

True Gratitude

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by Rev. Richard Tennes

“Such is the benevolence of Amida’s great compassion,
That we must strive to return it, even to the breaking of our bodies;
Such is the benevolence of the masters and true teachers,
That we must endeavor to repay it, even to our bones becoming dust.”
-- *Shōzōmatsu Wasan*, No. 59

Good Morning!

Today we are almost at the end of another year of our lives and, maybe more importantly, at the beginning of a New Year. I thought that it would be appropriate for us to think a little about the meaning of gratitude in Jōdo Shinshū. So I want to talk a little bit about *True Gratitude*. Sadly, most of us do not reflect on this very much; I know I don’t. Maybe we think that gratitude is only a feeling and that saying “thank you” is the only response necessary for the many gifts we have received in our lives. Do we realize the tremendous gifts we have received in our lives? Do we understand how much we owe to others? This is a very important question.

Of course, it is very easy to take our condition in life for granted. We all enjoy so many benefits in this world but do we really think about how extraordinary our situation is? For example, I live here in a nice apartment, with comfortable furniture and useful appliances that make life very easy. If I get bored, I have plenty of books to read, and music and TV to entertain me; when I get hungry, there is always plenty of delicious food to eat. Where did all that sustenance and comfort come from? Did I create it? And yet, I enjoy it. There is more: when I want to go somewhere, I only have to jump in the car and go; if I need to travel farther than that, I can easily hop on a plane. Life has certainly not been so easy for most people throughout history and, in fact, it is not so easy for many, perhaps most people today! So I am very fortunate to be able to live this way. But, I am ashamed to say, I don’t truly appreciate it. Of course, I know -- intellectually and also from experience -- that things could be much different.

For example, my grandparents did not have such an easy life, although they probably worked much harder than I do! I might easily be unemployed or homeless or sick; there are many people in the world today who are not only lacking in comforts and conveniences, but are unable to fulfill even their basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter. There are many people in our world who are really suffering from deprivation, from political oppression, from injustice, illness, and many other things. Yet although I know this is the case, I do not adequately appreciate what I have; I am not truly grateful. This is the case even though I often remind myself that all of these benefits have come to me through the sacrifices and labors of many beings. When I reflect more deeply and consider the way the world’s economic systems work, I realize that many people are suffering precisely because I am living so well, since I have more than I need and others have so much less. And I certainly did not earn the comforts I have. Yet, in spite of knowing this, my gratitude is weak and my endeavors to share what I have with others are never wholehearted. Although I know that my debt to others is very great, I have not made a sincere effort to repay it.

It is very easy to accept benefits as if we have truly earned them; isn't that true? Even my appreciation of food is rather self-centered. I may say that I am "truly thankful for the food I am about to eat," but in the back of my mind I am thinking that this is my food and that I deserve it. I might say that I "wish to share this food with all beings" but I have to question how serious I am about that. I guess most human beings tend to think that everything they receive or attain is the result of their own efforts; as a result we fail to reflect deeply upon the causes and conditions which made all these attainments possible. Thus, we never manifest true compassion for those who must do without. We are pleased that conditions have provided us and our families and friends with plenty but, as for the others, well, perhaps it is their fault that they are suffering, perhaps it is their karma. This is how we think, isn't it? We try to justify ourselves, even though it is clear that many of us enjoy benefits far beyond our needs. But if we think deeply about this, whether we are rich or poor, we cannot help but realize that the debt of gratitude we owe to other beings, simply for the sustenance of our lives, is truly immeasurable. Simply to have this rare opportunity to live is itself a priceless gift. We can never repay this gift with words or with any of our limited deeds; if we really think about it, the gift of living can only be repaid with the totality of our lives.

Our minds, however, usually employ "common sense" to rationalize our self-centered attitude, and we reason that, since it is impossible to repay such a debt, we do not need to concern ourselves with it too much. Since we always think in a self-benefiting way, this logic seems quite acceptable, at least most of the time.

In the Wasan that I read at the beginning, which is the one we commonly call "Ondokusan," Shinran Shōnin really challenges our whole ego-centered attitude. Let me read it again:

"Such is the benevolence of Amida's great compassion,
That we must strive to return it, even to the breaking of our bodies;
Such is the benevolence of the masters and true teachers,
That we must endeavor to repay it, even to our bones becoming dust."

This poem holds a special place among Jōdo Shinshū followers and, because of its deep meaning, it is often sung as a gatha during our services. When we sing it to a lovely melody we may be moved by it and may even reflect – for a moment at least – on its meaning and relevance to our lives. But we may also leave it behind when the music ends and, by the end of the service, have put these thoughts out of our minds.

Some might say that the self-centered attitude I have described concerns only worldly issues whereas Ondokusan concerns spiritual issues. It could be argued that, although we may lack gratitude toward other beings in our daily lives – the inevitable result of our condition as bombu or foolish beings burdened with blind passions – we are nevertheless able to repay the "benevolence of Amida's great compassion" and of our "masters and true teachers" because this benevolence is repaid by the Nembutsu we recite, which has risen to our lips as a result of that benevolence. In other words, having encountered the teaching through our teachers and thus embraced by Amida's great compassionate Vow, our gratitude is constantly expressed by the Nembutsu we joyfully recite. As for our debts to other beings; well, these are purely in the realm of causes and conditions and separate from our debt to Amida.

But, can there really be any spiritual concerns which are outside of, or separate from, the concerns of life? This is not possible. What we owe to the Buddha and to our teachers is precisely one with our debt to all who have helped us to acquire life and to encounter the Buddha's teaching; in other words, our debt is to all beings. Through their benevolence, we have been able to awaken to the reality of Amida's Primal Vow, the immeasurable Wisdom

and Compassion which is at the heart of all things. The Nembutsu that rises to our lips expresses the infinite gratitude which our limited and self-centered minds are incapable of even conceiving. And, despite our continuing selfishness, complacency, and lack of true understanding, when Namo-amida-butsu becomes the true heart of our own being; the wisdom and compassion of Amida must be expressed now in the very living of our lives.

In one of his letters, Shinran Shōnin wrote:

“Signs of long years of saying the nembutsu and aspiring for birth can be seen in the change in the heart that had been bad and in the deep warmth for friends and fellow-practicers; this is the sign of rejecting the world. You should understand this fully.”

Through his own “long years of saying the nembutsu,” Shinran Shōnin experienced the growing warmth of heart toward other beings which is Amida’s compassion manifested in limited, ordinary, self-centered beings like us. Actually, “long years” means our whole life, which is so fragile, rare, and brief but which we are so fortunate to be able to experience as human beings. Unfortunately we are very apt to waste this life with endless judgments, calculations, and attempts to justify ourselves at the expense of others. Still, though we are so self-centered, we are accepted by the Buddha totally without judgement, just as we are, good and bad. It when we realize this non-discriminating acceptance that we, as Shinran Shōnin said, come “to abhor such a self and to lament continued existence in birth-and-death.” Birth-and-death, you see, is the place where we live in ignorance of the fact of our self-centered nature. Once we begin to see ourselves, through the working of the Vow, as we truly are, the cycle of birth-and-death has already been broken.

I would like to read an English translation of a poem by Mrs. Nami Sogi. Mrs. Sogi was born in Fukuoka, Japan in 1894, but spent most of her life on the Big Island of Hawaii where, in her struggle to understand her own unhappiness, she began to attend temple services and to listen to the Dharma. She later wrote:

“Disregarding the sufferings of others,
grasping happiness only for myself,
I live with the mind of a hungry-ghost.
Yet, even though I live with this mind,
To know that I am the object of Amida’s compassion,
Makes me feel ashamed of myself.”

Nembutsu arises from this kind of self-awareness. Only when the depth of my own falseness and selfishness becomes clear to me can I really begin to appreciate what has been given to me. Before this, I still think I have earned my good fortune and, so, I cannot be grateful at all. Amida’s compassion awakens us to see ourselves this way because it is only with this insight that we can accept the embrace of the Great Compassionate Vow. So long as we remain in this world, we will remain limited beings, incapable of truly appreciating the benefits we receive and unable to even acknowledge our great debt. But in the Nembutsu, “the heart and mind of great compassion that is thoroughgoing,” the distance between myself and others, between myself and Amida is totally obliterated. In the embrace of the Vow, we need not worry about our lack of appreciation or our inability to properly express gratitude for the infinite gifts we have received. In living the Nembutsu, relying only on Tathāgata, our whole lives – defiled as they continue to be – “must” become an expression of gratitude, “even to the breaking of our bodies... even to our bones becoming dust.” Again, as Shinran Shōnin wrote, “once the true and real mind is made to arise in us, how can we remain as we were, possessed of blind passions?”

It is true, of course, that in the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, much emphasis has been placed on the next life and many have taught – and continue to teach – that in this life our task is only to attain shinjin and thus ensure our birth in the Pure Land; it is only after death, when we attain Buddhahood, that we will be able to help other beings. This view is often supported by a frequently repeated passage in Tannishō, which suggests that reciting nembutsu is the only method by which we can manifest the heart and mind of great compassion in this life. However, this passage should not be taken out of the context of the whole of Shinran Shōnin's teachings. In fact, Shinran Shōnin emphasized in his letters that the deliberate doing of evil, with the assumption that one will be saved in any case by Amida's Vow is the height of self-delusion. Such a person, he suggests, doesn't truly understand see him or herself as a limited person but merely uses the teaching to excuse evil behaviour. Such a person has not realized their true nature and has not come to feel – as Mrs. Sogi came to feel – ashamed of themselves. Without this sense of one's own self-centeredness, any excuse to satisfy one's desires will be readily embraced.

Reflecting on this, I cannot help but come to the conclusion that the deliberate "doing of evil" also includes the complacent "not-doing" of good. In other words, when there are tasks before us which need to be performed, when there are hungry people to feed, sick to heal, injustices to be put right, we cannot turn away with the excuse that we do not believe in self-power or that we will deal with social problems in the next life, when we become Buddhas. This is as deluded an attitude as maintaining that, being bombu, we all are free to commit crimes because Amida will save us anyway. In this life, our recitation of Namo-amida-butsu – by which the heart and mind of Great Compassion is manifested, and by which we repay our un-repayable debt to the Buddha – is expressed by responding, in every way we can, to the needs of others in this very life. The Namo-amida-butsu on our lips must also be in our hearts and in our hands. Of course, each one of us has to consider for himself and herself just how Namo-amida-butsu is manifested in the world. We must really look around us and, opening our eyes and ears, minds and hearts, make decisions and take actions which will, in one way or another, contribute to the well being of others and alleviate the sufferings which are growing in all places on this earth.

Actually, it is very difficult to spend five minutes of any day without encountering such suffering. There is homelessness, addiction, inequality, and injustice everywhere we look. Countless people are suffering the effects of war and brutality throughout the world. Lies are constantly paraded as truths and even the very planet we live upon is being – perhaps irreparably – damaged through our complacent selfishness. Shinran Shōnin, again in a letter, expressed the hope that all Nembutsu followers would embrace "prayers for the world in their hearts." Professor Shigaraki explains that this "prayer," *inoru* in Japanese, signifies an aspiration made to the Buddha to work for the state of society and the world. Our prayers for the world can only be fulfilled when we, as Shigaraki says "take Amida Buddha's Vow above all else as our own Vow and make Amida's wish our own wish."

In his 2008 New Year Message, our Gomonshu has strongly urged us to reflect on the issues that face the world today and to take action as Buddhists. He writes:

"All lives are interrelated, and therefore, armed conflicts or climate change cannot be regarded as the problems of other people. We must address them as issues that concern us all."

Some may wonder, Gomonshu notes, what peace and environmental issues have to do with Buddhism. Although it is true that birth and enlightenment are the basis of Buddhism, and that the teaching cannot magically cure social ills, the fact is, he continues,

"[T]he human race has caused serious problems on a global scale by pursuing their self-centered desires without careful consideration [thus] you cannot say that Buddhism is irrelevant to these issues. Buddhists seek enlightenment because actual humans, due to their ignorance and blind passions, constantly cause damage to their own lives and the lives of others, thereby deepening everybody's suffering. It is said that Bodhisattvas... cannot be happy unless all people.. become happy. As we have been given only limited amounts of air and water on this planet, let us make every effort to lead a moderate way of life and realize a society where everyone helps each other, so that all people are able to live life fully and with joy."

I hope that, in the coming year and in preparation for Shinran Shōnin's 750th Memorial, we can all put our Gomonshu's words into practice and, through Amida's Light, begin to see our own actions clearly and with true insight. May we all, in the embrace of the Great Compassionate Vow, live our lives expressing deep appreciation to all beings, through our words and deeds, for the inconceivable benefits we have received. In this way we will be able to return, with true gratitude and with the totality of our lives, the infinite benevolence we have received.

With that I would like to wish all of you a most happy New Year, in which justice, well-being, and therefore peace will prevail throughout the world. Thank you.

Namo-amida-butsu.