

Prayers for the World

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"I hope that everyone one will, deeply entrusting themselves to the nembutsu and firmly embracing prayers [for the world] in their hearts, together say the nembutsu." [1]

Prayer is an important part of the religious lives of many people around the world. For the faithful in many theistic religions, prayer is their way of having a relationship with their God or the gods. People may pray in order to praise their Lord, confess their sins, ask for forgiveness or guidance, share their thoughts and feelings, or simply be in the presence of holiness.

In Shin Buddhism, by contrast, we seldom come across the word "prayer." We are almost never encouraged to pray. The reasons for this are many, but, simply put, Buddhism is a path of teaching, practice and awakening, and the Buddha is not a god. Amida Buddha is not a deity to whom we pray for salvation. Saying "Namu Amida Butsu," we are taught, is our expression of gratitude for Amida's benevolence and not a call for help? [2]

Yet, in the passage above, Shinran Shonin himself urges us to say the nembutsu as we embrace "prayers for the world." What on earth could he have meant by that?

Shinran teaches us that when we entrust ourselves to Amida Buddha's Primal Vow we encounter the activity of wisdom and compassion. In Shin Buddhism, the Primal Vow takes the place of prayer. Instead of our petition, the Primal Vow is the basic wish of life, which seeks to become itself and give itself to us so that we may live. And with that encounter, there arises within each of our hearts a wish to live our true life, together with all beings. These wishes are our "prayers for the world."

My teacher, Shigaraki-sensei, writes that, "Our prayers contain our own aspirations to live our lives, learn the Buddha-dharma, and direct ourselves to the Pure Land. They will be fulfilled when we take Amida Buddha's Vow as our own vow. [3] Among the forty-eight Vows of Amida, for instance, the first four describe the nature of the Pure Land, which represents the ideals of freedom and equality. That is to say,

** The **First Vow** states that realms of hell, hungry ghosts and animals do not exist in the Pure Land. It is the wish that we may be without greed, anger, and foolishness.

** The **Second Vow** states that no one will revert back to their ignorant ways. Both offer the wish that we may be truly free to fulfill our lives.

** The **Third Vow** states that all beings in the Pure Land will be the color of gold, while the **Fourth Vow** establishes that no one will discriminate between beauty and ugliness, or high and low. They express the wish that we may dwell in a world of peace, harmony and equality.

When we take these Vows as our own, they will become our "prayers for the world" -- the motivating force that will allow us to devote our lives to the realization of true freedom and

true equality, for ourselves and all beings throughout the world. This is the life of the nembutsu, in which this world can become a reflection of the Pure Land and our hearts can cry out together in prayer, "May there be peace in the world and may the Buddha's teaching spread." [4]

Namu Amida Butsu.

References

- 1] "A Collection of Letters" (*Goshosokushii*), 2, CWS, 560 Words in brackets added.
- 2] It might be argued, of course, that a declaration of gratitude is, in fact, a prayer.
- 3] Takamaro Shigaraki, "A Life of Awakening: the Heart of the Shin Buddhist path" (Kyoto: Hozokan, 2005), 215-237.
- 4] "A Collection of Letters" (*Goshosokushii*), 2, CWS, 560.