Mother’s Day Service
May 10, 2020

“I, Shinran, have never even once uttered the Nembutsu for the sake of my father and mother. The reason is that all beings have been fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, in the timeless process of birth-and-death. When I attain Buddhahood in the next birth, each and everyone will be saved.”

Tannisho – Chapter 5

Mother’s Day was first suggested in the United States by Julia Ward Howe, the author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic. She suggested that this day be dedicated to peace. But it wasn’t until the late 1800’s through the efforts of Anna Jarvis that Mother’s Day became a national holiday in the US.

Almost hundred years have past and perhaps as recent as 50 years ago, our family lifestyles were much different than they are now. Family was a big part of life back then. Families ate all three meals together, each day. Father worked at a company were he'd probably work for the rest of his life and mother stayed home and took care of the house and fed the family. Life was remarkable uniform, predictable, safe.

Prior to COVID-19 pandemic, that picture of American life has given way to a vastly different one. Both parents are working, single parents, married couples opting not to have children, same sex marriages, or even new roles that mother and father have taken on, are some of the new lifestyles in our society that have been characterized by global issues, endless diversity, technological advances, and constant social upheaval and now we’re dealing with a deadly virus.

But there is one common thread that continues to tie all of humanity. We were all brought into this world by our mother and father. As we reflect on how we came into this world, we should truly reflect on the countless causes and conditions that enabled us to be who we are.

Through out all these years our parents have given unselfishly. Their love seems so unconditional. Our mothers and fathers undergo many sacrifices for their children without asking for special favors from their children.
So it would seem so natural to put our hands together and gassho to our parents. Yet, why does Shinran say he has never even once said the Nembutsu for his parents?

The passage I quoted at the beginning of this article comes from Chapter 5 of the Tannisho …

The point to this quote is two fold. “I, Shinran, have never even once uttered the Nembutsu for the sake of my father and mother”: Shinran wanted to express his view towards ancestral worship towards his parents. Prior to and during Shinran’s time it was customary to hold services, build temples and statues, chant sutras and recite the Nembutsu for the sake of those who had passed on, in the hope of increasing their merits and guaranteeing them a higher and happier state of existence. Shinran felt that these practices were superficial and unimportant. He discouraged the idea of saying Nembutsu to collect merit for other beings, even for the sake of filial piety.

In the second part of this passage, “The reason is that all beings have been fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, in the timeless process of birth-and death. When I attain Buddhahood in the next birth, each and everyone will be saved”: I think it’s very relevant to the Buddhist ideal of the universality of Buddha in all beings. Shinran’s understanding is that all sentient beings had been his mother, father, brothers and sisters during his innumerable past lives. Not in the literal sense, not the physical reincarnation sense, but in the Buddhist universalism that transcends all social, racial, ethnic, political obstacles. We are all one. The gratitude that we owe our mothers, fathers, our family, should be extended equally to all beings.

As we become more aware of this truth of interconnectedness and interdependence of all life we are able to inwardly realize the wisdom and compassion of Amida Buddha and outwardly live with gratitude for the life made possible for us not only by our mothers but also by everyone and not just on Mothers Day’s Day but everyday, every moment.

Namo Amida Butsu