

Dharma Talk: Why Are We Here Today?

by Paul Nakamura

(Paul Nakamura was a young dedicated Shin Buddhist. He returned to the Pure Land, passed away on June 24, 2003, leaving behind his wife and three young children. This talk was given on April 13, 2003 and represents his thought which he left for us, expressing his faith and devotion to Buddhism in the midst of his fleeting life. Paul was a member of the Aiea Hongwanji Temple in Honolulu.)

Good morning. Thank you all for being here this morning. I'm very happy that we have the opportunity to share a few moments and thoughts this morning.

Let's begin by asking ourselves a couple of questions: Why are we here this morning? Why do we come to this church on Sunday mornings?

Would anyone like to share your answers to these questions with us?

For some of us, we come to worship, to learn more about our religion and to practice the teachings of the Buddha. For others, we are here today because it makes us feel good or maybe even to see and exchange greetings with friends. Each of us has a number of different reasons for being here today and for coming to this beautiful church on Sundays. We gather here, join together in meditation, in the singing of gathas, chanting of sutras and recital of pledges and affirmations. We learn and think about the wisdom of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. We also sometimes gather for special occasions such as last week's Hanamatsuri service. We are very fortunate to have the opportunity to listen to people like our own Rev. Kawaji and other guest speakers discuss teachings such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the impermanent nature of our lives and the world around us.

After our Sunday church service, many of us go back to what might be called our "normal" lives. We go home and might go grocery shopping at the market, go shopping at Pearlridge Center, or go to Long's to buy items we've seen advertised in the Sunday morning paper. Some of us may do chores around the house, work in the yard, or maybe wash the car. Others may spend the day relaxing at home or at the beach, playing golf, or enjoying some other leisurely activity.

Before we are ready for it, Monday arrives and we are back to work, or back to school, or back to whatever our weekly "routine" is. Many of us fight the morning traffic as we go to work or to school. We take care of our Monday morning emergencies, hurry through our lunch, and then do whatever we have to in order to get through the afternoon and then go home, only to return for more of the same on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. Many of us get caught up in our weekly routines and sometimes end up blindly "going through the motions, anxiously waiting for the weekend to arrive.

As we do this, we (or at least I do) have a tendency to almost completely forget about the teachings we are exposed to every Sunday in church. Somehow, we seem to forget about "Right Thought", "Right Speech" and "Right Action". Examples: Have you ever gotten really upset when someone rudely pulls into the parking space that you've been waiting for in the Long's parking lot? Have you ever become angry when an advertised item is not available at a certain store? Is there anybody who hasn't had these kinds of experiences?

This morning, I'd like to share with you a method or technique that we can all use to incorporate some of the Buddhist teachings we learn about every Sunday into our everyday

lives. This will help us remember "Right Thought", Right Speech", and "Right Action", when the rude driver suddenly cuts in front of you on the freeway without any signal or warning.

The technique is called "flag on path." I'm sure many of you already use this technique. "Flag on path" is simply making yourself a reminder and then putting it in a place where you are definitely going to see it. My wife does this all the time at home. She writes herself little reminder notes on those yellow post it stickers. She puts the stickers on our door so that she has to see the note as she's leaving the house. Some of us have weekly planners, calendars or if you're a modern high tech person, you might have a palm pilot. Put your really important reminders on the yellow (or color of your choice) post it stickers and place it on the appropriate date in your calendar, or place it right on the face of your palm pilot. Guys, this works very well if you need help remembering birthdays and anniversary dates.

I'd like to share my version of a flag that all of us can use every day. These are actually reminder cards with the Four Noble Truths are printed on one side of the card and the Eightfold Path on the other side. These cards can be placed in your daily or weekly planner, in your wallets, on the dashboard of your car, under your computer screen or in any other place such that you will see it every day. You can even lean it against the mirror in your bathroom. The idea is to put the card in a place where you will see it every day. This will help us to think about ways in which we can live by these teachings on a daily basis, not only on Sundays when we come to church. The next time you become upset because another person rudely pulled into the parking space you were patiently waiting for, pull the card out and think about Right Thought, Right Speech and Right Action.

When you are looking at the card and thinking about the concept of Right Understanding, we need to remind ourselves that life is impermanent.

As Reverend Kawaji mentioned last week, every day is our first and at the same time, every day is our last. Similarly, every breath is our first and at the same time, every breath is our last. This concept may seem very scary to some of us, but it's really not. Try taking a deep breath – breathe in and then out. Once we let go of the breath, we cannot get it back. It is gone forever.

I'd like to share a recent personal experience related to impermanence. I learned in September of last year that I have a form of acute leukemia. As many of you know, leukemia is cancer of the blood and bone marrow. The overall cure rate for leukemia is not very high. Since October of last year, I have spent over 65 days in the hospital either receiving chemotherapy or having treatment for various kinds of infections. My bald head is not because I want to become a professional wrestler. As a result of this experience, I've had to accept the fact that life certainly is not permanent.

One of the things that I came to realize during my experience is that we can all benefit from the impermanence of life because with every new breath we are able to take and every new day that we awaken to, we are provided with a new opportunity to contemplate, think about and try to live by the teachings of the Buddha. We are not judged, or condemned if we do not do so well today and if we are fortunate enough to awaken tomorrow, we'll have another opportunity.

This morning, I'd like to share this thought with you; that each breath we take and each new day that comes brings with it a new opportunity for us to live by the teachings of the Buddha. Even if we did not do so well yesterday, we will have a new opportunity with each new day during our lives. Please try the "flag on path" technique. Please try putting this card in a place that you will see it every day. When you see it, read it and think about what we can do to practice these valuable teachings.