

# Go-Kōden?

Source Information: *Death*, first in a series called *Rites of Passage*, Arthur Takemoto, Masao Kodani, Russell Hamada, Pureland Press, 1997, supplemented with anecdotal information.

*As it says in Death, first in a series of projected publications entitled Rites of Passage, "... a funeral is... a time for the opening of many hearts, a time for expressions of compassion and interdependency. We are helped by knowing that we are not alone and that others care. ... This is the true spirit of koden.*

I recently lost a very dear brother-in-law, and in dealing with a *Haku-jin* (non-Asian) pastor we found that the concept of *go-koden* (or simply, *koden*) was totally new to him. Even having spent my whole life within the Japanese community and knowing *go-koden* as a part of any funeral, it was difficult to explain it in a satisfactory manner.

*Go-koden* is a monetary offering taken to Japanese funerals to support the bereaved family, an expression of sorrow shared. Although it was originally a Buddhist tradition, it has become a Japanese practice after being brought to the United States by our ancestors. The custom differs from Japan because many of the *Issei* were very young when they came and didn't know all of the customs and practices of Japan. The literature did not elaborate on how *koden* differs in the U.S. and

Japan, but clearly, the intent is good-hearted, and the practice has continued here over the generations.

Generally, the *go-koden* (literally, incense and sutra) is a gesture of condolence to the family and a way to share the financial burden of the family of the deceased as well as to share their sorrow. Sometimes the family establishes a fund or makes a donation to a favorite charity, or, as in many cases and consistent with the original intent of *koden*, the money is used to help defray the costs associated with the person's death and funeral. In its truest form, the *koden* is an unconditional gift.

There was a time when people began dictating what was expected in return for *koden* (called *koden gaeshi*). *Koden gaeshi* was never a part of the original intent or a requirement, although the gesture became somewhat commonplace, most usually by the return of a book of stamps or other token. Generally, temples and organizations were given monetary *koden gaeshi*. Some temples and organizations expected them while others refused them. When my father died, we were told that my family was expected to return two to three times the amount we had been given by organizations. This seemed so contrary to the intent of *koden*, creating an added financial burden for our family rather than helping us. It is nice to learn that the organizational *koden gaeshi* has returned to being a personal decision based on what you are inclined and able to give. Even the individual token *koden gaeshi* is no longer an expected or usual practice.

The amount of *koden* is never meant to be the measure of friendship or affection and should not be a matter of conscience. The act of shared sorrow is more important than the amount, and both the act and the amount are matters of the heart. ♡

## TIME CAPSULE

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