

## 7. Liberation by Limitless Light (Wisdom)

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### Introduction

Among various symbols used in Shin Buddhism, “light” that symbolizes “wisdom” is probably the most important. The original Sanskrit word for Amida, who is the liberator-Buddha in Shin Buddhism, is *Amitabha* (limitless light). *Amitabha* (limitless light) is the symbol of limitless wisdom.

Buddhism is a religion of wisdom. It is not a teaching of being saved by gods, or by external powers. In Buddhism, the power (or working) of wisdom that our teachers awaken in us liberates us. The power of wisdom is put into a personal symbol: Amida. Amida is not a savior like the Christian God, who is believed to be an actual being. Although Amida is presented in Buddhist literature as if he were an actual human being, he is not an actual human being; he is a literary device to show us the importance of the power of wisdom. Thus, strictly speaking, it is not right to say that there is an actual being (or savior) called Amida and that he has wisdom. The limitless wisdom that has the power of liberating us is real and is symbolically called Amida. I want to discuss here in this essay what it means to be liberated by Amida (limitless light).

### Rennyō’s Five Conditions for Spiritual Liberation

First, I want to discuss the importance of the symbolism of light by discussing the “Five Conditions for Spiritual Liberation (*Goju no gi*)” that Rennyō (1415-99, a Shin Buddhist teacher) taught. This schema shows the important role light plays in our experience of spiritual liberation. The five conditions are as follows:

1. A good karmic background
2. A teacher
3. Light (wisdom), i.e., Amida Buddha (limitless light)
4. Awakening (*shin*)
5. The Name (which means “saying the Name of the Buddha”): a concrete manifestation of awakening in one’s life

First, Rennyō talks about the importance of having a good karmic background, such as receiving a human existence and being born in a good spiritual climate. Second, he emphasizes the importance of meeting a teacher, a historical individual who transmits the Dharma to us. It is because of meeting with a teacher that we can meet light (wisdom), the third condition. Although a teacher is quite important, it does not mean that the teacher’s personal qualities are important. It is the light that is coming through him that is important. The teacher has received it from his teacher and is transmitting it to us.

Fourth, as a result of our meeting a teacher and light, we experience the awakening that is the most important part of this schema. Fifth, the Name (which means “saying the Name of the Buddha”) means a concrete manifestation or expression of our awakening experience. Rennyō indicates here that deep spiritual awakening cannot help manifesting itself in our lifestyle.

### **A Passage in the *Larger Sutra***

In order to see these five conditions for spiritual liberation in a more concrete context, let me discuss one passage in the *Larger Sutra*, the basic text of Shin Buddhism.

This passage is found near the end. In the preceding sections, Shakyamuni Buddha has given Ananda, the main recipient of teaching in the sutra, a discourse about how Amida Buddha realized his Buddhahood and created his land, and how people can be born in that land. Having listened to Shakyamuni's teaching, Ananda now experiences awakening (*shin*), a crucial spiritual transformation. This passage describes his awakening experience. Let me quote the passage:

The Buddha said to Ananda, "Stand up! Rearrange your robes, put your palms together, demonstrate your sincere reverence, and worship Amida Buddha! ..."

Ananda stood up and rearranged his robes. Keeping the right posture and facing the west, he demonstrated his sincere reverence. He put his palms together, prostrated himself on the ground, and worshipped Amida Buddha. Then Ananda said to Shakyamuni, "World-Honored One, please let me see Amida Buddha, his land of peace and happiness, and the great assembly of bodhisattvas and *sravakas* (disciples)."

As soon as Ananda had said this, Amida Buddha emitted a great light, that universally illuminated all the Buddha-lands ... It was like seeing the flood at the end of the period of cosmic change that fills the whole world; all existing things are totally immersed in it ... The light of Amida Buddha was precisely like that flood. All the lights of *sravakas* and bodhisattvas were outshone, and only the Buddha's light kept on shining bright and glorious.

At that time Ananda saw that the brilliance of Amida Buddha's dignity was so great that it was like Mt. Sumeru, that rises above all kinds of worlds. There was no place that was not illuminated by the light emanating from Amida Buddha.

Here we can see three of the five conditions for spiritual liberation: a teacher, light (wisdom), and awakening (*shin*). A teacher refers to Shakyamuni Buddha. It was through listening to Shakyamuni's teachings that Ananda was able to see light (wisdom). And Ananda experienced awakening and liberation.

Having recognized that Ananda has deepened his desire to see Amida Buddha, Shakyamuni tells him, "Stand up! Rearrange your robes." Then, for the first time in his life Ananda sees Amida Buddha, limitless light. This passage says that Amida's light illuminated all the Buddha-lands. Light is compared to a flood and Ananda is totally immersed in it.

### **Human Wisdom and Amida's Wisdom**

Now we have discussed a passage that describes the crucial spiritual transformation of Ananda. Having faced Amida, limitless light (wisdom), for the first time in his life, Ananda realizes that the light (wisdom) he has so far cherished is totally overshadowed by Amida's limitless light. The passage says, "All the lights of *sravakas* and bodhisattvas were outshone, and only the Buddha's light kept on shining bright and glorious." This means that the wisdom of Ananda who is a *sravaka* (disciple) is totally overwhelmed by Amida's wisdom.

Here two forms of wisdom are contrasted, human wisdom and Amida Buddha's wisdom. Now let me discuss what they are.

What is the regular human wisdom that Ananda cherished before his encounter with limitless wisdom? What is the regular wisdom that we also cherish in our daily life? It is dualistic wisdom (or the dualistic way of thinking). It is the wisdom in which we divide things into two. We talk about life and death, good and evil, right and wrong, purity and impurity, and happiness and unhappiness. We love positive values (like life, goodness, and happiness) and try to ignore negative values (like death, evil, and unhappiness). We build our lives on the basis of positive values and desire that negative things not exist in our lives.

Here one important point has to be noted. Although many Buddhist teachers criticize human wisdom, the dualistic way of thinking, as something erroneous and to be eliminated, it is not the dualistic way of thinking itself that is erroneous. It is our *attachment* to the dualistic way of thinking and our *overestimation* of it that are erroneous and cause various problems in our lives. Our dualistic way of thinking is so basic and indispensable to our living that I do not think we can eliminate it. Thus Buddhism teaches us that our *attachment* to it must be eliminated, not the dualistic way of thinking itself.

In the sphere of religion, too, people talk about dualistic ideas, such as “heaven and hell,” “enlightenment and delusion,” “nirvana and samsara,” and “the pure land and the impure land.” They desire to attain positive values and eliminate negative values by praying to superhuman powers (such as gods and buddhas), or by disciplining themselves or by practicing meditation.

But if we are attached only to positive values and do not see any meaning in negative values, then only half of our life has meaning. Only things such as life, goodness, beauty, and happiness have meaning; the opposite negative values do not have any meaning whatsoever. If we live our lives that way, our lives will end up in total meaninglessness, because the end of our lives will be negative—our death and the loss of all the things we cherish.

What, then, is the limitless wisdom of Amida Buddha? Limitless wisdom means *the spirit that limitlessly keeps on seeking and discovering new meaning in all things one experiences in this life*. It means the spirit that is not satisfied with fixed meanings, or with loving only positive values and hating negative values.

In the *Larger Sutra* a young seeker by the name of Dharmakara symbolizes the initial (or causal) stage in which aspiration for limitless wisdom is awakened; and Amida (whom Dharmakara becomes) symbolizes the fruit (or effectual) stage of the realization of limitless wisdom. Before Dharmakara makes his vows and takes up his practice to realize Buddhahood, he describes how he will realize his limitless wisdom in the “Verses in Praise of a Buddha (*Sambutsu-ge*)”:

Even though there are zillions of Buddhas  
And great sages as many as the sand grains of the River Ganges,  
I will visit all of them and study under them.  
Nothing is greater than seeking the way, continuously advancing and never  
retreating.

Even though the Buddha countries are as innumerable as the sand grains of the  
River Ganges,  
And other lands are also without number,

My light will illuminate all those countries and lands, spreading all over them.  
Such will be the way I will make continuous efforts, and my power will be limitless.

These two verses show the essence of Dharmakara's spirit. Here he says that he will keep on learning from innumerable Buddhas and will deepen and expand his wisdom; and he will eventually have limitless wisdom. With this limitless wisdom, he says that he will embrace all things that he encounters in his life. He will discover new meaning in all things that exist in this world. His wisdom is called the "wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive (*tenjo no chie*)."

He is determined to discover new meaning in all things that are usually rejected as meaningless by human wisdom.

After saying these words in the *Sambutsu-ge*, Dharmakara makes his so-called Forty-eight Vows; then, he performs practices, fulfills his vows, and becomes a Buddha by the name of Amitabha—limitless light (wisdom).

Being attached to the positive values in our dualistic way of thinking, we see only superficial meaning in all things in our lives. However, all things we encounter in our lives have deeper and undiscovered meaning in them. That meaning is waiting to be discovered.

Dharmakara (or Amida) is a symbol of the human spirit that humbly and dynamically keeps on discovering new meaning in all things he experiences. When we meet an authentic teacher in our lives, we see in him a Dharmakara, the humble and dynamic spirit. Then, our attachment to dualistic values is challenged and we are transformed into humble and dynamic seekers; we start to seek new meaning in all things.

Now I have discussed what limitless wisdom means. It means the spirit of a perpetual seeker who desires to discover new meaning in all things. Dharmakara (or Amida) means an all-encompassing spirit—the ocean-like spirit that desires to encompass all.

The passage that talked about the experience of Ananda said that Ananda was totally immersed in the flood of Amida's limitless light. It means that Ananda's dualistic wisdom was totally overshadowed and replaced with the all-encompassing wisdom of the Buddha. It means that the entirety of Ananda's life started to shine. Not only positive things in his life but also what he had considered negative and meaningless in his life started to shine and have meaning. Now, having been totally embraced by limitless light, there was nothing in his life which Ananda should throw away as meaningless. Since this internal transformation took place, we call Ananda's encounter with limitless light his experience of awakening and liberation.

### **Rev. Omori's First Flower Arrangement**

Here let me give you a couple of examples of what limitless wisdom means. Let me first talk about one experience Rev. Shinobu Omori, a Japanese Shin teacher, had.

One day Rev. Omori attended a class in flower arrangement for the first time in his life. When Rev. Omori sat in the art class, the master of flower arrangement gave him the materials (branches and flowers) for making a flower arrangement. Having received those materials, Rev. Omori tried to make his first flower arrangement, selecting good branches and flowers. But he had a hard time finding good materials. After having thrown some useless materials into a trash can, he picked up a couple of branches and flowers and somehow made his first flower arrangement. When all the students finished making their art works, the teacher came to examine them.

When the teacher came to him, Rev. Omori told the teacher, “Teacher, I somehow made this arrangement. Sorry, I could not find good materials.” Then the teacher put his hand into the trash can and picked up from it some materials that Rev. Omori had thrown away. Then, the teacher immediately made a beautiful flower arrangement using those very branches and flowers. Rev. Omori was amazed to see the wonderful flower arrangement made by the teacher.

In commenting on this episode, Rev. Omori said:

I threw away those branches and flowers because I thought them totally useless. But the teacher found usefulness in them and made a beautiful piece of work using them. This shows the difference between a foolish person and a wise person. A foolish person considers some things useful and meaningful, and other things useless and meaningless; and he throws away useless things. But a wise person finds usefulness and meaning in everything, even in those things that a foolish person considers useless. A wise person knows that all things are useful and meaningful. *It is not that materials have fixed usefulness, value, or meaning in them. It is our mind, our wisdom, that determines whether a thing has usefulness, value, or meaning.* A foolish person is attached to his fixed value system and discriminates. He says, “This is good, that is bad, this is right, that is wrong, this is useful, that is useless.” But a wise person does not have such a fixed value system; with the flexible mind of a humble student, he keeps on discovering new usefulness, new value, new meaning in all things he encounters in his life. A wise person can discover new value and meaning in the things that a foolish person considers meaningless.

Here Rev. Omori is saying that the master of flower arrangement had Dharmakara’s wisdom (i.e., the wisdom of transforming the negative into the positive). Just like Dharmakara who saw limitless meaning in all things, the master saw limitless beauty and usefulness in all branches and flowers.

### **Waste Material and Worms**

Let me give you another story. I read this story in a book written by Dr. Iwao Hosokawa (1919-96, a Japanese Shin teacher who was a professor of chemistry ).

In one pulp plant they had a lot of industrial waste. After making paper using the pulp and extracting useful chemicals from it, they had a tremendous amount of waste material left. Although many people spent a lot of time trying to figure out a way to make use of the waste, they could not find a way to do so. The waste was totally inorganic and useless.

But finally a man came up with a brilliant idea to turn what seemed totally useless into something useful. He turned the waste into very good fertilizer. This is what he did. He put tons of earthworms into the waste. Then, the earthworms started to eat it. When worms ate the waste, they digested it and excreted it. This way, after several months the worms digested the entire mass of waste and turned it into castings, fine organic fertilizer.

In this story we can see a good example of the power of Dharmakara’s wisdom (i.e., the wisdom of transforming the negative into the positive). The transforming power of worms is a good example of the power of Amida’s wisdom.

What seemed totally useless was turned into something quite useful by the power of earthworms. Likewise, in our lives what seems a totally meaningless human experience is turned into a very meaningful human experience by Amida’s wisdom.

When living worms go into the dead and inorganic waste, they turn it into living organic material. Likewise, when truly living power (Amida's spirit) goes into a lifeless world, it transforms the lifeless world into a living world.

When light comes into a dust-filled room, even the dust starts to shine. Likewise, when the power of Amida's wisdom enters our lives, all the things that have seemed totally meaningless in our lives, such as our mistakes, failure, sickness, accidents, frustration, struggle, and agony all start to have new meaning.

### **Conclusion**

It is so important that we meet a teacher and receive light, the wisdom of transformation, from him. It is so important that we receive wisdom, the spirit that keeps on seeking new meaning in life. Honen (1133-1212, founder of the Japanese Pure Land school) received wisdom from his teacher Shan-tao (613-81, a Chinese Pure Land master). Shinran (1173-1262, founder of Shin Buddhism) received it from Honen. All our predecessors received it from their respective teachers. The more wisdom we receive from our teachers, the deeper the appreciation we have about everything we experience in our lives.

In Buddhism there are many terms that describe human liberation, such as "Enlightenment," "attainment of Buddhahood (or Nirvana)," "birth in the Pure Land," and "*shinjin* (awakening)." Although many people give all kinds of definitions of human liberation in explaining those terms, I believe that the essence of what is expressed in them must be just this: meeting a teacher and receiving limitless wisdom (the wisdom of transformation). It must mean just receiving a humble and dynamic spirit that limitlessly keeps on discovering new meaning in all things we experience in our lives. I cannot think of the concrete meaning of human liberation in any other way.

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