



# The Aspect of Life of Meaning and Growth

by La Verne Sasaki

The 1952 Japanese movie *Ikiru* (To Live) is described by *Film Quarterly* as follows: "Akira Kurosawa (the director) has endowed the film with compassion and understanding, with an ironic awareness of human weaknesses and a knowledge of the dignity of the individual."

The goal of Jodo Shinshu is to learn "to live." This implies one of the basic premises of Buddhism—that most of us are not really living, but merely existing. This belief is dramatically communicated in the movie *Ikiru*.

The main character in the film discovers that he has cancer and has only six months to live. This rude awakening to his condition makes him reflect upon the sterility of both his private life and his monotonous office job. He realizes that he has wasted his entire life. His first impulse is to make up for all that he has missed by grasping at self-indulgent pleasures, but this is in vain, for he has forgotten how to enjoy himself. He finally realizes that his life can have meaning only through helping others. The last half of the film portrays his struggles with bureaucracy and apathy in order to present a long-neglected petition to build a children's playground. In the film's final and most moving scene, he spends the night of his passing on a playground swing singing these words:

*Life is so short; fall in love, dear maiden, while your hair is still black and before your heart withers; for today will not come again.*

The goal of Jodo Shinshu faith is to make real the possibility of living this difficult life with hope and optimism. A life of meaning and growth can be the outcome of living the life of Nembutsu. But, what is this Nembutsu way of life? What is a life of meaning and growth?

Many definitions and descriptions of the Buddhist life have been given to us through sermons, books, and illustrations of the actual lives of certain persons who have in one way or another, exemplified the qualities of self-awareness, humility, gratitude and transformation. I would like to share with you another perspective of such a life as found in the book entitled, *Psychology Today—An Introduction*.

The section of the book that interested me was the chapter on "Maturity and Adjustment." As I was reading its description of maturity, I could not help but relate it to the life of meaning and growth as taught to us as the way of Nembutsu. Maturity was described as follows:

1. *Maturity is not something one has but rather an ongoing striving toward a goal that is probably never reached in most lifetimes.*

This is certainly a description of the Buddhist way of life. Maturity, according to this definition, is no different from the Buddhist ideal of Enlightenment. This is like the Jodo Shinshu interpretation of the Pure Land—not equal to Enlightenment, but a means (stepping stone) to Enlightenment.

The chapter further states, "No one knows exactly what a fully mature person would look like or how he would behave." To me, this also holds true for an enlightened person or a person of Nembutsu faith.

2. *The mature person is realistic. He has developed a life style that is not fixed or rigid, a way of living that allows him to grow as a person by keeping his mind open to change and new experience.*

This is how I envision a true Buddhist. If this quality could be found amongst more of us, how much easier and better would human institutions (the family, the temple, B.C.A., community, nation and world) function!

3. *Maturity is made up of compassion and tolerance for others that allows the mature person to establish a sensitive, tender loving relationship with his fellow human beings.*

The ultimate goal of Nembutsu is none other than this ideal which we call the way of the Bodhisattva (the profound altruistic concern that all living beings become enlightened). In terms of our daily living, it is to regard all persons with compassion regardless of the other's karma. "Kokoro to kokoro no fure ai" (the coming together of one mind with another mind) is the Japanese version. I cannot imagine a more noble and beautiful vision.

4. *The mature individual must come to terms with what most of us believe to be real. Acceptance of common reality is a familiar measure of sanity in every society, but this does not mean blind acceptance of a reality based solely on what other people agree about.*

These ideas parallel the final words of Shakyamuni Buddha who told his disciples not to blindly accept his teachings, but, rather, to test them for themselves.

5. *If man were without emotions, the task of becoming mature would be simpler indeed. Tempering emotions and channeling their focus become the prime accomplishments of maturity . . . Emotional control implies postponing immediate gratification and learning to accept the necessity of work. It means selecting goals and laboring to achieve them.*

This is the goal of Buddhism in a nutshell and the spiritual path described by Shinran Shonin in his Buddhist work titled, *Kyo Gyo Shin Sho* (Teaching, Practice, Faith and Attainment).

6. *Maturity calls for a capacity to tolerate the inevitable frustrations of life and the ability to function in the face of fear . . . Maturity is a form of knowing oneself or recognizing emotions and coping with them in a variety of life circumstances. Given these specific qualifications, maturity and adjustment can be considered synonymous.*

Shinran Shonin's frustration while undergoing intensive Buddhist training and study was no different. Although we sometimes refer to him as "Saint Shinran" and tend to consider him a super-human, he never considered himself saintly. As we review his life, we see that Shinran Shonin changed from an *ordinary* human person to a *true* human person

(Ningen rashii Ningen ni natta koto).

Our own lives, too, would become more full of meaning and growth if we could see and appreciate the fact that Buddhist truths are found not only in Buddhist books, lectures, and sermons, but they are also found in countless other areas of study such as psychology, anthropology, astronomy, physics, philosophy, etc. Buddhism, furthermore, can be uncovered in the least expected places and persons—in the experiences of convicts in prisons; in the varying karmic backgrounds of patients in psychiatric wards; in the heat of argument with family members or friends; in all aspects of nature; in the quiet recitation of the Nembutsu by a terminally-ill person; in the open-mindedness and innocence of children playing among themselves . . .

Buddhism, therefore, is truly a *way of life* rather than a *way of religion*. You and I can continue to grow until we die, if we fully apprehend our daily experiences and live with a true perspective of ourselves in the world around us.

#### FROM THE TEACHING OF BUDDHA:

When the moon sets, people say that the moon has disappeared; and when the moon rises, they say that the moon has appeared. But, in fact, the moon neither goes nor comes, but shines changelessly in the sky. Buddha is exactly like the moon: He neither appears nor disappears; He only seems to do so, out of love for the people, that He may teach them.

People call one phase of the moon a full moon, they call another phase a crescent moon; but, in reality, the moon is always perfectly round, neither waxing nor waning. Buddha is precisely like the moon. In the eyes of men, Buddha may seem to change in appearance, but, in truth, Buddha does not change.

The moon appears everywhere, over a crowded city, a sleepy village, a mountain, a river; it is seen in the depths of a pond, in a jug of water, in a drop of dew hanging on a leaf. If a man walks hundreds of miles the moon goes with him. To men, the moon seems to change, but the moon does not change. Buddha is like the moon in following the people of this world in all their changing circumstances, manifesting various appearances; but in His Essence He does not change.

The fact that Buddha appears and disappears can be explained by causality:—namely, when the causes and conditions are propitious, Buddha appears; when causes and conditions are not propitious, Buddha seems to disappear from the world.

Whether Buddha appears or disappears, Buddhahood always remains the same. Knowing this principle, one must keep to the path of Enlightenment and attain Perfect Wisdom, undisturbed by the apparent changes in the image of Buddha, in the condition of the world, or in the fluctuations of human thought.