



The Aspect of Gratitude

by Shojo Oi

BUDDHIST GRATITUDE

Of the many teachings in Mahayana Buddhism given to us by the Historical Buddha, there is one which is related to a person's response to the awareness of being completely embraced by the wisdom and compassion of Buddha. This is gratitude and appreciation. This teaching of the Buddha, which emphasizes outward action, is one important aspect of serene faith made visible.

Historically, as Buddhism made its way in Japan, the basic word *go-on* (meaning deep gratitude) took on a more refined and universal meaning. Along with other Buddhist terms, this concept of gratitude became a commonly used word in complete harmony with the life style of the masses. It is interesting to note that the origin of the term is not known to many although it is used so widely with its Buddhist meaning.

Another word is the heart-warming expression *o-kage-sama* used in daily conversation. This word literally means, "by virtue of your shielding me I can live today, thank you." This sense of deep gratitude in *o-kage-sama* comes from the doctrinal basis of "engi," or the interpenetration in all relationships of all that exists. The English words, "dependent origination," applied to this concept mean in essence that nothing can come about of or by itself, that for anything to come about or to seemingly originate by itself, all elements, conditions and forces must come into harmonious interplay. This awareness of a close relationship between the one and the whole gives rise to the sincere human feeling of deep gratitude which should be basic in all human relationships. The Buddha mentioned this many times in his teachings:

*Those who conceive of dependent origination
Are those who see the Dharma
Those who conceive the Dharma
Are those who see dependent origination*

Thus the words, *o-kage-sama*, clearly indicate that the Japanese masters not only understood and grasped the underlying principles of the Buddha's teachings, but through actual application wrought out other beautiful and appropriate expressions such as *mot-tai-nai*, *ai-sumimasen*, and others. It should also be noted here that these concepts played important roles in the development of classical and semi-classical literature and culture.

The influence of Buddhist thought on all aspects of the peoples' lives was strongly felt during the Kamakura Era when all aspects of the cultural heritage were made available to the masses and were deeply cherished by them: this all

the more so because in previous eras they had been almost totally denied access to them. One of the foremost masters who practiced pure gratitude at this time in history was none other than our founder, Shinran Shonin. Shinran Shonin expressed his heart-felt appreciation for the boundless benevolence he humbly received from Amida Buddha and also the deep gratitude he felt toward all of those around him in his psalm of praises called the *ondoku-san*:

*For the blessings of Amida's compassion,
We must dedicate ourselves though our bodies be
broken,
For the guidance we owe our spiritual teachers,
We must devote ourselves though our bones be
crushed!*

SHINSHU GRATITUDE

The official "stand" of our Hongwanji Mother Temple in Kyoto in regard to Jodo Shin Shu faith is:

Shinjin Shoin - deep trust is the only cause.
Shomyo Houon - calling the Name is in gratitude.

Of the many instructions Shinran Shonin left for us, the passages in regard to his deep trust in Buddha and appreciation for Buddha's benevolence stand out:

Now having entered the sea of the all-embracing compassion of Amida Buddha, I truly appreciate the great benevolence originating in Buddha. As my humble response to these blessings, I hereby compile passages on the essentials of Jodo Shin Shu and call the Name of Buddha in deep gratitude.

(SSZ II, p. 166)¹

As indicated here, the calling of Buddha's Name truly becomes meaningful to us when one has this clear grasp of what Buddha directs us through the way of "merit transference."² Thus our masters have reiterated many times:

The way of the Nembutsu is the way unimpeded.

Blessed, indeed, are those who have put their whole-hearted trust in Amida Buddha, for they now tread the way of no-obstructions.

FOOTNOTES

1. SSZ, II, 166. SSZ is the Shin Shu Shogyo Zenshu, volume II, page 166. This publication is a compila-

tion of the major books by the succeeding masters of Shin Shu Buddhism. It consists of five volumes, which contain the instructions of the Sakyamuni Buddha, the writings of the seven masters in Jodo Shin Shu Buddhism, and those of the founder of Jodo Shin Shu, Shinran.

In the last two volumes are the instructions and writings of the succeeding masters after Shinran, up to the time of Rennyo Shonin, the sixth master after Shinran.

2. Merit transference. The "merit" here is the tre-

mendous power known as the power of Amida Buddha's primal vow, or the action originating from the side of the awakened Buddha, which enables man to achieve the highest goal of attainment of birth in the Pure Land. Unlike many denominations of Mahayana Buddhism which put emphasis on the achievements of the individual through pure practices, Jodo Shin Shu puts emphasis on the purity of Buddha's enlightenment and any power to enable one to achieve the highest goal of birth in the Pure Land has to be at the level of this absolute purity. In Shin Shu, the open acceptance of this power is called faith in Buddha.

FROM THE TEACHING OF BUDDHA:

Buddha has a three-fold body. There is an aspect of Essence of Dharma-kaya; there is an aspect of Potentiality or Sambhoga-kaya; and there is an aspect of Manifestation or Nirmana-kaya.

Dharma-kaya is the substance of the Dharma; that is, it is the substance of Truth itself. As the aspect of Essence, Buddha has no shape or color, and since Buddha has no shape or color, He comes from nowhere and there is nowhere for Him to go. Like the blue sky, He arches over everything, and since He is all things, He lacks nothing.

He does not exist because people think He exists; neither does He disappear because people forget Him. He is under no particular compulsion to appear when people are happy and comfortable, neither is it necessary for Him to disappear when people are inattentive and idle. Buddha transcends every conceivable direction of human thought.

Buddha's body in this aspect fills every corner of the universe; it reaches everywhere, it exists forever, regardless of whether people believe in Him or doubt His existence.

Sambhoga-kaya signifies that the nature of Buddha, the merging of both Compassion and Wisdom, which is imageless spirit, manifests itself through the symbols of birth and death, through the symbols of vow-making, training and revealing His sacred name, in order to lead all people to salvation.

Thus, Compassion is the Essence of this body and in its spirit Buddha uses all devices to emancipate all those who are ready for emancipation. Like a fire that, once kindled, never dies away until the fuel is exhausted, so the Compassion of Buddha will never falter until all worldly passions are exhausted. Just as the wind blows away the dust, so the Compassion of Buddha in this body blows away the dust of human suffering.

Nirmana-kaya signifies that, in order to complete the relief of Buddha of Potentiality, Buddha appeared in the world in bodily form and showed the people, according to their natures and capacities, the aspects of the birth, renunciation of this world and attainment of Enlightenment. In order to lead the people, Buddha in this body uses every means such as illness and death.

The form of Buddha is originally one Dharma-kaya, but as the nature of people varies, Buddha's form appears differently. Although the form of Buddha varies according to the different desires, deeds and abilities of people, Buddha is concerned only with the truth of the Dharma.

Though Buddha has a three-fold body, His spirit and purpose are one—to save all people.

Though in all circumstances Buddha is manifest in His purity, yet this manifestation is not Buddha because Buddha is not a form. Buddhahood fills everything; it makes Enlightenment its body and, as Enlightenment, it appears before all those capable of realizing the Truth.