

# ***Ultimate Value of Human Life***

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The *Kikyoge* or *Gatha of Three Venerations* starts with "Human life is the most difficult to receive. Yet we are actually endowed with it. Dharma is the most difficult to hear. Yet we are actually led to hear it." This phrase is profoundly suggestive of the ultimate value of human life.

First, let's consider the wonders of human life in three aspects; its history, function, and support.

Of the Forty-eight Original Vows of Amida Buddha, the fifth is the vow to bring humans and devas in His land to remember their former lives. This could be currently interpreted as a reference to the history of individual human life. According to today's life scientists, a life cell was born on the earth about three and a half billion years ago after the earth's birth four and a half billion years ago. The universe was started fourteen billion years ago. (Well, let us have a wide span of time sense here.) The cell started to divide and eventually the evolution of life developed into more and more species. How many species of life do you think exist on the earth now? Dr. Keiko Nakamura reveals that there are about thirty million species recognized at present and the human race is one of them. Then roughly it follows that to be born among the human race took thirty million turns in the long way of evolution or it was one-over-thirty-million chance to come to the gate of the human race.

However, you could not appear in this world yet; you had to compete with 299,999,999 other sperms from your father to get into the single ovum from your mother faster than others. Here was another narrow selection (one over three hundred million) to obtain an individual life as a human.

Arithmetically the probability of each human to be born into this world in the history of life on the earth was thus one over thirty million times three hundred million, that is, one over nine quadrillion (or gazillion). What an astronomically rare chance! And you did receive it! You may take it for granted that you are living today, but your life has such a wondrously long and difficult history of selections.

These are scientific observations in the realm of knowledge, which is not enough in Buddhism, the world of wisdom. What insight into life you get from such knowledge and how you feel about the real value of your life is a matter of wisdom. A famous novelist in Japan Eiji Yoshikawa, who authored *Shinran*, once composed a *waka* poem when he had his first child born:

"Hello, baby,  
which ways have you taken  
to be born as a child  
with me as your dad?"

He did not think he produced the child nor owned it, but he took the baby as an invaluable human being who was to complete its precious life in the intimate relationship with him as its father. This is a case of wisdom concerning the history of life.

In the second phase, we tend to take our physical functions for granted, but how can your heart continue to beat about two billion times in your life? How is it possible for a small cut in your finger to be restored to the original state in several days? We are living as the sixty trillion cells in our body and three billion bits of DNA information in each cell are working in harmonious cooperation. Have we ever thanked them for their marvelous functions?

Rev. Toshiko Kawamura wrote about her mother-in-law, Fude, who was a great Nembutsu woman. "My son wrote a composition at school; 'My grandma is a very strange person; when she takes me to the toilet, she presses her palms together and worships my poop when it gets out, saying *Thank you very much for your work.*" Fude was not a physiologist, but she knew well the wonders of functions within our bodies, and moreover she had wisdom enough to thank them. Our bodies are not our own possession, but they are keeping us alive. When we are awakened to this fact, we cannot help reciting Nembutsu in gratitude for them.

In the third, we may sometimes complain about the taste of food we eat, but have we ever wondered what we really eat?

In a kindergarten in Hiroshima, Japan, the bell rang to notify the time for school lunch. The teacher said to her kids, "Now, everybody, let's press our palms together and say 'Itadakimasu,' which literally means 'I am going to eat with thanks,'" a widespread Japanese custom. Then, as is usual with kids, one of them put in a question to her, "Teacher, why do we say 'Itadakimasu'?" She was still fresh from college and had never really questioned about the Japanese tradition, so she was stuck, only saying to herself in her mind, "You know it is what we should do in Japan, don't you?" Dismayed, she looked aside and happened to see a couple of women cooks in white aprons at the doors of the lunch room. "Well, Taro," she said with a smile, "ladies over there cooked our food very kindly, so we must say 'Itadakimasu.' OK?" But Taro was not satisfied. "But, teacher, last week my mom brought here 6,000 yen for the school lunch." He may have been thinking of the supermarket where customers pay money for what they have bought without thanking the store or anybody. The teacher's face turned red and stared at the boy.

It was then that the kindergarten master, who had been hearing this dialog behind her, came out in front and said to Taro, "Good boy, you asked a very good question, but your mom did not pay any money." "What? She paid it, I know. I was with her," Taro retorted. "No, she didn't." "Why, I am not a liar!" Taro was on the brink of tears. "Well, then, Taro, let me ask. You see a delicious-looking fish on your plate. How much did your mom pay to the fish itself?" After a moment of silence, "I don't know," Taro said weakly. "Surely no. You are honest. The fish did not get a penny from her. The money she brought here all went to the people for their work. But the fish is giving its precious life to you without any reward. It must be saying, 'Hey, Taro, please eat my meat and grow up. It's OK for me.'

"So we say 'Itadakimasu,' thanking the fish for its precious uncompensated life. Do you understand?" "Yes, I do, Master," Taro nodded with a smile.

What marvelous education the master conducted! At most schools, the scientific phrase "food chain" may be taught to explain such a phenomenon as people eating fish, which eat smaller living things in the sea, but that remains at the level of knowledge, which will not help people gain wisdom to enrich their life emotionally, volitionally and spiritually. The idea of 'Itadakimasu' comes from the Buddhist thought that all living things share their precious life with us and that taking such lives is a sin. Apology and thankfulness for the lives we have to take to sustain our lives may seem a contradiction, but both are combined into Nembutsu, the wisdom of Buddhism..

Now it is clear that human life is what was given, functioning and supported by the other powers than ourselves. We are surely allowed to live; we are not living on our own, so we should be thankful for being allowed to live.

However, Rev. Yutai Ikeda says, "Realization that we are being allowed to live should not be a conclusion, but a starting point." Yes, if you are really moved, you will cry out, you may start to run. If you are really awakened to the realities of your life, you ought to act or there should be some changes in your lifestyle. What changes?

Shinran Shonin says in his *Shoshinge* hymn,

"Shakyamuni Tathagata appeared in this world  
Solely to teach the ocean-like Primal Vow of Amida;  
We, an ocean of beings in an evil age of five defilements,  
Should entrust ourselves to the Tathagata's words of truth."

The basic change will be to be awakened to what we were born for. Here is an episode which Rev. Toshiko Kawamura, introduced above, revealed in her Dharma talk.

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In the southern part of Osaka Prefecture there lives an obstetrician and devout Nembutsu person, whose name is humbly hidden, but tentatively let's call him Joji. Joji was brought up by his father alone and urged to go to Sunday School at the temple. When he was a sixth grader, however, he sometimes failed to go. When finally his father knew the fact, he scolded him very severely. Joji made an excuse saying that he was studying for the entrance examination to the middle school as his friends did; he did not just play truant, but his father did not forgive him. In his vexation he started to cry, when his father spoke in a serious tone; "Listen, Joji! I intended to tell this to you after you enter the middle school, but this is the time, I think. You know you have no mother, but do you know how she died?"

"When she came to this house and became pregnant, everybody rejoiced, expecting the first child, and we held *Obi-Iwai* or a celebration of pregnancy, even inviting her obstetric doctor. A couple of weeks later, however, the doctor called the six of us, your parents and grandparents from two households and said, 'I feel very sorry to have to say this to you after your great celebration, but the pregnant wife is suffering from an acute toxemia. So I advise you to give up the fetus this time, or I cannot assure of her life.'

"Everybody was shocked into a long time of silence until your grandma from your mom's side whispered, 'please save my daughter,' and then all the others nodded. At that moment, your mom tossed her head decidedly and spoke out, 'Doctor, please let my baby come out to this world. I don't care about my life, because I was brought up in a Buddhist household, imbued with the idea that we humans are born in this world to hear the true Dharma, and I attended Sunday School and Buddhist Youth Association, encountering the *Shoshinge* and *Tannisho*, I am now treading the path to Pure Land in this world, so I have no apprehension about the future. But if my child in my womb were sent from the darkness to darkness, he will never meet Buddhism. Please let this precious human life come into this world to see the light of Amida. This wish is just what I was born for, Doctor.'

"Bursting into tears, her mother cried, 'I was wrong. I just wanted to save my own daughter, but she is right. Please do as she asks.' All the others simply nodded their heads. 'As you all say so, I will do my best to save both lives as far as I can,' the doctor said, but when you were born, your mom left this world at the age of twenty-two.

“Joji, now you know how you were born and what you were born for, don't you?”

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After this revelation, Joji was never absent from Sunday School; moreover he took every opportunity to hear Buddhist teachings and finally became a devout Nembutsu person.

On the other hand, as a student, Joji decided to become a doctor who can save such afflicted women as his mother and he finally became the head doctor of an obstetric hospital.

When Rev. Kawamura met him some time ago, she found all his family members, including his son and his wife, were leading very devoted lives as Nembutsu persons.

Now you see how Joji's mother's wish has come true; how one's own *Shinjin* does influence other persons into *Shinjin*. “Jishin Kyouninshin” or realizing *shinjin* oneself and guiding others to *shinjin* must certainly be the ultimate value of human life. In our daily life, that orientation will be implemented as follows:

### **Three Principles of Shin Buddhist Life**

1. Worshipping Amida of infinite light and life, we shall devoutly entrust ourselves to Him.
2. Awakened deeply to the truth of His Primal Vow, we shall endeavor to hear Dharma throughout life.
3. In gratitude for his salvation and reciting His Name, we shall propagate the true Dharma in the world.