

Providing Spiritual Care in Disaster-stricken Areas

Proposing the Necessity of Training “Rinsho Shukyo-shi” That Is Recognized in the Activities of Spiritual Support after the Great East Japan Earthquake



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The second training program of the Rinsho Shukyo-shi was held on March 4, 2013. Facing the sea at the Tokura Beach of Minamisanriku-cho, participants prayed for the tsunami victims.

At the “Endowed Department of Practical Religious Studies,” a program to train “Rinsho Shukyo-shi (or Interfaith Chaplains)” is being carried out. The “Rinsho Shukyo-shi” are people who are capable of providing spiritual/religious care to victims of various religious backgrounds. The program is being managed by Professor Iwayumi Suzuki as head, and Associate Professors of Hara After the Great East Japan Earthquake, attention was paid to religious leaders who were providing “religious support” using their religious characteristics of sutra recitation and spiritual-comforting. Before then, many local Japanese religious leaders expended most of their efforts giving interpretations of the teachings of their own denominations to the limited number of their believers. After the earthquake, however, when religious leaders were conducting relief efforts in disaster-stricken areas, they had to provide support to people having various religious backgrounds. This has led to the development of a program in which people are trained as special professionals who can provide spiritual care regardless of their religious viewpoints. Professor Suzuki says, “Because our university is a national university that is neutral in terms of religion, we could open this endowed department. Other reasons Tohoku University was chosen were that it has a Department of Religious Studies with a 90-year history and a School of Medicine that allows us to extend our activities into the mental health

area with the cooperation of medical professionals.

The program expects that participants will improve their capabilities of “listening attentively,” “spiritual care,” “inter-religious dialogue,” and “cooperation between religions” by attending lectures, group sessions, mourning pilgrimage, and practical training. In addition to providing suitable religious care, participants will be trained about approaches for collaboration with other organizations other than religious bodies. Program operating expenses are funded by donations. In March in 2013, the Japan Buddhist Federation and, in the following June, the Japan Association of Religious Organizations decided to recommend and support the Department of Practical Religious Studies. The department started as a three-year duration program. People involved in this activity hope that donations will increase and allow the department to continue operating beyond the duration limit that comes the year after next.

Professor Suzuki thinks, “Japan is entering a time of hyper-aging society with a high death rate. I hope that, in our future society, Rinsho Shukyo-shi will be permanently established at all medical and care facilities where people may seek salvation before the end of life.”



What is necessary at disaster-stricken areas and at medical institutions is not to instruct or guide people there but to attentively listen to them while thinking how they are feeling. Participants performed the activity of attentively listening to the survivors using the skills they acquired from the training program.



Cooperation in religions starts with coming into contact with people, but not for the promotion of specific religion.



Staff members of the Endowed Department of Practical Religious Studies. From left: Associate Professor Yozo Taniyama, Ms. Chihiro Sato, Professor Iwayumi Suzuki, and Associate Professor Hara Takahashi.

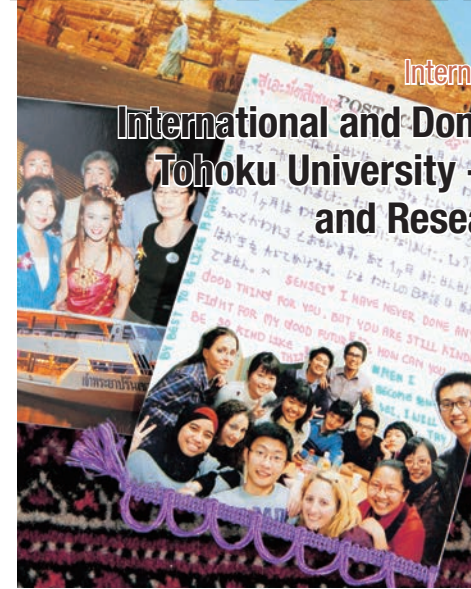


Human Culture Religious Studies,
Department of Human Sciences,
Graduate School of Arts and Letters

Professor
Iwayumi Suzuki

Born in 1951 and raised in Tokyo. He finished his master's program and acquired the credits of the doctoral program at Tohoku University Graduate School of Arts and Letters. He has been specializing in the science of religion, anthropology of religion and the folklore of religion. After serving as associate professor at Shimane University, he was an associate professor at Tohoku University Faculty of Arts and Letters and has been at his present post since 1997.

<http://www.sal.tohoku.ac.jp/p-religion/top.html>

International Student Support and Intercultural Education
International and Domestic Students Joint Study Class at Tohoku University - Improving the Quality of Education and Research by Putting Theory into Practice

Photos of Professor Suematsu's tour memories and picture postcards from students who have gone back to their home countries.



Various events are planned and executed within the theme of campus internationalization at Tohoku University.

Center for International Exchange at Tohoku University is mainly involved with educational support for its international students and assistance for domestic students who are to be delegated to its partner universities. Before serving as head of the center, Professor Suematsu created various educational opportunities at the Division of International Education and Exchange in the Graduate School of Economics and Management.

One of the activities, to which she currently gives high priority, is the improvement and expansion of the exchange program for liberal arts students. As the leader, Professor Suematsu has continued to negotiate with each of the liberal arts faculties to develop the program further and explain the advantages of accepting international students.

With her own experience of studying abroad, Professor Suematsu is able to provide sophisticated care to international students. Her activities start from making arrangements with domestic students and support groups to pick up international students at Sendai Station on their first visit in Japan, taking them to their dormitories, and helping them find jobs, while collaborating with domestic students and support groups for international students. Using external funds, she also provides support for childbirth and child-raising to international students and their families.

There is also an organization of domestic students to support international students. It

is the “IPLANET” that was launched by students who support the exchange students in the International Program in Liberal Arts (IPLA). IPLANET aims to give exchange international students the opportunity to have the same experiences that domestic students have during their 1-year stay in Japan. A variety of support activities and events are held to expand the network of international exchange at the university.

Intercultural education programs are also extensive. Professor Suematsu is specializing in intercultural education. She is implementing a Problem (Project) Based Learning (PBL) in a co-learning environment class, which is still rare at Japanese universities. In this class, groups of 7-8 domestic and international students conduct discussions from various perspectives and carry out projects together. The range of the projects is broad and includes planning of a club trial event to mediate between clubs and international students, making a restaurant map for international students, and introducing Japan through manga/comics. Professor Suematsu encourages students to improve themselves during the process of project development. “Joint study between international and Japanese students will be important for international education and for fostering global human resources. It is necessary to complete the cycle of researching the educational effects and putting them into practice. Students are saying that they are going to change what they think ‘they can’t do’ into what they can,” says Professor Suematsu.



Students often visit the professor's room equipped with comfortable sofas to make them feel at ease and relaxed when talking.



A brochure produced by Japanese students to introduce Japanese culture to international students.



“NO CLUB NO LIFE” introduces clubs in which international students can participate.

Raised in Osaka Prefecture. After graduating from the Department of Economics of the Rutgers University of New Jersey in the United States, she worked at an international trading company. Then, she was awarded her master's degree and doctoral degree from Indiana University. She is specializing in the education of international students, international education and intercultural education. She was a lecturer and associate professor in charge of international students at the Division of International Education and Exchange, Graduate School of Economics and Management, Tohoku University, and has been in her current position since 2013.

Center for International Exchange

Professor

Kazuko Suematsu



<http://www.insc.tohoku.ac.jp/cms/index.cgi>