

Loneliness



by Ken Yamaguchi

In all my life I had never experienced what I could really call loneliness until that day I was to depart for Japan to begin my studies for the ministry. All my feelings were of eagerness to get started on the "road" to learning, and all was excitement. As I boarded the plane and turned to take a last look at my family and friends who had come to see me off I could not control my emotions or maintain my composure. I just broke down and cried. All my fellow passengers thought it very strange that a big and husky (or should I just say fat) man would be acting like a cry baby. No one could understand and feel the loneliness I was experiencing leaving my loved ones behind.

Once on the plane I found myself sitting next to a young mother with a small daughter about three years old and also an infant about seven months old. The mother was on her way back to Japan to visit her folks and as she was having a difficult time taking care of both children I found myself carrying the infant throughout the entire trip. It reached a point where everyone began to assume that it was my baby and they were probably wondering how I happened to have such a young wife. Needless to say, I completely forgot about my loneliness throughout the rest of the flight.

The plane was late getting into Haneda Airport. Although my cousin had come to pick me up at the scheduled time he thought I had missed my plane and so returned home. When I finally got through customs inspection with my eight huge pieces of baggage and found no one waiting for me, a heavy feeling of despondency fell over me and I was just about ready to throw my hands up and say, "I quit!" Not being acquainted with the Japanese phone system I was almost in a state of tears at not being able to make phone connections. A kind Japanese gentleman, noticing my desperation, offered to help me and I was finally able to contact my cousin who then came again to pick me up. It seemed as if I waited for more than three hours and when I finally saw him driving up the happiness I experienced was something inexpressible in words.

After a few days' visit with my cousin and his family I boarded the *Shinkansen* bullet train and arrived in Kyoto. Three gentlemen from the foreign department of the Nishi Hongwanji were at the station to meet and welcome me. I was taken to Wakoryo, a dormitory for all foreign students studying for the American missionary program, and introduced to everyone residing there. Fortunately for me I

had already known Jim Yanagihara and he went out of his way to make me feel comfortable. He did everything he could, but when nightfall came he couldn't very well sleep with me and so I experienced my first night of loneliness in my own room. I tried to forget my loneliness and recited the *Nembutsu* for a long time, but it had very little effect for such is the way of self-powered *Nembutsu*. The night was long and lonely, but I finally cried myself to sleep after a few hours. The same thing happened the second night; I found myself again crying with unbearable loneliness. It reached a point where I could no longer stand it and I got up at 1:00 a.m. and called long distance (collect) to my family. My wife thought something had happened to me and with a very worried voice asked me what was the matter. I said I was so lonely. I wanted to hear her voice and the children's voices. She became very angry, a rare thing for her, and she scolded me for my weakness. That was the first time in my life I was happy being scolded. At the same time it made me realize many things.

In the past I had taken so much for granted. I had thought that the good life I had in the past was because of my own efforts, that it was solely up to me to make my own happiness. How mistaken I was, for I came to realize that it is only because of all the loved ones surrounding me and embracing me that I was able to enjoy a good life. My wonderful family, teachers, friends, and all the things in life to which I am exposed are the sources of my happiness and contentment. I thought of the poem, "*Gorin matsu no gosho*," recited by Shinran Shonin:

*Waga toshi kiwamari-te, Anyo jodo ni genki-su to
Yuutomo, Waka-no ura-wa no kata o nami no, Yo-se
kake, yo-se ka-ke, ka-e-ran ni onaji. Hitori i-te yoroko-
ba-ba, Futari to omo-u beshi, Futari i-te yoroko-ba-ba,
mitari to omo-u beshi. Sono hitori wa Shinran nari.*

Translated, it says,

*Though I, my life having run its course, return to the
Pureland of eternal rest, come back shall I to earth
again and again, even as the waves of Wakano-ura Bay.
When alone you rejoice in the sacred Teachings,
believe that there are two, and when there are two to
rejoice, believe that there are three, and that other*

shall be Shinran.

This poem constantly reminds me that I am never alone whether in joy or in sorrow.

I later received a letter from my wife and my daughters, who at that time were 10 and 8 years old. In the letter, my daughters wrote,

Dear Daddy,

We all miss you very much. Every night when Mommy is in her own bedroom we peek in there and she has tears in her eyes and she is crying. We are counting the days and look forward to the day when we can be with you again real soon . . .

I realized how selfish it was of me to be taking pity on myself and thinking that I was the only one suffering with loneliness. I began to concentrate on my studies and with the help of wonderful teachers and fellow students who went out of their way to help me I was able to bear with the loneliness during the ensuing months.

All things and actions are in relationship with each other, tied together like cords interconnected to form a fishing net, all inseparable. My illusions which blind me from this reality continue to bring me experiences of anxiety. Shinran Shonin taught us that those who believe in Amida Buddha's Supreme Vow and place their whole trust in Him, or surrender themselves completely to His Wisdom and Compassion though they remain unchanged in all forms, are actually endowed with the seeds of Buddhahood. As seeds germinate when planted in the soil, so the merits contained in the faithful heart are manifest in full glory when the believer is reborn in the Pureland to become one with Amida Buddha, who is boundless in Light and Life.

The question often asked is, "Where is this Amida Buddha?" In the *Amida-kyo* (*Smaller Sukhavati Vyuhā Sutra*), near the beginning, is a description of a land 100,000 billion worlds away called the Pureland, where Amida Buddha resides. In the *Kan-Muryō-Jukyo* (*Meditation Sutra on the Eternal Buddha*), the Buddha relates where one can experience the truth of the reality of Amida's Pureland right here and now. Two conflicting statements seem to be made. However, when things are seen in their proper perspective beyond the sense of time and space, the reality of both statements becomes more clear.

Human beings tend to look at things about life in relative terms; everything in relation to the "ME." Therefore, the vision of the Pureland being way out there in the infinite distance and time is easier to accept. We make comparisons between ourselves and all things outside us, and we tend to be concerned about the things outside us. We make outward gestures of concern for other people and things while, in reality, the true concern is for ourselves at the sacrifice of other people and things.

There is a story about a priest of a church who had great compassion for the unfortunate thief who had to steal from others to support himself. The priest sympathized with the thief, saying, "The poor soul, society has it against

him and he doesn't stand a chance in trying to make an honest living. We should try to help him out as much as we can."

One day this thief, who had been befriended by the priest and taken into the comforts of the church, took advantage of his opportunity and stole everything he could get his hands on. He escaped into the night, leaving a note of thanks to the kindly priest. There was a sudden change of attitude in the priest from one of compassion to one of uncontrollable anger and he immediately took steps to capture the thief to punish him. The moral of this story is that it is easy to understand the actions of, and sympathize with, the thief as long as the victim is not my "self."

We frequently compliment others' good fortunes outwardly but the complimenting is not 100 percent pure, for deep inside there is a tinge of jealousy in others' successes. For example, we hear of someone having the good fortune to come into a big inheritance, or having just won a big jackpot, and we start looking for some reason to criticize something about that person. We may complain that he is a stingy "so-and-so" because he doesn't donate to the church, etc. Oftentimes, I hear about someone winning first prize at a church bazaar and the first comment is usually, "Well, I guess we can expect half of the winnings to be donated back to the church." A guilt complex is created in the winner such that he is almost forced to donate some money. He won the raffle fair and square yet he is afraid he is going to be looked upon as a cheapskate, and so reluctantly parts with some of his legitimate winnings.

It is easy to sympathize with others' misfortune and at the same time it is so easy to pass it off and forget with a comment or thought like, "Well, maybe he deserved it." On the other hand it is difficult to understand when others don't show any sympathy if we happen to have some misfortune of our own. When watching a television program we are often affected emotionally, but when the same thing happens in our own real life we don't react with the same feelings.

There is a story about a couple preparing to cook a fish on the backyard patio. They were arguing about whether the fish should be fried or barbecued. The next-door neighbor was peeking over the fence and criticizing the way the couple were fighting with each other. Another neighbor, living next door to that "peeping tom," was looking through a small hole in his *shoji* door and saying, "Look at that nosy neighbor poking his nose into other people's business!" Not for a moment did he realize he was doing the same thing himself!

We are so busy poking our noses into other people's affairs, feeling sympathy for the imperfections of others, and feeling jealousy toward others, for example, that we hardly have time to look within ourselves. This is why we are unable to see Amida Buddha.

If, and when, we can begin to see this real "self," our own real self, and realize how cruel and dirty it is, then the "I" should be able, theoretically, to correct the "self" and clean up the "self." If we do this, we are then a Buddha.

However, the sad truth is that even though I realize

how important and soiled my heart and mind are, I cannot help but continue to be the same way. It is beyond my capacity to change. I begin to realize this total helplessness more and more, while at the same time experiencing the

absolute energy of Amida Buddha and His Wisdom and Compassion, and I cannot help but place my whole self in total reliance upon Him. This, I believe, is the essence of "ONENESS WITH AMIDA BUDDHA."

SHINRAN AND THE PARABLE OF THE BURNING HOUSE

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question.

In short, the system of Shinran's conviction regarding the instructions and principles originate in the Buddha's sermons as relayed to Shinran through the Masters before him. They were all believers in the *Nembutsu* way and were well versed in the Buddha's instructions based on the three basic sutras. This is one reason why other major Mahayana sutras are not necessarily emphasized by most of the Masters. Shinran inherited and faithfully adhered to this tradition.

Despite our founder not citing any passage from the *Lotus Sutra* in his major writings, the basic ideas and concepts developed in the sutra are adopted. One example is the idea of the burning house which, in the *Lotus Sutra*, symbolizes the human world of *dukkha* (suffering). This expression appears many times and for our purpose a few examples are given here.

In Volume II of the *Shin-Shu Sho-Gyo Zen-Sho* (sacred books of Shin Shu), on the matter of Pure Faith, Shinran refers to the example of "The White Path and the Two Rivers" presented by the Master Zendo in China:

To apply the situation in the form of a parable, by the eastern bank is meant the saha world of the burning house and by the western bank is meant the Treasure-land of Bliss.

(SSZ II, 56-8)

Also in Volume II, on the true (but hidden) teachings of the three basic sutras, and referring to the *Anrakushu* by the Master Doshaku of China, we find the following passage:

Although it has not been a period of time of 10,000 kalpas, all along, I have never been able to be freed from the agony of the burning house.

(SSZ II, 153-7)

Doshaku, Master of Genchuji Temple, again said:

Now those who sincerely follow the way to purity do so with an earnest mind and continuity, then having endured over a kalpa, for the first time realize the level of non-retrogression. Sentient beings of the present may be said to be of "such light-faith-minded, as it were hair and feathers." To them we may apply names such as bodhisattva-in-name-only, the bodhisattva of unsettled mind, or one outside of Buddhist traditions. These people have not been relieved of the sufferings of the burning house.

Along with the concept of the burning house, another attempt Shinran made in establishing the Shin Shu flavor of the Buddhist concept was the *ekayana* or one-level principle of attainment. In this regard, Shinran expressed this concept as *ichijo-kai* (一乗海) or the sea of one vehicle attainment. In regard to the "sea of one vehicle attainment" the one vehicle is meant to be the Mahayana tradition in Buddhism and by Mahayana tradition is meant Buddha-yana of One Buddha vehicle. Thus, those who achieve the level of Mahayana tradition attain the level of *amuttara-sam-yak-sambodhi*. By this is meant the realm of Nirvana, the ultimate (highest) Dharmakaya. Those who achieve this realm are those who have realized completely the essence of the realm of *ekayana*, the one-vehicle level. There is no other level of Tathagata than this as the Tathagata is Dharmakaya.

The significance of the one vehicle in regard to attainment is that the level or plane of one's attainment is of the highest level as well as being of the same ultimate qualitative value. This gives Shinran's conviction a unique position through which "absolute *tariki*" (power of Amida Buddha's Vow) is brought into focus. This also becomes the basis of strong conviction on the part of Shinran regarding non-retrogression while in this existence, meaning even before one realizes *Ōjo*. These convictions of our founder are firmly rooted in the power of the Buddha's Vow. Thus, for our founder, *tariki* is no other power than the power of Amida Buddha's Primal (18th) Vow.