So uniqueness is common and with a tradition like Buddhism which has gone through so many different cultures and developments and interpretations, it’s all unique. Chinese Buddhism is unique. Japanese Buddhism is unique. Hawaiian Buddhism is unique. California Buddhism is unique. Because the interaction between the tradition and the local culture and the local people and the local circumstances produces a kind of a hybrid. And that form of Buddhism becomes very unique.

If you just look at the architecture of Buddhist temples in Hawaii, you see that uniqueness concretely. The Honpa Hongwanji temple on the Pali Highway doesn’t look like a Japanese temple. That’s by design. That’s how Bishop [Yemyo] Imamura designed that building, saying very consciously, “I don’t want my temple to look like a temple in Japan,” for the obvious reason that this is not Japan. This is Hawaii. This is a part of America. His style of architecture is what we call the International style, where he has Indian Buddhist stupas on the roof, classical western Greco-Roman columns in the front and Islamic arches, believe it or not, in the façade on the outside as well as Islamic arches inside, just over the inner altar. And then, you walk in and you see pews. You don’t see pews in Japanese Buddhist temples in Japan. You’ve got Christian, Islamic, Indian, Buddhist, classical western … it’s this wonderful chop-suey that is what Hawaii is all about. We mix things up. And certainly with Buddhism, that was the case.

The Jodo Mission temple off the freeway, it looks like the Taj Mahal, which is an Islamic temple. And it has the minarets. All mosques have minarets and that temple has minarets.
It has the scalloped archway which is what you find with the Taj Mahal. That’s not by accident, because that temple was built in the early 1930s and the congregation told the architect that they wanted something that looked Indian. Again, following the vision of Bishop Imamura, who was totally convinced that what we needed to do here in Hawaii was demonstrate that Buddhism is not just a Japanese religion, it’s an international religion. Its origins are in India, to remind us of the international character of Buddhism, the architecture itself reflected that.

For the Jodo Mission, that pink building off the freeway, the architect said, “Let’s see, Indian building, Indian building,” and then thought of the Taj Mahal and designed it to look like the Taj Mahal, which is really an Islamic mosque. I’ve had so many colleagues come from the mainland and they see it and they say, “Wow, I didn’t know you had a mosque in Honolulu. It’s pretty nice. It’s big, it’s elaborate.” Then I have to tell them, “No, that’s not a mosque. That’s a Japanese Buddhist temple.” It throws them into great confusion, because it’s hard to put all the ends together.

That etiology is manifested in all of the headquarter temples here in Hawaii. Honpa Hongwanji is that international style. Jodo Mission off the freeway, that’s their headquarters temple, is of that international style, looking like a straight out of the book mosque, straight out of the book, the Taj Mahal. And then the Soto Mission temple on Nuuanu Avenue is also of that international style. No other place in the world would you find Buddhist temples that look like this. This is unique to Hawaii. It’s part of the way in which we in Hawaii take elements from different cultures and put them together. So that aspect was fascinating for my students to study. Very different if you were to do a study of a temple in Japan or China or any other Buddhist country. We have this sense of really mixing things up.

Bishop Imamura was very progressive. He had this idea that Buddhism was an international religion and he started the English department, headed by Ernest Hunt, who was a British merchant marine sailor and had studied Buddhism in Southeast Asia. [He] came to Hawaii, then decided that he wanted to settle here. Bishop Imamura ordained him as a minister—a fact that I always point out as an example from our own past as to local ordination. Bishop Imamura didn’t send Reverend Hunt to Japan to get ordained. We still do that today with people who want to become ministers. We train them partially here in Hawaii but in the end, they have to go to Japan to get ordained. My argument has been, um, Japanese don’t go to China to get ordained, Chinese Buddhists don’t go to India to get ordained, why are we sending our people to Japan to get ordained? We can ordain them here.

The sense of Buddhism in Hawaii as being still Japanese is very strong. Very little could be identified as American Buddhism… In the Japanese Buddhist community, the temple Buddhism here is still very, very deeply rooted in Japanese tradition. If you say Buddhism in Hawaii, you go to a Buddhist temple here in Hawaii and everybody would say, Japanese Buddhist temple, not American Buddhist temple.

LG: So, the next question is, like the Jodo Shu, you see this Taj Mahal structure, but when you go inside, how much of that internationalism that was reflected in the design when the building was designed and built, has actually affected what goes on inside of the building?

GT: Well, inside the building, there are two sections. The outer sanctuary, which has, as I said
before, pews, that’s the international part. The inner, the *onaijin* [altar], the inner altar, the main altar, is totally Japanese. So, the core is still Japanese. In a sense, you might say that what we see as the international Buddhism is the external wrapping, the building itself. That’s external, the outer sanctuary. But when you go to the most important part of the temple, which is the inner sanctuary, it is still very, very Japanese. That’s the problem. (Chuckles) As Bishop Imamura would say, this is not Japan.

And when you look at the clergy, when you look at the ministers, they’re all trained in Japan, whether they’re Japanese nationals or whether they’re Americans, who have to go to Japan to get trained and come back. We insist upon, temples insist upon keeping Japanese Buddhism Japanese. Which is exactly why Japanese Buddhist temples have not been able to make the transition to become American Buddhist temples. Which is exactly why fourth, fifth, sixth generation of Japanese Americans are not interested. They’re not Japanese, they’re Americans. Let alone speaking of the wider public who are not Japanese Americans. People who consider themselves American, and that’s true even for third generation, like us, we’re more American than Japanese, in terms of our language, in terms of values, in terms of culture. And so, it’s a foreign place, to go to a Japanese Buddhist temple despite…

**LG:** Let me throw something in, related to that. The institution, in this case the religious institutions, these Buddhist temples, they can only do whatever their current membership allows or demands. But one thing I notice … my observation as far as if you walk into a Sunday service or a *Kito* service, even an *Obon* service, in any Buddhist temple and you look at the congregation, it’s Japanese. Very limited diversity. Maybe two or three non-Japanese, and I’m not even saying non-Asian, non-Japanese. And I’ve even experienced personally where at the church that I am most familiar with, where, when we have outsiders coming in and trying to learn more about it, non-Japanese people coming in, there is this pull-back of the regulars, saying “Who are these people? Maybe they shouldn’t come around anymore.”

**GT:** Right.

**LG:** Is that part of it? It is to me, racism.

**GT:** Yes, it’s very ethnocentric, that’s the polite word for racism. It’s very oriented to Japanese and the sense is that this is not an American religion. This is a Japanese religion and therefore, it’s for Japanese. It’s not for American religion. Carl Becker was one of my former students at UH. He went on, [being] very fluent in Japanese, he went on to become the first tenured faculty member at Kyoto University, which is a real achievement! One of the national universities, to become a tenured faculty member. And he’s still there teaching …

**MI:** [First] non-Japanese to be tenured?

**GT:** Non-Japanese, yes. He’s a totally American guy, but his language is superb. He studied Japan and he did his undergraduate here at the University of Hawaii. He is now a tenured professor at Kyoto National University. He appears in the movie *Aloha Buddha*, that Lorraine Minatoishi did about Buddhism in Hawaii, which is really a good film. There’s an interview with Carl Becker. Carl says, on film, it’s on the record, “When I came to Hawaii to study, I was so interested in Japanese Buddhism. I went to one of the temples and very quickly I learned I was not welcome. And they told me so. So, if you are
explicitly driving people away, and it’s easy enough to say, “Ah Carl, well, Becker, it’s not a Japanese name.”

But now you have third, fourth, fifth generation Japanese Americans who are exactly in that same position. They go to the temples and they don’t feel welcome because they’re not sorta buying the whole Japanese thing. They’re not Japanese, culturally, intellectually. They’re Americans. The religion in the temples here in Hawaii is so Japanese, that it drives away not only people who are not Japanese but even younger Japanese Americans. Then the temple leaders sit around and say, “How come we don’t have young people coming to our temple?” Well, the answer is really clear, ’cause you don’t make them feel welcome! Because you’re perpetuating a religion that is so insistent on being Japanese. The people who could ensure a future for your temple are not Japanese, even though in terms of their ancestry, they may be Japanese. But in terms of their language and their culture, they’re not Japanese. So it’s an anomaly and it doesn’t fit in.

MI: Maybe this is a good point for you to start jumping into American Buddhism versus Hawaii Buddhism.

GT: Yes. So, the American Buddhism that has taken off, interestingly enough, it started with Japanese Buddhist leaders coming from Japan, going primarily to the mainland, starting Zen centers. The Zen centers became very quickly independent from whatever roots that they had in Japan, partly because of the Japanese monks, priests who were bringing Buddhism from Japan to America, as opposed to Hawaii. We have many Japanese Buddhist temples so the whole temple Buddhism is very, very strong here. On the mainland, the country’s just too big… in California, you can find all kinds of Japanese Buddhist temples but even California is pretty big, and the number of Japanese are much smaller in relationship to the general population. What’s here in Hawaii, we have a much larger proportion of Japanese Americans, so the whole Japanese culture thing is very strong here in Hawaii in a way that it’s not on the mainland.

It was much easier for Buddhism to develop outside of the Japanese cultural sphere on the mainland. That led to a large number of Buddhist groups, originally Zen-centered but now just widely diverse. That led to the development of what we now call American Buddhism. And it is home-grown. They don’t send their people to Japan for training, they’re not institutionally tied to Japan. All of our temples [in Hawaii] are institutionally tied to Japan. All of the temples here are basically branches of headquarters in Japan. On the mainland, they’re just developing in any way that they want to develop. They’re not beholden to institutional traditions. They’re not beholden to even doctrinal or ritual traditions. They’re just developing in the way that Buddhism has always developed, which is, you develop some form of Buddhism, some ritual, some teaching that makes sense for that community. You’re not doing it because that’s the way how they do it in the home country. American Buddhism has taken off. It’s really popular on the mainland. American Buddhism has the advantage of being American, which is to say, it’s not tied in so many ways to Japan, in a way that we here in Hawaii are really tied to Japan.

MI: Would you say it’s more like an academic Buddhism versus cultural, traditional Buddhism?

GT: No, I don’t think it’s academic so much. I think it’s more a Buddhism that fits in with
American values, contemporary values. It’s a Buddhism that places a great emphasis upon meditation and mindfulness. Here in Hawaii, we do meditation but it’s really a small part of it. What we do in temples is ritual. American Buddhists don’t do much ritual. Or if they do, it’s of their own making. They don’t import their ritual like we do, from Japan.
I’m still so amazed at how the rituals are still so Japanese. I gave a talk at a temple two weeks ago, and the service, it was a Sunday service. They sang, they chanted some chant in Japanese, they sang a hymn in Japanese and I know none of those people understood what they were chanting or what they were singing. They’re just reading the text phonetically and they can verbalize it but they have no idea what is being said.
With American Buddhism, they don’t do that. All their chants are in English. Everybody understands what the content of that ritual is and so it’s totally suitable for Americans. Their practice is a lot of meditation, a lot of talk about the Buddhist values of compassion, of being interrelated with everything. There’s a very strong ecological element in American Buddhism where the natural environment is taken seriously. It really fits in with American values and particularly contemporary American values. And it’s booming. It’s gone mainstream. We see actors, writers.
You go to San Francisco. The tallest building in the city of San Francisco is the Salesforce Building. It’s a huge building. The CEO of Salesforce is Marc Benioff, who’s a Buddhist, but not a Japanese Buddhist. He studied under Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist who was one of these teachers who helped to create American Buddhism. They’re not doing Vietnamese Buddhism. They’re doing American Buddhism. You read Thich Nhat Hanh’s book, it’s like the Dalai Lama, talking about universal values. Not talking about Tibetan values or, in Thich Nhagt Hanh’s case, Vietnamese values. He’s translated Buddhist teachings so that it makes sense to Americans. Steve Jobs practiced Zen Buddhism. The Salesforce Building—next time you’re in San Francisco, go look at that building. It has meditation rooms in it and they have really merged Buddhist ideas, Buddhist practices into their corporate culture.
LG: Do you think there’s a chance, even a small chance for … because, like you see on the mainland, on the west coast, their physical geographical distance from Japan is much greater than in Hawaii? Also, the racial and ethnic cultures are … the Japaneseness is not as predominant as it is in Hawaii. But in Hawaii, I’ve heard things like, “Well, we can’t change that because then it’s not going to be Nichiren Buddhism anymore.” Or, “It’s not going to be Honpa Hongwanji Buddhism anymore.” Or whatever, fill in the blank.
GT: That’s right.
LG: And that’s a big fear… that “We can’t let that go, otherwise we’re not Nichiren anymore.”
GT: That’s right. That’s what’s going to kill Nichiren Buddhism. It’s precisely that feeling that if we change, it’s not going to be Nichiren Buddhism anymore and that’s true. The irony is that that’s what’s going to kill Nichiren Buddhism. Because if you don’t change, you die. That’s just a universal truth. Traditions that don’t change die, and nothing is more traditional than change, especially in the Buddhist tradition. When you look at the history of Buddhism, it all changed. Chinese Buddhism is not Indian Buddhism. Japanese Buddhism is not Chinese Buddhism. The great strength of Buddhism has been its ability to change. In fact, that’s one of the basic teachings of Buddhism, right? Everything
changes, nothing stays the same. When the Buddha died, you know, his last words to his monks were, “Monks, work out your own salvation.” “Oh, okay.” That’s carte blanche to create something that makes sense for us.

If you look at the Buddhist scriptures … the Buddhist scriptures are huge. And the reason why it’s so huge is because there was this freedom for Buddhist communities to write their own scripture. You can’t do that in the Semitic traditions. The canons are closed. But the Buddhist canon is open. So you can write your own sutra for what is suitable for your time, your place, your circumstances, your language, your values. That’s been the strength of Buddhism.

That has become perverted in terms of tradition. Or that very deadly definition of tradition, being something you must preserve and never change. (Pause) That’s a misunderstanding of tradition. Traditions have always changed. If they don’t change, they die. It’s like technology. You don’t change, you die. You gotta keep up with the change. You have to foster the change. You have to make changes yourself. The way to make Nichiren Buddhism survive is to change it, is to make it not be the Nichiren Buddhism that our grandfathers practiced. That’s what’s happening with American Buddhism. It’s [a] completely changed Buddhism.

MI: How is this message that you’re giving received in the community? I don’t mean within the religious community or the Buddhist community, but in the lay citizens in Hawaii, especially Japanese American citizens. How are you received when you give it?

GT: Well, here’s my observation. I’ve been doing this for over thirty, forty years now, coming out with basically the same analysis and the same criticisms. Coming out, saying, “You don’t change things, you’re going to die.” In fact, when I was younger and more radical, I used to say, “If Japanese Buddhism doesn’t change, then we ought to kill it.” People go, “Oh, you’re so radical.” My observation about the message is that … most people agree with it, ‘cause I’m explaining it in terms of the Buddhist tradition. “Don’t argue with me, argue with the tradition.” Tradition is a story of change and new interpretations. Here’s the pattern. It’s not George Tanabe’s pattern, it’s the Buddhist tradition’s pattern, of how it survived, how it became a world religion. Then it comes down to: “Okay, are we going to cut our ties, cut our ties from the Japanese headquarters?” “No.” “Are we going to reach out to non-Japanese?” “Hmm, I don’t know. No.” The tribal mentality is very, very powerful, very strong: “We have to protect this thing called Nichiren Buddhism or Shingon Buddhism, or whatever it is. We have to protect it, we have to preserve it. We have to follow what the Japanese headquarters say.” The authoritarianism is still very, very strong. People don’t really want to go against the system.

When I’m in Japan, I tell them, you gotta let us go. Are you a parent? Did you raise your children to stay at home all their lives? Or did you raise them to go out and be on their own? Same with us. Think of us as your children. We’re grown now. We’re able to go out and start our own lives, our own careers. We’re not going to do it the same way that Daddy did it. Let us go. Let us be what we can be. We’ve got all the resources to train our own people. We don’t need to send them back to Japan. We can do it here. We have all the resources to interpret, re-interpret the teachings, as you have. Don’t forget, Nichiren was a rebel, and in his time, his interpretation of Buddhism was so different that he was exiled.
LG: Let me ask you. The difference in how the people in Hawaii view Buddhism, who identify themselves as “I am Buddhist” or “I’m Nichiren Buddhist.” Do you feel that people in Japan still, today, as a whole, view Buddhism or their affiliation with various Buddhist sects the same way? Like, “I am Nichiren Buddhist?”

GT: Yes.

LG: People from Japan that I meet... and I ask them about that, and these are people with a _butsudan_ in the house. I say, “What kind of Buddhist are you?” They seem confused. “What do you mean?”

GT: Yes, a lot of people don’t know. There’s a great movie called _The Funeral_. It’s about twenty years old. Somebody in the family dies and the family gets together and says, “We gotta have a funeral.” And they say, “But what sect do we belong to?” Nobody knows. “Oh, we gotta ask auntie.” They ask the auntie and the auntie says “I think we were …” So the sectarian consciousness is very low. People don’t really identify themselves as “I’m Shingon” or “I’m Jodo.”

LG: Like here.

GT: Yes, very strong sectarian consciousness [in Hawaii]. What you find in Japan is a very strong sense of traditional practices. So if somebody dies, you’re going to have a Buddhist funeral. Ninety percent of funerals in Japan are still conducted according to Buddhist rites. The family may not know what sect they belong to, they certainly don’t understand the ritual that is being performed, they don’t know what the chants are really saying but it doesn’t matter because “We’re having a Buddhist funeral.” It doesn’t matter which sect it is, nobody understands it anyhow. And so the sense of faithfulness, hanging on to the tradition of say, Buddhist funerals, is very strong. But the sense of which denomination or sect is very weak. And in a way, it doesn’t matter because Japanese Buddhism is not understood in terms of content or teaching by Japanese themselves, any more than Japanese Americans understand what Nichiren [is].

LG: So, even in Japan, what we in Hawaii perceive as “This is Japanese Buddhism and this is how Japanese Buddhism is practiced” in Japan, they don’t do that. They don’t practice it that way because people don’t go to church on Sundays.

GT: No, no they don’t. There’s no ...

LG: I’ve even had people tell me “You’re not a good Buddhist because you don’t come to Sunday service.”

GT: You could argue that in Japan, Buddhism is not really a religion. It’s a part of Japanese culture. It’s a cultural practice rather than a religious practice. Now the interesting thing about Buddhism in Japan, and I hear this all the time from my Japanese colleagues, is that it too is dying. It’s tanking. The younger kids, they don’t care. They’re in trouble financially, temples are closing, especially out in the countryside. If it weren’t for tourists, tourism, a lot of temples would close. There’s even a term, _kanko bukkyo_, which is tourist Buddhism. And that’s what’s keeping them alive. The other thing that’s keeping them alive is funeral services, because everybody’s going to do a Buddhist funeral. So those two things, funerals and tourism, are keeping Buddhist temples alive financially. But in terms of understanding or any application of Buddhist teachings to one’s life, there’s very little about that. This is why, when you don’t find graffiti on the walls in...
Japan, it's not because of Buddhism. Buddhism has no effect on people’s sense or understanding of how they’re going to live their lives. What they have is very strong Japanese values, which is what explains the lack of graffiti. But Buddhism is not a part of that. If you go up to any Japanese and ask them, particularly the younger ones, and say, “[Do] Buddhist values affect your life?” They would look at you and say, “What kind of question is that?” It just makes no sense, let alone them being able to… what they’ll probably say is “I don’t think so. I don’t even know what Buddhism is.”

So the practice of Buddhism in Japan, imported here to Hawai'i or to the mainland, worked well for my grandfather’s generation because he didn’t care what it meant. He just did the practice. You go, you [say] “Namu amida butsu” and all of that. I’m a Buddhist, I’m practicing it. But I don’t understand it.” Nisei, second generation, pretty much the same thing, although the cracks are beginning to show. Third generation, our generation, whoa, it’s starting to fall apart now because we’ve all been to college, or many of us, we come back and we want to understand what this is.

MI: Should there be an effort to bring American Buddhism to Hawai'i? Or, are we doing that already?

GT: Well, I think the first step would be to cut our ties to Japan. The temples are not going to welcome American Buddhism.

MI: How about new temples?

GT: Yes, and there are American Buddhist groups. The Diamond Sangha, in Palolo Valley. That’s one of them. That’s one of the older American Buddhist groups, led by Robert Aitken. I interviewed Robert Aitken once and that was published in *Hana Hou Magazine*, the Hawaiian Airlines in-flight magazine. He told me this great story because he was trained in the Sambo Kyodan. That’s the name of a new Japanese religious group that did a lot coming to Hawai'i and also to California. Robert Aitken studies Sambo Kyodan Zen Buddhism in Japan, he comes to Hawai'i, he starts the Diamond Sangha, he does everything on his own. He ordains his own priests, he writes his own books, he gives his own sermons. He doesn’t worry about Japan. And so, he told me this great story about how finally, he went to Japan once and he had lunch with the head of the Sambo Kyodan. And Robert Aitken said, “I think it’s time for us in Hawai'i to just break free from you guys here in Japan.” The leader, a guy named Kubota, said, “I agree.” He said, they shook hands and they had cordial relations all the time but there was no institutional tie. He was completely independent. So, that’s what has to happen here in Hawai'i. The temples are going to have to break away from their Japanese origins, just like Diamond Sangha did. And now, Diamond Sangha is one of the leading … Robert Aitken was a leading American Buddhist, not just here in Hawai'i but internationally he was known as a great Buddhist teacher and the group has spread all over.

[Break in the interview]

MI: Let me start you with a question. We’ve heard a lot about Reverend Imamura. Is there a Reverend Imamura today?

GT: The short answer is no. (Chuckles) There’s nobody like him, with the vision that he had. But Bishop Imamura was a man of contradictions as well. He was very progressive and you could argue that he became progressive because he came here to Hawai'i, he saw that...
this is not Japan. He saw that he had to do something different. Actually, he was progressive back in Japan because he studied at Keio University under Fukuzawa Yukichi. Fukuzawa Yukichi was very famous in Japan for being the great promoter of westernization. Fukuzawa Yukichi is telling people in Japan, “We have to change. We have to westernize. And that means that some of our old Japanese traditions, we have to get rid of.”

There’s a great story about Fukuzawa. He was against the idea that ordinary people should bow to people who are of higher status. So, he’s walking along, and he’s samurai class, and this guy bows down to him. He [Fukuzawa] says, “Don’t bow to me. Get up.” The guy says he can’t do it because he’s so ingrained with traditions. So, Fukuzawa pulls out his sword and he says, “If you don’t get up, I’ll cut your head off.” (Chuckles)

Bishop Imamura studied directly under Fukuzawa, and comes to Hawaii with progressive ideas of the need to westernize. Remember, Japan’s going full blast westernization. They’re remaking their army, they’re remaking the government, they’re writing a constitution—westernization. So he comes to Hawaii and he sees, “We gotta westernize Buddhism. After all, this is the west!” It makes perfect sense to him. But he knows he can’t do it so that’s why he brought in Reverend Hunt. And, Reverend Hunt, even though he’s now ordained and working for Honpa Hongwanji, he’s not a Hongwanji Buddhist.

MI: You’re talking about the 1930s?

GT: 1930s, yes. Reverend Hunt is a Theravada Buddhist, the early Buddhist teaching, which is morally-based, teachings like hatred can never resolve hatred, only love can resolve hatred. There’s no talk of deities. There’s no talk of Amida or Kannon or anything like that. It’s all this sort of moral teaching which is a part of early Buddhism so he comes in and … this is the kind of Buddhism that he is spreading now. And he is now working for Honpa Hongwanji and he sees that the old ritual is not really suitable for the younger generation. And, with the Buddhist services he thought that there should be hymns sung in English, so he writes hymns which are called gathas. He publishes this little service book and it has these English hymns. He and his wife and a whole bunch of other people, including the organist at St. Andrews Cathedral, they’re writing these Buddhist hymns and they’re putting together this service book. These hymns are still sung in temples today. Every Sunday you can hear these hymns, in all of the denominations. If you look at them, you’ll see D. Hunt, Dorothy Hunt, his wife or Shinkaku Hunt, his ordained name. So he’s westernizing it.

MI: Have some of these hymns made their way back to Japan?

GT: Ah, not in and of themselves, because they’re all English. But the Japanese, at this time, are starting to write hymns in Japanese. And so, both in Japan and in Hawaii. But the person writing the hymns are not the Japanese Buddhist ministers. It’s Ernest Hunt and his group of basically haole Buddhists, so-called white Buddhists, in Hawaii. They’re the ones writing these hymns. Their legacy is amazing because you can go to almost any temple today and you can hear their hymns being sung in the temples today. He also puts together an International Buddhist Institute, which was an international organization coming out of China. He starts a Hawaii branch and they publish books with all kinds of interesting essays about what needs to be done to make Buddhism survive. Even in the thirties, it’s clear that this thing is going to die if they don’t change. The motto of the International Buddhist Institute was “Buddhism shall not die in these
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islands.” Clearly, they’re facing the same problem that we face now. And their solution, they have a statement of purpose, that we will develop a new form of Buddhism that is not sectarian because sectarian Buddhism is, and this is their words, the evil in these islands. You know, every time people say I’m radical, I say, “You ought to go back to the thirties and read what these guys were doing.”

In 1930, they had an International Buddhist Conference of all young people. A hundred and thirty young people came to Hawaii from the mainland, from all over Asia, and they got together. Their explicit purpose was to develop a new interpretation of Buddhism, a new kind of Buddhism that was not sectarian, not Nichiren, not Honpa, not Soto. A new kind of Buddhism, suitable for young people, and here’s their vision—Hawaii would be the center from which this new Buddhism would spread throughout the world. That’s how big the vision was for Hawaii. Now, we’ve lost all of that.

LG: So, what happened?

GT: What happened was World War II, first of all. But the other thing that happened was that in 1934 [correction: 1932], Imamura died. The new bishop from Japan, a guy named [Gikyo] Kuchiba came and he was an ardent Japanese nationalist. Politically, culturally and everything. He said, “English Department? Buddhism is a Japanese religion,” and he closed the [Hongwanji] English Department. He fired Hunt. Hunt went to Soto Mission. But Soto Mission didn’t have the clout, you might say, that Honpa did. It’s a question of leadership. This is why Imamura is such an interesting guy. Such an interesting leader because while he himself couldn’t make the changes that were needed, he knew who to bring in. He supported Hunt. He may have even disagreed with some of the things that Hunt was saying but he knew that this is what had to be done. So, Hunt is developing this really, in some ways revolutionary changes in Buddhism, but then Imamura dies and the new bishop comes in, he shuts the whole thing down and then, shortly after that, World War II happens. Everything shuts down.

That put an end to this really fascinating story of the late twenties and throughout the thirties of what was happening here in Hawaii. What was happening here in Hawaii was really promising, really interesting, really revolutionary in some sense, and yet, so consistent with the history of Buddhism, which is to develop your own. And they were on their way to doing that. But it got shut down.

That parallels what was happening in Japan, too. Starting in the early thirties and leading up to the war. This nationalism. In the early twentieth century, it was progressivism and liberalism. In the thirties, it was nationalism and all those things were shut down.

LG: That parallels what was happening in Japan, too. Starting in the early thirties and leading up to the war. This nationalism. In the early twentieth century, it was progressivism and liberalism. In the thirties, it was nationalism and all those things were shut down.

GT: Yes. Then the war shuts everything down. Now it’s a matter of survival. You better get with it or else. So the postwar period here in Hawaii, there’s a chance that it could go back. But it doesn’t go back to the kind of 1930s developments. Then, particularly in our generation, third generation, as we move into the fifties and the sixties, there’s this kind of nostalgia that comes up. We want to become more Japanese. We want to do [the] tea ceremony, we want to do ikebana. We want to preserve our Japanese tradition and, oh yes, let’s start a Japanese Cultural Center dedicated to preserving all of that. Going back to it. But it’s a very clean version of Japanese culture. It’s all the wabi-sabi and sincerity and all of that carved on those pillars. It’s all that part of Japanese culture. Don’t look at the part where we went in to China and raped and killed people. No, no, no, that’s not Japanese culture. Don’t look at the kind of authoritarianism that our grandparents had.
No, no, no, no. That’s not what we want to honor and preserve. And so, our generation, we’re responsible for, in a way, whitewashing Japanese culture and preserving all the nice parts and saying, “Ah, this is what we are.” Wabi-sabi.

MI: Explain wabi-sabi to us.

GT: Wabi-sabi is that aesthetic sense of plainness. Not being garish and gaudy. Westerners are garish and gaudy. In wabi-sabi, we wear black and blue, we don’t wear bright colors or anything like that. And in terms of behavior, we look at haoles and we go, “Oh man, they talk a lot and they’re so aggressive” and so on. We choose not to remember that Japanese are pretty aggressive and loud, too. You’ve been to Japan. I remember the first time my mother came to Japan when we were there and we got on the subway and people are shoving and pushing and they’re kind of loud. My mother looks and she says, “These people are not Japanese.” (Laughter) But we don’t look at that part.

MI: Both of you have mentioned being punched in the stomach on the subway.

GT: Yes, right. I mean, you know, we have a very preferred, a selective view of Japanese culture. We don’t see the other side of Japanese culture. That carries over to the Buddhist temples as well. We look at the Buddhists. All those chants. I love the chanting. I don’t know what it says but I love the chanting. It’s an aesthetic experience. It’s not an intellectual one. It’s not one of understanding. It’s just, oh yes, I remember my grandma, and this and that and all of that. And it is! It is. Even for myself, I feel a connection to something in terms of my family and my grandparents and so on, when I hear the chants, when I chant myself. Very powerful. But it’s nostalgia. It’s a nostalgia that’s not shared by my kids or my grandkids. It’s a generational kind of a thing. Our third generation is really, in my view, a critical generation where we’re sort of between the old tradition and the really new. In some ways, we’re still confused. On the one hand, my kids, they gotta go to Yale and Harvard and become doctors and lawyers and become all this great American success stories and, we’ve done a pretty good job of that. We don’t tell them, “Don’t forget, you gotta learn Japanese. You gotta go Japanese language school,” like our parents did. So, on the one hand, we’re responsible for this accelerated westernization in our families and therefore in our community. At the same time, we’ve got this nostalgia. We gotta hang on to your Japanese values. Gotta hang on to wabi-sabi. That sense of sedate, not being garish. The nail that sticks up gets hammered down, and all of this. So we’re very confused. On the one hand, we want to be Japanese. On the other hand, we want to be really western and American. I look at myself. How come I wound up teaching as my profession, Japanese religion? You know, that’s part of my nostalgia, wanting to go back and understand. Now what’s this Japan thing all about? I don’t know anything about it so maybe I’ll go study it. Which is what I did. Not only that, I also start to teach it.

Yet, I’m not doing that to my son. I’m not urging him to go on and become a purely western guy, which is what he is, and my grandkids, even more so. I think the third generation, we’re really a transitional generation. The temples, in the meantime, still remain in our generation, in our time, the bastion of that tradition, Japanese tradition, that we have to somehow preserve. Don’t change it. Don’t change it because if you change it, it’s going to die. It’s true, which is exactly why we should change it. It should die. It’s not our culture anymore. It’s not our religion anymore. We need something different. American Buddhism is free from all of that. They
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just go out and they just do whatever makes sense for American culture. Three weeks ago, I was in New York for my fiftieth anniversary of my class that graduated in 1969 from Union Theological Seminary, a Christian seminary… They have this huge Buddhist program. One of the things they’re doing is a whole series of speakers, maybe a dozen speakers. The first one is Duncan Williams and all these Buddhist leaders. One of the topics is going to be Black Buddhism. Black Buddhism? Never heard of it. Well, you haven’t been to New York. It’s a big thing. None of them are from Japanese Buddhist temple tradition, except Duncan Williams but he’s not speaking in terms of temple Buddhists… The basic theme of the program is Buddhism and social justice. We don’t talk about that in Hawaii, social justice. Duncan Williams at Fort Sill, that’s what it’s all about, social justice. He puts together a group of American Buddhists. Now, there are some representatives from Japanese temple Buddhism, but not that many. And they’re out there protesting. Not something that we do. In the Christian tradition, when I was there in 1969, that’s all we did. We were protesting the war, we were working in Harlem … it was all about social justice. I never heard my fellow seminarians talk about Jesus or salvation. What we talked about was social justice.

MI: Did you ever hear social justice mentioned in the Buddhist community?

GT: Very seldom. Very seldom. Probably the one time it happened a little bit was during the Vietnam War period, when there were protests against the war and some temples got involved. Some temple leaders got involved. But for the most part, very little. And not just social justice but just social concerns. I was just talking with Clyde [BDK staff member] today because this past weekend, I couldn’t go, but BDK co-sponsored a workshop on suicide prevention. Huge problem in our community. Every two days, somebody commits suicide in Hawaii. Fifty percent of young kids, high school kids contemplate suicide in Hawaii. It’s a huge problem. Now, what are the temples doing about it? Nothing. It’s not even on the radar. So BDK, we partnered with Samaritan Counseling Center and had this workshop. A hundred people came to the workshop. This is one of the other things that I’ve been saying to temples for many, many years, with no real response. Everybody agrees, if you want to survive … think of it as a business. If you want to survive, you need to meet the needs of the people. And if you meet the needs of the people, then they are going to need you. But they don’t need you if you’re not meeting their needs. And so, what are the temples doing in terms of homelessness, and so on? Some temples are active, like Honpa. The headquarters is fairly active. In fact, they even have a committee called the Committee on Social Concerns. But very few temples have that kind of committee on social concerns. Are you kidding me? Social concerns? That’s not part of what we do. In Christian churches, this is a standard part, social concerns.

MI: I was interested in what you said about the Union Seminary and Buddhism. One of the things I wanted to ask was, with all the knowledge you have, especially with Christianity and Buddhism, can you envision a single, new religion which encompasses all of the major religions today, where we can all share one religion?

GT: Ah. That’s interesting. Right now, again, short answer is no.

MI: Why not?
GT: Well, because everybody is tribal, including Christians and certainly the Buddhists, very tribal. Union Seminary is an exception. There are tons of seminaries, all over the country, but Union is an exception. It’s unique in that it is so liberal. I go to California once a month to work for BDK there, getting to know the BCA, the Buddhist Churches of America, and getting to know some of the ministers there. I always thought of them as being more progressive and more assimilated and in some ways, they are. Yet, in some ways, they are more tribal than we are, more ethnocentric. I think it’s because they’re a real minority in California. Whereas, here in Hawaii, everybody’s a minority but we’re a large minority. We have a level of comfort, not just locked in some kind of a ghetto.

On the mainland, there still is that sense of being… one of my colleagues in our office, he’s a Japanese American from California and he was telling me, “Oh, yes. We gotta vote for all of the Nikkei politicians.” I said, “Are they good?” He said, “Doesn’t matter. They’re Japanese.” I don’t think we would make that kind of a political decision here, “I’m going to vote for you just because you’re Japanese.” I mean, I’m sure there’s some level of that but not as strong as it is over there. And as he said, “If we don’t stick together, then they’re going to run us over.” That sense of being a real minority. The temples are likewise very closed. They have some exceptions but for the most part because the temples in California still are catering to a Japanese American community, they’re still pretty ethnocentric. Still very, very Japanese.

MI: Let’s go, in the remaining time, to your academic career. Go ahead.

GT: Alright. My academic career is focused on Buddhism in Japan. All my research, all my publications are about Buddhism in Japan. The things that I’ve been talking about up to now, in terms of Buddhism in Hawaii, that’s just out of my personal interest, not my professional interest. All my research and publications have to do with Buddhism in Japan, ranging from the medieval period to the modern period. I’m really a specialist of Buddhism in Japan. That’s what I have been doing, in terms of my professional career. I’m interested in all aspects of Buddhism in Japan: Buddhist philosophy, Buddhist doctrine, Buddhist institutions, Buddhist personalities. My dissertation was on a fourteenth-century monk, so it’s a biography. My work in modern Buddhism has been looking at popular Buddhism. I wrote a book with a colleague of mine on the use of omamori, protective amulets, all of that, which many people say are superstitious and not really Buddhist, and yet it’s very, very popular in Japan. And I did a work on funerals, modern practices of funerals.

The EHIME MARU situation happened [on February 9, 2001]—a tragic accident where an American nuclear submarine crashed into the EHIME MARU, a Japanese fisheries school training vessel, off the coast of Hawaii—the tail of that nuclear submarine just sliced right through the EHIME MARU, which was a steel-hulled ship. Compared to a nuclear submarine, no match. The EHIME MARU sank in a very short time. The ocean was fairly rough and we had this photo of the EHIME MARU, damaged, going down, and the USS Greeneville, just sitting there and not offering any assistance. Now there was a reason why they couldn’t offer assistance. The ocean was rough enough that they couldn’t get off safely from the submarine, plus they’re not really equipped with smaller boats that can go out and help rescue. You had this very unfortunate photo of the American submarine sitting, just watching these survivors, struggling for their lives,
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trying to get onto life rafts and all of this. That immediately provoked a kind of prejudice in Japan towards America, that Americans are powerful, cocky, and uncaring. The commander of the submarine, Commander [Scott] Waddle was brought up on charges because the submarine had come up doing a maneuver for emergency purposes only, to blow the ballast. The submarine just shoots up at a sharp angle. You might have seen some videos of this. It comes out almost like halfway up and then drops down. It came up really fast, which is why it just sliced through…

MI: And why were they doing that maneuver?

GT: Because there were guests on board and they were trying to impress these guests to become donors for the USS Missouri project. These are possible deep-pocket donors and some of these guests were sitting at the controls at the time. Of course, standing behind them are the crewmen, so they’re not totally in control, but this is to give them kind of a thrill ride, an experience that they’ll never forget. Emergency ballast blowing, coming up out of the water, it’s really dramatic.

This Los Angeles-class American nuclear submarine did not know that there was a ship above them in the middle of the ocean. The whole thing was just not understandable. How could this happen? There were guests on board that they were trying to impress. They weren’t paying attention to what was above and they just came right up and they sank the EHIME MARU.

The whole thing is quite a scandal. And as information comes out, it looks worse and worse for the Americans. It looks like it’s just not negligence, but gross negligence. And the Japanese are getting pretty angry, understandably so. Commander Waddle is brought up on charges. He is up for possible court martial but first, there’s going to be a hearing. The hearing was widely televised. The news media from all over the world were here. Commander Waddle, unfortunately, was filmed coming out of the car with his wife and they were holding hands. He had the unfortunate habit of holding his face in such a way that you could see a smirk on his face. When the Japanese saw that, they went ballistic. They said, “How dare he? Here we’ve lost our husbands, our sons, our fathers, and he comes out with his wife!? Almost like, “Well, my family member’s okay. Sorry about yours but we’re okay.” That’s because we have so much power. What could be more powerful than a nuclear submarine and the commander of the nuclear submarine? You know, all the images, what we saw, worked against the U.S. Navy and worked against America. And the Japanese were really, really angry.

LG: Do you think it fit the stereotype of what an American is?

GT: Oh, absolutely, the ugly American.

LG: Especially the military.

GT: Yes. Absolutely. Absolutely. Totally. And one thing came after another. First, there’s the photo of the submarine just sitting there. Then comes Waddle out with his wife, with that little smirk, seemingly, on his face. And then, thirdly, when the Japanese were saying he should apologize, he refused.

MI: He refused?

GT: He refused to apologize. And he refused to apologize under advice from his lawyer who said—and this is kind of American legal custom—“If you apologize, you’re admitting
guilt. Don’t apologize. Your hearing is going to start. They haven’t found you guilty yet. You apologize, you’re basically saying, ‘Hey I’m guilty.’ Don’t apologize. Not now.” And the Japanese went ballistic on that. There was a lot of anger in Japan and then, because of all of that …

MI: Watching this in the news, how were you feeling about it? Were you aware of these things?

GT: Oh yes, I was aware. I’m looking at it and thinking, oh my, this is just tragic. There’s a lot of misunderstandings on both sides. But the Japanese families—and it went all the way up the Japanese government, even the prime minister got involved—their demand was, you have to recover the bodies of the nine people who were lost. That set the American public off, including here in Hawaii, like, whoa, that’s unreasonable for them to demand that the bodies be recovered. You know, they sank this ship called the Arizona. It’s still sitting in Pearl Harbor and we didn’t recover the bodies from there. And we didn’t demand that the Japanese go recover the bodies from the Arizona or any of the other ships that they sank. If you’re in the Navy or you’re a commercial fisherman, somebody said, “Honorable way to die.”

Now it’s getting two-sided. The Japanese are angry at the American cockiness and the Americans are angry at the Japanese for their unreasonable demand that the bodies be recovered. It became a whole diplomatic issue between Washington and Tokyo. It was really at the high levels where they were trying to work this out. The Americans were saying, a) We still haven’t recovered bodies that you guys killed and sank, and b) the EHIME MARU went down in something like six or seven thousand feet of water [correction: 2,000 feet]. The deepest recovery had been the TWA flight that went off the East Coast, and the Russian Kursk submarine, both of which went down in about two hundred feet of water. Two hundred feet, [versus the EHIME MARU at] six thousand feet [correction: 2,000 feet]. Technologically not possible. And the Japanese said and this is where the prime minister came in, he said, “Your problem. Recover the bodies.” There’s this heated debate going on.

I wrote an op-ed piece that was published in the [Honolulu] Star-Bulletin, where I tried to explain—especially because I’d just been doing this research on funerals—what’s the rationale for funerals? What’s the whole understanding of what happens after you die? And the basic point, that is that when you die, you still have your body with you. When we go to the cemetery, we take cookies and beer and cigarettes. Well, why do the dead need to eat? Because they have bodies.

The symbolic meaning of incense—there are many different symbolic meanings—but one meaning is that incense smoke is what the souls of the dead eat. They eat, so you offer incense in order to feed the souls of the dead. That’s part of the whole meaning of offering incense.

There’s this whole idea of these nine people, [on] the bottom of the ocean, and they’re not just dead, but they have… and it feeds in to this very universal idea that there is an afterlife… That when you die, you don’t just die and become nothing. There’s something else, a soul or spirit or whatever you want to call it, that continues to exist. In the case of Japan, but also in the western case as well, the soul is not disembodied. It’s not just some ethereal something that has no body. It’s still in the body. This is why we have to feed them. Because souls don’t need food, but bodies do, and so, this is why we feed the souls. And so Japanese funerals and memorial services are basically feeding rites. You go to the
grave to offer food. You offer incense. What are you doing? You’re feeding the dead, who are not really dead. They’re still alive.

And so I wrote this article to explain this idea of the conception of death as being one in which the dead are still alive and they still have their bodies and they still need to eat, and that if you just leave the dead in the bottom of the ocean, or any other place, they’re going to suffer. To bring closure and to bring peace to their souls so that they can truly rest in peace, as we say, you have to recover the body. You have to deal with it in the proper fashion and in the case of Japanese Buddhism, you cremate the body. The reason why you cremate the body is not to destroy it, but to preserve it. Bodily burial, no matter how much formaldehyde you put in to the body, the body’s still going to rot. Cremation purifies it. The ashes will never rot. And fire purifies. It’s a common ritual to use fire. This is why there’s so much fire in Buddhist rituals. Fire purifies. When you reduce the body into a set of ashes, you have a form of the body that is not going to rot, that is not going to spoil. You really have a purified form of the body. The idea that you would be leaving these bodies in the ocean so that the crabs and fish and so on can eat it all up, it’s just so repugnant, that you really do want to recover the bodies.

I wrote this op-ed piece to try to explain why the Japanese were demanding that they recover the body and also to remind everybody that that’s what we do, too. We still have people looking for bodies in Korea or Vietnam and so on. Here in Pearl Harbor, we have that lab that IDs bodies. We want to get the bodies back. There’s no closure until you get the bodies back. This is why the Japanese are demanding that the bodies be recovered. A few weeks later… my wife was the dean of Asian Studies at UH. She received a request from the Navy saying that they have decided that they’re going to make an attempt to recover the bodies and… they wanted to be sure not to make any cultural mistakes and inadvertently come across as being uncaring and cocky. The first thing was to do was produce an environmental impact statement, an EIS. Would she find people to work with the EIS people so that we don’t make any inadvertent mistakes? Because it had to do with religious ideas, she asked me and some other language specialists from UH. They had a hotel room in Waikiki where they had shoved all the beds against the wall and just jam-packed with these people doing different parts of their EIS. We worked with them. They produced [it] at a really fast speed, this environmental impact statement and they said, “Before we release it to the public, please read it.” We went through it. There were some changes that we suggested to make sure that the language would not be offensive to the Japanese. So the EIS statement was sent out. No problem.

Now it’s time to go get the ship. They put together a huge group, the Navy did. Admiral Bill Klemm was the head of the project and I got a call from the admiral’s office saying we’re going to get the bodies. We want to be sure that no mistakes are made… at the request of the Japanese families, it’s going to be videotaped… we want to make sure that we’re going to handle the bodies according to Japanese protocol. I said, “Well, I’m not so sure I know, but I have a lot of friends in Japan who are professors of Japanese religion and I can always call on them to help. So okay.”

I went down to Pearl Harbor, met with his group, which was a huge group, in a huge room, filled with people. And Admiral Klemm saying, “Okay, tell us. How are we going to handle the bodies?” By this time, they had brought in this special recovery ship that could send down robots. It could burrow underneath the hull of the ship. They could put cables and lift the ship up, 6,000 [correction: 2,000 feet], whatever the depth was, bring it
up and then they could slowly move it into shallower and shallower water. It took months for that to happen, but they did it, and they were ecstatic. Never before had a recovery at that depth been carried out.

MI: Why didn’t they just bring it up to the surface?

GT: First of all, because they were afraid that a lot of stuff would fall off the ship. They just gently brought it up and as they brought it to shallower water, they were going really, really slow because they wanted to keep intact, as much as possible, every object. They had cameras and everything. Anything that fell off, they would know, but to just bring it all the way up would risk a lot of stuff falling off. So they just brought it [up] slowly, slowly until they got offshore Honolulu, about a hundred feet of water, then the divers could go down and then recover it. There were about sixty divers, including some Japanese Self-Defense Force divers… divers drawn from all the different services. It was a huge group, sixty. I asked them, “Why so many?” They said, divers can only go down for so long and then they gotta come up. So you need other divers to keep going down, working on it.

The task at hand was to write their operational orders. I mean, the divers are nineteen, twenty-year-old kids. They’re really good divers but how do you handle bodies? Questions like the bodies have been down in the water long enough that they were pretty sure that it would come apart if you handled them. If you grabbed an arm, it would probably come off. And so, we sat there, we imagined or tried to imagine every scenario we could… alright, the diver’s going down, being videotaped. Now, imagine that the families, as they will be, watching this. They see now, there’s my husband, there’s my son, there’s my brother. This American diver is going to grab a part of the body and it’s going to come off. Which part of the body should he grab first? The arm? The leg? The head? They had body bags. They would put [it] into the body bags. I’m sitting there realizing that I haven’t the foggiest idea, in this situation. I go home, I get on my computer. I write to my colleagues in Japan, all experts on Japanese religion and funeral practices. I write them and say, “Here’s the situation.” They write back and they say, “We don’t know.” They don’t know, either. But I had to make a decision.

So finally, I made the decision that they should start with the legs, with the feet. And that’s based on the practice in Japan. When the body is cremated in Japan, they put it on this porcelain tray, they push it into the oven, they burn it and they pull it out and the skeleton is there. The family comes around, gathers around it and they’re given these long chopsticks and they pick the bones out and they put it in to the urn. That’s a very standard practice and in fact, in my research, I went to one of these cremations. The cremation technician gives this talk and explains to the family, “Alright now, when you pick up the bones, make sure you do it feet first. If you start with the head, Grandma is going to be upside down for eternity.” So you want the dead to be right side up. You start with the feet. Put the bones in and you work your way up from there.

Based on that, I told Admiral Klemm’s group, start with feet, put the feet first. We don’t want them upside down. And trying to imagine every situation that the divers might encounter, [we] had to have an answer. We didn’t want to leave it to the divers. It had to be worked out in detail… also, other kinds of questions, because the barge that hold these divers taking turns going down, up and down, up and down. I wanted to make sure that even when they’re not diving, that they had a sense of protocol, so that it wouldn’t be
offensive to the Japanese. After we finished writing all the orders, then Admiral Klemm said, “Okay, I want you to talk to the divers.” So, I went to Pearl Harbor. It was a group of sixty divers. These young, tough kids. I said, you’re going to find in your orders, this, that, and explained the reasons why. It was a remarkable experience for me, to use some of my academic knowledge in this real-life situation that had all kinds of implications, not just religious but political as well. We don’t want to make a mistake. We don’t want to inadvertently offend the families—and they’re watching—they’d all flown here to Hawaii. They were all here. It took days of this diving and there was a boat that would take the divers out to the barge, they would do their work, they would bring back whatever remains they had, and they went back and forth for days. The families were there every day to see whatever remains were coming back from the EHIME MARU.

MI: Were you communicating with the families?

GT: No. We talked about that, whether I should talk to the families or not. But we decided that it would be better just to… the Navy was a little afraid to have direct contact with the families because that would introduce more possibility of misunderstanding. We were really counting on the divers. I told the divers, “You’re standing on the barge. You’re waiting for your turn. Don’t horse around or don’t joke or laugh. Think of the people you’re recovering as your relatives, your brothers, your fathers. Show some respect because they’re watching. They can see what’s happening. Don’t joke around, don’t laugh. And when the divers come up and they’re bringing the bag of the remains up, stand at attention. Don’t even move. Show some respect.” Things like that. So, day after day after day, they did that. I was in touch with Admiral Klemm’s staff and they would call sometimes: “What are we going to do about this situation? Or that situation?” I’d make the best answer I could. But finally, they had recovered everything that they could. Personal belongings, remains. Of the nine, eight were recovered. Only one was missing. And, they speculated that he fell off the ship. Remarkably all the others were still there. But this one boy, a young kid, didn’t make it. That was the only unrecovered body. Later on, after the thing was all over, the Navy took the EHIME MARU back out to like six thousand feet of water and then let it loose so that it would go down, so far down that nobody could disturb it.

MI: It was all one piece?

GT: It was one piece. There was a huge gash, this mean cut, right through the center. But basically it was in one piece. That was one of the reasons why they didn’t want to just bring it all up. Besides, if they brought it all up, they couldn’t load it on to anything. So to get it to shallow water, they had to just sort of walk it. Afterwards, they took it out to deep water… with the permission of the families that now the ship would be at a place where no diver could go down and it wouldn’t become some kind of a diving attraction. They took the families out to where the EHIME MARU was going to be dropped and then, the mother of the one boy who was not recovered was there with all the other relatives. And what she took with her was a jacket. She threw the jacket in the ocean and her comment was, “My son is cold.” So, once again, this idea that the dead still have their bodies. They still can feel hunger, they can feel cold, and not only do you feed them but you have to clothe them. In her case, very poignant. She threw this jacket overboard and said, “To keep him warm.” So, it went off without any problems. The families were
satisfied.

MI: How long a period of time, for all of this?

GT: It took several months, because they had to do it really, really slowly. Really carefully. Plus, they were not just looking for remains but any personal items. There’s a lot of personal items. Wallets, rings. They swept the whole boat very, very carefully so that nothing personal would be left. So they brought all of it back.

One of the remarkable things, over this period of several months, was the Japanese families are all there. Every day they’re at the dockside where the transport boat is coming back. They couldn’t actually be at the dock, so they were standing off to one side. The ship would dock. As the divers got off the ship and onto the dock, all the families bowed and they said “Thank you, [whispers] arigato, arigato.” There was this sort of bond. And the divers, they responded also. Some of them actually turned and bowed back as well. There was this real sense of respect that both sides had, so the families were really grateful to the divers. The divers understood that they had to show respect to the families and they conducted themselves really well.

So it went off okay and the group was actually… they brought in divers from all over but it was part of a salvage unit of the [U.S.] Navy. Towards the end, I met with the divers, I thanked them, I said, “You guys did a great job. I think it went off without a hitch. We didn’t hear any complaints and in fact, the families showed a lot of respect and a lot of gratitude to you.” They made me an honorary member of that salvage unit. I still have on my truck, the decal of the salvage unit. The guy I worked primarily was the master diver. He was the head of the whole group so I had a lot of communication with him during that time. So it was a success.

LG: These divers, was it free-diving with the aqualung?

GT: It was with aqualung. They had to move around and go down in teams. And they’d have to come up. The next team would have to go down. They did a good job. Admiral Klemm sent me this nice little certificate. And the Japanese government—that’s what the Imperial Award was for—it was for my work with the divers, with the EHIME MARU recovery project. I was relieved because like I said, I really didn’t have any set answers to some of the questions that they were asking. I just had to kind of make it up, in a way. When it came off well, I was really relieved.

Interesting thing happened after this was over. The commander—he was a lawyer—he was my contact person, said to me: “Oh, you know, the families were really impressed with how the divers handled the remains, because they didn’t wear gloves.” That was the one question that we didn’t think of. I had said nothing about it because we never even thought about the question. Should they or should they not wear gloves? And upon reflection, I told this guy, “Oh my gosh, they were impressed that they didn’t wear gloves?” He said, “Yes, because if they wore gloves, they would imply that there was pollution, that the bodies were polluting.” But the divers, skin on skin, handled it without gloves. And the families were really impressed when they saw that.

LG: That just happened by accident, then? It wasn’t planned.

GT: No, it wasn’t planned. It’s just that, shallow enough, the water is warm enough, that they didn’t have to wear gloves. I said, “Boy, I’m sure glad that question didn’t come up because I think I would have said, wear gloves as kind of a sign of respect.” On the other
hand, you could take the other interpretation which is you’re protecting your hands because what you’re touching is polluting. They were really impressed. I think the families also expected that they would be wearing gloves. When these young kids went there and just bare-handed picked up the remains, they were like: “Oh my gosh.” They were really, really impressed with that.

So several years ago… every once in a while, there’s kind of a ceremony for the EHIME MARU recovery project. It was held at the Japanese Consulate, and all the people who were involved were there. This is maybe five years ago, so a lot of time has passed. I was there and the master diver was there. Oh my gosh. We remembered each other: “Hey, how’ve you been? That was amazing work that you guys did.” I said, “I heard that the families were really impressed that you didn’t use gloves. Did you guys consciously make that decision?” He couldn’t remember, but the divers didn’t wear gloves. At least some of the divers didn’t wear gloves when they were picking up the remains. He’s retired now, he lives on the East Coast someplace, but he came back just for this ceremony and he said, “It was the most amazing thing I ever did in my diving career.” He said that was really quite a project.

Anyway, it worked out well. Almost by good luck more than real knowledge. But I think that the Navy acquitted itself very well despite the problems that inadvertently came up at first and I told Admiral Klemm, I said, “I think you wrote the book on cultural sensitivity, when it comes to something like this.”

MI: That’s what I was wondering, when are you going to write to book?

GT: Yes. (Chuckles) Somebody asked me, but of course, my side is just a small part. The whole story needs to be told because it was really quite amazing, what they did. The team they put together, the speed with which they worked, the sensitivity that they finally realized they had to have, because of the mistakes that were made at the beginning… It took awhile for the whole thing to get put together, the decisions made. They had to bring this special ship, recovery ship from I don’t know where. Florida or someplace. This is why they were worried about the bodies coming apart because they’d been in the water long enough that it was going to decompose.

LG: It’s an interesting experience on your part, to practice the transition from academia to real life, because in real life, there are so many unknowns, you don’t know how things are going to turn out.

GT: Oh, yes. It was so spooky in a way because there weren’t any clear-cut answers.

MI: In a sense, you were lucky, in terms of the hands working...

GT: Yes.

MI: Good fortune. But, it just shows how complex politics can be.

GT: Oh, yes. I mean, there’s a lot that’s good luck and bad luck. Sometimes … and that’s what was happening at the beginning, too. Bad luck that Waddle came out with his wife. I mean, kind of innocent from our [point]… From their point of view, it was like “Whoa, they’re sticking it in our faces.” It took the Navy by complete surprise and this is why they turned to UH to get advice about how best to minimize those kinds of …

MI: Which was good.
GT: Yes. I remember telling the divers, I said, “You know, never in my life did I think I’d be giving a talk on Japanese religious practices to a group of divers.” This guy shoots his hand up, “Sir!”—I thought, boy, if only my students called me that (laughter)—“Sir, never in my career as a Navy diver did I ever think I would hear a lecture on Japanese religion.” I said, “Alright, great! We’re in the same boat.”

LG: So these were all from the Navy.

GT: They were drawn from all the services, including a few from the Self-Defense Forces so there were a couple of Japanese.

LG: So these were all hand-picked divers.

GT: Oh, they were hand-picked, yes, and that’s what the master diver told me. He said, “We just went through all the services and picked the best divers we could because it was going to be grueling work.” Not only did they have to be good at diving, but the master diver told me, one of their big worries was the psychological effect. They’re picking bodies apart and it’s not an easy thing to do. They were constantly watching the divers to make sure that none of them were getting upset to the point where they couldn’t do their job. So there are all these factors that went into the whole operation. Would the divers be able to withstand the psychological pressure of this kind of recovery project? Because it went on for months. And they’re going down, I forget how they timed it, which is why they put together such a large team. They couldn’t go down every day but every so many days, they’re going down, they’re coming up. So a lot of divers were involved. It was a really fascinating project to have been involved with. Very tragic and sad but I think it worked out okay.

LG: So that award, it was awarded to you by the emperor? [Order of the Rising Sun, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon]

GT: Well, it’s an imperial award but it was given at the consulate.

MI: It comes from the government. It’s a government award. It’s the highest award given to non-Japanese citizens.

GT: It was given here in Honolulu. They actually give out these awards worldwide and so all of the consulates will put in their recommendations for the award. The decision is made in Japan. Before this award, I also got the Gaimusho Award [Foreign Minister’s Commendation], comparable to our Department of State, the department that handles foreign relations. That’s what gainmu means, foreign relations. Our counterpart would be the Secretary of State. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, I got that award first, which is the usual pattern. If you get that award, it leads to the imperial award. So I got two awards for that work.

MI: Well-deserved.

GT: Well, more importantly I was just really happy that I was able to contribute something to try to work this horrible situation out as best as could be worked out.

LG: Waddle did eventually go to Japan to apologize.

GT: Yes, he did. After this was all over, he did go. I’d like to meet him some day. But he went to Japan and he apologized, because now, there’s no legal liability with him. So it’s not
that he didn’t want to. I mean, he was not a monster.

MI: It was his legal advice.

GT: Just legal advice: “Hey look, you’re going to the hearing. You don’t want to admit your guilt before you go in to the hearing. Let the hearing play itself out.” There was some controversy over the result, which was, he was allowed to retire with full benefits, and the Japanese were not really happy with that. Some thought he should have been court-martialed, or whatever.

But the anger was such that I was interviewed. I have a list of the media that I got interviewed, [by] TV and newspaper. But the guy I remember is the reporter from the Asahi Shimbun. I was really taken aback at his talk about aggressive Japanese. Boy, he was on the attack, following this whole idea that Americans are cocky and aggressive. And the issue of the apology came up and he said, “Waddle hasn’t apologized yet.” I tried to explain. Actually, the governor of Ehime tried to explain to the families why he didn’t apologize. He understood and he tried to explain that. This Asahi Shimbun guy, young guy, he’s just pissed off as hell, saying, “You Americans, you’re so cocky” and all of that. He was ranting on and on and on why hadn’t Waddle apologized. So I explained that. He wouldn’t accept it: “No, no, no, no.”

MI: He actually wrote an article in the paper about that?

GT: Yes. He said, “What Waddle has to do is dogeza.” Dogeza is when you go on your hands and knees and you go on all four and you touch your head to the floor. And he said, “We will not be satisfied until Waddle does dogeza in front of the families.” He wouldn’t let it go. Then, finally, he said, “Do you think that America is the country that is least likely to apologize for its errors?” And the patriot in me just sort of got a little rankled. (Chuckles) I said, “Well, I could make an argument that Japan is that country, because it has not sufficiently apologized to China, Korea, Southeast Asians, for what it did during the war. So if I were Chinese, I would think that the country that is least likely to apologize is Japan.” Finally he dropped the subject. He didn’t talk about apology after that… It got me thinking about this whole issue of apology as a geo-political matter. When is an apology sufficient? What constitutes a sufficient apology? It’s still an issue with the comfort women. The Koreans and other people are still saying, “You guys haven’t apologized.” Formal apologies have been given, but is it sufficient? What constitutes a sufficient apology? Do you want to let it go? Anyway, this Asahi Shimbun reporter, boy, he was really tenacious. He wouldn’t let it go. The big issue for him was the thing about apology.

I realize how sensitive that whole issue is, in terms of apology, especially for Japan. There’s so much apology going on, all the time, right? Sumimasen, sumimasen. They’re saying it all the time. It’s a country, it’s a culture of apology. How much does it really mean? It’s almost pro forma. But again, the whole perception of America as an unfeeling, unapologetic country. Certainly that image is being reflected by our current [president].

MI: Did you get any award or recognition from America? Any appreciation? The American government?

GT: No. Nothing, except I’m an honorary member of the salvage unit. (Chuckles) My Navy guys gave me enough recognition. I was really happy to work with them, a bunch of really young kids. I still have the decal on the bumper of my truck… I’m proud of that
sticker because it reminds me of the work that I did with these divers. Amazing group of people. They listened, they listened: “Don’t fool around, don’t laugh. Show respect.” The families saw it and were grateful to these young kids. So, yes, they were good.

MI: Thank you, very much.