

The Dharma Breeze

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Maida Center of Buddhism
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Human Existence As a Bridge

—The First Three Lines of the “Three Refuges”—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss the meaning of human existence by explaining the first three lines of the “Three Refuges” that we often chant in our Buddhist services. The “Three Refuges” (that is cited below) originally comes from the *Garland Sutra*. Many Japanese Buddhists, regardless of their sectarian differences, recite this statement in their services.

I believe that the first three lines contain one of the most important teachings in Buddhism. They describe the most important spiritual “turn-round” experience that we must have in our lives. The first three lines of the “Three Refuges” are underlined here:

Hard is it to receive human existence; I have already received it.
Hard is it to listen to the Buddha-Dharma; I have already listened to it.
If I do not transcend this human existence in this life, where else can I do it?

I, together with all people, sincerely take refuge in the Three Treasures:

I take refuge in the Buddha...
I take refuge in the Dharma...
I take refuge in the Sangha...

First Line

The first line says, “Hard is it to receive human existence, I have already received it.” Here the word “hard” implies “wonderful.” It implies that if we had been born as other animals like cats and dogs, we could not enjoy many things, such as entertainment, sports, and literature. Also, we have high intelligence that other animals do not have.

Here the term “human existence” means the realm in which we seek things and people outside ourselves, such as an education, a job, a family, material possessions, and a good reputation, to satisfy our desires.

But, the important question we must ask here is “Can we find ultimate happiness in human existence?” or, stated another way, “Is seeking things and people outside ourselves good enough?” To this question Buddhism answers “No.” It says that seeking objects outside ourselves cannot give us ultimate happiness. It teaches us that we must go beyond human existence.

Second Line

Then the second line says, “Hard is it to listen to the Buddha-Dharma; I have already listened to it.” Here the word “hard” again implies “wonderful.” It implies the joy of having been able to listen to the Buddha-Dharma. It also expresses deep gratitude for having been able to meet the Buddha-Dharma. This line implies that listening to the Dharma is the greatest dignity of human existence.

The Dharma in the term “Buddha-Dharma” contains two meanings: (1) the teachings (dharma) of Shakyamuni Buddha and (2) the Truth or True Reality (Dharma) that is taught by him. Thus, listening to the Buddha-Dharma means listening to the teachings of Shakyamuni in order to understand the Truth or True Reality.

Third Line

Then what happens if we listen to the Dharma? When we listen to it, we come to see human existence in a totally different way. The human existence that we have so far been cherishing loses its importance and attraction. We realize that we cannot find ultimate happiness in it. It becomes something we have to transcend. This is expressed in the third line: “If I do not transcend this human existence in this life, where else can I do it?”

In the first line, human existence is said to be wonderful. It sounds as if human existence were an ultimate goal. It sounds as if we should cherish and love it. But when we have listened to the Dharma, our view of human existence has gone through a transformation. Now human existence is suddenly seen as something to be transcended.

Human Existence as an Existence in Samsara

When we listen to the Dharma, it teaches us that we must transcend our human existence because it is an existence within the deluded world called samsara. In order to explain the Buddhist view of human existence, we must discuss the theory of the six realms of existence (samsara) that was part of ancient Indian cosmology.

The six realms of existence are: (1) god, (2) human, (3) fighting spirit, (4) hungry demon, (5) animal, and (6) hell. Human existence, which we have been discussing, is the second of these six realms of existence.

This theory of the six realms was originally part of the cosmology of Brahmanism (or Hinduism). In Brahmanism a sentient being is born in one of these six realms of existence and will be born in another realm in the next life. And it will continue to transmigrate in these realms eternally. Brahmins believed in the inevitable eternal transmigration of the soul from one life to another.

But Shakyamuni viewed this theory in a totally different way. He considered it totally meaningless to be attached to the eternal transmigration of the soul. He denied the existence of the soul itself and taught that one should put an end to one's attachment to the cycle of births and deaths. He saw the theory not so much as a theory about transmigration from one life to another, but rather as a theory about the transition from one state of mind to another that is taking place in the present moment. For example, our mind moves from greed (that "hungry demon" symbolizes) to anger (that "hell" symbolizes).

According to Shakyamuni, human beings are attached to the objects of their desires and live their lives meaninglessly seeking those objects. He calls this deluded way of living "samsara"—an endless cycle of births and deaths. Here let me present my interpretation of samsara. Samsara means the births and deaths of our dreams. It means the way in which we keep having one dream after another. For example, when we were young, we had a dream of getting into a nice school. We studied hard and got into the school, then the school as our dream disappeared. Then another dream was born. We wished to be employed by a nice company. When a company hired us, the dream disappeared and another new dream was born. Then, we kept on having other dreams concerning things such as our marriage, family, and retirement. And the last dream we have in our lives is a dream about another life after death. This is the way we have been living and is the way we are living.

T'an-luan (476-542, a Chinese Pure Land monk) compares our samsaric way of living to an inchworm's walking on the brim of a barrel. A worm is diligently walking on a barrel, believing that it is walking on a straight path. But it returns to the place where it started. It keeps on doing this endlessly. Many people live their lives the same way. They believe that since they are making a lot of effort in their lives, they are making progress. But that they are making great effort does not necessarily mean that they are progressing. A hamster on a wheel is running quite diligently, but it is not advancing even an inch.

The frustration that we feel concerning the cyclic life we are living is that there is no beginning or end and that nothing is accomplished or fulfilled. Although we live our lives in this samsaric way in Shakyamuni's eyes, many of us are not aware we do so. It is not until we listen to the Dharma that we clearly recognize our samsaric way of living and desire to transcend it.

It is said that when Shakyamuni as a young man went out of the three gates of the palace and saw the reality of aging, sickness, and death, he recognized the meaninglessness of his life. Not long after that, he went out of the fourth gate and met a traveling monk. The monk was living a powerful and meaningful life. Having listened to the monk's teaching, Shakyamuni was deeply moved by it and generated his aspiration to emulate the monk. At that moment, Shakyamuni probably said, "If I do not transcend this human existence in this life, where else can I do it?" When we gain insight into the meaninglessness of our lives and desire to transcend it, true Buddhism begins.

Human Existence As a Bridge

Thus, the third line says that our life as a circle must become a life as a line. In other words, our meaningless cyclic life must become a path in which we have a beginning and an end. Now we can say that the true meaning of human existence is that it is a path or a bridge. The bridge is the only place where we can cross the bridge and go to the other shore. Likewise, human existence is the only place where we can transcend human existence and go to the world of the Buddha.

The bridge is *not* a place for us to stay. It is not an ultimate goal. The meaning of a bridge is that it is something to be crossed—that it is a way to reach the other shore. If we stay on the bridge and become attached to it, the meaning of the bridge is lost. If we are just interested in adorning, decorating, and polishing up the bridge, and never cross it, the meaning of the bridge is lost.

Likewise, human existence is *not* a place for us to stay. The greatest meaning of human existence is that it is a process toward the realization of Buddhahood—the fulfillment of human life. If we are just interested in adorning, decorating, and polishing up human existence and do not go beyond it, the meaning of human existence is lost.

Thus, the third line says that the greatest dignity of human existence is that it is the only place where it can be transcended. Here let me cite the words of Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (1863-1903, a Japanese Shin teacher) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900, a German philosopher). Their words express the same idea.

Religion is not a path to follow to become a good man in this world. It is a path reaching beyond man.

(Manshi Kiyozawa, *December Fan*, p. 20)

What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not an end: what can be loved in man is that he is an *overture* and a *going under*.

(*The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. W. Kaufmann, 126-27)

Conclusion

Now I have discussed the first three lines of the “Three Refuges.” They teach that all of us must experience a spiritual transition. They teach us that we must meet a Buddha, listen to him, and see our lives in a totally different way. We must see human existence as something to be transcended. When we go through this spiritual transformation, our life becomes a path or a bridge. We become travelers. Being a traveler on the path is the most basic, profound, and natural meaning of human existence. Our cyclic life must become a path toward the realization of Buddhahood—toward the fulfillment of our lives.

Shakyamuni teaches us the shortness of human life and urges us to immediately discover the deepest meaning of our existence. We have such a wonderful existence, human existence. But if we end our lives without meeting Buddhas, without listening to them, our lives will be spent in vain. If we end our lives having only satisfied our human desires, our lives will be spent in vain. Only the teachings of Buddhas can awaken us from the deep dream we are having in our daily lives. Once we embark on the path, we will feel tremendous joy and deep gratitude to our teachers.

Becoming a Buddha Through the Nenbutsu (Thinking of the Buddha) —“The Great Stone Face” by Nathaniel Hawthorne—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to talk about a Buddhist teaching that we can learn from one of my favorite stories, “The Great Stone Face” by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

All of us have some unforgettable stories that we heard in our childhood. When I was fifteen, my junior high school teacher, who was a Christian, told me this story by Hawthorne. When the teacher told me the story, he said that this could be one of the most important stories in my life. I believe he was right. I have thought about it quite often ever since. It has become more and more important to me.

This story has all kinds of Buddhist messages. Here I want to talk about a Buddhist teaching of Shinran Shonin (1173-1262, founder of Shin Buddhism) that we can learn from it: “Shin Buddhism means becoming a Buddha through the nenbutsu.”

Then what is the nenbutsu? The nenbutsu literally means “thinking of (*nen*) the Buddha (*butsu*).” The first of the Three Refuges, “I take refuge in the Buddha,” is called the *nen-butsu*. (The second refuge, “I take refuge in the Dharma,” is called the *nen-po* [thinking of the Dharma]; the third refuge, “I take refuge in the Sangha,” is called the *nen-so* [thinking of the Sangha].) The nenbutsu means having a Buddha, a great human being, at the center of our lives and keep listening to his teachings throughout our lives. In short, it means the spirit of a student who keeps on seeking the deepest meaning of his life.

In the Sino-Japanese Buddhist tradition, Buddhists often identify the nenbutsu with the practice of chanting *Namu Amida Butsu* (“[I] take refuge in Amida Buddha”). Many of them chant it mechanically without understanding its meaning. I think it totally meaningless for them to do the practice if they do not understand its meaning. The practice is essentially thinking of or appreciating the wonderful spiritual qualities of the Buddha.

When Shinran says that we become Buddhas through the nenbutsu, he teaches us that we can become Buddhas by constantly thinking of a Buddha and listening to his teachings. It is so important for us to have someone we desire to emulate in our lives.

In the story of the Great Stone Face we learn about a young man by the name of Ernest who becomes a great human being by meditating on a great human being. Now let me give you an outline of the story.

The Story of the Great Stone Face

Once upon a time, there was a mountain village near a huge rock that looked exactly like a human face. This rock was called the Great Stone Face.

There was a little boy in the village. His name was Ernest. One day Ernest and his mother were looking at the Great Stone Face. The mother told Ernest, "Ernest, look at that Great Stone Face. In our village there is an old prediction that some day a child will be born in this village who will grow up to become the greatest and noblest of men. He will look exactly like that Great Stone Face." Ernest said, "Mother, how wonderful it must be to see such a great person! Mother, I want to see such a person!" Ernest never forgot this prediction about the coming of a great human being. He grew up looking at the Great Stone Face every day and thinking of this great human being.

When Ernest was a boy, there was a rumor in the village that the man who looked exactly like the Great Stone Face had finally appeared. People said that the great man's name was Mr. Gathergold. Mr. Gathergold was born in the village and had become a millionaire, the richest man in the nation. People said that he looked exactly like the Great Stone Face. Then, Mr. Gathergold decided to return to his village and spend the rest of his life there.

When Mr. Gathergold returned to the village in a carriage, all the villagers went out to welcome him. They waved their hands and shouted, "Welcome back, Mr. Gathergold!" They said, "Wow, look at his face! He looks like the Great Stone Face. He and the Great Stone Face are like twins." But when Ernest saw Mr. Gathergold, he was surprised, because he did not look like the Great Stone Face at all. Ernest was disappointed. As years passed by, Mr. Gathergold lost his money. Nobody any longer said that he looked like the Great Stone Face.

When Ernest became a young man, a famous general appeared. He was originally from the village. All the villagers said he looked exactly like the Great Stone Face. But Ernest was disappointed to see him because he did not look like the Great Stone Face at all.

When Ernest became a man of middle age, a great statesman appeared. He was originally from the village. He became a candidate for the presidency of the country and visited the village. Many people in the village again shouted, "Wow, look at him. He looks exactly like the Great Stone Face." But when Ernest looked at the statesman, he was again disappointed. Disappointed, Ernest went home. On his way home, he looked at the Great Stone Face. He felt as if it were telling him, "Ernest, wait, be patient! The man will come, the man will come."

Then, Ernest became an old man. He was still waiting for the appearance of the great man. One day Ernest picked up a book of poetry written by a poet who was originally from the village. When Ernest read his poems, they impressed him, because they were so beautiful. He thought that this poet must be the great man he had been waiting for. He wanted to see him.

This poet lived in a city. He heard about Ernest and one day decided to visit him. He came to Ernest's house. When Ernest met the visitor and learned that he was the poet he admired, he immediately looked at his face. But Ernest again shook his head. He was again disappointed. He said, "No, this poet is not the person. He does not look like the Great Stone Face." Then, the poet asked, "Ernest, why are you sad?" Ernest answered, "Mr. Poet, I have been waiting for the appearance of a great man throughout my life. When I read your poems, I thought that you were the great man I have been waiting for."

The poet said, "Ernest, I am sorry. I cannot be compared with the Great Stone Face. My poems, my words, may sound great, may sound like the voice of the Great Stone Face. But, those poems are my dreams; they are different from me, different from what I am. I do not look like the Great Stone Face. I am sorry, Ernest."

On the same evening, Ernest and the poet went out of the house to attend a meeting in the open air. Ernest stood on a platform and started to talk. His talk was very sincere, beautiful, and powerful. The poet and many villagers were listening to Ernest. When the sun was about to set, the illumination from the sun hit the face of Ernest and the Great Stone Face. Then, the poet suddenly stood up and shouted, "My friends, look at Ernest! Look at his face! He looks exactly like the Great Stone Face! Ernest is the person whom we have been waiting for!" People saw the face of Ernest. They realized that the poet was right. They said, "Yes, Ernest is the man predicted in our story. He is the great man."

The Ending of the Story

Before I tell you the ending of this story, let me reemphasize the importance of Shinran's teaching, "Becoming a Buddha through the nenbutsu (thinking of the Buddha)," that we can learn from this story. Ernest lived his life constantly thinking of the Great Stone Face. "Thinking of the Great Stone Face" was the nenbutsu for Ernest. Ernest eventually became a great human being by constantly thinking of a great human being.

Ernest met the richest man in the country, but he was not satisfied with him. He met the greatest general and the greatest statesman, but he was not satisfied with them. He met the most talented person in the nation, but he was not satisfied with him. He was not satisfied with things such as wealth, fame, power, or art that people usually praise and admire. He had a deeper aspiration. He had a desire to see a human being who transcended things such as wealth and fame

Now here let me talk about the ending of the story. In this ending we can learn another important Buddhist teaching. After the section in which people said, "Yes, Ernest is the man predicted in our story. He is the great man," Hawthorne says: After finishing his talk, Ernest came down from the platform. Although people told him that he looked like the Great Stone Face, Ernest did not believe their words. He

still kept on waiting for the appearance of the great man. He thought that some day he would meet with the great man.

In this ending I can see the Zen master Dogen's teaching, "A Buddha is not aware he is a Buddha." When we start to study Buddhism, we expect that some day we will realize Buddhahood and become aware we are Buddhas. But Dogen says that this will never happen and that if we become aware that we have become Buddhas, that is a very dubious attainment and there is something wrong with it.

We may call a Buddha a wise and compassionate person. But the Buddha would never call himself so. He would say that he is an ignorant and compassionless person. That is the nature of Buddhahood (awakening) taught in Buddhism. That is why Shinran said that he was a foolish ordinary person. We may call Shinran a wise and compassionate person, but Shinran would never call himself so and would say that he is ignorant and compassionless.

I really admire Hawthorne for saying that Ernest did not believe the words of the people and kept on waiting for the appearance of the great man. Hawthorne knew the truth that a Buddha is not aware he is a Buddha. A true Buddha is a humble person who is interested only in respecting his teachers and listening to them throughout his life. He is not at all interested in knowing if he has become a Buddha or not.

Conclusion

All our predecessors met their teachers. When Shakyamuni was a young man and went out of a gate of the palace, he met a traveling monk, a Buddha. Shakyamuni kept on doing the nenbutsu, kept on thinking of this great human being throughout his life, and he also became a great human being. When Shinran was twenty-nine, he met his teacher Honen, a Buddha. He kept on doing the nenbutsu and eventually became a great human being. The greatest happiness in our lives is that we meet Buddhas, have them at the center of our lives, and live our lives thinking of them and listening to their teachings.

Then, what is the Buddha in my life? Who has been my Buddha? I can say that the Christian teacher who told me this story was the first Buddha I met in my life. He really impressed me. Then, in my high school days I was strongly influenced by the religious writings of Leo Tolstoy, a famous Russian novelist. Tolstoy became my Buddha. Then, my Christian teacher, my first Buddha, was encompassed into Tolstoy. Then, in my college days, I met a Buddhist teacher by the name of Shuichi Maida. He became my Buddha. Then both my Christian teacher and Tolstoy were encompassed into Maida. Ever since I met my Buddhist teacher, I have been living my life having him at the center of my life. Although I cannot say I am his good student, I consider myself fortunate to have been able to have a Buddha at the center of my life.

All of us have "Ernest" in us. It is so important for us to have the nenbutsu, and live our lives on the basis of it. If we have the nenbutsu in our lives, we will be able to live our lives in a truly rich, meaningful, and fulfilling way.

(12/8, 2009)

Simplicity

Nobuo Haneda

Unfreedom Caused by Our Possessions

Many people love simplicity because their lives are not simple. As they get older, their lives often get more and more complicated, due to the fact that they have accumulated many possessions.

Talking about myself, when I was a student in Madison, Wisconsin, about thirty-five years ago, my wife and I did not have so many things. After my course work we moved from Madison to Chicago. At that time, we could move all of our property in a small car. Since then we have moved several times and each time we moved, the number of boxes we moved increased. If we were to move now (a thought I hate to have), a huge truck may not be large enough to carry all our possessions.

Initially we human beings acquire things because we desire to live our lives in a free and easy way. But, the irony is that the more material things we accumulate, the less freedom we have. Since we have to constantly worry about them, our lives become unfree and constrained.

There is a joke about the irony of material possessions. A gentleman says, "There were two happiest days in my life. The first happiest day was the day I bought a luxury sailboat. And the second happiest day was the day I sold it." When we acquire something we desire to have, we are happy. But often that possession soon becomes a burden or a pain in the neck.

We can say the same thing about our spiritual possessions. In order to seek spiritual happiness, we attend temples and churches and learn various religious teachings. But it is often the case that the spiritual teachings we learn make us more constrained and confused instead of making us free and peaceful.

Our excessive material and spiritual possessions can make us more frustrated and miserable. Although our original motivation in acquiring our possessions was seeking freedom, we can end up losing our freedom.

The Simple Lives of Our Teachers

Now I have talked about the frustration that is caused by our possessions. Here I think about great teachers of mankind, such as Shakyamuni, Socrates, and Jesus, who did not experience such frustration. They had

one thing in common. They all lived their lives in a simple way. Here I want to give a couple of examples of the simple life.

The first is a story about Diogenes, a Greek philosopher who lived in the 4th century BC. I read this story in an English textbook in junior high school in Japan.

Diogenes was a famous philosopher who taught the importance of living a simple life. His reputation reached the ear of Alexander the Great. The king was curious about the philosopher and wanted to see him. Thus one day the king decided to visit him. When he did, he learned that Diogenes lived in a barrel made of wood. The philosopher was sitting in the barrel and enjoying the sun. Alexander said to the philosopher, "I have heard of your reputation. I admire your wisdom. So, I want to give you a reward. Please request whatever you want. I will give you anything you want." Then the philosopher said, "Yes, king, I have one request." The king said, "All right, tell me what you want." Then Diogenes said, "Step aside, because you are standing between me and the sun."

When I read this story about Diogenes, I was impressed by his simple request. Other people would have requested things such as good status and money from the king, but the philosopher was not interested in those things. For him, things such as the sun and air were much more precious. This story teaches us that we must learn to appreciate things that we already have rather than seeking things we do not have. Many of us think that we do not have valuable things and go out to search for them. We think that we must pay to get them. But this story tells us that we already have the most valuable things, such as the sun and air, close to us and we can appreciate them immediately without any cost. Although they are always near us and support our life, we do not truly appreciate them.

Let me tell you another story told by the Zen master Dogen (1200-53). Dogen went to China to study Zen. In China he met many wonderful Zen teachers, and later he talked about them in his lectures. These lectures were recorded by one of his disciples in the work called *Shobogenzo-zuimonki*. In this work Dogen talks about one monk in this way:

When I was at the T'ien-t'ung Monastery, the secretary of the monastery was a senior monk named Tao-ju, a son of the prime minister. Since he had left his family and no longer sought any worldly profit, his robes were so tattered that he was hard to look at. But his virtue was known by others, and he became the secretary of that great temple.

Once I asked him, "Senior Tao-ju, you are the son of a high government official and a member of a wealthy and noble family. Why are the things you wear so shabby? Why do you live in such poverty?" Senior Tao-ju just said to me, "Because I have become a monk."

Here I can feel that Dogen was deeply moved by the monk's words "Because I have become a monk." Those words must have sounded like thunder to Dogen. From this senior monk Dogen learned what it meant to be a monk, to be a Buddhist. Dogen learned that a seeker of the way must live a simple life. Thus, throughout his life, he taught that a seeker of the way must live a simple life.

The Innermost Aspiration (Hongan)

Then, why were our teachers' lives so simple? I answer that it is because they had one aspiration, one focus, in their lives. I do not think they intended or tried to live a simple life. Their simple lifestyle was a natural outcome of the fact that they had one aspiration, one focus. When we have one aspiration in our lives, our lives become simple. The more focused our lives become, the simpler our lives become.

Then, what was this one aspiration, this spiritual basis of our teachers' lives? In order to explain it, let me discuss the life of Shinran Shonin (1173-1262, founder of Shin Buddhism). His life shows us the universal spiritual basis of our teachers' simple lives.

When Shinran was nine years old, he went to Mt. Hiei to study Buddhism. Then he spent twenty years there, studying various doctrines and performing all kinds of practices. In spite of his efforts to attain Buddhahood through those practices, he was unable to attain his goal. He became more and more frustrated, confused, and depressed. He could not understand what was wrong.

Then, when Shinran was twenty-nine, he met Honen (1133-1212, founder of the Japanese Jodo School). Honen was teaching the importance of the Innermost Aspiration (Hongan). The Innermost Aspiration means an aspiration to become a perfect student—an aspiration to keep learning from a limitless number of Buddhas, teachers. The *Larger Sutra* (i.e., the sutra that Shinran considered the most important text in Buddhism) has a story about a seeker by the name of Dharmakara. Dharmakara is a symbol of the Innermost Aspiration. In the story Dharmakara engages in a practice called "eternal practice" in which he keeps on discovering a limitless number of Buddhas and keeps on learning from them. And he eventually becomes a Buddha by the name of Amitabha (Limitless Light, i.e., Limitless Wisdom). This name means that Dharmakara has become a perfect student who can acquire light (or wisdom) from a limitless number of Buddhas. Thus, the *Larger Sutra* teaches us the exclusive importance of the Innermost Aspiration, the aspiration to become a perfect student.

Shinran believed that the Innermost Aspiration was the universal basis of all Buddhas (teachers) in history. It was transmitted from one Buddha to another, and was transmitted to Honen. When Shinran met Honen, he was deeply moved by him because the teacher embodied the Innermost Aspiration and was a perfect student. Honen devoted his life to learning from his predecessors. The Innermost Aspiration that Shinran saw in the teacher deeply shook him. Then, Shinran experienced the birth of the same Innermost Aspiration in him. He also became a student who kept on learning from a limitless number of teachers. Now

the only important thing in his life was listening to his predecessors' teachings.

When Shinran became a constant seeker, his life became very simple. Shinran experienced tremendous joy and gratitude in receiving teachings from his teachers. Thus he lived a very powerful and creative life.

Conclusion

Although we sometimes recognize the shortness of our lives, we forget it most of the time. It is important for us to gain deep insight into the shortness of our lives. This insight makes us urgently examine our priorities. Then we realize that the most important thing in our lives is listening to the Dharma and focusing our attention on it. If we do not have this focus in our lives, we will scatter our energies in pursuing various things and will not be able to appreciate the richness and depth of life. If we have a clear focus on the Dharma, the other things with which we are usually concerned become less important. If we start to live lives based on the Innermost Aspiration, our lives become simple. Whether our lives become simple or not depends on whether we have the Innermost Aspiration.

Something at the depths of our being is yearning to become a seeker who devotes his entire life to listening to the Dharma. It is yearning to transcend the pettiness of our being. It is yearning to live a rich, powerful, creative, meaningful, and fulfilling life. It is yearning to experience the complete combustion of our life. It is only when we have a focus in our lives that we can live our lives in a simple way. Let me end this essay with a haiku poem by Santoka (1882-1940, a Japanese haiku poet). The original Japanese poem is *Hitotsu areba kototaru kurashino hiwo tomosu*. My translation is as follows:

If I have one fire in my life,
That's good enough.
I will keep on burning it.

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(May–December, 2009)

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Notes:

On July 31–August 2, 2009, we held the Maida Center Summer Retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. Dr. Nobuo Haneda and Rev. Patti Nakai gave lectures on “What Is Shinjin?—An Introduction to the *Kyogyoshinsho*.” Fifty-two people attended it.

Every Saturday (from 2:00 to 5:00 pm) we have a Buddhist study class in English at the Maida Center. We are now studying the *Shoshin-ge*. Everyone is welcome. (T.H.)

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