When I was working as a Spanish interpreter, I happened to make the acquaintance of Maria, a woman who was working at the Embassy of Ecuador. She loved Japan and Japanese things. She learned how to do the tea ceremony, how to arrange flowers and how to make pottery. Above all, she had an interest in Buddhist temples, and whenever she was free; she took her camera and happily visited temples in the Tokyo area.

Unexpectedly, she was ordered to go home because of a personnel reshuffle and had to leave this country after only a year's stay. In the remaining days she wanted to fulfil various wishes. She climbed Mt Fuji and bathed at a hot spring. I accompanied her on both trips, adjusting my schedule to her busy one.

Three days before her departure, when I thought she was very busy, she called me and asked me to help her buy a souvenir which so far she had not been able to find. She wanted to obtain it by whatever means, but she did not know where to get it. In Hiroo, a central district in Tokyo and a high-class residential area with foreign embassies, where she lived, she seemed unable to find it.

She said, 'I want a Japanese bell.' I immediately thought of a wind-bell, a bell which hang at the edge of the eaves and tinkled in the wind refreshingly. It would be a good present from Japan.

'No, not that kind of bell. I want a little bell which sits on a small cushion on the altar of the temple.'

Oh, my! I thought, she means a rin gong on the Buddhist altar.

'I have never heard such a beautiful bell sound.'

Listening to her with my ear to the receiver, I was taken by a strange feeling. I knew that a rin gong rang with a rich tone, as she suggested,
with its high-pitched clear sound and lingering reverberation, but to describe the sound as beautiful was beyond my imagination.

A ringing gong is one of Buddhist articles used in funeral ceremonies and other Buddhist services. Usually priests strike it when they chant a sutra to mark a pause. Therefore, to us Japanese that sound is associated with death and reminds us of sad and painful memories. Or it is nothing but an unpleasant metallic sound because we were forced to sit in a correct manner and listen to it in our childhood.

While I was absorbed in such thoughts, Maria said to me urgently, ‘Could you tell me as soon as possible where to buy it?’ ‘All right. I will find out.’

Without thinking much about the task ahead I said I would, but I had no idea where the Buddhist articles were sold. I managed to find a friend who knew where the shop was. I asked her to accompany us to it the next day.

She took us to the busy traditional shopping arcade. Both sides of the straight street were crowded with so many different kinds of shops selling goods to meet all aspects of our daily lives. We found a particularly impressive shop with a glazed façade. There was a wide space inside the shop. On three sides different kinds of Buddhist articles, such as household altars of different designs, incense burners, candlesticks, vases and so on were displayed. We found ringing gongs in a glass case. There were many sizes – between a whiskey glass and a salad bowl – and materially different ones, for example, gold or silver. She asked for six of the same size – as large as half an orange, which was the normal size.

All of them tinkled refreshingly and reverberated around the shop.

‘What beautiful sounds! I’ll take them all.’

‘Are you sure, Madam? All of them? Thank you very much indeed. One moment please. I’ll wrap them up.’

The grey-haired elderly shop owner answered with a winning smile and took a grey-coloured paper from the cash register stand.

Slightly discontented, Maria said: ‘Haven’t you got a bright colour? I prefer a red colour.’