

Japan has many beautiful temples and shrines. They are popular for both Japanese and foreign tourists. Most temples have a large bell which is rung on special occasions. Some bells can be rung by visitors, others only by the temple priests. If you wanted to ring the bell, but there was a sign, that said, "Do not ring without permission!" What would you do?

I have an American friend named Pamela. She is 72 years old. She is a professional photographer and has published many photo books. Her hobby is visiting temples and shrines. Two years ago, I took her to a temple.

On the grounds, she saw a large bell. She wanted to ring it, but the signboard said, "Do not ring without permission!" What does this mean to you? For me, and I think for most Japanese people, it means "We don't have permission, so we can't ring the bell." I explained this to Pamela, and was ready to leave. But she said, "Please get permission for me." I was very surprised and thought, "Oh, no! I can't do that." I have visited this temple many times but I've never seen anyone ringing the bell.

Of course, I wanted to give Pamela a chance to ring the bell, however, I didn't think it was possible. But when I looked up at her, she was waiting with a broad smile. I couldn't say "NO". I walked and walked looking for the head priest. When I finally found him, I asked, "Can we ring the bell?" The priest and all the people around him were very surprised. He told me that no one had ever asked for permission before. But he smiled and said, "4:30 is the sun set time today. If you can come back then, it's okay." I was very excited. And I said thank you many times. Pamela was so happy. She also said I was brave to ask for her. At 4:30, the head priest was waiting for us with a smile. He prayed for us and for world peace, and then said "Please ring the bell."

Go-o-o-o-o-n-n... Go-o-o-o-o-n-n...

Wow! I've never heard such a beautiful and calm sound. Pamela thanked me for making that chance for her. But I think she made a bigger chance for me. I felt that American and Japanese thinking is very different. They do not give up easily when they want to do something. For example, Pamela went back to university when she was 50 years old. And now she is in Spain to study Spanish. She says, "It's never too late to study." She is always challenging something new. I admire this thinking and wanted to change.

Last year, I had a chance to enter the student council elections. I was interested, but I couldn't decide because I was very shy. Then, I remembered the sound of the temple bell and thought, "I can do it." This year, I entered a national Karate tournament. As I advanced, I imagined the bell before each challenge. Every time I lost my confidence, the sound always cheered me up and gave me strength. Now I have enough confidence to try anything.

Pamela told me, "There is value in every challenge, whether you succeed or not. It's never too late to have a dream and never too late to chase that dream."

Thank you Pamela. I'll ring the bell in my mind again and again. And I hope all of you find your own bell to ring. And even if you need permission, don't be afraid to ask.