Lafcadio Hearn avoided the world of luxury travelers and Christian missionaries. Instead, he enjoyed rickshaw rides into the back streets, delighting in the Yokohama hillside. But he constantly confronted the modernity that was rapidly consuming the older Japanese ways: “a shop of American sewing-machines next to the shop of a maker of Buddhist images; the establishment of a photographer beside the establishment of a manufacturer of straw sandals.”

Though tempted at times by the cheap objects he found, Hearn quickly realized “the largest steamer that crosses the Pacific could not contain what you wish to purchase. For, although you may not, perhaps, confess the fact to yourself, what you really want to buy is not the contents of a shop; you want the shop and the shopkeeper, and streets of shops with their draperies and their habitants, the whole city and the bay and the mountains begirdling it, and Fujiyama’s white witchery overhanging it in the speckless sky, all Japan, in very truth, with its magical trees and luminous atmosphere, with all its cities and towns and temples, and forty millions of the most lovable people in the universe.”
A colleague at the Society for Disability Studies sends me an e-mail telling me to contact Nagase Osamu, a disability studies professor teaching at the University of Tokyo (Todai). Immediately, I contact Nagase and receive his reply asking to meet me.

Since I am, as usual, early to meet Nagase, I take a detour: this morning I follow the wide, raised, yellow plastic strips, familiar in Tokyo subways. But here the yellow plastic strips not only lead out into the streets but also continue a distance past the station. I have noticed, and tripped over, these plastic yellow paths inside the subways, but until this morning, I never noticed them outside before, and I never understood what they are for.

I follow the prefab “Yellow Brick Road” out of the station, across the main street, and up a slight incline along a side street. I turn a corner and find myself in front of the Library for the Blind.

Later, I mention the paths to Nagase.

“The yellow roads let the blind know how to get to the train tracks and where the platform ends so they don’t fall in,” he says.

“But the raised yellow paths make it more difficult for those who use wheelchairs or those who, like me, have difficulty walking on uneven surfaces,” I reply.

“We are going to have a lot to talk about.” Nagase tells me about Hanada Shuncho, a disabilities studies scholar who has cerebral palsy. He mentions Hanada-sensei’s “Ebisu Mandala.” The article describes Ebisu, one of the shichifukujin, the Seven Lucky Gods, as having cerebral palsy.

“A disabled god?” I ask. I have never before heard of a disabled Japanese god. “Shinto? Buddhist?”

“Kind of both. Or neither.”

I wait for him to tell me more, but instead he asks, “Do you want to meet Fukushima-sensei and the research staff of our Barrier-Free Project?”

I want to know more about Ebisu. But I should answer his question.

“Of course I do.”
Nagase gives me articles about and by Fukushima Satoshi, a deaf-blind Tokyo University professor who runs Todai’s Barrier-Free Project. He calls the project’s secretary on his *keitai* and sets up a meeting.

Ebisu, a disabled god? I e-mail Nagase to find out more. In his response he provides a website address. I try to load the page. All I get is an error message.

Online, I do learn there is Ebisu, one of the Seven Lucky Gods, as well as the popular Ebisu beer. I can’t find anything about Ebisu having cerebral palsy. I can’t even figure out to what religion Ebisu belongs.

Many Asian cultures see disability from the Buddhist point of view: the result of having done something wrong in a previous life.

What might Buddhism tell me about how the Japanese view disability? I continue my search for Ebisu on the other side of Tokyo, at Sensō-ji, Tokyo’s oldest Buddhist temple. Sensō-ji is in Asakusa, just west of the Sumida River in *shitamachi*, the “old town” part of the city. Most of this part of Tokyo, including most of the venerated temple, was destroyed during the war.

As soon as I pass through a vermillion gate and its imposing depictions of the white-faced god of thunder and the red-faced god of wind, I am swept up in the carnival atmosphere of the 250-meter-long Nakamise, the lantern-adorned arcade leading to the temple. Countless small shops from which I buy souvenirs and sweets line the way. All is color and excess bordering on “kitsch,” for which there is no Japanese word.

I pass through another towering double-storied gate, this one displaying two enormous straw replicas of the Buddha’s sandals.

I hear the sound of wood against metal but cannot locate its origin.

But there’s smoke wafting from a large cauldron. Surrounding the cauldron, worshippers fan the smoke toward their faces. I look over the cauldron’s rim: inside are numerous incense wands standing in what
seems to be gray, ash-like sand. The smoke enshrouds the steep, long flight of stairs to the orange-red and gilded-gold hondo.

The energy outside in the Nakamise is matched by the raucous bustle inside the cavernous hondo, the main temple hall. The wall paintings of the life of the Buddha are cacophonous not only in their colors but in their numerous depictions of Buddhist deities. But, as far as I can tell, there is still no sign of Ebisu. Sensō-ji’s main devotional object is a hibutsu, an image of a tiny Kannon too holy to be on view. I’m frustrated, as well as intrigued, by what I cannot see.

In front of the main altar, I remember what I read in my guidebook: I bow twice, close my eyes, clap twice, bow once more. I leave my first prayers in Japan—for Ian to visit me—inside the hall.

At the top of the hondo stairs, I look out over the smoking cauldron and the Nakamise. I have seen this view before. But in the famous Hiroshige print in his Famous Sights of Edo series, this view includes a large red festival lantern. I remember that Asakusa was once Tokyo’s Yoshiwara, its pleasure quarters, where geisha and kabuki actors entertained the growing middle classes of late Edo-period Tokyo. I am standing amid what was once The Floating World.

Descending the stairs, I finally locate the origin of the sound of wood hitting metal. Along the path to the temple are the famous Senso-ji fortunes: bamboo sticks in a silver container. I pay one hundred yen and am handed a container. I shake it. One wooden stick escapes from the small hole on one end of the rectangular box. On the edge of the stick are kanji. Each combination of kanji matches with one of the array of drawers lining the entry walk to the temple. Each drawer contains a fortune.

The kanji are worn away from use. The characters on my stick are difficult to match with its drawer.

At last, I am able to find the proper drawer. I open the drawer and remove the small white paper on which is written—one side in Japanese, one side in English—No. 48 Small Fortune:
Just like looking at the treasure of other people beyond the valley. Let’s stop to hurt your heart and give trouble to your mind.

If once a chance comes you can meet an excellent fortune. Just like a giant happy bird fly up to sky, you will succeed in this society, and rise to be famous in the world, meeting with so many fortunes.

*If you have right mind, your request will be granted later on. *The patient, the sickness may last long, but is sure to get well. *The lost article will be found. *The person you wait for will come late. *Building a new house and removal might have a little trouble at first but it get well later. *Marriage, employment and to start a trip are all half good fortune.

I’m disappointed by this fortune, which seems neither good nor bad. It doesn’t give me any true direction.

Direction? Before arriving in Japan, I would not have even paid attention to a paper fortune pulled from a metal box at a temple for a religion I hardly understand. But I am worried by the sickness that may last. And I am stung by what the fortune says about wanting to stop to hurt my heart and give trouble to my mind. Is it Ian who is hurting my heart? He has yet to respond to my e-mail asking if he has booked his flight to Japan. Or is it my fruitless search for Ebisu—he doesn’t seem to be Buddhist—giving trouble to my mind?

*If you have right mind, your request will be granted later on.*

Is my request the same as my prayer?

More important: what is the right mind?

In Japan my questions don’t seem to get me anywhere, but I don’t seem able to stop asking so many questions. If I’m unable to stop questioning, then at least I can postpone the need to find the answer until later. In this way, I can, like Donald Richie writes, “truly observe. Observation, appreciation, and through these, understanding.”

I notice the many twisted strips of paper tied to a metal wire. Should
I keep my paper fortune with me or leave it behind with the countless others?

Brenda accompanies me to the annual reception of the foundation that is supporting us in Japan.

At the reception the staff keeps introducing me to the guests. Each person to whom I am introduced hands me his or her *meishi*, and I give each mine. I remember not to put someone’s *meishi* away while we are talking, refraining from slipping them in my pocket until the conversation is over and the person I was talking to has moved on. By the end of the evening, I have a thick stack of *meishi* in my shirt pocket.

It is late in the evening and I am on my way to the bathroom when I notice a widely smiling, short, rotund, bald Japanese man. He seems to be in his late fifties or early sixties and is wearing a tie with cartoon penguins on it.

“That’s a great tie,” I say to the man as I pass by.

“It is always a great icebreaker,” the man says, focusing his wide smile on me. “I wear it to international conferences where many languages are spoken, and it always does the trick.” He laughs heartily. “Muramatsu Masumi,” he says, extending his hand. He gives me his *meishi*, which also has a penguin similar to the one on his tie. “But you can call me MM.”

I present my *meishi* to MM and read his *meishi*, which tells me he is the founder and president of the English-Speaking Union of Japan.

MM reads my name from my *meishi*, pronouncing it correctly since the Japanese katakana characters are phonetic. “So, you are one of the artists being supported by the foundation. What is your business in Japan?”

“I am a writer researching disability in Japan.”

“Disability. Is this the politically correct word? Is this the word that is now used?”

“It’s the word I prefer. None are perfect.”
“Yes, words can be like that.”

“Others use words like physically challenged or the unfortunate differently abled.” I stop, realizing that what I had just said might be misunderstood. “I mean I find the choice of the phrase unfortunate, not the so-called differently abled.”

MM roars his warm laughter. “Many years ago, we used to call our live-in housekeeper jochu. However, as time has passed the word developed pejorative—pejorative, is that the right word?—connotations, and we no longer use it. Interesting how the meaning of words can change over time. Is this the kind of work you do?”

“Kind of. It is something I think about.”

“I would like to talk more with you about this and other subjects.”

“I have your meishi and will call you.”

“Please do. And when we meet, I will wear another interesting tie.”

I bow my head slightly and make my way to the bathroom.

Naoko, on the staff, intercepts me. “Do you know who was talking with you?” she asks.

“He says to call him MM.”

“Muramatsu-sensei is a famous man. He was the first simultaneous interpreter in Japan, interpreting for all important dignitaries. Presidents. Prime ministers. He also was the voice heard on Japan television speaking Neil Armstrong’s famous lines when he landed on the moon.”

MM and I begin meeting regularly for noodles. No matter where we go together, we somehow end up eating noodles. In Kanda, shopping for old books, he takes me to a famous old noodle restaurant. After seeing kabuki, I take him to a noodle shop under the elevated train tracks near Ginza.

“How do you know these places?” one of us invariably asks the other when we are delighted to be eating noodles together again.

I have never had a friend like MM before. His love of different languages, different cultures, and different senses of humor—he is a connoisseur of international humor—is catching. He has traveled all over and met most of the world’s leaders during the past four decades,
and when he retired he was still the finest simultaneous interpreter in Japan. This seventy-one-year-old man, a year older than my father, has more energy than I do. He thrives on the Internet, constantly using his laptop to research and send e-mails as he travels.

During our time together, I begin to hear MM’s story. Alone as a teenager living near Asakusa after the war (his family had escaped the Tokyo air raids for the countryside), he began collecting metal and bringing it to someone who manufactured toys. Soon, he was selling the toys. Then, he found a job as a clerk, typing for the occupying U.S. Army, which is how he first learned English. He studied at Waseda University in the evenings. In 1956 he moved with his wife to the U.S. to work for the Japan Trade Council, eventually becoming its director.

“Washington, DC, was a smaller city when I lived there,” he tells me. “I was well known around town as the character who drove his Pontiac dressed in a yukata.”


MM asks me to speak to his English-Speaking Union. After my talk, he introduces me to many of his former students, invariably women younger than he, with whom he has kept in touch years after he was their teacher.

Eating noodles after the talk, I ask MM, “What do you know about Ebisu?”

“The beer?”

“The shichifukujin. Are they Shinto or Buddhist?”

“I think legend says they come from China. Have you heard of Lafcadio Hearn?”

“I’ve been reading about him ever since I knew I was coming to Japan.”

“Last year I was in Matsue, where Hearn once lived. There’s a memorial hall, a museum, in his old house. I was outside the house when I started a conversation with a nice man. Turns out he was Hearn’s great-grandson. He now runs the museum.” MM lets out his boisterous laugh.
“It’s a beautiful place with a small area still reminiscent of old Japan. I will take you there. In *Kwaidan*, Hearn tells the tale of Hōichi, the earless blind *biwa* singer. It’s a ghost story. I love ghost stories. We should go see the ghost stories this month at *kabuki-za.*”

“Bakemono.” I say the Japanese word for ghost or monster.

“Yes, ba-ke-mo-no,” MM inimitably repeats, distinctly pronouncing each syllable, as if he wants to make sure I pronounce Japanese correctly.

“Bakemono” literally means a thing that changes.

Before Buddhism there was Shinto.

Shinto, the Imperial religion, “the way of the gods,” received its name only in the sixth century to distinguish itself from Buddhism, which had recently arrived from China. In Shinto, *kami*, gods, are everywhere: present in nature and objects. There are Shinto ways of doing things. For over two thousand years, it has become an integral part of what it means to be Japanese.

Researching Shinto, I discover the Japanese word *misogi*, a ritual of all-encompassing purity. Purity seems to be important to Shinto. How might this relate to the Japanese view of disability?

Followers of Shinto, which is practically everyone in Japan, believe they are the children of both their parents and the *kami*. They owe their lives to both society and nature. In return for love and protection, they are obliged to treat both with loyalty and respect. According to Shinto belief, when Japanese die they become *kami*, so not only are their ancestors *kami* but they themselves will become *kami*, an unbreakable relationship down through the generations.

Is Ebisu a Shinto *kami*? To find out, I decide to visit Meiji Jingu, Tokyo’s most venerated Shinto shrine. It is Sunday, the day when the teenage girls go to nearby Harajuku to dress up in elaborate, often cartoonish, outfits.

Arriving at Harajuku Station, I follow the crowd out of the station.
When I turn the corner onto the bridge leading to Meiji Jingu, I am stopped by what seems like hundreds of girls on the bridge, as well as a crowd of onlookers.

The style, if that’s the right word for it, of the clothes worn by the teenagers is one I have never seen before. The dominant colors are black and white, with an occasional bright red thrown in for emphasis. Short skirts and high woolen socks; long dresses in heavy fabric (even though it is a hot humid Sunday in late May) with thick high-soled close-to-the-knee black boots; hair dyed magenta, purple, and the blackest possible black. Faces painted kabuki-white with lips smeared midnight purple, accentuating the pinkish red of corners of eyes and the inside of open mouths. Bras and slips, all kinds of undergarments worn as overgarments. Not quite 1980s East Village Punk or 1990s Seattle Grunge; it is, and isn’t, both Victorian England and Jazz Age Chicago. A hybrid? An amalgam? “Trad by mod”? Nostalgia with more than one foot in the future? It is as if many—to too many?—past styles have been thrown together for no apparent reason other than it can be done.

I am both amazed and appalled—amazed at this burst of nonconformity in a culture of conformity; appalled, aesthetically at first, but after a while of watching, the nonconformity seems to follow a pattern, leading back to a kind of conformity, after all.

I pass over the bridge; everything is changed. The cityscape around the concrete bridge turns into dense, lush forest. The sign tells me 365 tree species, donated from all over Japan, line the wide path to the shrine.

I pass under the twelve-meter-high, over nine-meter-wide, cypress torii. I have entered sacred ground. Donald Richie writes: “Japan is entered; the event is marked, as one enters a Shinto shrine, by passing beneath the torii gateway. There is an outside; then, there is an inside. And once inside—the experience begins with a new awareness, a way of looking, a way of seeing.”

Is this the beginning of a new way of seeing?

I am led by my senses. Walking close to the torii, I breathe in the 1,700-year-old cypress. I press my face against the wooden gate’s smoothness. I have never felt wood so smooth.
To the side of the shrine entrance is the temizusha, the fountain where, following the directions of the English sign, I use the long bamboo dipper to pour water over one hand, then the next. I take a sip of the water, making sure my lips don’t touch the dipper, as instructed: to purify.

Inside the main courtyard of the shrine, the low walls allow the eye to follow across the space to the honden. All is Japanese cypress and copper roofs rusted an ethereal pale green. I cross the courtyard, walk up the stairs to the honden, and notice a few more of the lightning-shaped strips of white paper hanging near the entrance. I hear a faint rhythmic drumbeat but cannot find from where the sound emanates.

In front of the altar, I throw a few ten-yen coins, hear them clatter to the bottom of the slatted wooden box of offerings. In my short time in Japan, I have now asked both Shinto and Buddhist deities, whoever they may be, for Ian to visit me.

But to whom or what am I praying? In the shrine there are no representations of a kami or Ebisu or any other divinity.

I came to Meiji Jingu for a practical reason: to learn if Ebisu belongs to Shinto. But what I have learned is not concrete, does not relate to Ebisu: what is unseen is just as, if not more, important than what is seen.

Nor does what I’ve learned relate to purity. Back at the entrance, I once again look across the courtyard at the shrine. I can think of only one word: serenity.

I breathe deeply and relax for the first time since I arrived in Japan.