

Shaku Myoshin Friedrich Fenzl
(1932 – 2014)

When I received a call from the hospital that our Friedrich Fenzl, long-term president of the Salzburg Buddhist Association was in a very critical situation at the emergency ward I was alarmed. I was right in the middle of preparing for the Annual General meeting of the association in the afternoon and the Bodhi Day celebrations in the evening. So I could not possibly leave my desk this morning, as I had told everybody the days before.

Realising suddenly how habits tend to control everyday life and how they turn upside down what is important and what is not, I immediately left for the hospital to be by the side of our Noble Friend. For more than an hour I could sit there at his bed, holding his hand. As he was obviously not reacting to touch or words I sat there in silence watching the heavy breathing. Repeating the Nembutsu which he had valued above all for the larger part of his life I could observe that the patient's breathing slowed down, relaxed and calmed. So I carried on repeating the Nembutsu, paused for a short while and carried on. When I eventually left, the situation was so different from when I had arrived, so peaceful now.

I shared my experience at the meeting and we dedicated the Bodhi Day service to the benefit of our friend Friedrich. Arriving at home late this evening I was informed by the hospital that Friedrich Fenzl had passed away just before the day had ended. Obviously he had reached out for a hand inviting him on this Bodhi Day to follow to the Pure Land.

Although Friedrich Fenzl never nursed any doubt about his belonging to Jodo Shinshu and always rested in great confidence in the salvific power of the Primal Vow, he dedicated his life to encourage other European compatriots to discover the Buddha Path and unceasingly worked for the integration of responsible social action into the surfacing European Buddhism.

How did Friedrich Fenzl become a tireless advocate for ethical values and social engagement and a networking pioneer for European Buddhism?

Fenzl was born into a critical period of transition in European history, characterised by economic crisis, poverty, nationalism and social-political turmoil in the wake of the First World War and the Great Depression of the early 1930s. Born three months before Hitler came to power in Germany, Fenzl was raised in a German speaking Roman Catholic family in a small town that used to belong to the Habsburg Empire, but had become part of the Czechoslovak Republic.

Six years later this little town became part of Greater Germany and when Friedrich was 13 years old the Second World War came to an end, and his family, like other German speakers in the area were expelled from their home and took refuge in Austria.

Fenzl, like his younger brother, received a good education which further increased his thirst for knowledge. Foreign countries, their culture, language and religion fascinated the bright youngster. One day, when Fenzl was barely twenty he was studying in one of his favourite places, the central library in Salzburg. There, he later was never tired to repeat, he came across a book called "Buddhistischer Katechismus" which was written by a German in the late 1880s inspired by Henry Steele Olcott's "Buddhist Catechism", published in Sri Lanka in 1881. He was so fascinated that from now on he considered himself a Buddhist. For the next 60 years of his life being a Buddhist and building a Buddhist community became his lifelong mission.

For years now Friedrich Fenzl was on the look-out for people or organisations interested in Buddhism. The city of Salzburg, conservative, intolerant and deeply rooted in Catholicism was a barren ground for a young Buddhist. Eventually in 1955, while going through the telephone directory in Vienna he came across the newly founded Buddhist Society there and contacted the representatives there.

He admired their knowledge of the Palikanon and the learned debates at the small circle in Vienna, but he was most interested in the Karuna aspect of the Mahayana. Through the Society's secretary, Franz Zuzelka, Fenzl heard about Japanese Buddhism, Jodo Shinshu and Shinran. Zuzelka's enthusiasm, who had had the privilege to hear a lecture by Kosho Ohtani given in German in Vienna sparked Fenzl's interest in the Pure Land teachings.

Still, Friedrich Fenzl collected as much knowledge and information on different forms of Buddhism as possible and tried to get into contact with likeminded individuals. After meeting Harry Pieper, who had also been impressed by meeting Kosho Ohtani in Berlin, Fenzl knew that Jodo Shinshu and the teachings of Shinran was the best guideline for the path of his life, and like Pieper he got into contact with Nishi Honganji.

Friedrich Fenzl now started to build a network of contacts within Europe and beyond, and we consider it a great loss that most of his intensive correspondence of that time and the years after cannot be found any more.

When Fenzl in 1968 was invited to Kyoto to do systematic studies there, he was overjoyed. The University of Salzburg, however, for which Fenzl was working as a librarian and secretary were not prepared to grant him leave for that period of time. Fenzl now was decided to face the risk of not getting such a good job a second time again and quit his position at the university to pursue his studies at Ryukoku and other academic institutions in Japan.

Back in Austria in the early 1970ies Fenzl intensified his activities to create communicative networks among the few Buddhists in Austria and Europe. When the European Buddhist Union was founded in 1975, Fenzl together with his Buddhist friends in Vienna decided to host the first Annual General Meeting of the Union in Austria and Fenzl joined the executive board in 1976. Highly motivated by this international meeting, Fenzl succeeded with a number of friends to establish the first Buddhist association outside the Austrian capital, the "Buddhistische Gemeinschaft Salzburg" in 1977. Unceasingly Fenzl organised meetings, invited Buddhist monks, teachers and lecturers to give people an opportunity to get into contact with the wholesome teachings of the various Buddhist traditions. Although firmly grounded in his own tradition, his approach to other traditions was characterised by openness, knowing that everybody had to find her and his own Dharma door to walk through. And although a devout Buddhist himself, he was always interested in other spiritual paths and cultivated the dialogue with other religious representatives and never grew tired to encourage the younger and less experienced Buddhists around him, to share their own insight and faith with each other, but also stay open for a dialogue with other religions.

For many years he also continued to write hundreds of articles in various magazines on topics centred on Buddhism, even after he had retired from the chair of the association he had founded. He appeared on Austrian television and was asked to give interviews concerning questions of Buddhism including ethical and social questions. Late in his life he again took an active part and joined the administrative board, when the "Institute for the Study of Buddhism and the Dialogue of Religions" (ISBD) was founded in Austria in 2011.

A life full of dedication to the spreading of the Buddhist teachings received a lot of recognition during the last decade of his life. A diploma of honour was conferred on him by the Nishi Honganji in 2006 and around his 75th birthday in 2007 he was the guest of honour at the 30 year celebrations of the "Salzburg Buddhist Association", his favourite child.

The name of Myoshin Friedrich Fenzl will be remembered in many ways, not only among his various Asian, European and Austrian friends, but also through the "Friedrich Fenzl Social Award", created in honour of his life-long engagement to combine responsible social action with the limitless compassion of the Bodhisattvas. Whenever asked, Friedrich would share with his younger friends his

understanding of *oso-eko* and *genso-eko*. Maybe his life, devoted to *tariki* has helped them to overcome part of their ignorance.

On various occasions these days you will see people sitting down on a bench among the tall trees of Salzburg cemetery, some in silence, others with the Nembutsu on their lips, looking in deep gratitude at the stone in front of them, saying “Myoshin Friedrich Fenzl (1932 – 2014)”. Gassho!

Gakuro Kurt Krammer, Chair of Salzburg Buddhist Association

