

The Invisible World

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Amida has passed through ten kalpas now
Since realizing Buddhahood;
Dharma-body's wheel of light is without bound,
Shining on the blind and ignorant of the world.

The light of wisdom exceeds all measure,
And every limited living being
Receives this illumination that is like the dawn,
So take refuge in Amida, the true and real light.

(Hymns of the Pure Land, Nos. 3-4)

Last weekend, we celebrated Ho'onko here at the Betsuin, Shinran Shōnin's memorial service. Now we are back to normal, as normal as we can be anyway. But this week I've been thinking about the decorations on the Naijin. Last week, our Naijin was beautifully decorated as we do for all major services. For major services, we make a special effort to prepare the altar to set it apart from everyday services. Many of these special decorations have symbolic meaning. For example, we cover the altar tables with beautiful brocaded altar cloths that recall the custom, during the life of Shakyamuni, of people spreading out fine pieces of cloth for the Buddha to sit on when he came to teach the Dharma. So when we come to temple at Ho'onko or on any major service, and see those beautiful altar coverings, we can have a sense in our minds of hearing the Dharma from Shakyamuni Buddha.

We also decorated the Naijin with Manju and fruit offerings. Setting up these decorations was really interesting to me, since I am sort of new to this. Now this is a trade secret here, so don't tell anyone, but in order to display the manju on the "kesoku" (I think it's called), we had to wrap rows of them up in plastic wrap and then rubber band and tape them to these hexagonal shaped wooden holders. It's a bit of work to do this, but it's also fun. When we did this, though, I was thinking, "wait a minute, they didn't have plastic wrap and rubber bands in the old days in Japan.

But, when we finished and I was able to look at the decorations from the perspective of the Gaijin, I was really amazed. Up close, these manju decorations didn't look so great — with the plastic wrap and rubber bands and tape they look kind of flimsy and makeshift — but from a distance they really look impressive; almost magical. And together with the beautiful gold-brocaded cloth, the flowers, the lit candles, and the light glowing from behind the *gohonzon*, our beautiful statue of Amida Buddha, the effect — if you really gaze at it for a few quiet moments — is quite moving. It made me start to reflect on the meaning of our Buddhist Altar; I wondered what it could teach us today.

In the old days, when many people couldn't read, before radio, television and all the other entertainments we have now, people were, I guess you might say, more "easily impressed." I can imagine that when an ordinary village farmer or fisherman, a person who had very little time for fantasy and only very basic entertainments and pleasures in life, came into the local temple and saw the beautiful altar glowing with light and glittering with gold, he would have been deeply moved by it all. And if the priest had explained to him that the altar

represented the Pure Land, which is presided over by Amida Buddha, a place where even the ornaments, even the wind and the running water preach the Dharma, the Naijin would really have become real to this person. If he had further explained that the priests chanting sutras on the Naijin symbolized the inhabitants of the Land, the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas all praising Amida's infinite Wisdom and Compassion... Well, that must really have had a powerful effect on this person of pre-modern times.

But, even though I live in this time of overwhelming sensory overload as they call it, and though I grew up in the era of television and over-the-top movie spectacles, when I gazed at our specially decorated Naijin, I could really understand what the feelings of that farmer or fisherman must have been. All these things on the Naijin are only images, of course, there're just stuff made of wood and metal and cloth — and sometimes plastic wrap, rubber bands, and tape — but we are all still capable of being moved by them, because they are symbols of transcendent truth.

Now, of course, our Naijin doesn't have any inherent holiness or spiritual power. As I said, it's just made out of stuff. We build temples and, with the help of skilled craftsmen, we set up these altars for a purpose. What is that purpose? Partly it is in order to have a place to praise the Buddha and listen to the Dharma. But we also build temples in order to create a place where our senses can be offered an alternate view of reality, different from our everyday view which is based on our limited understanding.

Our everyday view is really based on what the Buddha called "craving" or "thirst." This thirst, also called "attachments" is the basis of our whole view of the world. Our view is literally self-centered; we see the world in terms of our own needs and understanding. With this kind of viewpoint, we cannot judge or discriminate anything with true objectivity. Our view can never be a "right view." The Buddha taught that the cure for our suffering and unhappiness resides in the eightfold path, which begins with having a "right view" or a "right understanding." Unfortunately, the basis of our actions tend to be "wrong views," which are what the Buddha called "ignorance." That means that, when we look at the world, we are not seeing it as it truly is, we are mainly seeing a distorted reflection of our own limited understanding of what is there. That is the difference between ordinary people and Buddhas. Buddhas see what is truly there, they see True Reality, the "True and Real." We look at the world through a filter made of our calculations and self-interest. We live in the world of relative truth, which conforms to our limited understanding and self-centered minds.

This is easy for me to relate to. Quite often I interpret other people's actions based on my own state of mind on a given day. If I am feeling insecure, I might easily take someone's innocent comment as a criticism and I will feel defensive. On another day, though, I will understand it in a different context. Also, since we live with other people, we tend to share our view of the world; we have a corporate or societal viewpoint. We find this in every culture and language. So when I look at the world around me, I see what I have been taught to see by my family and friends and society and it seems real to me! But the Buddha taught that we should look deeply into the things we take for granted and examine them fully. We should look deeply into ourselves. Our views are conditioned by our craving thirst, which creates ignorance, so we need to question all our assumptions and certainties. Am I *sure* that my view is correct? I often misinterpret what I see. In courtroom trials two witnesses may have different testimony of what they witnessed. There is a famous Japanese film directed by Akira Kurosawa called *Rashomon* in which the various characters, who each saw the same event, tell completely different stories about what happened, each based on their own self interests. Our perspective is never completely reliable and so we shouldn't believe that it is ultimate truth.

The craving thirst we all have, our attachments, are really the desire to keep control over our destiny. It is a desire for permanence. We think if we can get what we want we will finally be happy but, when we get it, we are never satisfied and want something else. This is very apparent in kids; they really want a certain toy and then, after they play with it for a day or two, it is forgotten and they start to want something else. Actually, I do that all the time myself. We adults also do this with tasks. We say, if I can only finish the things on my list I will be able to relax. But, somehow, the list is never finished. We always have something more that we have to do. Our wrong view makes us believe that we can have what we want, and achieve what we want, and that the fulfillment of these wants will make us forever happy. Unfortunately, we live in a world that is in constant motion and in which everything is changing at every moment; it is a world where *nothing* lasts forever, and nothing is ever final. In this case, our clinging and ignorant views are sure to make us unhappy, don't you think so?

But there is another view, a completely "right" view. This view is called enlightenment. However, the world that is viewed through enlightened eyes, is invisible to unenlightened people like us; it is an *invisible world* as opposed to our everyday world, which we take so much for granted. The visible world, our everyday world view, reflects our unenlightened perspective, based on our clinging attachments.

So our Naijin — did you forget we were talking about the Naijin — or any Buddhist altar or symbol, represents this invisible world, this world of true reality. Contemplating these symbols awakens us to question the real-ness of our everyday world and to think about the truth that is hidden behind what we normally see. The invisible world is enlightenment or suchness. It is the Pure Land, the place where spiritual perfection happens naturally, without any calculation on our part; it is the working of Amida's Great Compassionate Vow. Of course, True Reality does not arise from our wrong views, from self-interest, or preconceived ideas, so we who see through the eyes of self-interest cannot really comprehend this world; that is why we can say it is invisible. In the invisible world everything arises from the Buddha's infinite wisdom and compassion, not from actions based on ignorance. This invisible world portrayed by our Buddhist symbols can also be called emptiness, which is another word for "things as they really are."

By the way, the Buddhist concept of "emptiness" is often misunderstood. It doesn't mean that nothing exists, but that no thing exists on its own. Emptiness describes the teaching of interdependence, but it is also enlightenment and true reality. Zen teachers, I think, understand and explain this concept very well when they say "eat when you are hungry; sleep when you are tired." If we are able to act without calculation, we are acting in accordance with emptiness. However, if we keep eating when we are not hungry or sleep all the time because life seems too depressing or difficult, then we are simply following our attachments and so we are bound to remain unhappy *and* to create unhappiness for others. Shinran used a similar concept to describe being in accordance with true reality; he called it *jinen* or "naturalness." *Jinen* means suchness, "things as they are." For him, "things as they are" also called the "true and real" are the spontaneous working of Amida's Vow.

Interestingly, Shinran made a point of telling us that, once *jinen* is grasped and understood, we shouldn't waste our time talking about it. If we do, it just becomes more calculation, one more attachment, one more wrong view. There is a very good Zen story that illustrates this:

A knowledgeable young Zen student was showing off his knowledge in front of his teacher, talking in highly abstract terms about emptiness. He was saying "nothing whatsoever exists. The mind does not exist, the Buddha does not exist, you and I do not exist. Everything is ultimately empty of form. There is no teaching, no delusion, and no enlightenment. There is nothing to teach and nothing to learn."

Now his teacher was sitting quietly smoking his Japanese pipe, with a long bamboo stem (called a *kiseru*). After the student stopped speaking the teacher remained quiet for a moment then, suddenly, he took his pipe and whacked the student over the head with it. The student was stunned at first, then he became indignant and angry. Then the teacher said, "I guess what you say is correct but, if nothing exists, where did your anger come from?"

Now this invisible world, this true reality, is not some other world separate from our world. The difference is only in our views. In fact, far from being somewhere else, it is the invisible world, the world of suchness, which sustains our visible everyday world. In one of his Wasan's (Japanese hymns) Shinran wrote that "Every being is nurtured by this light" (Hymns of the Pure Land, No. 6). In the Wasan I read at the beginning he said:

"Dharma-body's wheel of light is without bound,
Shining on the blind and ignorant of the world."

If the world of true reality was somewhere else, far removed from us, we could never be affected by the Buddha's wheel of light, shining on us blind and ignorant people. We can see this light in some way; it embraces and transforms us. But this can only happen when we allow ourselves to doubt the absoluteness of our own views, when we realize that our views are flawed. Once that happens, I think, the Buddha's light begins to illuminate us through the cracks in our facade. But actually, the Buddha's Compassion is the cause of our self-questioning in the first place.

We encounter the invisible world through the benevolence of the Buddha: we have experiences that jar us from the sleep of our certainties to the wakefulness of understanding. We all meet, in some form or another, just as Shinran did, teachers whose presence and example help us to transcend our limited selves. We don't discover the invisible world casually; we really encounter it in a living way. It moves us and wakes us up.

Throughout our lives we will continue to be affected by our limited understanding. Our behavior will often be conditioned by our attachments, anger, selfishness and calculation. We will never be totally at peace or completely happy. But awareness of the invisible world is truly what makes us human beings. Even though it is a dim awareness, the Buddha's light, which reveals the true nature of things, transforms our anger into kindness and our self-centered calculation into gratitude for every aspect of the gift of life.

So each time you look at this Naijin, or at any Buddhist symbol, please remind yourself of what you are seeing. The thing itself is not important. What matters is that we are being reminded of the Buddha's light shining upon us from that invisible world of true reality. When that light of understanding illumines us — and this happens throughout our lives — we are able to accept our difficulties and troubles with warmth of heart and gratitude. Then we can live our lives with open hands and open hearts, receiving and giving with gratitude and joy.