

## The Concept of Gratitude in Shin Buddhism

by Taitetsu Unno

At the heart of Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) is a radical transformative experience, consistent with the goal of Mahāyāna Buddhism, which converts a being, bound to the infinite burden of saṃsāra, into a free liberated person who, willingly taking on the responsibilities of his karmic existence, manifests wisdom and compassion in relation to the world. This positive affirmation of life comes from a deep sense of gratitude to all forms of existence, a gratitude rooted in being itself and permeating one's every thought, speech, and action. Gratitude, in this profound sense, is not simply a mere attitude, a deep feeling, or even a desirable virtue; it is as elemental as life itself.

The original term for "gratitude" in Sino-Japanese is *en* (in Chinese) or *on* (in Japanese). This term connotes kindness, goodness, favor, blessing, benevolence, and grace which make possible one's life and existence. Later, with the strong influence of Buddhism, it took on the additional meaning of the feeling of gratefulness or thankfulness, as well as the deep wish to repay or reciprocate for a salutary act.<sup>1</sup> The two connotations, however, are inseparable, since the latter is the natural reaction to the former, and the former cannot be talked about without some sense of the latter. The English word "gratitude" fails to adequately convey this twofold sense but since there are no other equivalents in Western languages, it must suffice for now to convey the dual meaning of the original term.

Although the profound sense of gratitude is brought to awareness in the person who has been touched deeply by life, it has been the fundamental ethos of East Asian people and permeates

their attitude to the world even without such an awareness. The Japanese idiomatic expression, *Okage-sama*, is a case in point. Whatever one's present circumstances, he or she lives by virtue of the workings and sacrifices of countless others, including nature. (*Kage* means "shade," protection, assistance, beneficence, kindness; and *o* and *sama* are honorifics.) Thus, *Okage-sama* prefaces the words of gratitude expressed by a person recovering from illness, a man beginning anew after a failure in business, a scholar publishing a book, a woman who has raised fine children, an artist who has achieved success—in none of these cases does an individual claim to have made it on his own. In fact, just to be alive is *Okage-sama*—our life is a gift of nature and all the hidden forces contained therein.

Such an appreciation for life comes from a humble sense of self. From gratitude is born this sense of natural humility which, in turn, deepens one's gratefulness to all things. Both continue to grow with maturity and age; they are the qualities of a truly wise, humane person. The consequence of humility and gratitude is compassion, a compassion that is unforced and free flowing. These manifestations of what it means to be truly human—gratefulness, humbleness and compassion—are the natural flowerings of life, free of any will, purpose, judgment, or discrimination.

The concept of gratitude has deep roots in Indian Buddhism in which recognition or awareness of favors (*kṛtajña*, *kataññū*) is not only essential to the religious life but, more fundamentally, to human life itself. It even becomes the propelling force behind acts of compassion, even though one is not the recipient of any favor or kindness. This

is because life is a vast network of interdependence and mutuality that constitutes being. In early Buddhism this appears in the affirmation of daily life, as exemplified in the Eightfold Noble Path, based on the principle of the Middle Way and negating any concept of an absolute. In Mahāyāna Buddhism Nāgārjuna gave it a fuller expression in his philosophy of dependent co-origination. The basic motivation behind the bodhisattva's six *pāramitā* is said to be a sense of gratefulness, the crucial component being *kṣānti* with its dual connotation of "tolerance" and "wisdom." Through the practice of tolerance one is able to become cognizant of the standpoint of others, as well as of favors or blessings received; hence, it makes possible the birth of wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese Buddhism, in spite of its variegated expression, inherits this understanding of life and enriches it with some basic assumptions of its own. They may be summarized in the assertion that "the genuine Chinese cosmogony is that of organismic process, meaning that all of the parts of the entire cosmos belong to one organic whole and that they all interact as participants in one spontaneously self-generating life process."<sup>3</sup>

The concept of gratitude which evolved in East Asia, thus, is a deepening appreciation for the interdependency and interpenetration of life as it is. It rejects any kind of a supreme being or power that rules over human destiny, as well as any nihilistic and fatalistic acceptance of things. Gratitude is an essential and integral part of the ecology of life.

The first formulation of Four Gratuities, reflecting the original connotation of *en* or *on* as blessing, caring, kindness, and benevolence, was used to translate the Four Embracing Acts (*catvāri samgrahavastūni*) taught in Indian Buddhism.<sup>4</sup> The four are generosity, loving words, beneficial acts, and empathy, all highly acclaimed qualities of a bodhisattva. But this was a special usage, quite different in contents from what was later to become widely associated with the popular understanding of the Four Gratuities.

One of the first examples of the more standard form appears in the *Sūtra on the Meditation on the True Dharma*, translated in A.D. 359.<sup>5</sup> The four objects of gratitude, enabling one to come into contact with the Buddha Dharma, are mother, father, Tathāgata, and teacher of dharma. They are considered to be "fields of merit" (*punya-kṣetra*), any devotional acts to them being considered meritorious for advancing on the religious path. Among them, the fourth, the teacher of dharma, was considered to be crucial.

In the ninth century different formulations of the Four Gratuities appear in sūtras translated during this period. In the *Mahāyāna Sūtra on Meditation of the Mind of Original Birth* the four are listed as 1) father and mother, 2) sentient beings, 3) king, and 4) Three Treasures of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.<sup>6</sup> Among these the gratitude to sentient beings reflects the interdependent nature of existence, and the inclusion of king or ruler is thought to reflect certain periods of Indian Buddhism. In another version, *Sūtra on Embracing Truth in Various Buddha Realms*, the Four Gratuities are given as 1) king, 2) father and mother, 3) benefactors of the dharma, and 4) sentient beings in all the universes.<sup>7</sup>

In contrasting the fourth century and the ninth century formulations scholars have pointed out that the latter show accommodation to Chinese values, exemplified in patriarchal Confucian ethics, listing the father first as the primary object of filial piety and the ruler as the exclusive object of loyalty. The religious dimensions are found in the reverence for the Three Treasures and for sentient beings. The former, on the other hand, still retains remnants of matriarchal Indian society with the mother given priority and the religious components, the Tathāgata and teacher of dharma, maintaining their central place.

The patriarchal nature of Confucian hierarchical ethics can be summarized, for example, in the following statement found in the *Classic of Filial Piety*:

The connecting link between serving one's

father and serving one's mother is love. The connecting link between serving one's father and serving one's prince is reverence. Thus, the mother elicits love, while the prince calls forth reverence; but to the father belongs both—love and reverence.<sup>8</sup>

This great tradition of filial piety directly countered the central practice of the Buddhist tradition—renunciation of the family and the worldly life. This conflict ultimately forced the Buddhists to justify their ways by making accommodations to the prevailing family ethics. This they did by arguing that renunciation itself was the highest form of filial piety, since the forsaking of worldly life for supreme enlightenment meant that ultimately one would return to save all beings, including one's own parents. Moreover, filial piety should not be solely a matter of the present but of past and future lives; the entry into religious life meant that seven generations of ancestors would also be saved.<sup>9</sup>

The sacrosanct nature of familial ethics led the Buddhists to forge several apocryphal sūtras, two of the most famous and important being the so-called *Ullambana Sūtra*, composed around A.D. 510,<sup>10</sup> and the *Sūtra on the Heavy Indebtedness to Parents*, probably compiled around the same period.<sup>11</sup> Several versions of both sūtras exist, but the first stresses the gratitude owed to ancestors, especially to fathers and mothers for seven generations past, and the second focuses on the gift of human life received from parents to whom children are deeply indebted.

These accommodations made in the course of Sinicization, however, did not mean the outright capitulation to secular ethics. A common refrain in Buddhist liturgy, frequently chanted in ordination ceremony, states: "To abandon gratitude [based upon human ties] and to enter the realm of the uncreated (*asaṃskṛta*) is the true and real expression of gratitude."<sup>12</sup> Here we see a clear rejection of particularistic ethics and an affirmation of universal ethics. Among Buddhists, then, a clear distinction existed between gratitude in the social context, expressed to parents or rulers,

and gratitude in the religious sense which ultimately expresses thankfulness for this human life, the vehicle through which one realizes supreme enlightenment. While the horizontal and vertical relationships are inseparable, the basis for gratitude is clearly the vertical one between the Buddha and oneself.

This rejection of particularistic ethics on the horizontal plane is characteristic of Japanese Buddhism in the Kamakura Period (1185-1333). In spite of the fact that Buddhism was intimately bound to the state from the time of its introduction into Japan in the sixth century and that filial piety was an accepted social and ethical norm, the leaders of Kamakura Buddhism, such as Hōnen, Shinran, Dōgen, and Nichiren, were adamant in claiming the superiority of the Buddha Dharma over all secular allegiances.

Both Hōnen and Shinran, affirming the exclusive reliance upon the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha, negated the conventional social norms. According to the *Tract Lamenting the Deviations*, Shinran states unequivocally:

I, Shinran, have never even once pronounced the nembutsu for the sake of my father and mother.<sup>13</sup>

This did not mean that Shinran had no concern for the welfare of his parents; what he negated was a particularistic ethics centered on family ties. His parents, naturally, would be included in his universal concern for the happiness of all beings, the solidarity of all forms of life being expressed in the statement immediately following the above quotation: "The reason is that all beings have been fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, in the timeless process of birth-and-death."

Shinran's rejection of filial piety also appears in his advice to Shōshin, who was among those followers in the Kantō district being persecuted for following the nembutsu path. In short, he suggests that Shōshin disregard his mother's criticism of his activity:

It is extremely wrong for people to place the responsibility for the nembutsu persecution on you alone. Those who uphold the nembutsu should be on your side and should be helping you. That your mother and younger and older sisters criticize you is simply behind the times. [You should disregard their criticisms.]<sup>14</sup>

The life of nembutsu, in accord with the Primal Vow of Amida, takes priority over all conventional social and ethical practices, including filial piety.

Nichiren, Shinran's younger contemporary, expresses the religious standpoint even more clearly when he writes: "In general, it is the son's duty to obey his parents, yet on the path to Buddhahood, *not* following one's parents may ultimately bring them to good fortune . . . That is, in order to enter the true way, one leaves his home against his parents' wishes and attains Buddhahood. Then he can truly repay his debt of gratitude to them."<sup>15</sup> Another contemporary, Dōgen of Sōtō Zen, echoes this rejection of particularistic ethics and advocates the Buddhist ideal of liberation for all beings. In the *Record of Things Heard* Dōgen states:

Because renunciants abandon the debt of gratitude and enter the uncreated, the proper act of a renunciant regarding the payment of gratitude is not limited to one person. Thinking with deep gratitude to all sentient beings alike as fathers and mothers, he returns the roots of goodness he creates back to the universe. If one were to limit it specially to his parents in this life's single generation alone, he would be going against the path of the uncreated.<sup>16</sup>

The unequivocal negation of hierarchical ethics also meant the negation of the ruler, whether king or emperor, as the object of gratitude which was an essential component of the Four Gratuities. Prior to the Kamakura Period, Japanese Buddhism had flourished by virtue of imperial and aristocratic patronage. Buddhism was a *de facto* state religion, regulated and controlled

by government authorities. The rejection of the emperor and state as paramount is found in common in Shinran, Nichiren, and Dōgen, and we can cite many instances to demonstrate this fact, but suffice it to say that the traditional notion of Four Gratuities was undermined by these religious thinkers. What was central was the deep and profound gratitude to the Buddha and dharma through which the Four Gratuities become truly meaningful.

A standard recitation in Buddhist liturgy begins with the reading of the "Refuge in the Three Treasures"—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha—which begins with the lines:

Difficult is it to be born into human life;  
Now we are living it.  
Difficult is it to hear the teachings of the  
Buddha;  
Now we hear it.

In order to truly realize the sacrosanct nature of human life, one must first be awakened by the teachings of Buddha. This awakening enables us to see the boundless compassion that constantly works in our life, liberating us from karmic bondage. When liberation is experienced, then we become truly grateful for life itself. Although it is, indeed, difficult to comprehend and manifest the teachings in one's being to the point of ultimate liberation, that is the *raison d'être* of human existence.

That one can awaken to the teaching and become liberated from *saṃsāra* is a momentous event that comes not from will power or rational decision but from the sole working of the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. The gratitude thus born directed to the compassion of Amida is immeasurable. Shinran praised the working of the Vow until the very end of his earthly life:

Those who truly entrust [*shinjin*],  
Saying Amida's Name,  
Are constantly mindful of Buddha  
And wish to repay the Tathāgata's  
benevolence.<sup>17</sup>

The Buddha's protection and testimony  
Are due to the fulfillment of the  
compassionate Vow;  
Those who have attained the diamond-like  
mind [*shinjin*]  
Should repay Amida's benevolence.<sup>18</sup>

Those who lack full awareness of all that has been done for the self (that is, those who lack *kṛtajña*, *kataññū*) will remain forever unenlightened and will continue wandering aimlessly in *samsāra*. In other words, people who cling to self-centered calculations (*hakarai*) and rely upon their own powers in the religious quest can never know liberation and what it means to be truly grateful. According to Shinran,

Doubting the inconceivable wisdom of the  
Buddha  
And favoring the recitation of nembutsu  
by self-power,  
One remains within the borderland, the  
realm of sloth and indolence,  
And has no gratitude for the Buddha's  
benevolence.<sup>19</sup>

Our gratitude to the Buddha is made real for us through our *kalyanamitra*—good friends, spiritual guides on the way to enlightenment. For Shinran such a person was his teacher Hōnen to whom he expressed everlasting affection and gratefulness:

Even within countless lives,  
Never would I have known the good  
fortune of liberation,  
If I had not met my teacher Genkū  
[Hōnen],  
This life, too, would have passed in vain.<sup>20</sup>

The deep sense of gratitude to the Buddha and to the teacher are inseparable. Both are connected to a historical legacy, a legacy that extends back through history and beyond it to the Primal Vow of Amida, the home-ground of existence itself. The infinite gratitude expressed to this historical legacy—the seven patriarchs enumerated by Shinran—knows no end:

The benevolence of the Buddha's  
compassion,  
Even if our bodies are crushed must be  
returned in gratitude.  
The benevolence of masters and teachers,  
Even if our bones are broken should be  
returned in thankfulness.<sup>21</sup>

Since gratitude is such a concrete experience, it is also expressed not in euphoria but in practical terms of everyday life. As one of the ten qualities or benefits of the nembutsu, "Knowing gratitude and repaying benevolence,"<sup>22</sup> it is manifested in 1) the constant saying of the nembutsu in the midst of daily living, 2) the sharing of the joy of nembutsu with others, 3) the communal expression of gratitude in worship, and 4) the concern for the well being of all life.

A central characteristic of Shinran's teaching is that the nembutsu, the saying of *Namu Amida-butsu*, is not a petitionary act leading to a desired goal but a confirmation of having been liberated from *samsāra*, of having arrived. Moreover, the saying of nembutsu expresses profound gratitude for having attained the ultimate realization. Both confirmation and gratitude come from a source deeper than the mind or heart of an individual; they come from the very source of true compassion, the Primal Vow of Amida.

This means that the virtue of nembutsu does not depend on the subjective feelings of a person, whether grateful or ungrateful, nor upon the circumstances of one's life, whether fortunate or unfortunate. The nembutsu is the most concrete manifestation of our profound appreciation for life that can be expressed by anyone, any time, and anywhere. In the words of Shinran,

We should know that all the nembutsu said  
throughout our lifetime expresses gratitude  
to the benevolence and give thanks to the  
true compassion of the Tathagata.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, the saying of nembutsu is an unconditional celebration of life and an unqualified affirmation of its essential meaningfulness. It



clearly recognizes evil and sin, tragedy and suffering, but no matter how tragic they may be, they are completely transformed by the power of Amida's Primal Vow into joy and thanksgiving. "Broken tiles and rocks are transmuted into gold," so says Shinran, by virtue of true compassion.

Such a radical sense of gratitude naturally leads to the wish to expand the circle of joy to share the teachings with others. "To believe oneself and to make others believe—this is the most difficult of all difficulties in the world. That great compassion is spread widely and brings benefits to all beings—this is the true way of repaying the Buddha's benevolence."<sup>24</sup> This was the powerful motivation in Shinran's life that lead to the prolific output of numerous treatises, commentaries, religious poetry, and letters in his eighties, the most productive years of his life. He states this explicitly at the end of his major work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.

Now, having entered the ocean of Amida's vow, I have come to know deeply the Buddha's benevolence. In order to repay the teaching of highest virtue, I have selected the essential passages concerning the true teaching to forever praise the inconceivable ocean of merit. I rejoice in the Primal Vow and humbly receive the dharma.<sup>25</sup>

All the religious rituals in Shin Buddhism are expressions of gratitude to the salvific powers of the Primal Vow which becomes an occasion to deepen one's awareness of true compassion. Whether it is a daily home ritual, a temple service, even a memorial or funeral gathering, they are all directed to praising and expressing thanks to Amida Buddha. The most important among the religious observances is the communal worship of Hōonkō or the "Service to Express Gratitude" which commemorates the passing of Shinran on the 28th day of the 11th month in the year 1262. Patterned after the memorial service honoring Hōnen, held by Shinran for his teacher on the 25th of each month (also called Hōonkō), it was observed monthly on the day of Shinran's death. However, as the Hongwanji became institution-

alized, Hōonkō was held at all Shin temples for seven days and nights during the month of November or January, according to the calendar used.

The Hōonkō is more than a memorial service, for it is an occasion for people to deepen their understanding of the teaching by devoting the whole week to immersing themselves in the dharma. Thus, they took off from work, closed their shops, observed vegetarian diets, discussed questions of faith, shared their meals, and enjoyed spiritual fellowship. As part of the formal ritual, the biography of Shinran, written by Kakunyo, the third head of Hongwanji, is read and received by the congregation in all Shin temples. In some areas of Japan Hōonkō is held in every home of the faithful where the teachings are heard, discussed, remembered and celebrated.

Finally, gratitude is expanded into compassionate concern for the welfare of all beings. The ultimate manifestation of compassion occurs when one becomes part of the working of Amida's Primal Vow—called *gensō-ekō* or returning to samsaric existence. This completes the progression on the path to enlightenment—called *ōsō-ekō* or going to the Pure Land. Both the going and returning are the workings of the Primal Vow, the whole process infused with the human feeling of boundless gratitude for the gift that is life itself. It is the propelling force behind the deep wish to actualize reality, to make real the complete enlightenment of self and the world:

For the sake of repaying benevolence, we say the nembutsu with the thought: may peace abound in the world and may the Buddha Dharma become spread evermore.<sup>26</sup>

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#### FOOTNOTES:

1. Nakamura Hajime, "On no shishō," in *On* (Gratitude), edited by Bukkyō shisō kenkyū kai (Kyoto: Heirakuji, 1979), pp. 3-4. I am indebted to this volume,

- the fourth of a series of studies on Buddhist thought, for the preparation of this article.
2. Nakamura, *Ibid.*, p. 32.
  3. Frederick W. Mote, *Intellectual Foundations of China* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf, 1971), p. 19.
  4. See, for example, *P'u-yao-ching*, Taishō 3.495c.
  5. *Ch'eng-fa nien-ch'u-ching*, Taishō 17.359b.
  6. *Ta-ch'eng pen-sheng hsin-ti kuan-ching*, Taishō 3.297a.
  7. *Chu-fa-ching-chieh she-chen-shih ching*, Taishō 18.284b.
  8. *The Hsiao Ching*, translated by Mary L. Makra (New York: St. John's University Press, 1961), p. 11.
  9. For a discussion, see Kenneth Ch'en, "Filial Piety in Chinese Buddhism," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, Vol. 28, (1968), pp. 81-97.
  10. *Yü-lan-pen ching*, Taishō 16.779a-c.
  11. *Fu-mu-en-chung ching*, Taishō 85.1403b-1404a.
  12. *Chu-ching yao-chi*, Taishō 54.29b.
  13. *Tannishō: A Shin Buddhist Classic*, translated by Taitetsu Unno (Honolulu: Buddhist Study Center Press, 1984), p. 10.
  14. *Goshōsokushū, Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, Vol. II (Kyoto, 1957), p. 696.
  15. "Letter to the Brothers," *The Major Writings of Nichiren Daishōnin*, Vol. I (Tokyo: Nichiren Shōshu International Center, 1979), p. 141. See also, *Nichiren: Selected Writings*, translated by Laurel Rasplica Rodd (Honolulu: The University Press of Hawaii, 1980), p. 124.
  16. *Record of Things Heard from the Treasury of the Eye of the True Teachings*, translated by Thomas Cleary (Boulder: Prajna Press, 1980), p. 45.
  17. *Jōdo wasan*, Ryūkoku Translation Series IV (Kyoto, 1965), p. 26.
  18. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
  19. *Shōzōmatsu wasan*, Ryūkoku Translation Series VII (Kyoto, 1980), p. 61.
  20. *Kōsō wasan*, Ryūkoku Translation Series VI (Kyoto, 1974), p. 126.
  21. *Shōzōmatsu wasan*, p. 59.
  22. *Kyōgyōshinshō, Shinshū shōgyō zensho*, Vol. II, p. 72.
  23. *Tannishō: A Shin Buddhist Classic*, p. 26.
  24. *Kyōgyōshinshō*, p. 165.
  25. p. 166.
  26. *Goshōsokushū*, p. 697.