

# Arts Education and Relief Activism After the 2011 Japanese Tsunami

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## Abstract

Tenrikyo, one of the New Japanese Religions, has a charitable tradition of practical voluntary help called *hinokishin*. The teaching of this tradition translates as selfless actions performed in gratitude for life's blessings that are usually taken for granted. *Hinokishin* has been ingrained in Tenrikyo's philosophy since its inception, as a natural reflection of Buddhist and Christian norms circulating in Japan at the beginning of the 19th century. In modern Japanese history, Tenrikyo *hinokishin* provided relief after the earthquakes of Kobe and Sanriku-Minami, and other natural disasters. When the bewildering news was broadcasted on 22 March 2011 that the powerful Tohoku earthquake was followed by a tsunami hitting the coast of Japan, Tenrikyo established a disaster response centre at its headquarters in Tenri and members from all over Japan instantly joined the *Disaster Relief Hinokishin Corps*.

**Keywords:** Japan, Earthquake, Tohoku, Tsunami, Tenrikyo, Hinokishin, Arts

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## Introduction

Japanese volunteers were still working in New Zealand, helping to clear the affected city of Christchurch, hit by the latest powerful earthquake on 22 February last year, when the bewildering news came that a powerful earthquake followed by tsunami had hit the northeast coast of Japan. Many Japanese volunteers were faced with the difficult choice of returning to their country.

With the shock of a disaster, the large majority, 70% of the affected people, were stunned and bewildered, while only 12% were able to effectively respond and assist in the coordination of support for other victims. The occurrence of a natural disaster is still very hard to predict, it presents a novel situation for the affected areas and leaves people no time to think. The key to a quick and effective response is: preparation.

One of the sources of volunteers in the emergency response was the Tenrikyo organization based in the city of Tenri in the Nara prefecture. Tenrikyo shares a common characteristic with other Japanese New Religions, that of having lay organizations and networks prepared for major national and international emergencies. The *Tenrikyo Disaster Relief Hinokishin Corps* is equipped to work with local governmental agencies and provide assistance in emergencies. When the news of the tsunami came Tenrikyo established a disaster response centre at its Headquarters and Tenrikyo members from all over Japan immediately joined the *Disaster Relief Hinokishin Corps*.

Tenrikyo has a tradition of charitable aid. This tradition of practical voluntary help is called *hinokishin* whose teaching translates as selfless actions performed in gratitude for daily blessings, such as health, food and love that are usually taken for granted. *Hinokishin* has been ingrained in Tenrikyo's philosophy since its inception, as a natural reflection of Buddhist and Christian norms circulating at the start of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The *hinokishin* response arose from the tough times experienced by Tenrikyo farmers during the last Tokugawa Shogunate in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the imperial Meiji, Taisho and Showa eras when *hinokishin* actions resulted in sending soldiers to fight for Japan in the Russian, Korean and Pacific wars of the last century. And *hinokishin* meant providing relief for the Kobe, San-riku-Minami and other natural disasters in modern Japanese history.

Dr. Barbara Amos, Associate Professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina gives background information about the involvement of several Japanese New Religions in quickly responding to the cataclysm. In a Special Edition for CNN, from March 26, 2011, she praises the fast and effective disaster aid provided by well organized groups such as Soka Gakkai, Rissho Kosei-kai or Shinnyo-en. Dr. Amos points out that Tenrikyo's efforts were 'largely neglected by the news media,' including the Japanese media. She notes that Tenrikyo, the second oldest of the Japanese new religious organization, founded in 1838, has a remarkable tradition. Dr. Amos means the *hinokishin* tradition—of routinely assisting other people in dire situations—through relief, encouragement and voluntary work. From my observations, there is however a difference that sets Tenrikyo

apart from the other prominent new religions such as Shinnyo-en and Soka Gak-kay. This difference manifests itself in the ways help is offered and is truly given as ‘an offering.’ However, as the giving is motivated by a sincere urge to help and spurred by a religious ethic of social engagement, most new religions donate a lot of money and time, but also use this opportunity to improve public relations and even promote a favorable public image. Tenrikyo has a tradition of human outreach that is almost two hundred years old and performed today as it was done in the early nineteenth century.

In the months following the destruction that occurred in March 2011, Tenrikyo aid continued to support affected citizens. According to information collected by Japan’s National Police Agency as of March 22, 2011 more than 260,000 evacuees were living in shelters, including 44,000 in Iwate Prefecture, 108,000 in Miyagi Prefecture and 83,000 in Fukushima Prefecture. Shelters had also been set up in thirteen other prefectures to accommodate the growing number of displaced persons from the hardest-hit prefectures of Miyagi and Fukushima. Given the severity of the situation, Tenrikyo Disaster Relief Headquarters set up an office to make arrangements for free shelter provision for evacuees from the Iwate and Miyagi prefecture. Three thousand inhabitants affected by the tsunami were sheltered in guest houses and followers’ dormitories in Tenri City for the following six months. The children of the accommodated families joined one of the six schools and the kindergarten founded by Tenrikyo. These children participated not only in the daily program prescribed by the Japanese curriculum, but also partook in the unique weekly extracurricular programs that Tenrikyo is well-known for. These activities include dancing the traditional Teodori hand-dances, playing traditional musical instruments, participating in brass bands and taiko drumming groups.

All these activities that are customary for Tenri children and students were shared with the new-comers from the Iwate and Miyagi prefectures. Tenrikyo children also follow the tradition of *hinokishin* help from an early age. This can vary from helping an elderly person to cross the street, visiting the sick in hospitals and weeding the parks, as well as more recently singing or giving concerts for the benefit of those in the tsunami affected areas. The young guests had the opportunity to participate in the yearly ‘Children’s Pilgrimage Festival’, held in August in the city of Tenri. With this occasion almost two thousand children from all over the world come to meet and engage in sporting competitions and various musical activities, including vocal, small instrumental and orchestral performances. There is a lot of singing during the festival; international songs brought by the guests and songs from Tenrikyo children’s repertoire. This repertoire covers a variety of musical styles—from traditional Japanese through disco.

I selected two tokens of love and friendship uttered by the youth of Tenrikyo that through their humble appearance speak for themselves. The first one were the concerts given in the affected earthquake areas by Tenrikyo school children and university students, concerts that took place over the following year. School bands from Aimachi offered concerts in the autumn months of 2011. *Gagaku* concerts were performed in October, and January, with the next that took place at the end

of March 2012. The Australian non-profit community *taiko* group *Kizuna* ('Bond') offered all concert revenues to the Tsunami Fund. *Kizuna* achieved the incredible task of having daily concerts over the entire months of May and June 2011!

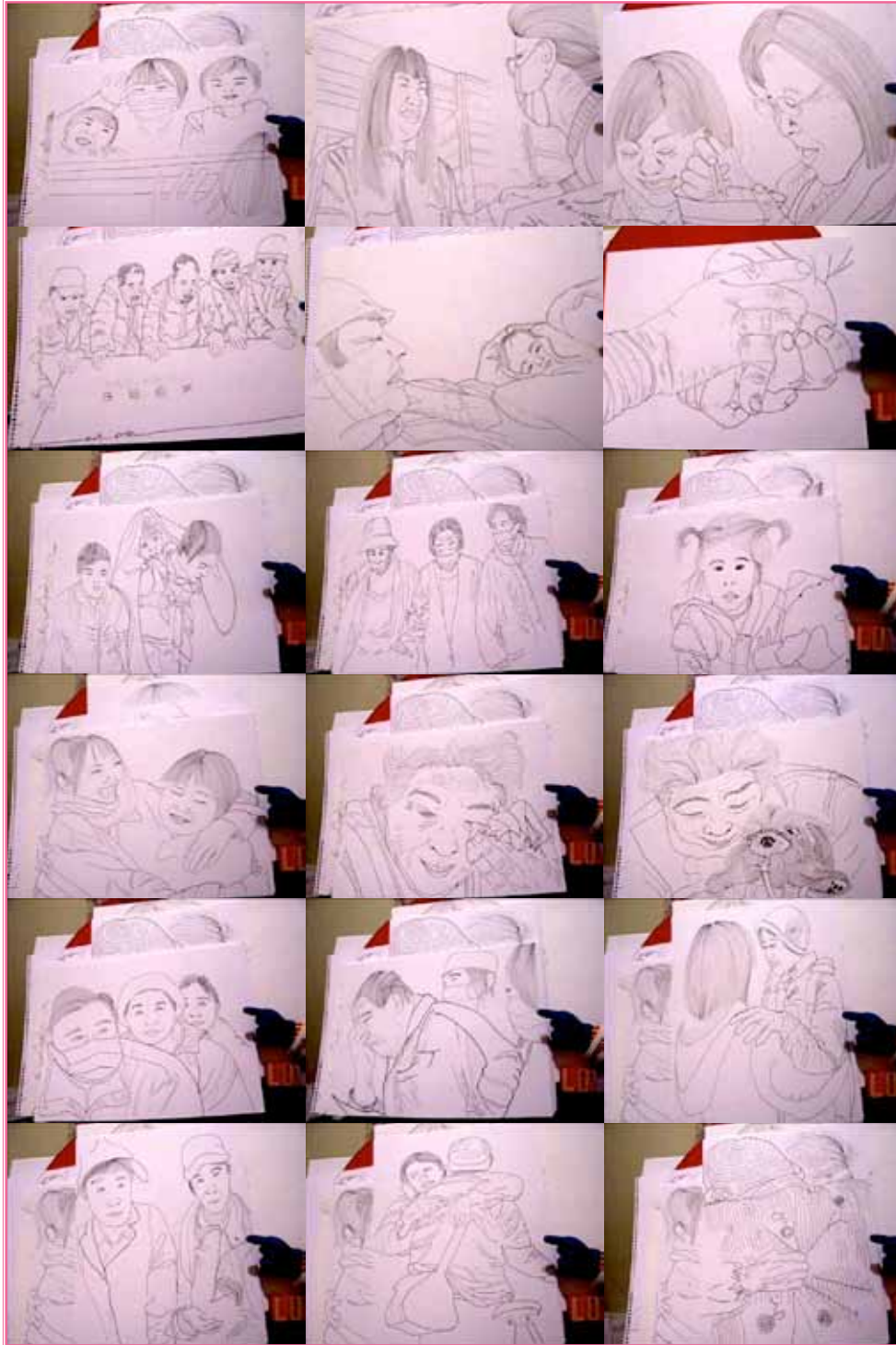


Figure 1. Drawings by a Tenrikyo hinokishin volunteer who prefers anonymity.

The second *hinokishin* offer came from a Tenrikyo *hinokishin* volunteer living in Toronto, Canada. The volunteer arrived in Japan shortly after the Tohoku earthquake, to help affected survivors. Perhaps as a form of therapeutic expression, during the voluntary activities the artist made a set of drawings that captured in a few lines the feelings of the survivors. The drawings express what words cannot define, the great compassion felt by the artist. They capture people's drawn, tired faces, moments of sorrow and grief, but also the hope and intense joy that wells up when a relative is found. 'This project is dedicated to the survivors I met at Koriyama or on the JR Shinkansen. There are no sketches of buildings destruction or victims,' writes the artist, who does not mention his or her name. Tenrikyo members habitually choose anonymity as an expression of modesty and prefer to remain anonymous, to be congruent with the Japanese cultural values related to modesty and with the moral values of *hinokishin*. Unlike the national and international press, Tenrikyo volunteers did not take pictures of the affected area where they worked and no sensationalistic photographs were circulated in Tenrikyo publications. The anonymous drawings when completed, were uploaded to YouTube so they could be shared. See URLs in References.

The drawings, the singing and dancing are daily activities of the *hinokishin* youth, who in an effort to create a sense of normality in the aftermath of the disaster, were exercising ancestral components of life itself: *dance – music – drawing*.

So many testimonies could be recalled about human tragedy and countless humanitarian tokens of *hinokishin*. I will convey to you just two testimonies, quoted from the victims of the tsunami:

Testimonies about Tenrikyo Disaster Relief-Corps members playing games with children and singing songs came from Higashimatsushima: the testimonies tell about three members of the disaster relief corps from Shiga Diocese who hit upon the idea of holding a 'game fest' for children of evacuees living at Akai Community Gymnasium, an evacuation centre housing about 200 people in the Miyagi Prefecture. One of the three members, Kazuki Tani, who is a committee member of the Tenrikyo children's association, the Boys and Girls Association, said:

We wanted to do something for the evacuees even after our daytime tasks had ended, so we hit upon the idea of trying to cheer up the children living at the centre by playing simple games with them.

Visiting the evacuation centre, he explained the proposal to the supervisor, who readily agreed. After introducing themselves as members of Tenrikyo's Disaster Relief Corps and expressing their condolences to the evacuees, the three members set about playing games and singing songs with the children, who ranged in age from four to 12. Parents watching this activity expressed their gratitude to the members for taking the initiative to cheer up their children. At the back of gymnasium, the members spotted an elderly woman who was joining in the singing. When they spoke to her she told them: 'I love singing! Having no house anymore was beginning to get me down, but thanks to your songs and games, I feel so much happier!'



An official from Higashimatsushima City's Disaster Response Task Force said: 'Miyagi Prefecture has been battered by a number of earthquakes and tsunami in recent years. On each of those occasions, Tenrikyo Disaster Relief Hinokishin Corps came to our rescue. As they did following the Sanriku-Minami Earthquake of 2003, for instance, when the members of Miyagi Diocese's corps, as well as other dioceses' corps, won the admiration of our community members for their assistance in helping to dismantle destroyed homes and remove wreckage. Because of that relationship with Tenrikyo's corps, we immediately became hopeful and resolute to reconstruct our life.'

One resident said: 'I can't thank them enough for removing the sludge. I was amazed at how these Tenrikyo followers seem to find their reason for living in helping others. I will remember their blue helmets as long as I live.'

'Reason for living in helping others' while singing a song and playing games with the children...



Figure 2. Tenrikyo Disaster Relief Hinokishin Corps providing medical and other services.

## Conclusion

During visits in March and April, the head of the Tenrikyo organization, in one of his speeches, compared the emotional state of 'happiness' with 'bliss.' He said that 'happiness' is an ephemeral feeling achieved after attaining a certain goal, whereas 'bliss' can be and should be a permanent state of contentment that mankind achieves through unconditionally contributing to humanitarian well-being. This is hinokishin, an old Tenrikyo tradition. And the testimonies from Japanese survivors of last year's trying times prove the contents of these words right.

Below are the lyrics of the background song that accompanied the 'Tenrikyotoronto' 1 and 2 YouTube films titled "Japan earthquake sketches"

### The power in you

I can't believe how slowly time goes  
I think, hope and pray for you, who are far away  
the sense of value we had-our daily life  
that have vanished in an instant  
I keep asking 'why?'  
But the answer never comes

Refrain:

Even if fear, grief and pain are coming,  
we must overcome them,  
now, the power is inside of us...  
the power is inside of you.

I can't bare even this small distance  
I'm thinking of your smile  
and I am scared of facing the reality  
that appeared so suddenly  
and only hope supports me to fight  
to fight with this darkness.

Refrain: even if fear, grief and pain are coming, etc...

The text below is that at the end of the YouTube film *Japan Earthquake Sketch Part II* ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJyFCmTNhYc&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJyFCmTNhYc&feature=related))

'This is an original, non-for-profit song written, sang, and recorded in Toronto, Canada, on March 2011 – to all our family, friends and loved ones who are fighting to stay strong in Japan.'

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