



Danny Topp: Living the Values of Jodo Shinshu

By Joan Tamori



Daniel “Danny” Topp was born in Sidney, Montana, and spent his early years moving between North Dakota and Montana before his family eventually settled in Kalispell, in the northwest part of the state. His passion for music took root in the fourth grade when he began playing the violin, a talent he continued to develop through high school. His dedication to the orchestra provided him with numerous opportunities to perform at various events throughout his middle and high school years in Kalispell.

After graduating high school, Danny enlisted in the Air Force, where he specialized in avionics, working with aircraft navigation systems. He later attended the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado, earning his degree in 1985. Over the next 14 years, his career included designing experiments for a suborbital rocket, analyzing Soviet ICBM reentries, and contributing to the development of imaging satellites. His service took him across the country, with assignments in Southern California, Ohio, and Florida, among others, before he retired in 1998 in Colorado. Following his military service, he continued his work in national defense as a contractor, first in Colorado Springs, then in Washington, D.C., before ultimately supporting the Air Force on Maui.

When Danny’s employer, Integrity Applications Inc., merged with a company based on Maui, it opened the door for him to relocate to Hawaii. In 2014, he accepted a position with Pacific Defense Solutions in Kihei, Maui, where he continues to work today. He is a proud father of four and is a grandfather.

Danny’s interest in Go, a strategic board game with origins in China, began in 1990. When he moved to Maui, he was surprised to find that there was not an established Go club on the island. Determined to share his passion for the game, he started a community Go club where members could gather to learn, teach, and play. While researching the game, he discovered that a Go club on Oahu was connected to a Buddhist temple. This connection led him to explore local temples after moving to Wailuku, ultimately bringing him to Wailuku Hongwanji Mission. There, he could often be found in the social hall, playing Go and even introducing dharma school students to the game. His passion for Go inspired him to start a community Go club, where members gather to learn, teach, and enjoy the game together.

Although raised in a Christian tradition, Danny’s spiritual journey deepened when he began attending services at Wailuku Hongwanji Mission. Immersing himself in the teachings of the Buddha and Shinran Shonin, he found a welcoming community at the temple. There, he met Ms. Florence Tanaka, a musician skilled in piano, harmonica, and ukulele. Their shared love of music led Danny to join the Dharma Strummers, WHM’s ukulele group.

(continued on page 3)

MORE ON CHORALFEST 2025 GATHAS

By Francis Okano

As Choralfest returns in September, you may be wondering as to what kinds of Buddhist sentiments do choral gathas express. Sure, Japanese lyrics have always moved Japanese speakers, but can their English renditions do the same for English speakers? While you have the right to judge the translations' efficacy, allow me to say something about three more of Choralfest 2025's total of five offerings -- on the heels of two that were introduced in the last issue.

An energetic piece, ***Upon Clouds (Nagareyuku kumoni)*** overwhelms us with irrepressible joy. Even on a humdrum day, our moods can be uplifted to the point where "our dreams soar up high upon clouds streaming by" and "our hopes...echo through tomorrow's sky." With "each new dawn", the "earth and sea and sky...awaken", incredibly "so alive!" Equally, the sight of "a flower's pretty smile" refreshes and inspires us to embrace "life's harmony" and "our dreams for tomorrows ever bright." It is when we realize that this joy is not our doing but that we are rather "guided on the true way, as meant to be," that our hands "freely" and "firmly" meet "palm to palm in deep gassho."

Can we be happy, however, in a world filled with calamities and cruelties? ***To All We Owe (Ikasarete)*** replies, gratefully, "we can and we are." For, surely, we all come to realize, at some point in life, that we are given an immense gift -- that we live because we are allowed to live. Through the four seasons -- from a shepherd's-purse ruffling in the playful spring breeze, to a bright oleander preening in the summer heat, from pampas grass swaying in the autumn wind, to bare trees braving the winter cold -- the

sights offer compelling examples that life is rich with variety and is worth living. Each one of us, like nature's flora, is given to live by the mystery and miracle of uncountable conditions, known and unknown, that sustain us. For that, no words suffice.

If life is a gift, surely behind the third gatha, ***Where, Oh, Where? (Hotokesama wa)***, lies a tender reminder of the Buddha-nature in all living things. The unity of life and Buddha's compassion for all are caressed ever so lightly in this song's delightful question, "where, oh, where can the Buddha be found?" Is Buddha to be seen "in the trees abloom" in spring or "in the grassy shade of summer riverbank"? Or is Buddha present "above the drifting clouds" in autumn or "in the winter snow pelting window pane"? It turns out the Buddha is "ev'rywhere", come "rain or shine, watching over me just as I am". At home, the Buddha is seen in Grandpa's bushy eyebrows, Grandma's twinkling eyes, Father's mighty chest, and Mother's loving hands -- "ev'ry minute, day or night, caring for you just as you are." And, surely, "the Buddha's near, oh so close, oh so dear, here by your side!" To find Buddha's goodness, we need only to, openly, look around.

It is one thing to appreciate that poetry married to music becomes a new entity in song. I think it is quite another to *experience* bringing to life this mix of poem and melody -- especially under expert baton. The opportunity to *live* each gatha is before you in Choralfest 2025. Why not take advantage of this opportunity to either sing with friends on Choralfest weekend, or be at Hawaii Betsuin on Sunday, September 21, to hear first-hand the range of Buddhist sentiments in choral gathas?



(Topp continued)

As he played with the group, his passion for the ukulele grew—not just as an instrument but as a craft. A longtime woodworking enthusiast, he received a "build-your-own-ukulele" kit from his wife for Christmas in 2019. He assembled it with care, and to this day, he plays that ukulele with pride and joy.

When the COVID-19 pandemic brought in-person activities to a standstill in 2020, Danny turned to music as a way to stay connected. Around the same time, his father—who had originally nurtured his love for woodworking—suffered a stroke that limited his mobility. Wanting to lift his dad’s spirits, Danny frequently FaceTimed him, sharing his latest projects in ukulele restoration and repair. To better demonstrate his process, he began recording videos, which eventually led to the creation of his YouTube channel, *Topp Ukuleles*. Through his channel, Danny has repaired, restored, and even built ukuleles from scratch. His generosity and craftsmanship have touched many, as he has selflessly repaired ukuleles for fellow church members, ensuring that the joy of music continues to bring people together.

After the pandemic, as Florence’s mobility declined, Danny stepped up to lead the Dharma Strummers, holding weekly practices for the group. Under his leadership, the group continues to perform at temple services once a month and fills in whenever an organist is unavailable. They have also shared their music at special events such as Hanamatsuri and Fujimatsuri, performing both traditional gathas and contemporary songs. In addition to leading the Dharma Strummers, Danny has been a longtime member of the WHM choir and has participated in Choralfest.

Danny’s dedication to the temple extends beyond music. He has actively served in various leadership roles, including director of social activities, chair of the 125th temple anniversary celebrations, and board member. His contributions to Hongwanji temples at both the district and state levels have been recognized with the prestigious Tadaichi Fukunaga Dana Award, honoring his selfless service and compassionate actions.

With his innovative spirit, Danny founded and chairs the Coin Committee, which promotes the dharma and supports the temple through fundraising efforts. The committee has designed and distributed “Gratitude,” “Compassion and Kindness,” and “Community” coins, with their latest project focusing on an “Interdependence” coin. An avid reader, Danny also established the Buddha Reads Book Club at WHM, welcoming all who are interested in exploring Buddhist teachings through literature. Additionally, he volunteers at the Kihei branch of the Friends of the Library, further demonstrating his commitment to lifelong learning and community service.

As a minister’s lay assistant, Danny conducts temple services in the absence of the resident minister. He has completed the Buddhist Churches of America’s Basic Buddhism correspondence course and continues to deepen his understanding of the dharma. Another vital role he plays at WHM is serving as the technology coordinator. Every Sunday, he ensures the temple’s audio-visual needs are met, from projecting service programs on TV monitors to managing the PA system and microphones. He also coordinates and hosts Zoom meetings for Kyodan and provides technical support for temple, district, and statewide workshops and gatherings. Looking ahead, Danny hopes to continue his service as a minister’s lay assistant, remain active in the temple, and eventually explore chaplaincy to provide end-of-life counseling.

Danny’s deep dedication to Jodo Shinshu is reflected in his active participation and leadership at WHM. Each Sunday, he finds fulfillment in attending services, engaging with the temple community, and embracing new challenges with an open heart.



The Honpa Hongwanji Choir (HHC), comprised of Hawaii Betsuin Choir members and singers from Jikoen, Moiliili, and Windward Buddhist Temple, offered the prelude at the Hawaii Buddhist Council Bodhi Day Service at Nichiren Mission on December 1, 2024. The HHC, directed by Ms. Mari Murakami, sang **Sambo no On/The Wondrous Gift of Peace** in four-part harmony.



HBC Bodhi Day – Honpa Hongwanji Choir



Erika Sato Bar-David and Udi Bar-David

Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin

Hawaii Betsuin hosted a first-time Nirvana Day Concert on Nirvana Day, February 15. The concert featured Udi Bar-David, internationally-recognized cross-cultural cellist and improviser, Udi's daughter, Erika Sato Bar-David, violinist, Steven Casano, shakuhachi master, Lama

Wangchuk, Tibetan chanting/meditation, and Poetry by Rabindranath Tagore read by Wendie Yumori. Udi and Erika played a touching duet of **Theme from Schindler's List** and Udi's cello-shakuhachi duet with Steven Casano, **Forest Whispers**, was captivating. The concert was very well-attended and extremely well-received.

Nirvana Day Concert participants



(continued on page 5)

HONOLULU District (continued)

Windward Buddhist Temple (WBT)

WBT pianists, Lisa Fujikawa and Joy Wasai Nishida, enjoy playing for services on the Roland Digital Piano HP704 (W/RPG-100BK) that WBT purchased in October 2022. Joy shared that their digital piano has an embedded speaker; the sound can project from the piano itself or the piano can be plugged into a sound system. It has a mobile app that connects via Bluetooth and the settings on the piano are also accessible on the app. WBT members are used to piano rather than organ accompaniment so Lisa uses the “Concert Piano” setting during services and Joy uses the “dual” mode with “Concert Piano” mixed with strings. Lisa and Joy appreciate the flexibility offered by WBT’s digital piano, especially when tapping into contemporary genres.



Lisa Fujikawa and Joy Wasai Nishida



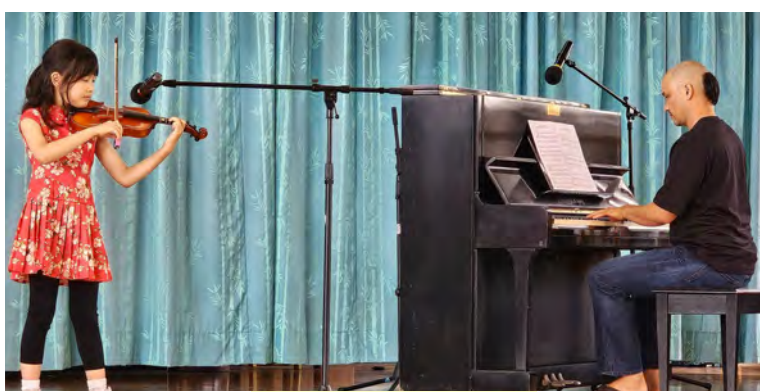
Pete Doktor – *Lean on Me*

Jikoen Hongwanji

“One of the unique features of Jikoen Hongwanji services,” remarked Pete Doktor, “is that we usually close our services chanting the Nembutsu accompanied with the Uchinanchu sanshin, connecting the sound of Amida’s call with our Ancestors.” Pete, who plays sanshin, ukulele, and guitar, led everyone in singing *Lean on Me* following David Atcheson’s Dharma Message on January 19.



Jikoen’s New Year’s Luncheon on January 26 featured a variety of musical offerings. Okinawan dances were presented by Ann Kamimura and Ann Moribe, Kacie and Marcie Moribe, and Keith Oshiro. Jimmy and Dorene Toma, Judy Muramoto, and Rev. Nishiyama lifted their voices in song, and Justin Hong accompanied his daughter, Suki, during her violin performance.



Justin Hong and Suki



Okinawan Dancers

(continued on page 6)

HONOLULU District (continued)



Moiliili Hongwanji

Moiliili held their New Year's celebration, Shinnen Enkai, on February 16. Moiliili's Sangha Ohana members, who play ukulele and sing, presented **When We See the Golden Sun** and a Hawaiian favorite, **Puamana**. Dancing the hula to **Puamana** was guest performer, Kumu Anuhea. Ministers, Bishop Toshiyuki Umitani, former Bishop Thomas Okano, Rev. Bert Sumikawa, Rev. Tatsuo Muneto, and Rev. David Fujimoto, and friends, sang **Shiretoko no Misaki**, accompanied by Francis Okano. Lois Ohta complimented the ministers' performance -- "They all have such nice voices!"

Sangha Ohana – *When We See the Golden Sun*



Kumu Anuhea – *Puamana*



Ministers – *Shiretoko no Misaki*



Oahu District Sangha Day Festivities



On Sunday, March 2nd, Oahu District was fortunate to be able to celebrate Sangha Day at Pearl City Hongwanji. A very special “thank you” to Miles Tamura, Pearl City Hongwanji Temple President and his committee members who spearheaded and worked really hard to ensure the success of this event! 150+ attendees came for a well-planned, inspirational, touching, and fun filled event that highlighted speaker, Roy Sakuma, who kindly shared his story. Roy shared that music has truly helped him to get over very difficult situations in his life and truly inspired him to strive to live his best life. Roy Sakuma and his wife Kathy, have indeed built an amazing ukulele culture here on Oahu through the Roy Sakuma Ukulele Studios as well as establishing the Ukulele Festival at Kapiolani Park every year since 1971. Those of us who were able to hear Roy’s talk were touched to learn about the power of music and how it changed his life.



Roy Sakuma and Rene Mansho singing, *I Am What I Am*



Guest Speaker, Roy Sakuma

Sangha Day began with a morning service, and was followed by the adults moving on to listen to Roy tell his story, and the children moving to a “making musical instru-



Children with their instruments (and parents and workshop leaders) performing to *Thankful*



ments” workshop. This was followed by everyone gathering back together in the social hall. Attendees were invited to sing with the Mililani Hongwanji Choir as they sang, *May Peace Prevail* and *Flying Free*. The children and parents enthusiastically sang and played their instruments to *Thankful*. Everyone enjoyed the delicious bentos and extra salad and desserts. The day ended with a generous raffle!

(continued on page 8)

OAHU District (continued)

From **Miles Tamura**, Pearl City Hongwanji Temple President:

When we got the assignment for Sangha day, we decided to strive to produce an event that was both informative and fun. We decided to go with the theme, "Music, It's Influence on Buddhism". While researching some background information involving Buddhism and music, we were so fortunate that Francis Okano was able to provide us with a report about the very topic. Reverend Fujitani had written a very detailed report entitled "The History of Buddhist Music in Hawaii", October 15, 1997 which was a treasure trove of information. We immediately foresaw to turn parts of the report into teaching moments videos, that would serve to communicate our overall theme for Sangha Day.

We were so fortunate to get a commitment from Roy Sakuma as our guest speaker. We also got a commitment from the Mililani Buddhist Temple Choir to perform, plus we had volunteers who developed an idea to work with the children to perform as a group. All the presentations were well received, even the spontaneous ones. We are grateful to everyone who attended and hope that they were informed and entertained. As a matter of fact, it was the most highly attended Sangha Day in recent memory.

Later in the day despite the event ending and the hall being cleared, the memories and the energy of the day's events continued to linger, highlighting the lasting impact of the celebration on those who attended.



Mililani Hongwanji Choir members were present at Sangha Day leading the attendees to sing, *May Peace Prevail* and *Flying Free*.



Folks enjoying friendship, food, and the program in the Social Hall.



CHORAL FEST 2025

WHEN
September 20 - 21, 2025

WHERE
Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin
1727 PALI HWY, HONOLULU, HAWAII

MUSIC SELECTIONS TO INCLUDE:
TO MY DAUGHTERS — SURELY, WE WILL MEET
AGAIN SOMEDAY — WHERE, OH WHERE — UPON
CLOUDS — TO ALL WE DWE

PLEASE REGISTER FOR CHORALFEST WITH
YOUR RESPECTIVE TEMPLES

LINKS FOR PRACTICE MATERIALS VIA GOOGLE
DRIVE WILL BE PROVIDED

**ALL ARE
WELCOME!**

CONDUCTOR:
Nola Nahulu

PIANIST:
Francis Okano

**TENTATIVE
SCHEDULE:**
9/20:
PM Practice
Dinner Program
09/21:

AM Practice
Music Service
Fellowship

**DEADLINE TO
REGISTER:**
April 30, 2025

**REGISTRATION
FEE:**
\$35

MUSIC COMMITTEE

Chairman *Francis Okano*, Honolulu

Hilo Betsuin: *Rev. Blayne Nakasone-Sakata*

Kauai District: *Brandi Yamamoto*

Honolulu District: *Osamu Kawabata*

Oahu District: *Gail Taira*

Maui District: *Joan Tamori*

Hawaii District: *Ethel Miyashiro* - East Hawaii; *Miles Okumura* - West Hawaii

“Musical Notes” is published biannually by the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii,
Office of Buddhist Education Music Committee.

Francis Okano—Chairman

Joan Tamori—Edit, Layout & Design

Yoshiko Umitani and Rev. Daido Baba—Distribution