

***The Aspiration to be an Ordinary Person
In Memory of Rev. Gyoko T. Saito (1927-2001)
A Eulogy***

(The following essay is a sermon given by Dr. Nobuo Haneda, Director Maida Center of Buddhism, at the funeral for Rev. Gyoko Saito who was the Chief Minister of the Higashi Hongwanji Betsuin in Honolulu. Rev. Saito had only recently come to Honolulu when he took ill. He will be sadly missed even though he was there but a short time. Though many in Shin Buddhist circles will know Rev. Saito, we hope that others will come to see the reality of Shin faith that he evidenced and Dr. Haneda so eloquently sets out. We thank Dr. Haneda for permitting us to place this essay on the Internet.)

"Blessed are those who have only one teacher, who serve only one Buddha!" Haya Akegarasu

Rev. Saito passed away on March 10. Two weeks before that I came here, to Hawaii, to see him in the hospital. I was fortunate to spend three days with him. He and I talked about many things; we talked about our Buddhist teachers, such as Rev. Haya Akegarasu (1877-1954) and Shuichi Maida (1906-67). At that time, I promised him that I would speak at his funeral service if his operation turned out to be unsuccessful.

After seeing Rev. Saito, I left Hawaii and went back to Berkeley, and then I traveled to Japan to stay there three weeks. While I was in Japan, I was praying that his operation would be successful and he would get better. I was praying that I did not have to make this speech. But while I was in Kyoto, I was informed that he had passed away. I was deeply saddened. I felt that the largest pillar that had been supporting my life had collapsed.

Now I am standing here to give a speech that I was reluctant to make. Rev. Saito, my teacher, is gone. I did not want him to go. I wanted him to live many more years, to guide and encourage me many more years. But now that he is gone and three weeks have already passed since his death, a speech that I was reluctant to make has now turned into a speech that I want to make. This is a speech that I want to make because Rev. Saito was a great human being—because something must be said about this great human being. Although my oratorical abilities are limited, I feel a strong desire to talk about him—to talk about what a great human being Rev. Saito was.

There is an English proverb: "The tree is best measured when it is down." Now, having experienced the passing of Rev. Saito, I am feeling the truthfulness of this proverb. I am having a renewed sense of realization of what an important person Rev. Saito has been for my life. I totally owe him what I am today. No other persons whom I have personally met have had such strong influence upon me as Rev. Saito. Ever since I came here from Japan, I have lived my life in this country following the course he laid down for me.

First, let me talk about my association with Rev. Saito. It was in 1971, exactly thirty years ago, that I met him for the first time. At that time I was a twenty-five year old man who had left Japan and gone to the Buddhist Temple of Chicago. Earlier, when I was a college student in

Japan, I became interested in Buddhism through a Buddhist teacher by the name of Shuichi Maida. Then, one of Maida's students told me, "If you are interested in translating Maida into English, I could introduce you to the Buddhist Temple of Chicago. There you could study Maida and Rev. Haya Akegarasu, Maida's teacher." I asked him to introduce me to the temple in Chicago.

I went to Chicago with a tourist visa. In Chicago, I had no friends. I was just staying at the temple; I was nothing but a parasite on the temple. I did not know how long I could stay in the United States. Not long after I went to Chicago I met Rev. Saito for the first time at a temple party. I still remember the first words he said to me. When we met, he firmly grabbed my hands and said, "I will help you 200%!" At that time I was a twenty-five year old man who had come to Chicago without any money, any job, or any specific plan. I just wanted to study the teachings of Rev. Akegarasu and Maida. The way Rev. Saito said those words was quite powerful and unforgettable. I received tremendous encouragement from him. Reflecting upon my past thirty years in this country, I realize that Rev. Saito kept his word that he gave to me when we first met. Yes, Rev. Saito indeed helped me and supported me 200%!

Then I started to attend the Thursday discussion class conducted by Rev. Saito at the temple. Although my English was poor at that time, he encouraged me to translate the writings of Shuichi Maida. And he published all of my translations in the temple's bulletin. Since I had come to the United States on a tourist visa, I could stay in this country only a limited time. If I did not change my visa, I had to leave the country. Thus, Rev. Saito advised me to become a student and acquire a student visa. He drove me to the University of Wisconsin to introduce me to a Buddhist scholar there. This way I became a student at the University of Wisconsin. I was able to acquire a student visa to stay in this country. I am infinitely grateful to him for his advice that I go to a university in this country. It was so important for me to receive an education in this country at that point of my life.

When I received a Ph.D. degree from the University of Wisconsin in 1979, Otani University in Japan gave me a post-doctoral grant. Thus, I went to Kyoto to study at Otani University. While I was in Kyoto, Rev. Saito suggested that I get a Buddhist ordination. Frankly speaking, at that time, I did not understand why he advised me to get a Buddhist ordination. Shuichi Maida, who initially introduced me to Buddhism, was a lay person. And I had never wanted to become an ordained Buddhist minister. But Rev. Saito told me that it was good for me to get a Buddhist ordination. So, although I did not understand why, I received a Buddhist ordination in Kyoto twenty years ago, because he advised me to do so.

Reflecting upon the past twenty years of my life, I now understand, why Rev. Saito advised me to get a Buddhist ordination. Although I did not understand it at that time, I now understand it. For the last twenty years I have been making friends with many Buddhists in this country, simply because I have been invited to speak at various Buddhist temples. If I had not been ordained as a Buddhist minister and had not been invited to Buddhist temples, I could not have made so many friends. Since Rev. Saito knew that, my status as a Buddhist minister would

enable me to make friends, he advised me to have the status. For that, too, I am infinitely grateful to him. I totally owe him what I am today.

Rev. Saito taught me many things. He taught me not only Buddhism, but also drinking and cooking. When he invited me to his house for the first time, he said that we were going to have an initiation ceremony. I thought that I was going to have some kind of Buddhist initiation. Then he offered me a large glass full of vodka - Smirnoff. I had never drunk vodka in my life before. He said that it was the initiation ceremony. Yes, indeed, he was a great teacher -- a great teacher of drinking. I was also a good student of that subject. Thanks to him, I learned the joy of drinking.

Many of us here know that Rev. Saito was a great cook. We enjoyed his cooking. He loved to treat people by making sushi, steamed fish, and steak. During one Buddhist retreat he made the largest chawan-mushi (steamed egg-custard soup) I had seen in my life. Ignoring the traditional method, which involved a small soup cup, he used a huge pot into which he put dozens of eggs. When he cooked, I used to cut vegetables for him. Thanks to him, I am now not so much a Buddhist scholar as a kitchen helper. My wife Tomoko is very grateful to him because he domesticated me and taught me how to cut vegetables and cook.

I have talked about my association with Rev. Saito. Now let me talk about what I consider the most important period of Rev. Saito's life. When the Second World War ended, he was nineteen years old. Like many other Japanese, he was greatly confused by the collapse of traditional values--like the divinity of the emperor--that he had been indoctrinated in. Then he majored in electrical engineering at Kumamoto University. One day he read a book written by Rev. Akegarasu. He was so deeply moved by Akegarasu that he decided to devote his life to learning from this teacher.

In Buddhism, probably the most important concept is Hongan. Hongan literally means "Innermost Aspiration" or "Basic Desire." It means Aspiration to become Buddha--to become a true human being and live a fulfilling life. It means the deepest desire all human beings have. Because we have this Hongan, Innermost Aspiration, we are human beings.

More specifically, Hongan means the Aspiration to transcend the smallness of our being and become one with all human beings. When Rev. Saito met his teacher Akegarasu, he saw in Akegarasu the Aspiration to transcend all forms of human pettiness--the Aspiration to transcend all artificial distinctions of race, culture, and religion. He saw in him the Aspiration to become a naked human being--to seek life-to-life contact with all human beings. When he saw the Aspiration in the teacher, the same Aspiration was awakened in him. He could not suppress his desire to become a person like Akegarasu.

When Rev. Saito made up his mind to study under Rev. Akegarasu, he told his parents about his decision. His parents were appalled to hear it. His parents had been proud of their "elite" son, a graduate of the Japanese "West Point" and an electrical engineering major in college--an enviable status in postwar Japan. They had high hopes for his future success as a secular person. (In Japan, a Buddhist temple is usually maintained over generations by the same family;

the oldest son of the temple family usually takes over the temple. For someone from a lay background like Rev. Saito to become a Buddhist minister is a very rare occurrence.) Since Rev. Akegarasu told him, "If you cannot get permission from your parents to carry out your decision, I would not accept you as my student," Rev. Saito went on a hunger strike to get his parents' permission. He continued the hunger strike for sometime. Eventually, his uncle intervened and told his parents, "Your son's determination, is so strong. He really wants to devote his life to learning from Rev. Akegarasu. Consider that your son has already died. Allow him to become Akegarasu's student." Having listened to these words of his uncle, his parents very reluctantly allowed Rev. Saito to become Akegarasu's student.

Rev. Saito's uncle told his parents, "Consider that your son has already died." Yes, his uncle was quite right. Rev. Saito experienced his "spiritual death" in meeting his teacher; his old self died and his new self of the Aspiration was born. From that time until he passed away, he lived his life only as Rev. Akegarasu's student-only as a person who pursued the Aspiration.

At that time Rev Akegarasu was administrative head of the Higashi Honganji I Headquarters and lived in Kyoto. Thus, Rev. Saito became a student at Otani University in Kyoto, and studied Shin Buddhism. His student life was financially difficult. He told me that he used to deliver bottles of milk to many houses early in the morning. The only food that he could afford was bread crumbs. But his financial difficulties were nothing, because, he was happy to be able to study under Rev. Akegarasu. He also had wonderful Dharma friends in Kyoto. He often told me about wonderful discussions he had with his friends.

In 1954 when Rev. Saito was twenty-seven, Rev. Akegarasu passed away. Then a couple of years later, the Buddhist Temple of Chicago asked Rev. Akegarasu's Sangha members if there was a young man who might be interested in coming to the United States to work for the temple in Chicago. The leaders of Akegarasu's Sangha thought that Rev. Saito was the right person for the job.

Thus when Rev. Saito was twenty-nine, he came to Chicago. The only objective that he had in coming to this country was to live his teacher's Aspiration and share it with Americans. However, his initial years in Chicago were not easy. I heard from some members of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago that the temple had actually wanted a young man from Japan who could teach cultural things, such as flower arrangement and the tea ceremony. But Rev. Saito was not interested in teaching those things. He was interested only in sharing his teacher's Aspiration with people

Some members of the temple expected Rev. Saito to behave like a "religious" person. But that was what Rev. Akegarasu, Rev. Saito's teacher, told him not to do. Akegarasu really hated people who had the so-called "smell of religion." Akegarasu said, "Just as miso (bean paste) that smells like miso is not first class miso, a Buddhist who smells like a Buddhist is not an authentic Buddhist." Akegarasu taught Rev. Saito to be just himself-to be his ordinary self. Akegarasu taught him to forget about all artificial labels and identities, such as "Buddhist" and "Buddhist minister ." He taught him to be a naked person and seek life-to-life contact with people.

This teaching of Akegarasu echoes the essence of Shinran Shonin's teaching. Shinran Shonin talked about the importance of being an ordinary human being. He said, "Don't externally show your wise, good, and diligent face, because you internally possess vanity and falsehood" and "It would be better for you to be looked upon as a stealer of cattle [i.e., one of the worst kinds of criminals in Shinran's time] than as a pious religious person."

Rev. Saito was a person who did not have any pretensions. He was what he was. He never claimed to have any authority or power. He was always just like us, one of us. His greatness was his ordinariness. Thus for those who wanted to see in him an image of a Buddhist minister, a spiritual leader, or an ethnic leader, he was a great disappointment. He was not interested in behaving like a teacher. He was simply interested in being himself-in having life-to-life contact with all people, forgetting all distinctions of race, culture, and religion.

Although Rev. Saito did not complain about the treatment he had received from the temple, some members of the temple told me that the temple did not treat him well in the initial years of his life in Chicago. His salary was very small. He lived in the basement of the temple. Usually when young Buddhist ministers came to this country from Japan, they were given the opportunity to learn English at school. But the temple did not give him that opportunity. He had to learn English all by himself. Further, although the temple board knew that he had come to the United States leaving his wife and his son in Japan, they did not do anything about it for a long time. It was after two years' separation that his wife and son were finally able to join him in Chicago. His son Shin, who was a small boy at that time, could not recognize him as his father

I know that many members of the temple initially did not appreciate Rev. Saito very much. They could not understand his single-minded devotion to his teacher Akegarasu. They could not understand his open, free, and unconventional way of sharing the Dharma. Worse, they misunderstood his devotion and passion for a manifestation of some kind of selfishness or stubbornness.

But as years passed, many members of the Buddhist Temple of Chicago gradually came to understand Rev. Saito. They touched the essence of his being. They understood that he was actually an extremely selfless and humble person and that he had only one wish: to share his teacher's Aspiration with all people. When they understood the true essence of his being, they all became his friends-his very close friends. For the last thirty years I have witnessed that many people who initially did not appreciate him have become his close friends.

Probably the most important thing in Buddhism as well as in our lives is to have friends, to have "true" friends. If there is a criterion by which we can measure the authenticity of a Buddhist, having "true" friends must be it. Having "true" friends, however, is the most difficult thing. Only a person who can be a true friend can have true friends. Only a person who can be an ordinary person can have true friends. He can immediately identify himself with others. The person who regards himself to be unique, special, or superior cannot be a friend and cannot have true friends. Rev. Saito was a person who could be a true friend. Thus he was able to have so many "true" friends. I don't know anyone else who had as many wonderful friends as Rev.

Saito. During the three days I spent with Rev. Saito in the hospital, many of his friends were visiting him from New York, Chicago, Arizona, and California. Many people were calling him from various places.

Rev. Saito was a very warm teacher to me. But if I say that he was simply a warm and compassionate teacher to me, I am not accurately describing my relationship with him. Rev. Saito was also a very scary person for me. His selflessness, his whole-hearted devotion to his teacher, the purity of his heart, were always a mirror that reflected something selfish and impure in my mind. His heart was so pure and stainless that it reflected whatever impurity I had in my mind. In that sense, he was a scary person for me. He seldom used harsh words to advise me, but his sad glance sometimes most eloquently scolded and admonished me.

Rev. Rijin Yasuda (1900-81, a Shin teacher) once said, "In Buddhism we do not have to talk about various sins (such as killing and stealing). There is only one sin in Buddhism. That is 'spending our lives in vain' or 'wasting our lives'." Then how can we live our lives meaningfully, without spending our lives in vain? We must meet a Buddha. We must listen to the Dharma. We must have our deepest Aspiration awakened in us. If we live our lives without meeting a Buddha, without listening to the Dharma, such lives are vainly-lived lives, a wasted life, no matter how much wealth and fame we may have attained.

We must have one Aspiration--one thing to which we can devote our entire lives. If we do not define human happiness as having one thing to which we devote our entire lives, how else could we define it? We have a desire for the complete combustion of our lives. We cannot be satisfied with a life like a smoldering fire, with a lukewarm life.

The goal of Buddhism is attaining parinirvana--the perfect combustion of our lives. Parinirvana literally means "perfect extinction (or combustion)." The end of life should be a full stop, a complete end. It should not be a comma. We should live our lives in such a manner that we have a deep sense of contentment, a deep sense of fulfillment. We should not live our lives in such a manner that we need another life, another future existence. Both Shakyamuni and Shinran Shonin taught us to attain parinirvana, the completion point, at the end of our lives.

The life Rev. Saito lived is so beautiful, because he had one Aspiration to which he devoted his entire life. The life he lived is so beautiful, because he fully lived. He lived the richest and most fulfilling life. I see in him parinirvana--complete combustion of his life. That's why his life is so beautiful.

Rev. Saito loved Santoka, a Japanese haiku poet. He especially loved one haiku poem composed by Santoka. The poem says: "If I have one thing, that's good enough. I can keep burning the fire of my life (Jpn. Hitotsu areba koto-taru kurashi no hiwo tomosu.)."

When Rev. Saito met his teacher, he received one Aspiration from him. After that he lived his entire life, every minute and every second of his life, for it. Rev. Saito had the Aspiration to be what he was. He had the Aspiration to feel the warmth of human life, transcending all artificial labels and identities, transcending all distinctions of race, culture, and religion. For him, labels

such as "Christian," "Buddhist," "Buddhist minister ," and "lay person" did not mean anything. He lived simply as a human being who craved human warmth, life-to-life contact with another human being.

Sensei, thank you for your guidance and encouragement. Sensei, thank you for living the Aspiration, for showing it to us, and for teaching it to us. We will, like you, live the Aspiration and share it with other people. Your Aspiration will live in us forever. Your lively and resounding laughter will live in us forever. Sensei, please keep watching us, guiding us, and encouraging us. Your life is so beautiful because you had one Aspiration -- because you lived one Aspiration. Thank you very much.

(A eulogy given 3/31/2001. Revised.)