

# The Dharma Breeze

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## The Two Types of Mahayana Wisdom

—“Basic Wisdom” and “Subsequently Acquired Wisdom (That Is Synonymous with Compassion)”—

Nobuo Haneda

### I. Introduction

#### A. The Importance of the Topic of “Wisdom and Compassion”

Wisdom and compassion are two of the most important concepts in Mahayana Buddhism. We cannot emphasize the importance of these two concepts too much. If we do not have a good grasp of them, our Buddhism becomes shallow or mistaken. By frequently hearing and mentioning these two concepts in our discussions, we somehow have formed the illusion that we know them well. We have neglected to seriously search for their deep meanings. I believe that these two concepts have much deeper meanings than we usually think. In this article, I want to explain what I consider the important meanings of the Mahayana concepts of wisdom and compassion, particularly the former. The two types of wisdom, “basic wisdom” and “subsequently acquired wisdom” that I will discuss in this article, are the basis of the Mahayana Buddhist traditions that include Shin Buddhism and Zen Buddhism.

#### B. The Exclusive Importance of “Wisdom” in Mahayana Buddhism

I have said that wisdom and compassion are two of the most important concepts in Mahayana Buddhism. But wisdom is actually the only important issue in Mahayana Buddhism. Compassion is contained in wisdom. We cannot discuss compassion as an independent issue that is separate from wisdom.

Here I want to point out a problem we have in studying Mahayana Buddhism in the English-speaking world. It is the fact that English-speaking people use only one English word, “wisdom,” in discussing Mahayana wisdom. They therefore think that Mahayana Buddhism talks about only one type of wisdom. I think it an unfortunate misunderstanding that leads to a shallow understanding of Mahayana Buddhism. Mahayana wisdom consists of two types of wisdom. One English word, “wisdom,” cannot express the twofold meaning of Mahayana wisdom. Although there is this problem in studying the Mahayana in the English-speaking world, there is no such problem as far as the Japanese term for wisdom (*chi-e*) is concerned. The Japanese term *chi-e* consists of two Chinese characters, *e* and *chi*: *e* refers to “basic wisdom” and *chi* to “subsequently acquired wisdom.” The original Sanskrit term for *e* (“basic wisdom”) is *prajna* and that for *chi* (“subsequently acquired wisdom”) is *jnana*. Thus the Japanese term clearly shows the two types of wisdom that Mahayana Buddhism teaches. People who are familiar with the Japanese term for wisdom can see that Mahayana wisdom consists of two types of wisdom. But people in the English-speaking world who use only one word, “wisdom,” cannot see it. (These two types of wisdom are explained in detail in “The Chapter of the Ten [Bodhisattva] Stages (*Juji-bon*)” in the *Avatamsaka-sutra*.)

Of the two types of wisdom, “basic wisdom” and “subsequently acquired wisdom,” the latter is synonymous with compassion. Thus we know that the concept of compassion is contained in the concept of *chi-e* or *jnana-prajna*.

Then what is Buddhist wisdom? How is it different from other types of wisdom? Generally speaking, wisdom means knowledge about things such as the universe, nature, and society. Various religions define wisdom in different ways. For example, Christianity defines wisdom as knowledge about the will of God, or about ethical values such as good and evil. Taoism defines wisdom as knowledge about the laws of nature, or the natural way of living. Confucianism defines wisdom as knowledge about harmony in a nation, community, or family.

Buddhist wisdom, however, is different from the wisdom that other religions teach. Buddhism defines wisdom as knowledge about the truth of conditional arising (or dependent origination)—the truth that all things exist because of causes and conditions.

One important point we must know concerning Buddhist wisdom is that it is *subjective wisdom*—that we have to recognize the truth of conditional arising within ourselves. It is not something to be seen objectively outside ourselves. Since Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination, it is within ourselves that we must recognize the truth.

Subjective wisdom consists of two types of wisdom: “basic wisdom” and “subsequently acquired wisdom.” Since I will extensively discuss these two types of wisdom later in this article, on pages 3–5, let me give a brief explanation of them here. The two types of wisdom are as follows:

When Shakyamuni meditated under a tree immediately before his Awakening, he saw that the truth of conditional arising was the absolute truth that underlies all existing things, including the self. The self was nothing but an assemblage of causes and conditions. Thus he saw the emptiness of what he had thought of as the substantial self. This was the first wisdom, which is called “basic wisdom.” It was the content of Shakyamuni’s Awakening.

After his Awakening, Shakyamuni was happy and immersed himself in the samadhi of selflessness; he did not have any intention of going back to the world of samsara, the world of human suffering. Then, Shakyamuni gained deeper insight into the truth of conditional arising. He now realized that although the truth of conditional arising negated the substantial self that he thought he had, the same truth taught him that there was a true self that consisted of myriad causes and conditions, of all things and all people. This truth taught him that all things outside him were the contents of the self—that the self and all things were one. After gaining this insight, he could not sit still but stood up and went back to the world of samsara, identifying himself with all sentient beings that were suffering. The second wisdom, insight into the oneness between the self and others, which he gained after the first wisdom, is called “subsequently acquired wisdom.” This second wisdom is synonymous with compassion.

Now let me talk about Buddhist compassion. Many people think that Buddhist compassion is not so much different from the compassion and love that other religions teach. For example, some Buddhists think that Buddhist compassion is synonymous with the love that Christians teach or with the *jin* (love or benevolence) that Confucians teach. But Buddhist compassion is quite different from the compassion and love that other religions teach. It is connected with the two types of wisdom—“basic wisdom” in which the substantial self is negated and “subsequently acquired wisdom” in which a true self is identified with all sentient beings.

We can see in Shin Buddhism the same exclusive emphasis on the importance of wisdom. All of Shinran’s key concepts are connected with wisdom (*chi-e*). “Amida Buddha” is a symbol of wisdom and “the Pure Land” is a symbol of the world of wisdom. The *nembutsu* (i.e., the Buddha’s command telling people, “Take refuge in Amida Buddha [a symbol of wisdom] !”) and *shinjin* (i.e., spiritual awakening that is realized through hearing the *nembutsu*, the Buddha’s command) are two of Shinran’s most important concepts concerning spiritual liberation. Shinran says that the *nembutsu* is wisdom (*chi-e*) and *shinjin* is also wisdom (*chi-e*). He does not say that the *nembutsu* or *shinjin* is compassion (*ji-hi*), because he knows that the Buddhist concept of wisdom (*chi-e*) contains the two types of wisdom, “basic wisdom” and “subsequently acquired wisdom” that is synonymous with compassion.

## II. The Two Types of Buddhahood in Shakyamuni’s Life: “Static Buddha” and “Dynamic Buddha”

### A. Shakyamuni Buddha’s Life

In order to discuss the two types of Mahayana wisdom, let us first briefly review Shakyamuni’s life and examine the two types of Buddhahood he attained.

After having spent six years in performing various practices that included ascetic practices, Shakyamuni renounced all of them. Then, he started to meditate under a tree. Here it is important to note that simply meditating under a tree was not considered a religious practice in his time. His co-practitioners mocked him, saying, “Siddhartha has become a backslider and

taken to an easier lifestyle.” But this meditation, an idle action seen in the eyes of his co-practitioners, led him to Awakening.

What, then, was the meditation that Shakyamuni took up under a tree and that led him to Awakening? It was *examination* and *understanding* of the self. He was desperately asking one question, “What am I?” He wanted to understand the basic nature of the self. Because he thought that his ignorance of the self was the basic cause of suffering, he thought that he could be liberated from suffering by clearly understanding the self. The first thing we have to know in Buddhism is that Buddhism is nothing but a teaching of self-examination.

Then, through meditation, Shakyamuni attained Awakening when he was thirty-five. Tradition tells us that immediately before his Awakening, he was meditating on the truth of conditional arising. As I emphasized earlier, he was examining the truth within himself. When he attained Awakening, he clearly understood that because of the truth of conditional arising, the substantial self that he thought he had did not exist.

After his Awakening, he was very happy and immersed himself in a trance. He was in a trance for twenty-eight days. But for some unknown reason, he moved to a new location every week and meditated there. Then Brahma, the highest god of Brahmanism, appeared before Shakyamuni and asked him to go back to the world of samsara, the world of suffering beings, and share his insight with them. But Shakyamuni refused to do so, telling Brahma, “Even if I teach people, they will not understand me. They will be confused by my teaching.”

However, some time later, Shakyamuni changed his mind and decided to teach. He stood up and returned to the world that he had left behind six years before. Then, he taught people until he passed away at the age of eighty.

## **B. The Two Types of Buddhahood in Shakyamuni’s Life: “a Static Buddha” and “a Dynamic Buddha”**

Buddhism is based on Shakyamuni’s awakening experience. There are different interpretations of his awakening experience. Hinayana has its interpretations and Mahayana has its own. Here let me give you the Mahayana interpretation.

Dr. Susumu Yamaguchi (1895-1976, a Japanese Buddhist scholar) says that we can see two types of Buddhahood in Shakyamuni’s life. Dr. Yamaguchi claims that Shakyamuni’s decision to teach was a crucial dividing line between the two types of Buddhahood, that Shakyamuni was “a static Buddha” (or a Hinayana Buddha) before his decision to teach, and was “a dynamic Buddha” (a Mahayana Buddha) after his decision.

Following Dr. Yamaguchi’s view, I have spelled out the basic differences between the two types of Buddhahood we can see in Shakyamuni.

### **1. Before Shakyamuni’s decision to teach: he was a static Buddha (or a *tatha-gata* [one who has gone to the world of the ultimate truth of suchness]).**

- a. He was sitting in isolation in the world of the ultimate truth.
- b. He was a loner Buddha (*pratyeka-buddha*): a Hinayana Buddha.
- c. The basis of his static Buddhahood was “basic wisdom”—insight into the emptiness of what he believed to be the substantial self.

### **2. After his decision to teach: he was a dynamic Buddha (or a *tatha-agata* [one who has come back to the world of samsara from the world of the ultimate truth of suchness]).**

- a. He stood up and returned to the world of samsara.
- b. He became a Buddha who worked as a bodhisattva: a Mahayana Buddha.
- c. The basis of his dynamic Buddhahood was “subsequently acquired wisdom”—insight into the fact that the true self consisted of myriads of conditions, such as things and people.

Now in order to further explain the differences between these two types of Buddhahood, let me explain the two types of wisdom that are the basis of the two types of Buddhahood.

## **III. The Two Types of Wisdom—“Basic Wisdom” and “Subsequently Acquired Wisdom” That Shakyamuni Attained: Two Ways of Understanding the Truth of Conditional Arising**

Shakyamuni attained two types of wisdom because he understood the truth of conditional arising in two different ways. His first wisdom (or his first way of understanding the truth)—

basic wisdom—was the basis of his Awakening. This wisdom made him leave the world of samsara and go to the world of the ultimate truth of suchness. His second wisdom (or his second way of understanding the truth)—subsequently acquired wisdom—made him leave the world of the ultimate truth of suchness and return to the world of samsara.

The two types of wisdom, or two different ways of understanding the truth, are as follows:

#### **A. The First Wisdom (“Basic Wisdom”): Understanding the Truth of Conditional Arising as the Truth of “the Emptiness of the Self (Atman)”**

During the night immediately before his Awakening, Shakyamuni was meditating on the truth of conditional arising—the truth that things arise because of causes and conditions.

People of Shakyamuni’s time generally believed that atman (which is usually translated as “self” or “soul”) was the eternal spiritual substance and that it existed in all human beings. Atman was the basis of Brahmanism (or Hinduism), which was the religion of his time in India. Atman was defined as something (i) permanent, (ii) independent, and (iii) autonomous.

Shakyamuni wondered if he actually had atman in himself. When he meditated on the truth of conditional arising and realized that everything in his being was conditionally arisen, this truth challenged his view of the self (atman) as something permanent, independent, and autonomous. It made him recognize that the self that he thought he had was a delusion pretending to be an eternal reality.

Shakyamuni now realized that his entire being, his body and mind, was nothing but a collection of causes and conditions. He realized that the body consisted of myriad causes and conditions. It consisted of air, water, and all kinds of food he had eaten. All kinds of things outside his body happened to come together and form his body. Apart from myriad conditions, there was nothing to be called his body. His body could not exist for even a few minutes if air or the heat of the sun had not existed.

Further, he asked himself, “Does my mind not consist of conditions that came from outside me?” Then he realized that his mind was nothing but a collection of myriad ideas given to him by the people he had met in his life. If they had not existed, his mind could not have existed. Hence, he realized that multifarious things and people were forming his body and mind.

In this way, Shakyamuni gained insight into the emptiness of the self. He clearly understood that what people considered the self did not actually exist. He realized that there was nothing permanent, independent, and autonomous in the self—that everything was conditionally arisen. That which exists only as conditionally arising is devoid of anything substantial. Thus it exists as emptiness or zero.

Shakyamuni saw the foolishness of being attached to what is actually empty and nonexistent. He thought, “I exist as zero (emptiness). What exists as zero does not get old and die. If something does exist, then I can say that it appears and perishes or gets old and dies. If the self as something substantial truly exists, then I can be attached to it. If it does not exist and is actually something like a mirage or rainbow, it’s stupid for me to be attached to it.” Thinking this way, he overcame the fear of aging and death.

This insight made Shakyamuni liberated from all kinds of difficulties and frustrations that came from the idea that he had a permanent and substantial self. Because of the idea that he had a substantial self, he developed attachment to it. This attachment became the cause of his suffering. Now that he clearly understood the emptiness of the self and the mistake of being attached to it, he was liberated from the suffering caused by his attachment to the self.

In this way he attained Awakening—Buddhahood. Having attained wisdom, he was quite happy. He experienced liberation from all kinds of difficulties that were caused by his attachment to the self. Then he became immersed in samadhi, in the joy of his attainment.

At this point Shakyamuni intended to stay in samadhi, in a trance. He was in isolation and had no intention of sharing his insight with other people. If he had stayed that way and died, he would have ended his life as a *pratyeka-buddha*, a loner Buddha—a Hinayana Buddha. There would not have been any Buddhism in this world.

As we discussed earlier, when Shakyamuni had spent twenty-eight days in samadhi, Brahma appeared before him and asked him to teach. Initially he refused to do so, but later he changed his mind and decided to teach.

Now let me talk about Shakyamuni’s second wisdom, his second way of understanding the truth of conditional arising, which contributed to his decision to stand up and teach.

#### **B. The Second Wisdom (“Subsequently Acquired Wisdom”): Understanding the Truth of Conditional Arising as the Truth of “the Oneness of the Self and Others” That Is Synonymous with Compassion**

After Shakyamuni heard Brahma's request to teach, he meditated further and his first wisdom about the emptiness of the self turned into *another deeper form of wisdom*. This new wisdom arose in the following way. Initially the truth of conditional arising made Shakyamuni recognize the emptiness of the self. And he was so happy to discover the emptiness (or zero-ness) of the self and was joyfully immersed in the samadhi of emptiness or selflessness.

But, now his new understanding of the truth of conditional arising made him see the self in a totally different way; it made him stand up and go back to the people to teach. Having fully understood the emptiness of the self, he now recognized *the richness of the self*. The fact that the self was devoid of all permanent and independent elements did not mean that the self was a vacuum; it rather meant that *the self consisted of myriad components—myriad causes and conditions, myriad things and people in this world*. This insight was his second wisdom, which is probably the most important thing in Mahayana Buddhism

Shakyamuni realized that dynamically moving, flowing, and changing conditions were the contents of the self. There was nothing permanent, independent, or autonomous there, but those things—temporal and phenomenal things—were the actual contents of the self. This way, he discovered *a new self that was one with all things and people of the world*. He realized that his newly discovered self was a collection or assemblage of all the things and people that existed outside him; they were all indispensable components of his being.

When he gained this insight, he could not help identifying himself with all sentient beings. This realization of the oneness between the self and all things and people that exist outside the self is compassion. Thus “subsequently acquired wisdom” is synonymous with compassion—the self being identified with all existing things. We could call the second wisdom “compassion-wisdom.”

When Shakyamuni attained the second wisdom, he realized that the liberation of the self was no different from the liberation of all humanity because all humanity was the content of the self. There could not be any individual liberation apart from the liberation of others because others were the actual contents of the self. There could not be a self that was separate from others, or others that were separate from the self. So long as there were suffering people in the world of samsara, he could not be happy because they were the contents of the self. Their sufferings were his sufferings. He realized that it was when all sentient beings attain their happiness that he could attain his happiness.

Shakyamuni now realized that it was wrong to be immersed in the joy of individual attainment. He could no longer sit still and enjoy his individual happiness. In Shakyamuni a deep aspiration arose. This aspiration told him to stand up and go into the world of samsara, the world of suffering people. He could not help experiencing oneness with all humanity. He could not help experiencing all forms of suffering with all people, not as an outside observer but as a co-sharer of them.

Later in Indian history, Mahayana Buddhists believed that the second wisdom (or the aspiration to return to the world of samsara) was the spiritual essence of Shakyamuni and created the concept of “*hongan* (innermost aspiration).” Believing that the second wisdom, *hongan*, was the most important thing that saved not only Shakyamuni but also all humanity, they composed the *Larger Sutra* and told in it the story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara, who becomes Amida Buddha. Bodhisattva Dharmakara symbolizes the second wisdom, or the Buddha's innermost aspiration to return to the world of samsara.

## VI. “Subsequently Acquired Wisdom” as “Compassion (*Ji-hi*)”

I have said that the second wisdom and compassion are synonymous. Now a discussion on the Buddhist concept of compassion is in order. I will first explain the meanings that are contained in the Japanese term *Ji-hi* (or Skrt. *maitri-karuna*) that is translated into the English word “compassion.” Then I will explain the three types of compassion that the Mahayana teaches us.

### A. Meanings That Are Contained in the Japanese Term *Ji-hi* (or Skrt, *Maitri-karuna*) That Is Translated as the English Word “Compassion”

In our earlier discussion of wisdom, I indicated that one English word, “wisdom,” couldn't convey the twofold meaning of the Japanese concept of *chi-e*. We can say the same thing about the English word “compassion.” It cannot convey the twofold meaning of compassion that is contained in the Japanese term *ji-hi*. The Japanese term consists of the two Chinese characters, *ji* and *hi*, which refer to two types of compassion. The Sanskrit equivalent of *ji* is *maitri* and that of *hi* is *karuna*.

The twofold meaning of the Japanese term is as follows:

1. *Ji (maitri)*: “affection,” “benevolence,” “love,” “friendship,” “nurturing”—a desire to give something positive and comfortable to others
2. *Hi (karuna)*: “pity,” “compassion,” “commiseration”—a desire to liberate others from suffering, from something negative

Although the Japanese term *ji-hi* refers to two types of compassion, English-speaking people do not understand them when they use the word “compassion.” Without knowing that Buddhism talks about two types of compassion, their understanding of Buddhism becomes shallow, if not mistaken.

## **B. The Three Types of Compassion**

Many Buddhists think that Buddhism talks about one type of compassion. They believe that Buddhist compassion is not so much different from the love and compassion that other religions teach. But, there are considerable differences between Buddhist compassion and the compassion that other religions teach. Being a teaching of serious self-examination, Buddhism does not easily acquiesce to or condone the compassionate human actions that other religions praise, because those actions can be based on ignorance of the self, or self-love or self-attachment. Buddhism teaches us that good actions that are not based on wisdom are not true compassion, and that unless we attain wisdom, we cannot possibly have true compassion. Unless we have the self critically examined and our ignorance and self-attachment expelled by the truth of conditional arising, we cannot possibly have true compassion. Buddhist compassion is inseparably connected with wisdom. To show that true compassion is based on wisdom, Buddhism talks about three types of compassion and teaches us that we must move from small compassion to great compassion. The three types of compassion are as follows:

### **1. Small compassion: the compassion of “unawakened people”—the compassion that has sentient beings as an object**

This is the compassion that people usually think of as compassion. Since this compassion is directed to specific people such as one’s parents, wife, children, and friends, it is called “the compassion that has sentient beings as an object (*shujo-en no ji-hi*).” This type of compassion is based on ignorance or a dualistic way of thinking (or dualistic human wisdom), not on the Buddha’s wisdom. The person acting on this type of compassion is aware of the dualistic relationship between the giver of compassion and the recipient of compassion; he is aware of being a giver of compassion—that he is doing something good for others.

Since this type of compassion is not based on the Buddha’s wisdom, there is no guarantee that the loving action can truly benefit the recipient of compassion. On the contrary, the action could end up causing harm to the recipient by spoiling him. An example of that is as follows. Every time a baby cries for candy, its mother, feeling sorry for the baby, gives candy to the baby. The mother’s action is a loving and compassionate action, but there is no guarantee that it results in truly benefiting the baby. Constantly giving candy to the baby, the mother who is ignorant and shortsighted could damage the baby’s healthy growth.

### **2. Middle compassion: the compassion of Hinayana practitioners or bodhisattvas, which has the dharmas (things) as an object**

This is the compassion that Hinayana practitioners and bodhisattvas, who have experienced the emptiness of the self, have toward all sentient beings that are attached to the self. Since they have this compassion because of the truth that “all dharmas (things) are empty,” it is called “the compassion that has the dharmas as an object (*ho-en no ji-hi*).”

The person acting on this compassion is aware of the dualistic relationship between the giver of compassion and the recipient of compassion; he is aware of being a giver of compassion. This compassion means a desire to eliminate sentient beings’ ignorance through teaching. Unlike small compassion that is directed only to specific and limited sentient beings, this compassion is directed universally to all sentient beings.

### **3. Great compassion: the Buddha’s compassion that has no object**

This is the compassion of the Buddha. It is the compassion that is synonymous with the second wisdom, “subsequently acquired wisdom.” The Buddha experiences the

emptiness of the self because of the first wisdom and the realization of the true self that is one with all things and all people because of the second wisdom. He goes back to the world of human suffering, identifying himself with all humanity.

Since the Buddha does not have any dualistic ideas such as subject-object, he is not aware of any distinction between the giver of compassion and the recipient of compassion; he is not aware that he is a giver of compassion. Thus this compassion is called “the compassion that has no object (*mu-en no ji-hi*).” Although the Buddha does not have any idea of teaching or saving others, he teaches and saves innumerable sentient beings. In his *Lun-chu* (Jpn. *Ronchu*), T’an-luan talks about this type of compassion, saying, “Although there is no saver, many are being saved” or “Although there is no player of the harp, the music is being heard by everyone.” In the *Sokushin-ki* (i.e., a record of the words of the Zen master Shiido), the Zen master talks about the same idea, saying, “If one acts on compassion without being aware of acting on it, it is called true compassion.”

Here we can see that the compassion that we usually discuss is called “small compassion” and is something done by unawakened people. Since small compassion is based on ignorance or self-attachment, it cannot give true help or liberation to its recipients. Middle compassion can give people wisdom and liberation, because this compassion is based on wisdom. But, it is still based on dualistic ideas; the giver of this compassion is aware of being a giver of compassion. The main difference between small compassion and middle compassion is that the former is done toward specific people with whom we have some karmic connection, but the latter is done universally toward all humanity.

Only the great compassion of the Buddha that is based on two types of wisdom can give people true liberation. The Buddha identifies with all humanity, with all kinds of human suffering. The *Larger Sutra* says, “The Buddha takes upon himself human sufferings and does not consider them a heavy load.” The *Vimalakirti-nirdesa-sutra* says, “I am sick because all sentient beings are sick.” The 18<sup>th</sup> Vow of the *Larger Sutra* says, “Unless all sentient beings attain Buddhahood, I will not attain my Buddhahood.”

Many Buddhists, being ignorant of the three types of compassion, confuse small compassion that is based on secular human sentiment with great compassion that is based on the Buddha’s wisdom. We must know the difference between these two types of compassion and move from the former to the latter by hearing the teachings of our teachers. Here let me cite a story that clearly shows the difference between small compassion and great compassion:

When Shakyamuni was alive, there was a non-Buddhist philosopher who was concerned about the welfare of people. He believed in the importance of engaging in social action. One day, this non-Buddhist thinker challenged Shakyamuni, saying, “Oh, Shakyamuni, why do you go out begging food? Why do you go out to preach to people? Shakyamuni, if you have extraordinary powers as people say, why don’t you transform this rock into gold with your powers? Why don’t you bring the gold to suffering people? It will do more good than your preaching. It will surely eliminate the suffering of countless people.” To this Shakyamuni answered, “You are wrong in what you say. Even if I transform Mt. Himalaya into gold, that would not be quite enough to satisfy the greed of even one person.”

This story talks about the two types of compassion: small compassion and great compassion. The non-Buddhist philosopher was talking about small compassion—ordinary compassion that was associated with compassionate actions. His focus was on enhancing the material welfare of people. However, Shakyamuni’s compassion was totally different. His focus was on realizing wisdom and spiritual transformation in a human mind. His compassion did not mean offering a material gift to people. It meant helping them to attain spiritual awakening—to open their eyes by eliminating their ignorance.

Shakyamuni believed that only wisdom could give people ultimate liberation and happiness. He knew that true human liberation depended on the attainment of the two types of wisdom. “Basic wisdom” made people gain insight into the emptiness of the self and “subsequently acquired wisdom” made them gain insight into the richness of the self that consisted of myriad things and people. For Shakyamuni, compassion was not related to taking some specific actions. It was related to whether our whole existence is permeated by wisdom.

In Buddhist sutras and scriptures we cannot find any reference to Shakyamuni’s or Shinran’s so-called social action. No passage says that these two teachers ever engaged in activities such as giving material things to people.

## V. Shinran's View of the Two Types of Compassion

Now let me explain Shinran's view of the two types of compassion, which we can see in his words recorded in chapter four of the *Tannisho*. The text is as follows:

We must move from the compassion of the path of sages to the compassion of the Pure Land path.

Compassion in the path of sages means pitying, loving, and caring for sentient beings. But it is impossible for us to help them as fully as we wish.

Compassion in the Pure Land path means immediately becoming a buddha by saying the *nembutsu* (i.e., receiving the Buddha's wisdom) and benefiting sentient beings as fully as we wish with the mind of great compassion.

No matter how much love and compassion we may feel toward sentient beings in this life, we cannot help them as fully as we wish. Thus the compassion of the path of sages is not thoroughgoing.

Hence, only saying the *nembutsu* [or receiving the Buddha's wisdom] perfectly realizes the mind of great compassion. (Trans. by Nobuo Haneda)

In the first paragraph, Shinran says that there are two types of compassion: the compassion of the path of sages and the compassion of the Pure Land path. He indicates that we must move from the compassion of the path of sages to the compassion of the Pure Land path. This view of Shinran is synonymous with his view that we must move from provisional Buddhism that is based on dualistic human wisdom to True Buddhism (*shinshu*) that is based on the Buddha's non-dualistic wisdom. This spiritual transition is one of the most important issues that he discussed in his main work, the *Kyogyoshinsho*.

In the second paragraph, Shinran defines the compassion of the path of sages. He says that this compassion means actively taking good action to help and save sentient beings. It means ethics-oriented compassion or action-oriented compassion. This compassion refers to the "small compassion" that we discussed above. It is based on dualistic thinking. The person who acts on it is aware of the dualistic relationship between the giver of compassion and the receiver of compassion, and thinks that he is doing something good. Although people usually admire this compassion, Shinran says that it falls short; it cannot give people true spiritual liberation. He mentions the imperfection of this compassion again in the fourth paragraph.

In the third paragraph, Shinran defines the compassion of the Pure Land path. He says that it means "saying the *nembutsu*" (i.e., receiving the Buddha's wisdom), immediately entering the process of becoming a buddha, and benefiting sentient beings freely. Shinran claims that the *nembutsu* (i.e., wisdom [*chi-e*]) alone is necessary for realizing the Pure Land compassion. Here he identifies Pure Land compassion with great compassion, the compassion of the Buddha. Shinran implies here that Pure Land compassion has nothing to do with taking ethical or compassionate action; it is a matter related only to wisdom (*chi-e*). If we receive the *nembutsu* alone that contains *chi* (subsequently acquired wisdom) and *e* (basic wisdom), we receive wisdom and compassion. We embody compassion and can benefit sentient beings as fully as we wish. Although the compassion of the path of sages means compassion that we have to act on, Pure Land compassion means the compassion that we receive.

Shinran says that we can benefit others "as fully as we wish." Since he talks about great compassion here, the expression "as fully as we wish" means "without being aware of doing something compassionate."

In the fourth paragraph, Shinran says that the compassion of the path of sages, small compassion, is not thoroughgoing. Although he does not give reasons for saying so, we can infer two reasons from his other writings. They are: (i) our ineradicable self-love (or ego) that exists at the depths of our beings, and (ii) the fact that our existence is based on the truth of conditional arising.

The first reason means that we have deep self-love (or ego) at the basis of our beings. Unless we have an experience in which we recognize the emptiness of the self, we maintain our self-love and cannot depart from it. Even if we take so-called good and compassionate action, our deep self-love remains. When we are healthy and financially in good shape, we may be able to have kind thoughts about other people. But if we face crises like starvation, sickness, or imminent death, it is difficult for us to care about others. Although we like to think that we are good-natured human beings, we, in such adverse conditions, often have to recognize the fact that we are more egocentric than we think. We have to recognize the fact that our compassionate actions are designed not so much for the welfare of others as the enhancement of the self or the satisfaction of the ego.

The second reason is the fact that since our existence is based on the truth of conditional arising, we cannot control our minds as we wish. What we think we are is one thing, but what we really are is another. Although we may think that we can maintain consistent minds, we cannot do so because unfathomable and unpredictable conditions determine what we think and do. It is rather ignorant or arrogant for us to think that we can control our minds and do whatever we wish to do. In chapter thirteen of the *Tannisho*, Shinran says,

If we could always act as we wished, then when I told you to kill a thousand people in order to attain birth, you should have immediately gone out to do so. But since you lack the karmic cause enabling you to do this, you do not kill even a single person. It is not that you keep from killing because your heart is good. In the same way, a person may wish not to harm anyone and yet end up killing a hundred or a thousand people... When the karmic cause within so moves us, we will do anything.

(*Tannisho A Primer*, p. 33)

These words of Shinran teach us that we cannot take good action without causes and conditions. If we think that we have minds that can think independently and autonomously, we are ignorant of the truth of conditional arising. For these two reasons Shinran believed that the compassion of the path of sages was not thoroughgoing.

## VI. Conclusion

The issue of compassion in Buddhism is not related to taking compassionate action; it is related to wisdom. Whether we are receiving the Buddha's wisdom or not is the only crucial issue in Buddhism. We cannot realize true compassion by trying to perfect our actions. We cannot start with actions. We must start with examination of the self by hearing the words of our teachers. It is only after hearing our teachers' words of wisdom that we can receive the two types of wisdom. The two types of wisdom that we receive will perfectly realize our compassion. When we receive the two types of wisdom, our entire being becomes the embodiment of compassion. Then, all our activities will naturally manifest great compassion. We will be able to share the two types of wisdom without being aware of doing so. That is why Shinran says, "Only saying the *nembutsu* perfectly realizes the mind of great compassion." (December 15, 2019)

### An Excerpt from *Face to Face with Shakyamuni* by Shuichi Maida

[The translator's note: *Face to Face with Shakyamuni* is Shuichi Maida's commentary on the *Sutta Nipata* (A Collection of Sutras), one of the earliest Buddhist scriptures. This excerpt is Maida's commentary on the third verse of "The Sutra of Rhinoceros's Horn," a sutra that is contained in the *Sutta Nipata*.]

If you pity your friends and comrades, your mind will be bound and you will lose  
the benefit [of freedom].

Detecting this dreadfulness in intimacy,

Let us walk alone like a rhinoceros' horn.

This verse talks about "pity"—a form of attachment that arises in a negative (or tragic) situation. "Pity" means sympathy. Is it not a good thing to pity others? But this verse says that there is "dreadfulness" hidden in pity...

In this world, sympathizing with the misery of others is considered to be very virtuous. But it is not the compassion that Buddhism teaches. Buddhist compassion means something else. It is found only in a liberated and free person; it is different from the sympathy that unliberated people conceive of (on the basis of their secular sentiment). When an unliberated person, whose wisdom eyes have not been opened, patronizes a suffering person with so-called sympathy, persistently saying, "I am sorry, I am sorry," he will increase the person's misery and suffering, instead of eliminating them.

Buddhist compassion is the spiritual atmosphere of a liberated and free person, which is replete with wisdom. It is the spiritual atmosphere of the world of liberation. It is a cool breeze that naturally comes blowing from the world. It is a feeling people receive when they come in contact with a liberated and free person.

Whatever sympathy a secular person has toward others is nothing but an expression of his ignorance. When a suffering person asks for sympathy from others, he too is doing so simply out of his own ignorance. This is called “grumbling” (an act of ignorance). When these two forms of ignorance meet, the suffering person says that he is consoled. There is no clear-cut solution to the fundamental problem. Ignorance cannot liberate ignorance. The suffering of the suffering person will just increase.

Let me cite a counter illustration here. The Zen master Gazan was informed that the Zen master Tekisui of the Myoshinji Temple, who had been sick, was about to die. So, Gazan came to visit Tekisui. When he came to the entrance of the temple, a monk received him. Then, Gazan said to the monk, “Hey, tell Tekisui that Gazan came to inquire after his health. Tell him that he is better-off dead.”

When a person sympathizes with others, he thinks that he is doing something good. This consciousness of doing something good contains danger and is dreadful. To think that one is doing something good is an attachment. It is a kind of unfreedom that is based on secular sentiment. Thus it is better that we do not take such good actions. Against the common sense view of compassion, the liberated person does not express his pity and sympathy for others, and does not perform any good actions for them. He appears cold and ruthless. He does not do anything that secular sentiment regards as compassionate action.

For example, Shakyamuni does not seem to have engaged in social action. Shomatsu, a lay Buddhist in Sanuki Province, did not tell a monk in a dilapidated temple to engage in social action. He told him that he should just say the *nembutsu*. The fourth chapter of the *Tannisho* clearly explains this point by saying, “There must be a transition from the compassion of the path of sages to the compassion of the Pure Land path.” The chapter concludes, “Only saying the *nembutsu* [or receiving the Buddha’s wisdom] perfectly realizes the mind of great compassion.”

How dreadful it is to have self-consciousness that one is doing something “good”! This is the dreadfulness of self-affirmation. It is a form of self-restraint. We should simply separate ourselves from it. Only in this separation, in this freedom, is there genuine compassion that truly liberates people from misery and suffering. Wisdom is simultaneously compassion. Wisdom is cold. Thus compassion is something dialectical.

“Intimacy” exists in a relationship where a person identifies his ignorance with that of others. “Intimacy” does not contain absolute negation. There is no sharp flash of wisdom in it. Where there is no sharp separation, there cannot be liberation. If we coldly and ruthlessly depart from “intimacy” by clearly knowing and detecting that “intimacy with friends and comrades” (that is based on the secular sentiment) just leads us to unfreedom, then we can for the first time attain the freedom of the independent person. It is only there that “the working of the Buddha’s great compassion (*daihi-koai*)” [i.e., Shinran’s expression] exists.

The word “benefit” in the sentence “you will lose the benefit (of freedom)” means the liberating working that comes from the dynamic sphere [of the Buddha’s wisdom]. It means a compassionate working that is called “skillful means [that the Buddha uses for guiding people].” It means the liberating working of the truth of impermanence, the working of wisdom; the Buddha recognizes the truth and becomes one with it, and his life itself works as the truth. The “benefiting” in “benefiting-others,” which is a working of the Tathagata, is precisely that. Thus, I have added the expression “(of freedom)” to it.

(*Maida Shuichi Zenshu* [The Complete Works of Shuichi Maida], vol. I, pp. 278-280. Tr. by N. Haneda)

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