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Both My Hands as a Symbol of Self-Power

—The Unreality of Self-Power and the Reality of the Power beyond the Self—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to explain two of the most important concepts in Shin Buddhism, self-power (*ji-riki*) and the Power beyond the Self (*ta-riki*). Although Shin followers often discuss these concepts, they seem to have a shallow, if not mistaken, understanding of them. Since having a correct understanding of these two concepts is crucial to the right understanding of Shin Buddhism, I want to discuss them.

What is the Power beyond the Self? It does not refer to the power of a human savior or a divine savior. It does not refer to a mysterious superhuman power that influences us. Unfortunately many Shin followers believe that Amida Buddha is a personal savior like the Christian God and that the Power beyond the Self refers to the power of that Buddha. This is a serious misunderstanding of the Power beyond the Self.

The Power beyond the Self refers to the Dharma (i.e., the truth of conditional arising or the truth of impermanence), the ultimate truth that Buddhism teaches us. The truth of conditional arising means that everything exists because of causes and conditions. Everything exists as an assemblage of causes and conditions. Nothing exists by itself.

For example, I exist here because of the Power beyond the Self—because of the truth of conditional arising. My body is an assemblage of all kinds of physical conditions; all kinds of things such as food and water that I have consumed are forming my body. My mind is also an assemblage of all kinds of mental conditions; all kinds of things such as ideas and information that I have learned are forming my mind. It is because of the truth of conditional arising that my self that consists of my body and my mind can exist. There is nothing impermanent or independent in me—no “substantial self.” Thus the Power beyond the Self refers to the truth of conditional arising and is a term that explains the true manner how I exist.

Then, what is self-power? It means ignorance of the Power beyond the Self—the truth of conditional arising. It means ignorance of the fact that we are enabled to exist by causes and conditions, things and people. Self-power means the wrong view that we have something permanent and independent within us and can exist all by ourselves. It means overestimation of our own abilities.

The person of the Power beyond the Self has a correct view of himself. But the person of self-power does not. Buddhism teaches us that we are initially self-power oriented and have an infatuated view of the self. We think we exist all by ourselves. But Buddhism teaches us that we must recognize this mistake and become persons of the Power beyond the Self who have the right view of the self.

To show the difference between the person of self-power and the person of the Power beyond the Self, let me talk about two types of student, Mr. A and Mr. B. They have just received the same academic degree, the Ph. D. in science. They see their academic achievements in two totally different ways.

Mr. A says, “I have received the degree because I worked hard. I did it all by myself. I can take all the credit for this achievement.” But Mr. B says, “I have received the degree because many people and things helped me. I was fortunate to attend a wonderful school where I was

able to have many wonderful teachers, books, and materials. Many people such as my parents and friends have encouraged me. I owe this achievement to all of them.” Mr. A thinks that he can take all the credit for his achievement. But Mr. B believes that he owes his achievement entirely to many people and things—to various wonderful conditions.

We can call Mr. A “a man of self-power” and Mr. B “a man of the Power beyond the Self.” Mr. A is ignorant of the truth of conditional arising—of the fact that many people and things have enabled him to gain the degree. He overestimates his own abilities, But Mr. B is aware of the truth of conditional arising—of the fact that many people and things have encouraged and supported him. When we are young, all of us are initially like Mr. A. Buddhism, however, teaches us that we must gradually become mature by hearing the words of our Buddhist teachers and become like Mr. B, who has a correct view of himself.

My Experience of Losing Both My Hands

Now in order to further discuss the fact that self-power means an overestimation of our own abilities, I want to discuss “both my hands” as a symbol of “self-power” and say that “my hands” are actually not so great and potent as we think they are.

We usually think that our hands are quite potent and capable. We usually see only our own hands and don’t recognize the existence of the hands of other people. We usually think that we can do all kinds of things with our hands and do not realize that so many hands of other people are helping and supporting us. If we see only our own hands and do not see the hands of other people, we lead a life that is based on self-power. But the reality is that we cannot live our lives all by ourselves. When we gain deeper insight into how we exist, we learn that many “invisible hands” of other people are supporting us. If we can see the many “invisible hands” that are supporting us, we live a life that is based on the Power beyond the Self.

Simply because we have too much confidence in our own hands, self-power, we cannot see “the invisible hands,” the Power beyond the Self. It is when we lose the use of our own hands that we can discover the hands of other people. When we see the limitations or emptiness of our own hands, we can appreciate the hands of other people.

Here I want to talk about a couple of experiences, my experience and that of Rev. Junkyoni Oishi, in which we lost the use of both our own hands. By discussing these two experiences, I want to say that it is when we lose the use of our hands, our self-power, and see the unreality or emptiness of our hands that we can appreciate the reality and greatness of the hands of other people, the Power beyond the Self.

First, let me talk about my experience. About thirty-five years ago, my wife and I moved from Chicago to Berkeley. One month before we moved, I broke both my elbows on a Chicago street. You may probably know that anything could happen on a Chicago street. One evening, I was walking on a sidewalk and tripped over an iron bar that stretched from a parking lot. I fell down like a bowling pin. My eyeglasses flew away from my face. As I fell down, I instinctively protected my head with my two arms just as a boxer protects his head from his opponent’s attack to his head. But my two elbows that protected my head landed directly on the concrete ground and received the full impact. Both of my elbows were broken. I felt extreme pain. Then an ambulance came. A couple hours later I had an emergency operation on my right elbow that had multiple fractures. Before the operation the doctor told my wife that I might permanently lose the use of my right arm. But fortunately the operation was successful and I was able to retain the use of my right arm. A couple of days later I had another operation on my left elbow. The pain I experienced after the operations was quite unbearable.

After the two operations I was lying in a hospital bed for two weeks. During that time I was lying on my back with my two arms in two large casts. Those two casts had to be lifted above my heart for a medical reason. My friends who visited me told me that I looked exactly like a lobster. While I was in the hospital, I could not use my hands at all. So I could not do anything by myself. I could not eat or drink. I could not bathe or change my clothes. I was just like a baby. Nurses and my wife had to do everything for me. They were constantly helping me.

Before that experience, I never thought that I could lose the use of my hands. I never thought that I could live without using my hands. When I lost their use, I realized for the first time in my life that I could live without using my hands. So many people were actually supporting and helping me. They were enabling me to live. I realized that what my visible hands could do was limited and many “invisible hands” were doing tremendous work for me.

A few days after I was discharged from the hospital, I received a telephone call from the Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS) in Berkeley, California. They told me that there was an emergency meeting several days later at the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) and they wanted me to attend the meeting. I had previously been hired by the Institute as an interim dean and was supposed to start to work there two weeks later. When I received the call, both my arms were

still in casts; I could not move my hands at all. Since they said that it was a very important meeting in which a joint program of the IBS and the GTU was to be discussed, I, a representative of the IBS, was expected to attend. I had no choice but to go to Berkeley to attend the meeting.

My wife put the necessary stuff in a bag. She hung the bag from my neck because I could not carry it with my hands. Since I could not move my hands, I seriously doubted that I could successfully go to Berkeley. Anyway, I went to O'Hare Airport to fly to San Francisco. As soon as I got to the airport, I immediately realized that all my worries about my trip were not necessary. When people noticed that I was handless, they offered their hands to help me. A gentleman offered to carry my bag. On the plane, a flight attendant brought a couple of pillows and put them under my two elbows. She also helped me to eat and drink. After I got to San Francisco many people helped me. So I had a very smooth trip and came back safely to Chicago.

I realized that before the accident I had been overestimating the abilities of my hands, my self-power, and neglecting to appreciate other people's hands, the Power beyond the Self. I recognized the fact that other people's hands had been supporting me all the time although I was not aware of them. This was a very humbling experience for me, but it was also a wonderful awakening experience.

Rev. Junkyoni Oishi's Experience of Losing Both Her Hands

Here I want to talk about another similar experience that Rev. Junkyoni Oishi (1890–1965, a Shingon nun) had. She did not simply lose the use of her hands but lost them altogether. Her experience was much more tragic than mine.

Rev. Oishi's childhood dream was to become a professional performer of Japanese dance. Thus, when she was seventeen, she started to live in the house of a dance teacher in Kyoto to learn dancing. As a novice dancer, she was given the name Tsumakichi. One night, a tragedy happened. The dance teacher's wife ran away with her boyfriend. On being informed of this, the dance teacher became a madman. He took out a sharp samurai sword and started to slash everybody he encountered. First, he chopped off the head, arms, and legs of his wife's mother. Then, he did the same to his wife's brother and sister. Then he attacked the three dance students who were in the house at the time. Tsumakichi was one of them.

When the bloody cutting and slashing were over, people found five dead bodies that were completely mutilated. In a pool of blood, they also found the barely moving body of a girl whose two arms were cut off from her shoulders. When a doctor examined her, he said that the girl would not live. But miraculously, she did survive. This girl was Tsumakichi.

Having lost her arms, Tsumakichi had to give up her desire to become a professional dancer. Her life after that time was not the easiest kind. She joined a circus. By showing her armless body, she earned her living. She was one of the main attractions of the circus because she was known as the sole survivor of the famous "Slaughtering Incident in Kyoto." Having experienced many difficulties in her life, she later appreciated the Buddha's teaching and became a Buddhist nun. Her name was changed to Junkyoni. Here let me talk about one episode from her life as a Buddhist.

One day Junkyoni and her student visited a Buddhist temple in Kyoto. This temple had a Buddha statue that had many arms stretching out of his shoulders. This statue is known as *Senju-Kannon-Bosatsu* (Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara who has one thousand hands). Each of his hands held all kinds of things, such as food, medicine, tools, and weapons.

When Junkyoni and her student came to this statue, they stopped in front of it. Then, Junkyoni asked a question to her student, saying, "Do you know what kind of person came up with the idea of creating a Buddhist statue like this?"

Her student answered, "Teacher, I think that a famous Buddhist sculptor must have made it."

Then, Junkyoni said, "Of course, a famous sculptor must have made it. But I am not asking you who made this statue. I am asking you, 'A person with what human experience could have initially come up with the idea of creating a statue like this, a statue with one thousand hands?'" To this her student answered, "Teacher, I have no idea who initially thought of creating this."

Then Junkyoni said, "I think that the first person who came up with the idea of creating a statue like this must be a person who did not have both arms. Because I don't have my arms, I can know very well that so many people have been supporting and helping me with their hands. So I can know that the Buddha has one thousand hands and is helping people with those hands. I believe that *only a person without arms* can know that the Buddha has one thousand arms and is helping people with them. So I say that the first person who thought of creating a statue like this must be a person who did not have both arms."

Reflecting on her life, Junkyoni said that if someone were to offer her a new set of arms in exchange for her Buddhist faith, she would not accept the offer. She said that the Buddhist insight she learned thanks to the fact she did not have arms was a priceless treasure that she

could not exchange for anything else. She said, “It is simply because I was armless that I was able to receive a priceless treasure, a deep joy.”

Mrs. Hisako Nakamura Who Did Not Have Any of Her Four Limbs

So far I have said that simply because we have too much confidence in our own hands, we cannot appreciate the hands of other people. When we lose the use of our hands, we could come to know the existence of the invisible hands that are supporting us.

Here I want to discuss another point concerning the issue of self-power and the Power beyond the Self. The point is that recognition of the Power beyond the Self supporting us does not mean that we don't have to do anything. If you think that since the Power beyond the Self is supporting us, we don't have to do anything and it's all right for us to be lazy, you are not right. That is not what Buddhism teaches us. To explain the point that recognition of the Power beyond the Self makes us have a dynamic lifestyle, not a lazy one, I want to talk about another Japanese Buddhist by the name of Mrs. Hisako Nakamura (1897–1968).

When Hisako was three, she lost all of her four limbs to frostbite. Just like Junkyoni, Hisako did not have an easy life. When Hisako was a child, her parents kept her in a closet because a child like her was an embarrassment for the family. Her mother had tough love for Hisako. She taught her to do everything, writing, cooking, sewing, and knitting, with her mouth and a remaining small part of her arm. In her childhood, Hisako hated her mother; she considered her a devil because she was so strict and relentless. But later when Hisako grew up, she was deeply grateful for her mother's tough love.

When Hisako grew up, she worked in a circus. She exposed her limbless body. She demonstrated her skills of writing, drawing, cooking, sewing, and knitting. Her show name was “Bodhidharma girl.” (Bodhidharma was the Indian Buddhist monk who first introduced Zen to China. A legend says that he meditated such a long time that all his limbs decayed and dropped from his body.) Just like Junkyoni, Hisako became a Buddhist later in her life. She became a devoted student of Shinran.

As Hisako grew older, she was deeply grateful to many people for their help and support. She often said, “If it were not for the support of so many people, I, without my four limbs, would not have been able to live.”

Let me quote one of the impressive statements of Hisako. She said, “We are not living by our own efforts but are being enabled to live by others. So we must make the utmost effort.” This statement sounds contradictory. She says that she is not living by her own efforts—that she is being enabled to live by others. Then would it not be natural for her to say that she doesn't have to make any effort? Would it not be natural for her to say that she just relies on other people's help and does not have to do anything? But she says that because she is being enabled to live, she has to exert herself as much as possible. Doesn't her statement sound contradictory?

It may sound contradictory, but it is not. She is saying here that she has to make every effort simply to repay for the benevolence that she is receiving from others. She is saying that since she is receiving so much from others she cannot help making every effort to repay for their kindness. She cannot sit still being a passive recipient of their kindness. This is precisely what Shinran says in one of his verses. He says,

Such are the benevolence and virtues of the Tathagata's [i.e., Amida's] great compassion,

That you should repay for them even to reducing your body to dust.

Such is the benevolence and virtues of Shakyamuni and the teacher [i.e., Honen],

That you should repay for them even to the breaking of your bones to pieces.

(Cf. *Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 412, with modification by Nobuo Haneda)

Shinran indicates here that since he is receiving so much from Amida, Shakyamuni, and his teacher Honen, he cannot help repaying for their kindness. I said that recognition that the Power beyond the Self is supporting us does not mean that we don't have to do anything. It does not mean that we should be passive recipients of other people's kindness. On the contrary, if we know that the Power beyond the Self supports us, we just cannot sit still. If we know that we owe so much to others, we cannot help making every effort to repay for their kindness.

Conclusion

I have talked about the meaning of self-power and the Power beyond the Self. The truth Buddhism teaches is the truth of conditional arising—the truth that everything exists because of causes and conditions. This truth is that we exist because of things and people. We totally owe our existence to them. The Power beyond the Self refers to this truth—it refers to the true manner how we exist.

Self-power means the ignorance of this truth. It means overestimation of our own abilities. It means a wrong view that we can do everything all by ourselves. We must see the unreality, limitation, and emptiness of our hands, and we must see the reality and greatness of the “invisible” hands that are supporting us. Simply because we have too much confidence in our own hands, we cannot see the many “invisible” hands that are supporting us. Junkyoni said, “It is simply because I was armless, I was able to receive a priceless treasure, a deep joy.” Her insight into the fact that many things and people had made her live was such a wonderful treasure.

Insight into the fact that we are being enabled to live by the Power beyond the Self, by the truth of conditional arising, does not mean that we don’t have to do anything and just rely on other people and things. Hisako says that her insight into the fact that so many people are supporting her compels her to make as much effort as possible to repay for their kindness. She cannot sit still. She cannot help having a dynamic and active life, filled with gratitude.

Shinran’s View of Gratitude

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

Gratitude is one of the universal virtues. Both secular and religious people honor it. In his writings, Shinran (1173-1262, the founder of Shin Buddhism) often talks about his heartfelt gratitude to the Buddhas and to his teachers. In this essay I want to discuss his view of gratitude. I specifically want to discuss Shinran’s view of gratitude as it is expressed in his verse that is called the *Ondoku-san* (A Verse about Knowing Indebtedness). In this verse Shinran expresses his gratitude to Amida Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha, and his teacher Honen. I consider this verse one of the ultimate expressions of his life as a Buddhist. It says:

Such are the benevolence and virtues of the Tathagata’s [i.e., Amida’s] great compassion,

That you should repay for them even to reducing your body to dust.

Such is the benevolence and virtues of Shakyamuni and the teacher [i.e., Honen],

That you should repay for them even to the breaking of your bones to pieces.

(Cf. *Collected Works of Shinran* [henceforth abbreviated as *CWS*], p. 412, with modification by Nobuo Haneda)

Here Shinran talks about two things, (1) “knowing one’s indebtedness for the benevolence and virtues of the two Buddhas (i.e., Amida and Shakyamuni) and his teacher Honen” to which the first and third lines refer and (2) “repaying for the indebtedness” to which the second and fourth lines refer. Shinran calls the first thing “knowing one’s indebtedness (*chion*)” and the second thing “repaying for the indebtedness (*hotoku*).” He mentions these two (*chion* and *hotoku*) as one of the ten benefits that the person of *shinjin* (awakening) receives in this life. (Cf. *CWS*, p. 112). In this essay I want to talk about the following three topics.

The first topic concerns “knowing one’s indebtedness (*chion*).” I want to answer the question, “What does it mean to know one’s indebtedness to the Buddhas and teachers?”

The second topic I will discuss is the unique feature of Shinran’s gratitude. When I study Shinran’s view of gratitude, I realize that his view of gratitude is quite different from the view of gratitude that other Buddhist teachers entertain. The unique feature is that Shinran expresses his gratitude exclusively for the Buddha’s wisdom—or to the things, such as the Buddha’s teachings, vows, *nembutsu*, and *shinjin*, that are directly connected to the Buddha’s wisdom. Although other Buddhist teachers emphasize the importance of expressing gratitude to various things, such as parents, the state ruler, people in general, nature and food, Shinran *never* expresses his gratitude for those things. I will discuss the reason Shinran expresses his gratitude exclusively for the Buddha’s wisdom, not for other things.

The third topic concerns “repaying for one’s indebtedness (*hotoku*).” I want to answer the question, “What does it mean to repay for one’s indebtedness?” I want to discuss what kind of action Shinran means when he says, “You should repay for their benevolence and virtues even to reducing your body to dust...even to the breaking of your bones to pieces”?

I. What Does It Mean to Know Indebtedness to the Buddhas?

Knowing indebtedness to the Buddhas and teachers is synonymous with gaining insight into the difficulties that they experienced in order to bring their teachings to us. It means gaining insight into the history (or background) behind the wonderful teachings that we are receiving.

Although we usually do not pay much attention to how things exist, there is actually a long history behind all existing things. Things cannot exist without a limitless number of causes and conditions. Buddhism calls this fact “the truth of conditional arising.” It teaches us to see all existing things as a dynamically flowing assemblage of causes and conditions. For example, I have a pencil in front of me. Although I cannot see its background, it’s there. This pencil must have been originally part of a tree. Then, many people must have worked on cutting it, manufacturing it, designing it, transporting it, and selling it. A number of causes and conditions are contained in it. When I see this pencil, I am seeing only its surface. Just like when I see an iceberg, I am seeing only its surface; its larger part is hidden and I cannot see it.

Similarly, all human beings have a long history behind them. This insight into the truth of conditional arising—the fact that all human beings have a long history behind them—is very important when we talk about the topic of our gratitude to the Buddhas and teachers.

A. Mr. Sumita Oyama’s Encounter with a Round Pebble

When we gain insight into the fact that our teachers experienced hardship in order to bring their teachings to us, we begin to realize how much we owe them.

Here I want to talk about an episode that Mr. Sumita Oyama, a haiku poet in Japan, mentioned in one lecture that I attended about forty years ago in Kyoto. At that time, Mr. Oyama reminisced about his visit to a famous beach on the Japan Sea. The beach was famous for its huge violent waves.

When Mr. Oyama visited the beach, he went to the shore, and there he found many small round pebbles. When he picked up one pebble and put it on the palm of his hand, he could not help saying, “How beautiful this pebble is! How smooth and round it is! It must have endured a lot of hardship and suffering!” When he said those words, I could not understand their meaning. Then Mr. Oyama explained what he meant by those words.

When Mr. Oyama saw the perfectly round pebble, he saw it as a symbol of the wonderful teachings of his teachers. At the same time, the pebble taught him that there was a rough and turbulent time before that perfectly round pebble came into being—that there was also a time of suffering and agony before the wonderful teachings of his teachers came into being.

Millions of years ago the pebble was part of a huge sea wall. Then a rock from the sea wall fell onto the beach, and violent waves repeatedly pounded it. Then the rock broke into many small ragged rocks. The violent waves repeatedly pounded those rough rocks so that they gradually lost their raggedness. After many years of pounding, they turned into smooth and round pebbles. When Mr. Oyama saw the pebbles, he realized that the ocean pounded rocks for a long time before the beautiful pebble was born.

Simultaneously, Mr. Oyama realized that because his teachers endured all kinds of suffering, struggle, and agony, their wonderful teachings came into being. He understood that they were a crystallization of the tears of his teachers. He could not help thinking of the background of the wonderful teachings of his teachers. He could not help feeling deep gratitude to them.

We can easily appreciate artworks but it’s not easy to see from where they are derived. Many people can easily appreciate the wonderful music of Beethoven and the wonderful pictures of van Gogh, but it’s not easy for us to gain insight into from where they are derived—into the depths of spiritual struggle and agony. It is when we gain insight into their background, this suffering and hardship, that we can start to have real appreciation of those artworks.

B. Shinran’s Gratitude for the Vow that Amida Made Many *Kalpas* Ago

The experience of Mr. Oyama makes me think of one of the most impressive statements that Shinran made concerning his gratitude. This is the following statement that is recorded in the *Tannisho*, composed by Yuien, a disciple of Shinran:

When I carefully think about the Vow that Amida made after having meditated for five *kalpas*, I realized that it was made for myself, Shinran, alone. Then how I am filled with gratitude for the Vow in which Amida aspired to save me, a being with such heavy karma!

(CWS, p. 679, with modification by N.H.)

Here Shinran is expressing his gratitude to Amida for his Vow. Then what is “Amida”? What is “his making the Vow”? “Amida” symbolizes “all Buddhas (or teachers) in history.” Although there are several ways of defining “Amida,” here it is the best one: to define it not as a proper

noun but as a collective noun that refers to all historical Buddhas (or teachers), such as Shakyamuni and all other teachers. “Amida’s making the Vow (or Aspiration)” symbolizes “our teachers’ aspiration to realize teachings that are designed to liberate all sentient beings.”

By saying “When I carefully think about the Vow that Amida made after having meditated for five *kalpas*,” Shinran is expressing his gratitude to his teachers for coming up with the aspiration to save unsavable people after long meditation. Here Shinran is also expressing his gratitude for their practice that they performed to fulfill their aspiration after numberless *kalpas*. Then, by saying, “I realized that it was made for myself, Shinran, alone,” he is indicating that he has now actually encountered wonderful teachers and received their wonderful teachings that liberate unsavable people like himself.

With this statement Shinran is expressing his gratitude for all the difficulties and hardship his teachers had gone through in order to liberate him. In other words, Shinran is expressing his heartfelt gratitude to all his historical teachers, such as Shakyamuni and his personal teacher Honen, for their teachings. The expression “five *kalpas*” (that symbolizes limitless time) means that it took a *long* time before these wonderful teachings came into being. It was only after his teachers struggled, suffered, and agonized for a *long* time that their wonderful teachings came into being. He is saying that all their struggle, hardship, and agony have crystalized into the teachings that he is receiving now and that he is infinitely grateful for them. Thus in this statement he is saying that he cannot help feeling gratitude to his teachers when he gains insight into the background of their teachings.

II. Shinran’s Gratitude Being Expressed Exclusively for the Buddha’s Wisdom

A. The Unique Feature of Shinran’s Gratitude

Now let me talk about the second topic—Shinran’s gratitude being exclusively expressed for the Buddha’s wisdom. This is a unique aspect of Shinran that we cannot see in most other Shin teachers. In my introduction I said that other Shin teachers emphasize the importance of expressing gratitude to all kinds of things, such as parents, the state ruler, people in general, nature, and food. But, Shinran *never* expresses his gratitude to those things. He expresses his gratitude exclusively for the Buddha’s wisdom—or to the things, such as the Buddha’s teachings, vows, *nembutsu*, and *shinjin*, that are directly connected with the Buddha’s wisdom.

In Sino-Japanese Buddhist history, many Buddhist teachers have commonly talked about “the four types of gratitude (*shion*).” They are: first, gratitude to one’s parents; second, gratitude to the ruler of the country; third, gratitude to society or people in general; and fourth, gratitude to the Three Treasures (i.e., the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha). Shinran expressed his gratitude only to the fourth of these, i.e., the Three Treasures. He never expressed his gratitude to the other three. In modern times, we often hear Buddhist ministers emphasize the importance of expressing gratitude to all kinds of people, such as parents, friends, and people in general and for all kinds of things, such as technology, medicine, food, and good health. In Shinran’s writings we cannot find any passage where he expresses his gratitude for any one of those things.

B. Human Wisdom and the Buddha’s Wisdom

Now let me answer the question, “Why does Shinran express his gratitude exclusively for the Buddha’s wisdom?” In order to answer this question concerning wisdom, I must first talk about the difference between human wisdom and the Buddha’s wisdom. By doing so, I want to explain Shinran’s emphasis on the exclusive importance of the Buddha’s wisdom.

What is human wisdom? It is the common sense wisdom that we use in our daily lives. It is “dualistic human wisdom” or “the dualistic or discriminative way of thinking (i.e., Japanese *funbetsu* or Sanskrit *vikalpa*).” It is the wisdom that divides things into two opposite values, positive values and negative ones: life and death, good and evil, right and wrong, purity and impurity, and happiness and unhappiness. Then, we love positive values (like life, good, right, purity, and happiness) and hate negative values (like death, evil, wrong, impurity, and unhappiness). We build our lives pursuing positive values and desire that negative things not exist in our lives.

Here one important point has to be noted. Although some Buddhist teachers criticize dualistic human wisdom, the dualistic or discriminative way of thinking, as something erroneous and to be eliminated, it is not dualistic human wisdom itself that is erroneous. It is our *attachment* to it or our *overestimation* of it that is erroneous and causes various problems in our lives. Our dualistic human wisdom is so basic and indispensable to our lives that it cannot be eliminated. Thus Buddhism teaches us that our *attachment* to dualistic wisdom must be eliminated, not human wisdom itself.

If we just trust human wisdom and are attached only to positive values and do not see any meaning in negative ones, then only half of our lives have meaning. Only things such as life, health, and

happiness have meaning; the opposite negative values do not have any meaning whatsoever. If we live 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. Thus Buddhism calls the life that is based on human wisdom “the samsaric life” in which people chase one positive dream after another. Such a life is an endless cycle; it is not a path in which we can complete and fulfill our lives.

What, then, is the Buddha’s wisdom? It is called “non-dualistic (or non-discriminative) wisdom,” or “the wisdom of oneness,” that challenges and negates our attachment to dualistic human wisdom. The Buddha’s wisdom is also called “transformative wisdom (*tenjo-chi*),” the wisdom that transforms negative values into positive ones. Amida (i.e., *amitabha* meaning “limitless light”) symbolizes the Buddha’s wisdom. Amida is a device (or expedient means) to show the exclusive importance of the Buddha’s wisdom. Now having explained the difference between human wisdom and the Buddha’s wisdom, let me discuss Shinran’s emphasis on the exclusive importance of the Buddha’s wisdom. He constantly says that the Buddha’s wisdom alone liberates us.

C. Shinran’s Exclusive Emphasis on the Importance of the Buddha’s Wisdom

All of Shinran’s key concepts are connected with the Buddha’s wisdom (*chi-e*). “Amida Buddha” is a symbol of the Buddha’s wisdom and “the Pure Land” is a symbol of the world of the Buddha’s wisdom. The *nembutsu* (i.e., the Buddha’s command telling us, “Take refuge in Amida Buddha [i.e., the Buddha’s wisdom]!”) and *shinjin* (i.e., spiritual awakening that is realized through hearing the *nembutsu*) are two of Shinran’s most important concepts concerning spiritual liberation. He says that the *nembutsu* is the Buddha’s wisdom (*chi-e*) and *shinjin* is also the Buddha’s wisdom (*chi-e*).

1. The two types of the Buddha’s wisdom and the two types of obstacles

Here in order to explain why Shinran emphasizes the exclusive importance of the Buddha’s wisdom and expresses his gratitude exclusively for it, I must discuss two issues: (a) the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom and (b) the two types of obstacles that Mahayana Buddhism teaches about. If we do not have a clear understanding of these two issues, we cannot understand Shinran’s teaching. The two issues are as follows:

The two types of the Buddha’s wisdom:

- a. Basic wisdom (*e* in classical Chinese and *prajna* in Sanskrit): This is non-dualistic wisdom that works as a negative force to destroy attachment to dualistic human wisdom. It destroys the dualistic values established on the basis of dualistic human wisdom, because of which we end up in living our meaningless lives in samsara. This wisdom liberates us from it.
- b. Subsequently acquired wisdom (*chi* in classical Chinese and *jnana* in Sanskrit): It is a positive wisdom called “transformative wisdom” that transforms negative values into positive ones.

The two types of obstacles:

- a. Discrimination-obstacles (or view-obstacles): These obstacles are connected with the mind, i.e., obstacles that we have acquired after birth. These obstacles involve things such as dualistic human wisdom and preconceived notions.
- b. Defilements-obstacles (or passions-obstacles): These obstacles are connected with the body, i.e., obstacles that we have inherently. These are things such as anger, hate, greed, and envy.

There are two major traditions in Buddhism: Hinayana (or Theravada) and Mahayana. These two traditions have totally different doctrinal orientations concerning these two issues. In Hinayana Buddhism that is based on dualistic human wisdom, its followers are mainly concerned with eliminating defilements-obstacles, i.e., obstacles, such as anger and greed, that are connected with the body. They believe that defilements-obstacles are the basic cause of human suffering. They are not aware of the existence of the problem of discrimination-obstacles (or human wisdom). Trusting their dualistic human wisdom, they consider defilements-obstacles such as anger and greed “evil and impure”; they attempt to destroy them and become *arhats* (holy persons). Thus Hinayana is known as a teaching that says, “By destroying defilements-obstacles, one attains Nirvana.”

But Mahayana Buddhism teaches us that if we receive the Buddha’s wisdom, the two types of wisdom, it will fully take care of all the problems caused by the two types of obstacles. Let me

explain how the Mahayana solves the problems. Mahayana followers are mainly concerned with the problem of discrimination-obstacles, or dualistic human wisdom, that is connected with the mind. They believe that discrimination-obstacles, or dualistic human wisdom, are the basic cause of human suffering. They believe that if they receive basic wisdom (i.e., non-dualistic wisdom), it will destroy discrimination-obstacles—attachment to dualistic human wisdom. When non-dualistic wisdom destroys attachment to dualistic wisdom, practitioners can no longer maintain their dualistic values, such as “good and evil” and “pure and impure.” Then, defilements-obstacles, such as anger and greed, which dualistic human wisdom regards as negative, as being “evil and impure,” cease to have those negative meanings. In losing their negative meanings, defilements-obstacles become neutral, neither good nor evil. Then, subsequently acquired wisdom (i.e., the transformative wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive) turns the defilements-obstacles into virtues, something positive. Thus Mahayana is known as a teaching that says, “Without destroying defilements-obstacles (i.e., by transforming defilements-obstacles into virtues), one attains Nirvana.”

2. Shinran’s view of the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom and the two types of obstacles

Now let me discuss how Shinran viewed the two issues, i.e., the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom and the two types of obstacles. As a teacher of Mahayana Buddhism, Shinran viewed the two issues in the Mahayana way I discussed above. Dr. D.T. Suzuki called Shin Buddhism “the climax of Mahayana Buddhism” because Shinran captures the essence of Mahayana. In Shinran we can see a clear explanation of the relationship between the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom and the two types of obstacles. In explaining the *shinjin* experience, Shinran says that it is the experience in which the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom (that Amida symbolizes) solve the problems of the two types of obstacles.

Shinran says that in the *shinjin* experience, basic wisdom first destroys discrimination-obstacles and then subsequently acquired wisdom transforms defilements-obstacles into virtues. This means that Shinran viewed discrimination-obstacles (that he calls “darkness”) as the basic cause of human suffering; he does not view defilements-obstacles as the basic cause of human suffering as Hinayana followers think.

Now let us study two of Shinran’s verses in his *Shoshin-ge*. In these verses, he describes the *shinjin* experience in which the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom resolve the problem of the two types of obstacles. The two verses are as follows:

The light of compassion that grasps us illumines and protects us always;
The darkness of our ignorance is already destroyed.
Still the clouds and mists of greed and desire, anger, and hatred,
Cover as always the sky of true and real *shinjin*.

But though the light of the sun is veiled by clouds and mists,
Beneath the clouds and mists there is brightness, not dark.
When one realizes *shinjin*, seeing and revering and attaining great joy,
One immediately transcends crosswise, severing the five evil courses.

(CWS, p. 70 with modification by N.H.)

Here Shinran uses the expression, “the light of compassion,” as a symbol of the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom, basic wisdom and subsequently acquired wisdom. He also uses the two expressions “darkness” and “clouds and mists” as symbols of the two types of obstacles: “darkness” symbolizes discrimination-obstacles; “clouds and mists” symbolize defilements-obstacles.

First, Shinran says that in the *shinjin* experience “the light of compassion” (i.e., basic wisdom) destroys “darkness” (i.e., discrimination-obstacles or attachment to dualistic human wisdom) and terminates samsara. “The darkness of our ignorance” here specifically means our conceited idea that we are wise and that we can clearly discriminate between “good and evil,” “right and wrong,” and “pure and impure.”

Shinran says that although “darkness” (i.e., discrimination-obstacles) can be destroyed, “clouds and mists” (i.e., defilements-obstacles) cannot be destroyed. Thus he says, “Still the clouds and mists of greed and desire, anger, and hatred cover as always the sky of true and real *shinjin*.” Defilements-obstacles remain with the *shinjin* person until the moment of his death. In another writing, he says, “Foolish beings...are full of ignorance and blind passions; our desires are countless, and anger, wrath, jealousy, and envy are overwhelming, arising without pause; to the very last moment of life they do not cease, or disappear, or exhaust themselves.” (CWS, p.488)

Shinran, however, says that although defilements-obstacles cannot be eliminated, they can be transformed by subsequently acquired wisdom, which transforms them into virtues. Thus he says,

“Though the light of the sun is veiled by clouds and mists, beneath the clouds and mists there is brightness, not dark.” These words indicate that although defilements-obstacles never disappear, they are no longer a problem. “Clouds and mists” that were scary and intimidating before in darkness have now become “*shining* clouds and mists.” Now we can even receive light (i.e., the Buddha’s wisdom) coming through *shining* clouds and mists. Thus Shinran says, “Beneath the clouds and mists there is brightness, not dark.” This way, Shinran beautifully describes how the two types of wisdom resolve the problems of the two types of obstacles. Further, the following two verses show his view that subsequently acquired wisdom transforms defilements-obstacles into virtues.

Through the benefit of the unhindered light [i.e., subsequently acquired wisdom],
We realize *shinjin* of vast, majestic virtues,
And the ice of our blind passions [i.e., defilements-obstacles] necessarily melts,
Immediately becoming water of enlightenment.

Obstructions of karmic evil [i.e., defilements-obstacles] turn into virtues;
It is like the relation of ice and water:
The more ice, the more water;
The more obstructions, the more virtues.

(CWS, p. 371, with modification by N. H.)

3. Summary: Shinran’s appreciation of the Buddha’s wisdom alone makes him appreciate all things in his life.

Shinran claims that subsequently acquired wisdom transforms all the things that he previously considered negative and meaningless (i.e., things such as misfortune, accident, poverty, sickness, and death) into positive things. He says that if he receives the Buddha’s wisdom alone, all things in his life become meaningful. Everything starts to shine. Everything becomes indispensable conditions for the fulfillment of his life. All things, not only positive things but also negative things, become the objects of his gratitude. That’s why he expresses his gratitude exclusively for the Buddha’s wisdom.

People usually express their gratitude only for positive things that are pleasant, useful, and beneficial to them. They express their gratitude to their parents, teachers, and friends because those people have helped, nurtured, and supported them. They express their gratitude for things such as nature, food, and health because those things are pleasant, comfortable, and convenient to them. Expressing the feeling of gratitude is a virtue; it is something commendable. But if people appreciate only positive things and cannot appreciate negative ones, their gratitude is shallow. That betrays the fact that their lives are based on dualistic human wisdom, not the Buddha’s wisdom.

Shinran believes that it’s so crucial for him to receive the Buddha’s wisdom, because it alone can make him appreciate all things in his life, not only positive things but also negative ones. *Since the Buddha’s wisdom alone can make his life complete and fulfilled, he expresses his gratitude exclusively for the Buddha’s wisdom. He does not have to express his gratitude for other things. His gratitude for the Buddha’s wisdom means his gratitude for all things in his life.*

Things do not have inherent values or meanings in them. It is our mind that determines the values and meanings. Thus whether we cherish the dualistic mind or non-dualistic mind is the most crucial issue in our lives. Whether our dualistic mind is challenged by the Buddha’s wisdom or not is the most important issue. Even what we consider the worst disaster in our lives does not have any absolute or fixed meaning as “negative” or “evil”; although dualistic human wisdom can never see a positive meaning in it, the Buddha’s wisdom alone can make us see some positive meaning in it and make us accept it.

III. What Does It Mean to Repay for the Benevolence of Our Teachers?

A. A Dynamic Action Coming Out of Knowing One’s Indebtedness

In the *Ondoku-san* I cited in my introduction, Shinran said, “You should repay for them even to reducing your body to dust” and “you should repay for them even to the breaking of your bones to pieces.” These words express the deep sense of gratitude that Shinran felt when he thought about his teachers’ teachings. They made him take powerful action to repay for his indebtedness.

In recent years some of my Buddhist teachers have passed away. When I was informed of their passing, I was shocked and felt deep sorrow. This sorrow made me depressed, passive, and inactive. But when I recognized how much I owed them for their guidance, my deep sorrow turned into a deep feeling of gratitude. I could not help jumping up into action to repay for their teaching. I could no longer sit still being sunk in sorrow. I believe that the deeper the sorrow

about the passing of my teacher, the deeper the feeling of my gratitude to him. The deeper the feeling of my gratitude to him, the greater my desire to repay for my indebtedness.

B. What Specific Action Does Shinran Mean by “Repaying for the Benevolence”?

When Shinran says that he should repay for his indebtedness, what specific action does he mean? What kind of specific action are we supposed to take to repay for our teachers guidance? Shinran’s answer is: *only hearing the teachers’ words of wisdom*. Let me explain this answer.

1. Shinran’s teaching: “Just hear the teachers’ words of wisdom!”

Shinran considered that whether one receives the Buddha’s wisdom or not is the only crucial thing in life. Only the Buddha’s wisdom can totally liberates us. Thus Shinran believed that hearing his teachers’ words of wisdom was the only important thing to do. Although most of the teachers of world religions talk about the importance of “hearing,” Shinran’s view of hearing is different. Those teachers view hearing as *one of many important practices* that they perform in their religions, but Shinran just teaches us, “Hearing *alone* is important.”

The most important expression in Shinran’s teaching is “hearing the Name (*mongo-myogo*)” (which is found at the outset of the second volume of the *Larger Sutra*, the textual basis of Shinran’s teaching). This expression talks about the exclusive importance of hearing and receiving the Buddha’s wisdom. “Hearing the Name” means hearing *Namu Amida Butsu* (i.e. a calling voice, saying, “Take refuge in the Buddha’s wisdom!”) In the following verse, Shinran says that the dynamic action of hearing the Name makes us attain *shinjin*.

Those who hear the Buddha’s Name [i.e., the calling voice, saying, “Take refuge in the Buddha’s wisdom!”]—
Going even through flames that fill
The great thousandfold world to do so—
Attain forever the stage of nonretrogression [i.e., *shinjin*].
(*CWS*, p. 332, with modification by N.H.)

2. The action of repaying for one’s indebtedness: offering of “the hearing mind”

Traditionally, Buddhism teaches us that there are two types of offerings: (a) material offerings and (b) the Dharma (or wisdom) offering. Of these two, people (or students) are supposed to make the first type of offering and teachers are supposed to make the second type of offering. This is a kind of division of labor between recipients of the Dharma and givers of the Dharma. I don’t think this traditional division-of-labor type of definition of Buddhist offerings is accurate enough. Are material offerings the most important offerings that we can make to our teachers? Of course, making a material offering is an admirable action because it is an expression of a student’s appreciation of the Dharma he is receiving. But, are material offerings the only thing that our teachers want from us? I believe that what our teachers really want from us is not so much material offerings as a spiritual one.

Once Rev. Haya Akegarasu (1877-1954, Japanese Shin teacher) was invited to the house of one of his students. He regularly gave a Dharma talk there. In his talk he said, “Every time I am invited here, you make all kinds of material offerings to me, such as gratuities, delicious food, and fragrant incense. I am really grateful for them. But, to be honest with you, the greatest offering you can give me is not material offerings. The greatest offering you can give me is ‘your hearing mind.’ It is for your hearing mind that I feel the greatest joy and gratitude. If you have a desire to hear me talk and hold a Dharma-talk session for me, that’s the greatest gift for me.”

These words of Rev. Akegarasu indicate that what our teachers really want from us is not so much material gifts as a spiritual one, “the hearing mind.” Thus the dynamic action that we are supposed to take to repay for the gift of the Buddha’s wisdom is our action of hearing the Buddha’s wisdom. That’s what our teachers really want from us.

Shinran’s predecessors considered hearing the Buddha’s wisdom the most important thing in their lives; they devoted their entire lives to hearing and receiving it. Since they knew the exclusive importance of hearing the Buddha’s wisdom, what they really wanted their students to do was also to hear the Buddha’s wisdom. Shinran knew that the most important thing his predecessors wanted him to do was to hear the words of wisdom. Thus he devoted his entire life to hearing his teachers’ words of wisdom; it was his action of repaying for his indebtedness to his teachers. Likewise, the most important thing Shinran wants us to do as an expression of our gratitude is to hear our teachers’ words of wisdom.

3. “Hearing the Buddha’s wisdom”: the core of the transmission of Buddhism

If we hear and receive the Buddha’s wisdom and start to live our lives in a fulfilling way, then we will inadvertently be able to share the Buddha’s wisdom with others. The Buddha’s wisdom is quite contagious, like a strong virus. If we embody the Buddha’s wisdom, it will spread to others and influence them by itself. This is the way Buddhism has been transmitted in history. It has been transmitted from person to person. This is the meaning of compassion in Buddhism.

The Buddha’s wisdom is so powerful that it totally transforms the person who encounters it. It is like a powerful magnet that transforms a nail into a magnet. When a magnet sucks a nail to it, it magnetizes the nail and turns it into a magnet. Then, the magnetized nail starts to work as a magnet; it sucks another nail to it and turns it into another magnet. Likewise, when a person hears and receives the Buddha’s wisdom, he comes to embody the Buddha’s wisdom. Then, the person inadvertently starts to exert the power of the Buddha’s wisdom on another person and makes him embody the Buddha’s wisdom. The same process will keep repeating. This is the way Buddhism has been transmitted from generation to generation in history.

Conclusion

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 the two types of the Buddha’s wisdom, basic wisdom and subsequently acquired wisdom. Shinran calls this the *shinjin* experience. Simply because he believes that the Buddha’s wisdom liberates him and makes him complete and fulfill his life, he is grateful to the Buddha’s wisdom. Because he was able to appreciate everything in his life, not only the positive but also the negative, he expressed his deep gratitude exclusively for the Buddha’s wisdom.

Although some people say that we feel gratitude *as the result of* our experience of liberation, that is not the case. The fact that we are feeling gratitude is not an outcome of liberation. It is itself liberation; it is a concrete sign of ourselves being liberated. Gratitude and liberation are not two separate things.

If we share the same gratitude that Shinran expresses in his *Ondoku-san* verse, we are experiencing the same *shinjin* liberation that he is experiencing. Our gratitude for the Buddha’s wisdom means our gratitude for all the things in our lives, not only for the positive but also for the negative. It also means our gratitude for the fulfillment of our own lives. Let me close this essay with another verse of Shinran:

Those who truly attain *shinjin*
As they utter [and hear the meaning] of Amida’s Name [i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu!*
 (“Take refuge in the Buddha’s Wisdom!”)],
Always recollecting [the compassionate mind of] the Buddha,
Desire to repay for the great benevolence.
(*CWS*, p. 321, with modification by N.H.)

Notes:

This year, we could not hold both our English summer retreat and our Japanese fall retreat because of corona virus pandemic. This year we did not published the May issue of this newsletter. We deeply apologize for that.

During this year, two of our dearest Dharma friends passed away: Mrs. Sachi Ochiai on July 25; Dr. Kiyoto Arakawa on December 11. They attended our summer retreat regularly. We want to express our deepest sympathy to their families. We will greatly miss them.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to our three friends: to Mr. John Veen for creating an e-book version of *Dharma Breeze: Essays on Shin Buddhism* by N. Haneda; to Mr. Paul Del Bene for donating a nice electric BBQ cooker to our center; and to Mr. Steve Kaufman for valuable suggestions concerning the two essays contained in this issue.

When you read “Shinran’s View of Gratitude,” the second essay of this issue, we recommend you also read Dr. Nobuo Haneda’s essay on “The Two Types of Mahayana Wisdom” that you can find in the last issue of this newsletter (i.e., December, 2019). You can find the essay in our website: www.maida-center.org

The Evil Person: Essays on Shin Buddhism by Shuichi Maida (tr. by N. Haneda) is available as an e-book on www.Amazon.com. Please welcome a wonderful new year! (T.H.)