

# The Dharma Breeze

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Maida Center of Buddhism

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## Sangha

Nobuo Haneda

### Introduction

The Sangha is one of the three treasures (or refuges): the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. All Buddhists, irrespective of their sectarian orientations, say, “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.” “Sangha” literally means “gathering” or “assembly” of people. In a Buddhist context, Sangha means an assembly of Dharma friends or Dharma seekers. I believe that there are basically two types of Sangha: the universal Sangha and a specific Sangha. The former refers to the Sangha that consists of all the great teachers in the past, such as Shakyamuni, Honen (the founder of the Japanese Pure Land [Jodo] school, 1133-1212), and Shinran (the founder of Shin Buddhism, 1173-1262). The latter refers to a Sangha, a group of teachers and Dharma friends, with whom we are connected in our contemporary historical context. The most crucial issue here is that we must have a specific contemporary Sangha by which we are connected with the universal Sangha.

Then, is the temple institution a Sangha? Depending on the function of the temple, the temple could be a Sangha or a mere social gathering place. If the main function of the temple is Dharma seeking, the temple is a Sangha. But, if a temple’s function is only ethnic and cultural activities, it cannot be called a Sangha; it is a mere social gathering place that has nothing to do with true Buddhism.

In this essay I will discuss the following three issues. First, I will show that the Sangha is the most important of the three treasures. Second, I will discuss how we can be connected with the Sangha. Third, I will say that becoming part of the Sangha is itself our liberation.

### The Sangha Is the Most Important of the Three Treasures

First, I want to say that the Sangha is the most important of the three treasures. I cannot emphasize the importance of the Sangha too much. We usually consider that of the three treasures, the Buddha or the Dharma is the most important. There is no doubt that the Buddha or the Dharma is the core of Buddhism. But, many Buddhist teachers have told me that the Sangha is the most important part of the three treasures. They have said so because if we are not connected with the Sangha, we cannot understand the *true* Buddha and the *true* Dharma. It is only within the context of the Sangha, our teachers and Dharma friends, that we can understand the *true* Buddha and the *true* Dharma.

We human beings are very subjective. We are self-centered; and it is very difficult for us to see things objectively. If we are attached to our subjective way of thinking, how can we understand the Buddha and the Dharma objectively? Without a Sangha, how can we view them with objectivity and accuracy?

When we start to study Buddhism, we have all kinds of subjective expectations. We project our wishful ideas onto Buddhism. We wish to attain our personal type of goal in Buddhism, and that goal is often based on our deluded way of thinking. Thus the Zen master Dogen said, “If your enlightenment has turned out to be as you expected it to be, that is a very dubious enlightenment.” Thus in our initial approach to Buddhism, we have a very subjective understanding of the Buddha and the Dharma, and we are far away from viewing them with objectivity and accuracy. The only thing that can prevent us from having a subjective understanding is a Sangha. Only our teachers and Dharma friends can correct our wrong understanding and guide us to an objectively accurate understanding.

I have met many Buddhists who do not have a Sangha. They try to understand Buddhism without belonging to a Sangha, just by reading books or practicing meditation. Many of them think that their view of the Dharma is accurate and authentic. But, how can they know that their view of Buddhism is accurate and authentic? What are their criteria? Their subjective ideas cannot be objective criteria.

There is in Buddhism a type of practitioner called a *pratyekabuddha* (a loner Buddha). A *pratyekabuddha* is a person who attempts to attain enlightenment all by himself by trusting his own individual abilities. He does not think it necessary to listen to other people. Throughout Buddhist history, a *pratyekabuddha* has been considered a narrow and misguided type of Buddhist. There is always a danger that we become *pratyekabuddhas*. Our Buddhist teachers have warned us not to become a *pratyekabuddha*, a person who complacently dwells in a religious cocoon of his or her own making. If we do not become part of a Sangha, we could easily become *pratyekabuddhas*. If we become loner Buddhas, we will not have the joy of learning the Dharma with our friends, the greatest happiness in our lives.

### **How Can We Be Connected with the Sangha?**

Now let me move to the second issue, how we can be connected with a Sangha. Here let me discuss how I have been connected with a Sangha. I was connected with the Sangha through my meeting with a Buddhist teacher. This teacher guided me to a Sangha—to an innumerable number of teachers and Dharma friends.

About forty-five years ago, when I was a college student in Tokyo, I majored in Russian literature. When I was a senior, I was reading all kinds of Western novels. In one bookstore, I found a small commentary on Faust, a play written by Goethe. An author by the name of Shuichi Maida wrote the commentary. I had never seen or heard his name before in my life. Since I just wanted to know the story of Faust, who wrote the commentary did not matter. I bought the book. When I read it, I was really impressed by it. I was impressed not so much by the story of Faust as by what Maida said about Faust. He was a Buddhist and was interpreting Faust from a Buddhist point of view. That was the first time I was exposed to Buddhist ideas. Up to that time I had no interest in Buddhism. Since Maida impressed me so much, I went back to the same bookstore and bought other books written by him. His other books also impressed me and I decided to study Buddhism. Thus, my interest moved from Russian literature to Buddhism.

Initially I discovered one Buddhist teacher. Then this discovery led me to the discovery of other teachers. Maida's personal teacher was Rev. Haya Akegarasu (a Japanese Shin teacher, 1877-1954). Rev. Akegarasu's teacher was Manshi Kiyozawa (a Japanese Shin teacher, 1863-1903). All these teachers deeply respected Shinran. Shinran deeply respected the seven patriarchs (i.e., Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o, Shan-tao, Genshin, and Honen).

Since I discovered one Buddhist teacher, during the last forty-five years of my life I have discovered many other teachers and Dharma friends. My teacher Maida has guided me to a wonderful Sangha that consists of many past and contemporary teachers and Dharma friends.

In reflecting upon my life, I can say that a discovery of one Buddhist teacher through a book led me to the discovery of a Sangha that consists of many wonderful Dharma friends.

Here I think of the words of Rev. Rijin Yasuda (a Japanese Shin teacher, 1900-82). He compared the discovery of a Sangha to the discovery of many stars in the sky. Rev. Yasuda said, "At night a person looks at the sky. He first discovers one large brightly shining star. Then he notices that several other stars are brightly shining beside it. Then he also sees many other stars shining beside them. This way, he keeps discovering many new stars. He eventually realizes that the entire sky is covered with innumerable stars."

I think Rev. Yasuda accurately describes how we become connected with a Sangha. I initially discovered one star (one teacher), but its discovery led me to the discovery of innumerable stars (Dharma friends). I have discovered many wonderful teachers and Dharma friends. The Sangha in which I found myself is getting bigger and bigger.

The true Buddhist teacher is a guide. He never tells us, "Come to me." He tells us to go to wonderful teachers and respect them. He tells us, "Let's study the Dharma from our wonderful teachers."

### **Becoming Part of the Sangha Is Itself Our Liberation**

Now let me talk about the third and final issue: that becoming part of the Sangha is itself liberation. I am sure all of you know that a Sangha is important. But are you not thinking that a Sangha is important as a *means* of attaining liberation, or as a *means* of attaining some kind of goal like enlightenment or shinjin? If you think so, you are wrong. Becoming part of a Sangha is itself the goal in Buddhism; it is itself liberation.

Here let me talk about one Buddhist scripture in which we read about a conversation between Shakyamuni and Ananda, his student:

One day, Ananda said to Shakyamuni, “O Venerable One, when I think carefully, it seems to me that my having good friends [i.e. a Sangha] is equivalent to my having already passed the middle milestone of the Holy Path. What do you think about this view of mine?”

Shakyamuni answered, “Ananda, that’s wrong. Such a view is not correct. Ananda, our having good friends is not equivalent to our having passed the middle milestone of the Holy Path. Our having good friends and being with them is the entire Holy Path.”

—*Samyutta Nikaya*

In this conversation, Ananda, having recognized the importance of having friends (i.e., a Sangha), tells Shakyamuni that since he has good friends, he feels that he has already passed the middle milestone of the Holy Path. But Shakyamuni contradicts him by saying that having good friends is everything in Buddhism—that it is itself liberation. He tells him that there is no liberation apart from having good friends, a Sangha.

This teaching of Shakyamuni reminds me of the time when I attended a Buddhist lecture by Rev. Rijin Yasuda. In that lecture, he said that becoming part of the Sangha is synonymous with attaining “birth in the Pure Land.” He said that becoming part of the Sangha is itself liberation. In the lecture he said:

People say various things about birth in the Pure Land. But could there be any greater “birth in the Pure Land” than the fact that we are now learning the Dharma together? ... This Sangha, this place where we are listening to the Dharma together, is the Pure Land. Our being allowed to be part of this place, of this Sangha, is our “birth in the Pure Land.”

Do you think that you can have anything greater than this in your life—than the fact that you are listening to the Dharma as a member of a Sangha? ... The fact that we are privileged to be part of the Sangha is our liberation, our “birth in the Pure Land.”

When I heard these words of Rev. Yasuda, I was deeply moved. He also said that we were so self-centered and were always thinking of our own happiness and welfare—of what we should eat, wear, and do. Everything centers round our own individual welfare. But if we, such self-centered beings, are able to forget ourselves, become part of a Sangha, respect teachers, and listen to their teaching, it is itself our liberation.

In a Sangha, in the world of Dharma friends, we are liberated from our preconceived notions and attached ideas. We can unlearn them. We can become true seekers, true learners.

Our predecessors, Shakyamuni, the seven patriarchs, and Shinran, were all seekers and learners. In the Sangha, our teachers and friends do not allow us to become complacent with our own ideas, opinions, and assertions. They encourage us to grow out of them. They encourage us to become true seekers, true learners.

Becoming part of the Sangha, we can realize the true self—the dynamically seeking and learning self. Becoming a seeker and a learner is the most important thing in our lives. The Sangha is our spiritual homeland where we can be life itself—where we are liberated from all forms of fixed ideas, opinions, and assertions. The Sangha, our teachers and Dharma friends, is the greatest gift that we receive in our lives.

## **Don’t Forget the Beginner’s Mind!**

**Nobuo Haneda**

### **Introduction**

In this essay I want to talk about the sentence, “Don’t forget the beginner’s mind!” This sentence captures the essence of Buddhism.

Ze’ami (the systematizer of the Noh play, 1363?-1443?) said, “Don’t forget the beginner’s mind. Don’t forget the beginner’s mind, particularly when you are old.” After the Noh master said these words, many Zen teachers often discussed the first sentence. Thus many people now think that it is a Zen teaching.

What does “the beginner’s mind” actually mean? It means our initial desire to study Buddhism. When we meet a Buddhist teacher, hear an inspired Buddhist talk, or read a wonderful Buddhist book, we awaken our desire to study Buddhism. This initial desire to study Buddhism or to seek the Dharma is “the beginner’s mind.”

In Buddhism, the beginner's mind, the initial desire to seek the Dharma, is not just an important thing; it is everything. Buddhism is the process of deepening the beginner's mind. If you think that the beginner's mind, or initial desire to seek the Dharma, is a means of attaining enlightenment or Buddhahood, a goal that you imagine in the future, you are mistaken. It is only in the process of deepening the beginner's mind that liberation, enlightenment or Buddhahood, exists for us. If the future attainment is not already present at the beginning then it can never be there at the end.

### **Dogen's View on "Initial Aspiration ('the Beginner's Mind')"**

The Zen master Dogen (the founder of the Japanese Soto Zen school, 1200-53) talks about two stages in the Buddhist path: the initial aspiration and ultimate attainment. The initial aspiration refers to the beginner's mind. Dogen comments on a verse in the *Mahaparinirvana-sutra* as follows:

The initial aspiration [for Buddhahood] and the ultimate attainment  
[of Buddhahood] are two separate stages, but are not different.  
Of these two minds [or stages] the former is harder to awaken...  
*Mahaparinirvana-sutra*, chap. 38

After having awakened the initial aspiration [for Buddhahood], we go on to visit innumerable Buddhas and worship them. Having seen Buddhas and heard the Dharma from them, we further awaken the initial aspiration [for Buddhahood]. It is like having frost over frost. "Ultimate attainment" refers to the fruit of Buddhahood or enlightenment.

If we compare these two, the initial aspiration and the ultimate attainment of unsurpassed enlightenment, the former is like a fire of a firefly and the latter the fire of the world-consuming fire. But if we have awakened the initial aspiration, the two attainments, being two separate stages, are not different...

—*Shobo-genzo*, Vol. *Hotsu-bodaishin* (Awakening the Aspiration for Buddhahood)

Here Dogen says that the stage of initial aspiration (or the beginner's mind) and the stage of the ultimate attainment [of Buddhahood] are two separate stages—that the former is the beginning and the latter is the goal. However, he says that the two stages are no different in that they have the same content—the initial aspiration. He says that what differentiates the two stages is the repetition (or deepening) of the initial aspiration. In the former stage one awakens the aspiration for the first time, but in the latter stage one perfects the same aspiration, having awakened it innumerable times.

Thus Dogen says, "*After having awakened the initial aspiration* [for Buddhahood], we go on to visit innumerable Buddhas...*we further awaken the initial aspiration* [for Buddhahood]." He says that the only thing necessary in Buddhism is to keep reawakening the initial aspiration—to keep repeating and deepening it. Thus he says, "It is like having frost over frost."

Here let me explain Dogen's words, "It is like having frost over frost," by giving the example of a snowfall. Suppose we have the first snowfall of the winter. We see that the ground is covered with a little bit of snow. When we measure the depth of the snow, it is one tenth of an inch. If there is no more snowfall, the snow will disappear. But if snow keeps falling day after day, week after week, then there will be a tremendous accumulation of snow. The depth of the snow gets to be 50 feet.

We can say that the initial aspiration is like the first snowfall on the ground, and the ultimate attainment of Buddhahood is like the snow's depth reaching the 50-foot mark. Here we can see no qualitative difference between the two stages, between the first snowfall and the final snowfall. Whether it is the first snowfall or the last snowfall, it is the same snowfall. But there is a considerable difference between them in regard to their depths. The former does not have depth, and the latter has depth as a result of continuous repetition. The fact that there is a repetition or deepening process between them differentiates the two stages.

We can say the same thing about climbing Mt. Everest. Although the first step on the ground and the final step onto the summit of the mountain are taken at different stages, they are one and the same action. Whether a step is taken for the first time or the last time, it is the same action. But there is a considerable difference between them in regard to height. Although the first step does not have any repetitions behind it, the final step has innumerable repetitions behind it.

Thus, Dogen says that there is a tremendous difference between the initial aspiration and ultimate attainment in regard to repetition and depth. Talking about this difference, he says that the initial aspiration is "like the fire of a firefly" and ultimate attainment is "like the fire of a world-consuming fire."

In Buddhism the initial aspiration, the beginner's mind, is everything. We don't have to add anything to it. The only thing necessary is just to repeat and deepen it. When we become

interested in Buddhism, we say, “I want to listen to the Dharma.” The only thing necessary is just to deepen this initial aspiration.

Buddhism does not teach us anything extraordinary, supernatural, or mystical. It teaches us the importance of something we already know. It teaches us that the only thing important in human life is deepening our initial aspiration to study the Dharma.

A common mistake we make in Buddhism is that we imagine extraordinary things about enlightenment and Buddhahood. To caution us about this mistake, Dogen says, “If your enlightenment has turned out to be as you expected it to be, that is a very dubious enlightenment.” Here he indicates that Buddhism teaches us to discover and marvel at something we already know, or to discover depth in something we have taken for granted. If you expect something extraordinary or mystical in Buddhism, you will be disappointed because Buddhism does not talk about such a thing. It just tells us, “Your initial aspiration to seek the Dharma is everything in Buddhism. Just deepen it!”

Listening to the Dharma or respecting our teachers is nothing extraordinary; it is something that many of us are already doing in our daily lives. But our problem is that we do not think listening to the Dharma or respecting our teachers is itself the goal, our liberation. We mistakenly think that listening to the Dharma is a means of attaining something else. Listening to the Dharma is not a means; it is itself liberation.

Now I have explained the meaning of the beginner’s mind by discussing Dogen’s view of the two attainments in Buddhism.

### **“The Beginner’s Mind” in Shakyamuni’s Life**

Here let me talk about “the beginner’s mind” in Shakyamuni’s life. When Shakyamuni was a prince and went out of a gate, he met a traveling monk whose face was shining with wisdom. Shakyamuni was moved by him and awakened his aspiration to emulate him. This means that he awakened the beginner’s mind. Because the monk was a perfect seeker, an embodiment of the beginner’s mind, Shakyamuni could not forget him. Thus, when he engaged in various practices, having left his home, he must have thought about the monk and kept on deepening the beginner’s mind. He was not satisfied with any answers, dogmas and creeds, which spiritual leaders of his time offered him.

Then when Shakyamuni was thirty-five, he attained enlightenment. The content of his enlightenment was insight into the Dharma, the truth of impermanence. He realized that the truth of impermanence was the only truth in the world—that all things outside and inside him were moving, changing, and flowing. Having become one with the truth of impermanence, he had realized that the truth, which he feared as a negation of all things he had cherished, had in fact turned into a wonderful truth. The truth that all things were moving and changing meant that all things were the dynamic and creative flow of life. Not only animate things but also inanimate things were shining with the freshness and newness of life.

Shakyamuni’s becoming one with the dynamic and creative flow of life means that he became a perfect seeker and learner. Now he was no longer attached to any fixed viewpoint, opinion, concept, or idea. He was no longer attached to any label or identity. He saw the futility of being attached to those things. Now he became the process of seeking and learning itself. His whole being became the beginner’s mind. He deepened and perfected the beginner’s mind that the travelling monk had awakened in him.

Think of Shakyamuni as a river. When he was a young man and awakened the beginner’s mind, he was a tiny stream that desired to flow. Then the tiny stream got greater and greater and became a small river. It eventually became a huge river. The tiny stream’s initial desire to flow became deepened and intensified. It became a massive flow of water.

Whether it was a tiny stream or a huge river makes no difference; they were both one flow (or thrust) of water. But eventually there was a considerable difference between them in regard to their sizes and depths. When Shakyamuni started his search for the Dharma, a part of his being was filled with being a pure student. But when he attained Buddhahood, his entire being was filled with being a pure student. Small studentship became perfect studentship. The small beginner’s mind became the perfect beginner’s mind.

Now I have discussed the meaning of the beginner’s mind in Shakyamuni’s life.

### **A Teacher: The Most Important Condition for Awakening “the Beginner’s Mind”**

Here I want to pose one question. Why do some attain their goal of Buddhahood while others do not attain it although both of them awaken the beginner’s mind? I answer this question by saying that whether people can attain the goal or not depends on the quality of their beginner’s mind. The crucial issue here is whether our beginner’s mind is weak or strong. Are we seeking the Dharma in a truly serious manner or not?

We must say that awakening the beginner’s mind is one thing, but maintaining it is quite another. It may be easy for us to awaken the beginner’s mind, but it is quite difficult for us to

maintain it. Unless our beginner's mind is based on a strong motivation, it disappears quickly. It is easily forgotten. That is why Ze'ami says, "*Don't forget the beginner's mind!*"

A Buddhist sutra says somewhere, "Many people awaken their aspiration to become a Buddha. But very few of them actually become Buddhas. They are like mango seeds or fish eggs. Innumerable mango seeds are born, but only a few of them actually grow to become mango trees. Many fish eggs are born, but only a few of them actually become fish." Many of us awaken the beginner's mind by reading Buddhist books, or by listening to Buddhist lectures. But the beginner's mind that is awakened because of intellectual curiosity or interest is not strong; it could easily disappear.

Then how can a strong beginner's mind be awakened in us? What is the condition for awakening the beginner's mind that reaches the ultimate attainment? We can talk about various conditions, such as our own aging, sickness, and death, which can make us awaken a strong beginner's mind. But no other condition is as powerful as meeting a teacher (Buddha), an actual historical person, living or deceased, who embodies the perfect beginner's mind. When we see the lives of our predecessors, such as Shakyamuni and Shinran, we can say that meeting with a teacher was the condition that made them awaken a strong beginner's mind.

When we meet a Buddha, an individual who embodies the perfect beginner's mind (or perfect studentship), we are moved by him and awaken the aspiration to emulate him. Only a Buddha can awaken this powerful aspiration in us. The beginner's mind that our teacher awakens in us is powerful and lasting, but the beginner's mind that we awaken by ourselves is weak and short-lived. The beginner's mind that our teacher realizes in us—that we receive from him—has the power that assures our ultimate attainment. It has powerful encouragement and protection for us.

Then, how can we meet a teacher who embodies the beginner's mind? We cannot talk about a standard procedure for meeting him. Meeting with our teacher takes place accidentally—through our unfathomable karmic conditions. The only thing we can say about the meeting is that the more desperately we search for the Dharma, the greater the chance we have for the meeting. As the Bible says, "Seek, it will be given. Knock, the door will be opened," I have no doubt that if we seriously seek the Dharma, we will be able to meet a teacher. When we meet a teacher, he will guide us to the Sangha, a world of wonderful Dharma friends of the past and present.

### **"The Beginner's Mind" in Shinran's Teaching**

Here I want to explain what "the beginner's mind" means in Shinran's teaching. In his teaching the beginner's mind refers to *shinjin* (literally, entrusting mind)—a concept that he uses to describe the most important spiritual awakening that human beings can experience. Shinran identifies *shinjin* as hearing the words of his teachers because the words he hears awaken his beginner's mind.

Shinran believed that when he met his teacher Honen (the founder of the Japanese Jodo school, 1133-1212), an embodiment of the perfect beginner's mind, he was deeply moved by him and the beginner's mind (*shinjin*) was awakened in him.

After meeting his teacher, Shinran studied many writings of Indian, Chinese, and Japanese Pure Land teachers and came to the conclusion that *shinjin* was the most important experience, not only for himself but also for all humanity. Thus, he devoted his entire life to emphasizing the importance of *shinjin*. His teaching is commonly known as the teaching in which "*shinjin* is considered most important (*shinjin-ihon*)."

Then how does Shinran explain *shinjin*, the beginner's mind? Shinran considers that Dharmakara, the hero of the story told in the *Larger Sutra*, is a symbol of *shinjin*, the powerful beginner's mind. In the story, Dharmakara meets a Buddha and awakens his aspiration to become a Buddha—the beginner's mind. This beginner's mind is so powerful and indestructible that it contains the element of necessity or inevitability of realizing Buddhahood, of becoming the perfect beginner's mind. In the first verse of the *Jusei-ge* (Verses of Repeated Vows) in the *Larger Sutra*, Dharmakara says, "I have established my aspiration (or vow) to transcend the world. I will unfailingly reach supreme enlightenment."

Then, Dharmakara engages in a practice (which is called "the eternal practice") to deepen the beginner's mind: visiting innumerable Buddhas and learning from them. (Here I recall Dogen's words "having frost over frost" that we discussed earlier.) When Dharmakara perfects his beginner's mind, he becomes a Buddha by the name of Amida (or Amitabha). The name Amitabha (Limitless Light [Wisdom]) means that Dharmakara has now become a person who can learn *wisdom* from a *limitless* number of Buddhas. It means that Dharmakara has perfected the beginner's mind—that his whole being has become the process of listening and learning.

Shinran explains the process of human liberation as follows. When we meet a historical teacher (like Shakyamuni or Honen) who embodies Amida Buddhahood, i.e., the perfect

beginner's mind, and hear his teaching, we are moved by him and awaken the beginner's mind (shinjin). The beginner's mind that the teacher awakens in us is so powerful that it makes us unflinchingly realize Buddhahood, the perfect beginner's mind. From the time we awaken the beginner's mind until the moment of our deaths, we keep on deepening our beginner's mind. We live the very powerful life of a constant seeker and learner. We live our life in the most meaningful and fulfilling way. When we die, our deaths are the completion of the process of perfecting the beginner's mind.

Shinran teaches us that when we awaken shinjin, we are immediately born in the Pure Land, the sphere of limitless wisdom (or of the perfect beginner's mind), and attain the stage of nonretrogression (where we are assured of the attainment of Buddhahood). Thus Shinran considers that the three concepts, i.e., shinjin, birth in the Pure Land, and the stage of nonretrogression, are all synonyms. He considers that they all refer to the beginner's mind.

Some people believe that Shinran taught that the Pure Land referred to an actual place that we enter after our physical deaths. This is not what Shinran taught. Shinran teaches us that "birth in the Pure Land" is a symbol of spiritual death—the death of the old self and birth of the new (shinjin) self. It means that we are born in the sphere of the perfect beginner's mind and we start to deepen our beginner's mind. "Birth in the Pure Land" is not a one-time experience; we must keep deepening it.

Shinran teaches us that the entirety of Amida Buddhahood, a symbol of the perfect beginner's mind, and the Pure Land, a symbol of the sphere of the perfect beginner's mind, are contained in the Name (or Namu Amida Butsu). The Name (or Namu Amida Butsu) is a voice calling us, "Come to Limitless Light [Wisdom]!" It is a voice inviting us to be born in the world of the perfect beginner's mind. When we hear the calling voice through our teachers who embody the perfect beginner's mind, we are moved by it, and we awaken shinjin, the beginner's mind. Then, we are immediately born in the sphere of the perfect beginner's mind, discover many Dharma friends, and start the process of deepening and perfecting the beginner's mind, while being encouraged and protected by our teachers and Dharma friends.

Shinran teaches us that Amida and the Pure Land are coming to us taking the form of the Name, or taking the form of our teachers and their teachings that embody the perfect beginner's mind. We do not have to make efforts to go to the Buddha or the Pure Land. If we only hear and appreciate the deep meaning contained in the one phrase Namu Amida Butsu ("Come to Limitless Light!"), which our teachers are conveying us, that's good enough. We are immediately born in the sphere of the perfect beginner's mind and eventually realize it.

### **Conclusion: The Shortness of Human Life**

In concluding this essay, I want to emphasize the importance of thinking about the shortness of our lives. The shortness of our lives is such an obvious fact. But it is the most forgotten fact. If we clearly recognize it, we cannot help becoming serious about our lives. If we awaken the beginner's mind, we cannot help questioning the meaning of our lives. Only then may we begin to earnestly seek the Dharma.

When I was a teenager, I used to think that I could accomplish many things in my life. But having lived for some time, I now realize how little I can accomplish in one life. When I think of the short duration of my life, I cannot help setting my priorities right—having a focus. I cannot help devoting my life to hearing the words of my teachers. There are many wonderful teachers in this world. There is no greater joy in our lives than hearing the Dharma.

In Buddhism the initial step, the beginner's mind, is everything. We must awaken the beginner's mind. We are never allowed to graduate from the beginner's mind. In academic learning, we must move from the first grade to the second grade. But in Buddhist learning, we are not allowed to do that. The only thing necessary in Buddhism is to deepen and perfect the first grader's spirit. Buddhism is nothing but a process of deepening and perfecting the beginner's mind. There is no Buddhism apart from this. The ultimate goal in Buddhism is the perfection of the beginner's mind. A Buddha is an embodiment of the beginner's mind. The only thing the Buddha did in his life was to perfect the beginner's mind.

Buddhist learning is like digging the ground in search of water. The deeper we dig, the more water we receive. In a similar way we must deepen the beginner's mind. The deeper it becomes, the more joy we receive. The greatest happiness in human life can be found in hearing our teachers' words. Shinran says that shinjin means hearing our teachers' words and it is always accompanied by joy. Because of the joy we cannot help deepening our shinjin,

Many of us have already awakened our desire to listen to the Dharma. The beginner's mind, the desire to seek the Dharma, is itself the Dharma, the truth of impermanence. The dynamic seeking process is itself the Dharma. The answers, things such as opinions, views, and ideas that are given to us, are not the Dharma. It is not in fixed views and ideas that we

discover the richness and fullness of life. It is in the dynamic process of seeking and listening that we discover them.

In this essay I have talked about the importance of the sentence, “Don't forget the beginner's mind.” A small accumulation of snow must become a huge accumulation. The tiny fire of a firefly must become the fire of a world-consuming fire. A tiny stream must become a mighty river.

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**Notes:**

July 27-29, 2012, we will hold our summer retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. The two speakers, Dr. Nobuo Haneda and Rev. Patti H. Nakai, will speak on “Shinran's View of the Tathagata's *Eko* (‘Directing of Virtues’).” The information about the retreat is attached to this newsletter.

We want to express our gratitude to the following individuals:

Mr. and Mrs. Roy Nakahara for converting audiotapes into CDs and making DVD sets of various seminars.

Mr. Michael Rimkus for installing bookshelves in our cottage-library.

Mr. Donald Bender, Mr. Steve Kaufman, and Mr. Paul Vielle for editing the articles in this newsletter.

Now the DVD sets of “Summer Retreat” of the last four years are available. Each set is \$50 including handling/postage.

Every Saturday (from 2:00 to 5:00 pm) we hold a study class at the Maida Center. We are now studying the *Shoshin-ge* Verses in Shinran's *Kyogyoshinsho*. Everyone is welcome to attend. (T.H.)

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