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New Year's Eve Bell Ringing: A San Diego Tradition

by Joyce Teague

The tradition of the ringing a huge temple bell on the Eve of the New Year is a Buddhist ritual which seems to resonate in all who participate. This may explain the increasing number of people who forgo watching the Times Square “dropping ball” countdown on television, or who pass on the chance to clink a champagne glass at a noisy party so that they may be at the Shelter Island Friendship Bell on the last moments of the outgoing year and the break of the New Year. Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike show up at the bell each year whether the event is publicized or not.

Surrounded by a little moat, the bell tower is not accessible to the public for most of the year. But each December 31, the Buddhist Temple of San Diego has permission from the City to put down a little ramp, connect a rope to the striker log, and conduct the bell-ringing ceremony at the site. A diverse crowd, which varies annually from dozens to hundreds of people, listens to a brief history of the Yokohama Friendship Bell, offers fragrant incense as the Buddhist minister chants sutras, then awaits a chance to ring the bell.

Crossing the ramp to climb the steps to the bell tower, participants of all ages take turns approaching the huge bell, and grasping and swinging the rope which guides a length of wooden log against the large bell. If your swing is strong and the log hits the bell just right, you are rewarded with a deep and resounding gong which assures you of a “clean slate” for the next 365 days.

This year-end, the community is once again invited to participate in this annual tradition carried over from Japan to our fair city. The bell is located at 1401 Shelter Island Drive at the very end of the peninsula. Dress warmly and plan to be there at 11:30 on New Year's Eve. After the bell-ringing, you may be treated to the sight of fireworks from downtown across the Bay. It's a satisfying way to “rush out” the old and “ring in” the new.