

A Way of Living as a Nembutsu Follower

Buddhism began when Sakyamuni attained enlightenment and became a Buddha about 2500 years ago. In Japan, Buddhism was originally referred to as the Buddha Dharma. The Dharma here refers to the true reality of how the world is and the nature of humanity itself. It is the universal truth that transcends both space and time. The one who awakens to this truth is called a Buddha, and the teaching of the Buddha is the wisdom that teaches us how we can live, while dealing with many anxieties and sufferings we may experience in life.

Buddhism describes the true reality of this world and humanity using such phrases as 'impermanence' and 'dependent origination.' 'Impermanence' refers to the fact that everything changes moment by moment. On the other hand, 'dependent origination' explains that all things and phenomena are interconnected with one another, which bring about various causes and conditions that then give another set of causes and conditions and so on and so forth. Therefore, in this world we cannot find an unchanging and fixed 'self.'

However, we are unaware of this reality and thus we try to find some unchanging and fixed entity we call the self. This mindset is the basis of our egocentric way of thinking in which we judge things whether they are beneficial to us or not, or whether we like something or not. As a result, we suffer when things do not turn out as we like and we become hostile to each other, thus confining ourselves to a bitter reality where we cannot truly be free. In Buddhism, this self-oriented tendency is expressed as 'ignorance and blind passions,' which are the very reason we are deprived of our liberty and bound to this world of suffering. Ignorance and blind passions are represented as greed, anger, and foolishness also known as the 'three poisons.'

Shinran Shonin pursued religious practices for 20 years on Mount Hiei with the hope to attain enlightenment by conquering his blind passions. However, being aware of the depth of human desires which are irremovable by religious austerities, he descended Mount Hiei and under the guidance of Honen Shonin, finally encountered the salvific working of Amida Tathagata. Amida is the Buddha who not only wishes for but is actually working in accordance with the wish to save and guide to supreme enlightenment, all living beings who are in the midst of constant worries and distress. The Buddha's Wish, or the Primal Vow, declares that Amida's Great Compassion embraces us all as we are, as beings filled with selfish attachments and blind passions. However, even in encountering such all-inclusive salvific working, because of our own fathomlessly deep egocentric mindset and desires, we still cannot wholeheartedly entrust ourselves to the Buddha's Great Compassion. How sad this truly is.

By listening to the Primal Vow and how it was established by Amida Tathagata, we are enabled to become conscious of our own ignorance and self-oriented inclinations, and through such awareness, we naturally become gentle in word and deed in our efforts of minimizing our egoistic way of thinking. For example, with regard to how we live our lives, we "learn to be content without wanting too much" and with regard to how we may treat others we "associate with people using gentle expressions and kind words." Even though our efforts may pale in comparison to the Buddha's Compassion, we are at least

guided in the proper direction by the Buddha Dharma. Shinran Shonin clarifies this in his letters addressed to his followers, one of which states, "There was a time for each of you when you knew nothing of Amida's Vow and did not say the Name of Amida Buddha, but now, guided by the compassionate means of Sakyamuni and Amida, you have begun to hear the Vow. Formerly you were intoxicated with thoughts of greed, anger, and foolishness, but since you have begun to hear the Buddha's Vow you have gradually awakened from the drunkenness of ignorance, rejected the three poisons, and have come to prefer the medicine of Amida Buddha at all times." This is a stern admonition we should humbly receive.

In today's world, there is an endless list of difficult global issues that are directly related to the existence of humanity such as terrorist attacks, armed conflicts, widening economic gap, global warming, mishandling of nuclear waste, and violation of human rights through discrimination. Such are the result of our ignorance and blind passions in which we fail to see the true nature of ourselves. It is indeed true that we are imperfect with our selfish desires and cannot act in complete purity like the Buddha can. However, by trying to live according to the Buddha Dharma, let us make an effort to consider other peoples' joy as our own, as well as other peoples' suffering as our own. In this way, we can live to the best of our ability, aspiring to live up to the Buddha's Wish.

I will endeavor to share Amida Tathagata's Wisdom and Compassion through simple and clear language with as many people as possible regardless of nationality and ethnic background. Let us encourage everyone to act in accordance with the Buddha's Wish in an effort to create a society in which everyone can live a spiritually fulfilled life. In the hopes of creating a joyous world, let us continue moving forward by putting these words into action and together walk on our path to the truth.

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