

Learning the Buddha's Great Compassion

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Introduction

Buddhism is called a religion of compassion. Among many different schools of Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism, especially, Jodo Shinshu (The True Essence of Pure Land Way, which is more popularly known as 'Shin Buddhism' in the West) is often called 'Buddhism of Compassion.'

In the Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life (that forms the basis for Pure Land tradition), there is a well-known passage that reads:

'The Buddha's mind is Great Compassion. It is with this unconditional compassion that they embrace all beings'.

This passage means that learning the teaching of Buddha is nothing but understanding what the boundless compassion of Buddha is all about.

Meaning of Compassion

Love is often used together with compassion as a word having the similar meaning to that of compassion. In Buddhism, however, love is considered as a kind of blind passion meaning greed, thirst, attachment, etc. since love is accompanied by anger or hatred out of egoism if it turns out to go against one's desire. Compassion, on the other hand, can be called the most purified form of love as there is no trade-off relationship in it.

(Note: the above description of love is called 'Eros' in western tradition. However, there is a second type of love called 'Agape' which is giving love and what theologians would associate with compassion. Thus, love can be a confusing concept because of these two approaches, i.e., one is selfish and the other is self-giving)

Compassion is translated as '*Jihi*' in Japanese. The word *Jihi* consists of two terms, i.e., *Ji* is the translation from an ancient Indian word '*maitri*', meaning the desire to give everyone comfort that transcends love and hatred out of true friendship or fellowship. *Hi* originated from '*karuna*', meaning pity or sympathy for those who suffer and the desire to end their suffering. To learn the great compassion of Buddha, therefore, is to become one who understands pains and sufferings of others.

As we look at the reality of our own existence, however, the way of our living goes totally against the mind of Buddha. We clearly distinguish ourselves from others, good from evils, right from wrong, etc. based on our self-centered thoughts. This leads us to see all things in a dualistic manner with discriminative thoughts from the perspective of our own interests. We divide things into ones that are beneficial or useful to us, and ones that are non-beneficial or not useful to us. We then pursue getting those that are favorable to us as much as possible. On the other hand, we refuse to accept those that are unfavorable to us. Even if we could get those favorable things, we are never contented or satisfied with them because of our greed. Likewise, when we fail to reject our unfavorable ones, we show anger or hatred toward others, so that we are harming each other endlessly.

By awakening to the Buddha's mind of great compassion, we become aware of our foolishness associated with pursuing our own interests. What is important for us is to make endeavors to learn the way of living in accordance with the Buddha's mind.

Amida as Compassionate Means

According to the teaching of Buddha, the reason why we continually have suffering (*duhkha*) in our lives is because we do not see the true reality of life and the universe as it is.

The true reality that the Buddha awakened to is the law of causes and effects. According to this law of causation, nothing exists just by itself, independently of others. All beings are interconnected with each other or related to each other. Everything depends on something else for its existence. In the dynamic world of interdependence, everything is constantly changing and, therefore, subject to impermanence. There is no substantiality in all existence.

The ultimate reality as manifested in the wisdom of Buddha constantly works to let foolish beings know that they are in delusion with wrong views. At the same time, they get rid of their delusions by awakening them to the true reality that all beings have no inherent existence under the law of causation. The true reality is called 'Oneness' or 'Suchness' (or 'Emptiness' in Mahayana Buddhism). Foolish beings like us, however, are incapable of awakening to the ultimate reality, which is colorless and formless, unless the working of this reality is manifested, taking a specific name and form.

"From this treasure ocean of oneness form was manifested, taking the name of Bodhisattva Dharmakara, who through establishing the unhindered Vow as the cause, became Amida Buddha. For this reason Amida is the 'Tathagata of fulfilled body.' Amida has been called 'Buddha of unhindered light filling the ten quarters.' This Tathagata is also known as Namu-Buddha of inconceivable light and is the 'dharma-body as compassionate means.' 'Compassionate means' refers to manifesting form, revealing a name, and making itself known to sentient beings. It refers to Amida Buddha. This Tathagata is light. Light is none other than wisdom; wisdom is the form of light."

(Notes on Once-Calling and Many Calling)

Amida is the personified Buddha manifesting compassionate activities of the true reality as it symbolizes the process of interdependence. In the transliteration of Sanskrit terms, Amida is derived from '*amita*' meaning 'infinite' or 'immeasurable'. More specifically, Amida is originated from '*amitabha*' and '*amitayus*', meaning infinite light and eternal life, respectively. The great wisdom of Buddha is symbolized by light in many Mahayana sutras, while the great compassion of Buddha is depicted by life. The infinite light of Amida goes beyond space, while the eternal life of Amida goes beyond time, i.e., past, present, and future.

Shinjin as Compassionate Wisdom

The central teaching of Shinran, founder of the Jodo Shinshu, is to receive the true and real mind (*'makoto-no-kokoro'* in Japanese) from Amida Buddha. To entrust oneself to the Primal Vow of Amida to save all sentient beings, unconditionally, is called *shinjin*. *Shinjin* is the only and true cause for ordinary beings to attain birth in the Pure Land and become Buddha. The Primal Vow (*purva-pranidhana*) of Amida is an expression of the working of the true reality in human language.

Shinran often states that *shinjin* is wisdom in his writings, for example:

Through the compassion of Sakyamuni and Amida,
We have been brought to realize the mind that seeks to attain Buddhahood.
It is by entering the wisdom of *shinjin*
That we become persons who respond in gratitude to the Buddha's benevolence.
(Hymn of the Dharma-Ages) *

* Note: A footnote on the above hymn explains that 'since Amida's Vow is wisdom, the emergence of the mind of entrusting oneself to it is the arising of wisdom.'

Additionally, Shinran explains how true and real *shinjin* is developed into the mind that aspires for Buddhahood and also the mind to save sentient beings as follows:

Because they know true reality, they know the characteristics of the false state of sentient beings of the three realms. Because they know the false state of sentient beings, they awaken true and real compassion.
(Chapter on Realization of Kyogyoshinsho)

Shinran stresses that foolish beings like us are saved only by the great compassion of the Buddha of Eternal Life.

When we reflect on the establishment of the Vow,
We find that the Tathagata, without abandoning sentient beings in pain and affliction,
Has taken the directing of virtue to them as foremost,
Thus fulfilling the mind of great compassion.
(Hymns of the Dharma-Ages)

Furthermore, Shinran describes the content of *shinjin* as follows:

True and real *shinjin* is the diamond-like mind. The diamond-like mind is the mind that aspires for Buddhahood. The mind that aspires for Buddhahood is the mind to save sentient beings. The mind to save sentient beings is the mind to grasp sentient beings and bring them to birth in the Pure Land of peace. This mind is the aspiring for great enlightenment. This mind is the mind of great compassion.
(Chapter on *Shinjin* of Kyogyoshinsho)

We should bear in mind the following statement by T'anluan, the third master of Shinran's lineage, in his 'Commentary on Vasubandhu's discourse on the Pure Land' in our walking the path to attain birth in the Pure Land:

Suppose there is a person who, without awakening the mind aspiring for supreme enlightenment, simply hears that bliss is enjoyed in that land without interruption and desires to be born there for the sake of the bliss; such a person will not be able to attain birth.

Mahayana bodhisattvas, having become fully aware of the principle of interdependent origination, act to benefit others free of self-attachment and their selfish desires. Thus, the bodhisattva path in Mahayana Buddhism is for one not only to aim at becoming Buddha oneself (self-benefit) but to save all sentient beings by bringing them to birth in the Pure Land also (benefiting others). In other words, attaining Buddhahood oneself also holds the meaning of bringing others to the attainment of Buddhahood.

Return to This World

Shin Buddhism maintains the fundamental practice of a two-fold 'merit transference' (*eko*) of *oso* and *genso*, where *oso* is the state of departing this world for the Pure Land, while *genso* is that of returning from it to a worldly existence, both originally emanating from the single source of Amida Buddha. The reason for returning is to seek salvation for those suffering in this world.

Reverently contemplating the true essence of the Pure Land way, I see that Amida's directing of virtue to sentient beings has two aspects: the aspect for our going forth to the Pure Land and the aspect for our return to this world.

(Chapter on the True Teaching of Kyogyoshinsho)

As is seen from the above, our going forth to the Pure Land from the defiled world is not a human act but the directing of virtue of the Tathagata to enable us to do so. Upon attaining birth in the Pure Land, we immediately return to this defiled world to save all sentient beings. This is also due to the working of the Tathagata. While there are two different directions, i.e., going forth and returning, from our human point of view, they are nothing but the two types of manifestation of the same great compassion of the Tathagata.

Through great love, which is Amida's directing of virtue for our going forth,
We attain great compassion, which is Amida's directing of virtue for our return;
If not for the Buddha's directing of virtue,
How could we realize enlightenment in the Pure Land?

(Hymns of the Dharma-Ages)

From the viewpoint of our contemporary interest in 'Engaged Buddhism', *genso* can be seen as a concrete expression of the compassion in this world. As we observe people who engage in social welfare, etc., for instance, they can really be called 'people in *genso*' though they may not be aware of it. As we participate in their social welfare activities, we can also be viewed as those in *genso* though we cannot take credit for it nor regard ourselves such because we are corrupt beings. Further, social actions may be seen as Amida's compassion working through us, though it is not our action for which we take credit. Merit-transference called *eko* means that such working is given by Amida Buddha in the teaching of Jodo Shinshu. To Shinran, the Pure Land of Amida Buddha is the realm of the source of saving sentient beings.

Those who reach the Pure Land of happiness
Return to this evil world of the five defilements,
Where, like the Buddha Sakyamuni,
They benefit sentient beings without limit.

(Hymns of the Pure Land)

Dr. Daisetz Suzuki, a world-renowned Buddhist philosopher, stressed the importance of *genso* in an essay entitled "Final Words on the Dharma" as recorded just before his death as follows (which provides profound insight into Dr. Suzuki's thought on the Pure Land of Buddhism):

"The Pure Land is not a place where one expects to stay for a long time. One does not intend to linger there. Though one is thankful to be there, simply being thankful serves no purpose. This is just self-satisfaction. Therefore, it is essential to see the Pure Land as a place one must return from. One enters the realm of *genso*."

It is most likely that Dr. Suzuki wished to explain that when one receives salvation here and now, one must immediately proceed from that point to activity, wherein one subjectively engages with others.

Conclusion

As described above, Shinran makes it clear that the practice of compassion is done by the ones who have realized *shinjin*. The wisdom of Buddha received by us free of doubt will start working as the compassionate mind to save others immediately. This means that followers of Shin Buddhism seek enlightenment not only for themselves but for all others also.

Genso is a symbol of the altruism-compassion of Buddhism. In general, the salvation process never ceases until the Primal Vow of Amida is fulfilled and all people are brought to enlightenment-Buddhahood. This is the spirit of Mahayana Buddhism. Compassion becomes a matter of this life both through the working of Amida in others as they are viewed in the stage of *genso*, and through our trust in the compassionate vow of Amida that may inspire actions in contributing to the welfare of society also through the stage of *genso*.

We could view our lives as an expression of *genso*, so far as we become a channel for Amida's compassion to reach people in our world and relationships. Taking into account Shinran's understanding about the self-powered compassion that has limitations (and often leads to failures), we should never take those virtues and actions as our own doing (but they are given by Amida).

Persons who enter Amida's directing of virtue to beings
And realize the mind that seeks to attain Buddhahood
Completely abandon their self-power directing of merit,
Thus benefiting sentient beings boundlessly.
(Hymn of the Dharma ages)

Lacking even small love and small compassion
I cannot hope to benefit sentient beings
Were it not for the ship of Amida's Vow
How could I cross the ocean of painful existence?
(Gutoku's Hymns of Lament and Reflection)

These two hymns appear to contradict one another. It should be noted, however, that the latter hymn does not simply negate the actions to bring benefit to others. It is a hymn of lamentation and confession, which arose from the fact that Shinran earnestly aspired and acted to bring benefit to others, yet realized his limitations and failures, and deeply reflected upon himself. This implicitly proves how deeply Shinran aspired and endeavored to bring benefit to others.

We now live as recipients of the compassionate vows that Amida Buddha established and fulfilled. It is the overall symbol, universality, and inclusiveness that embrace all lives. We live in the world of *genso*. In such a perspective, we see the social relevance of the symbol and also our responsibility as recipients of compassion. In other words, it could become the basis for a personal and social philosophy which is practical in this world to mobilize the good-will of all people whether they are specifically Buddhists or not.

Reference: "Collected Works of Shinran" (CWS) by Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha