

*FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE*

# DHARMA WORLD

SPRING 2021 Vol. 48





First World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 1970



Second World Assembly in Leuven, Belgium, 1974



Third World Assembly in Princeton, the United States, 1979



Fourth World Assembly in Nairobi, Kenya, 1984



Fifth World Assembly in Melbourne, Australia, 1989



**Religions for Peace**   
Japan

## Religions for Peace Japan

Religions for Peace was established in 1970 as an international nongovernmental organization. It obtained general consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1999. As an international network of religious communities encompassing over ninety countries, the Religions for Peace family engages in conflict resolution, humanitarian assistance, and other peace-building activities through dialogue and cooperation across religions.

Religions for Peace Japan was established in 1972 as a committee for the international issues supported by Japanese Association of Religious Organizations. Since then it has served as the national chapter of Religions for Peace.

### Purpose

1. Calling on religious communities to deeply reflect on their practices, address any that are exclusionary in nature, and engage in dialogue with one another in the spirit of tolerance and understanding.
2. Facilitating multireligious collaboration in making peace initiatives.
3. Working with peace organizations in all sectors and countries to address global issues.
4. Implementing religiously based peace education and awareness-raising activities.

### Activity

Religions for Peace Japan promotes activities under the slogan: "Caring for Our Common Future: Advancing Shared Well-Being," which include cooperating and collaborating with Religions for Peace and Religions for Peace Asia; participating in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) review conference; cooperating and collaborating with both international and local faith-based organizations; and building networks with various sectors (politics, economics, academics, culture, media, and so forth). Religions for Peace Japan also promotes various programs related to peace education that include hosting peace research seminars and peace university symposiums.

The fiftieth anniversary ceremony of Religions for Peace Japan will be held in November in Kyoto.



Sixth World Assembly in Rome and Riva del Garda, Italy, 1994



Seventh World Assembly in Amman, Jordan, 1999



Eighth World Assembly in Kyoto, Japan, 2006



Ninth World Assembly in Vienna, Austria, 2013



Tenth World Assembly in Lindau, Germany, 2019

## Religions for Peace Japan Different Faith, Common Action

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# DHARMA WORLD

FOR LIVING BUDDHISM AND INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

SPRING 2021, VOL. 48

## FEATURES: What Is Prayer?

*Dharma World* presents Buddhism as a practical living religion and promotes interreligious dialogue for world peace. It espouses views that emphasize the dignity of life, seeks to rediscover our inner nature and bring our lives more in accord with it, and investigates causes of human suffering. It tries to show how religious principles help solve problems in daily life and how the least application of such principles has wholesome effects on the world around us. It seeks to demonstrate truths that are fundamental to all religions, truths on which all people can act.

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**2** Prayer in Rissho Kosei-kai and the Power of the Sangha  
*by Takanori Kumano*

**3** Contemplating Prayer  
*by David R. Loy*

**6** A Shin Buddhist Perspective on Prayer: Petitionary Prayers and Prayers for Buddhist Awakening  
*by Kenneth K. Tanaka*

**10** The Christian Meaning of Prayer as Intercession  
*by Juan Masiá*

**14** Revisiting “Homage to Hell, the Great Bodhisattva” Today  
*by Masaki Matsubara*

**18** Prayer in Shugendo  
*by Gaynor Sekimori*

**22** Prayer as Action: Buddhist Priests During COVID-19 in Japan  
*by Levi McLaughlin*

**26** What Is Prayer?  
*by Tomoshi Okuda*

**29** Zen Prayer? Maybe, Maybe Not  
*by Pamela D. Winfield*

.....

**32** Prayer in Rissho Kosei-kai  
*by Dominick Scarangelo*

**39** People Who Bring Joy to Others  
*by Nichiko Niwano*

**40** The Three Pillars of the Lotus Sutra  
*by Nikkyo Niwano*

### THE THREEFOLD LOTUS SUTRA: A MODERN COMMENTARY

**43** The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law  
Chapter 28: Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (2)



Photo: Gaynor Sekimori





# Prayer in Rissho Kosei-kai and the Power of the Sangha

by Takanori Kumano



***Prayer is a wish, an expression of love and hope for a change for the better in the situation in which we and others find ourselves.***

*Takanori Kumano is director of the Dharma Dissemination Department of Rissho Kosei-kai in Tokyo.*

It is hardly any exaggeration to say that our life is bound together by prayer. We pray whether or not we have a faith. And at the same time, our lives are supported by prayer.

When we are born, our parents and family pray that all will go well. As we grow, they pray for our healthy development: when we start to crawl, they pray for us to stand up, and when we stand up, they pray for us to walk. As we grow older, they pray that we will be successful in our exams, and when we become adults we pray for things such as our job, our marriage, and the birth of our children. When we become ill, our family prays that operations and treatment will be successful and that we will be able to overcome our many trials. At the end, they pray for the repose of our souls.

Prayer is a wish, an expression of love and hope for a change for the better in the situation in which we and others find ourselves. We can say it is life's activity itself as, both praying and being prayed for, we try to live through the many painful moments of life together.

How we perceive the power of prayer may vary. As I did when I was young, many probably feel that prayer is unreliable and that prayer alone solves nothing. However, the sincere prayers of a person of faith are beautiful and powerful. In Rissho Kosei-kai, for example,

when our sangha friends find themselves hard-pressed, we join our hearts and pray together. I wonder how many people have been heartened and given courage by the sincere prayers of the sangha. Prayer is powerful, certainly not unreliable.

In his book *Cultivating the Buddhist Heart*, President Nichiko Niwano writes: "For Buddhists, prayer is the same as what is called a vow, and both are at the core of our being" ([Kosei Publishing, 2008], 93).

On April 1, 2020, at 10 p.m., President-designate Kosho Niwano offered a prayer for the whole world from Rissho Kosei-kai's headquarters in Tokyo. In response to the spread of the coronavirus, the International Council of Religions for Peace, broadcasting live on social media, connected people of religion from different countries to organize the Interfaith Moment of Hope and Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19.

After reciting the daimoku three times, President-designate Niwano recited the words of the prayer: "When we have to cancel plans to go out with friends, may we have compassion for those who have to work outside the home to make ends meet. When we are stressed staying at home all day, may we remember those who have no safe place to stay. When our country is ruled by fear, may our bright smiles be like lights shining in the darkness."

More than a prayer or a wish, this was a rigorous vow of self-reflection as well as an offering to the gods and the buddhas. This was a prayer offered by a person of religion, full of love for humanity. It was not as if any single problem caused by the pandemic is someone else's but one that concerns us all. It was as if all prayers and wishes had become a single thought that echoed throughout the three thousand realms.

We are believers, and as such can't make vaccines or provide cures. But we can reflect on our daily lives, feeling that the world is connected to us, and pray that we might be able to fulfill the Buddha's wishes. Prayer leads to action. I hope that if there is someone close to us who is suffering, we will be able to listen to what they have to say and give them the courage to live together with us through the many hardships of life. □



*Some nine hundred delegates and guests of the Tenth World Assembly of Religions for Peace, which was held on August 19–23, 2019, in Lindau, Germany, took part in an interreligious and spiritual ceremony at the island town's Luitpold Park on August 20.*

# Contemplating Prayer

by David R. Loy



***Although theistic prayer is often petitionary (“God, please do this . . .”) in a way that assumes God is separate from us, is there another way to understand prayer? Aren’t there other ways to pray?***

## What Is the Role of Prayer in Buddhism?

In order to understand the role of prayer in Buddhism, we must first understand what prayer is. A common definition is that prayer is a form of communication between humans and some higher power—which naturally leads to a further question: what is a higher power?

Abrahamic religions such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam believe that an omnipotent, all-loving God created everything. Although this God created us, God has an existence separate from us, so we can appeal to such a God and ask for something.

From a Buddhist perspective, however, such an understanding is dualistic and delusive. What Thich Nhat Hanh says about bowing also applies to praying: “A prostration based on the perception that Buddha has a separate self from your own, and that you have a self separate from the Buddha, can only be called superstition.” When we bow or pray to an image of the Buddha or a bodhisattva, we should remember that such physical objects or mental visualizations are only symbols that point to something beyond themselves—to something that cannot actually be depicted, because “the one who bows and the one who is

bowed to are both, by nature, empty.” The one who prays and the one who is prayed to are also both empty, according to Buddhist teachings.

So a dualistic way of understanding prayer seems incompatible with Buddhism, but is there another way to understand the “higher power” that is prayed to? Larry Dossey, a physician who has researched and written about the effectiveness of prayer, understands prayer in a slightly different way: “Prayer is communication with the Absolute.” The concept of an Absolute (the ultimate, unrestricted, perfect—literally, “the Unconditioned”) is more compatible with Buddhism because it does not distinguish between a personal creator God and a more impersonal ultimate reality (for example, nirvana, or the Pure Land). That leaves open the possibility of a more nearly nondual relationship between those who pray and that which they pray to. And it also creates a bridge—a relationship—between prayer and the meditation practices that Buddhist teachings more often emphasize.

Although theistic prayer is often petitionary (“God, please do this . . .”) in a way that assumes God is separate from us, is there another way to understand prayer? Aren’t there other ways to pray? A common mistake is to compare a popular

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(and simplistic) version of one religion with a more sophisticated (theological or philosophical) version of another religion (as one’s own is usually perceived). The result supposedly reveals that the latter is superior to the former, but in fact such comparisons are unfair and misleading. When we remember that both Buddhism and Christianity are complex and diverse traditions, with a great variety of teachings and practices adapted to the needs of different types of believers at different stages in their spiritual development, then the various meanings and roles of prayer can become clearer.

The types of Buddhism that have spread beyond Asia and become popular in the globalized modern world usually emphasize some form of meditation—for example, *zazen* in Zen—while overlooking or minimizing the role of devotional practices that work more directly with the emotions than with the conceptualizing intellect. In its original Asian homelands, however, buddhas and celestial bodhisattvas have long been important objects of devotion, and this is especially true for Pure Land Buddhism, which often

emphasizes recitation of a buddha's or bodhisattva's name (e.g., *Om Amitofo*) in ways that can lead to salvation via rebirth in Amida's Pure Land. In Tibetan Buddhism a comparable practice, reciting *Om mani padme hum*, which is the mantra of Avalokiteshvara (in Japan, Kannon), is probably the most popular Buddhist activity. In both cases, repetition of the sacred phrase can eventually take on a life of its own, operating less as a way to gain salvation (the *means* to some other *goal*) and more as a self-sufficient, hence self-transformative, devotional exercise.

An even better example of overlapping spiritual functions is Tibetan deity practice. At the beginning, yogis visualize and pray to a deity who is usually sitting or standing in front of them. (The Sanskrit term usually translated as "prayer," *pranidhana* [or *pranidhi*], literally means "to set something down in front.") Such deities are understood to embody perfection, in contrast to one's own faults and character flaws. At this stage the practice seems dualistic, but the deeper goal is to visualize oneself as the deity, experiencing its perfection as the inherent purity of one's own buddha nature. In the final stage, one allows the visualized form of the deity to dissolve into emptiness, and one's mind rests in its own nature. So this practice begins dualistically and then becomes nondual, but at the conclusion "form is emptiness." We could say that in the process, prayer, too, transmutes from a focus on something external to oneself into a meditation that leads to realizing something about one's own true nature. Such prayer is not about asking for something but a practice that, as occurs in other types of Buddhist meditation, involves self-transformation.

It is no coincidence, I think, that the same spectrum of prayer/contemplative practices can also be found in the main Abrahamic traditions. Given the limitations on the length of this article, I will focus on Christianity, beginning with

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk, mystic, and writer who was once asked, "How do you pray?" He replied: "I pray by breathing." This can mean many different things, but none of them involves petitioning God to do something. Instead, it invites comparison with the wide variety of Buddhist meditative techniques that involve focusing on the breath in one way or another. When Larry Dossey was asked why he prayed, he quoted a Chinese saying: "A bird does not sing because it's looking for an answer. It sings because it has a song. When I pray, I'm just singing my song." The thirteenth-century Zen master Eihei Dogen said something similar about *zazen*: it is not the means to something else, such as enlightenment, but a natural manifestation of our inherent buddha nature.

In contrast to Western Christianity, which has emphasized accepting Jesus Christ as one's savior, Eastern Orthodox Christianity has long advocated that we ourselves should *become* Christlike—in other words, the focus is more on one's own personal transformation. What is known as the Jesus Prayer (or, more simply, The Prayer) suggests comparison with the Pure Land and Tibetan practices mentioned above: believers are encouraged to recite "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me." Again, the content of the prayer seems dualistic, but the function of simply repeating it, over and over again, can be self-transformative in a way similar to the effects of Buddhist meditation. The point of such contemplative prayer is not simply to know Christ or to love Christ but to "empty" oneself (*kenosis*) as Christ did (Philippians 2:7) and thereby follow the example of the disciple Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

Recently another type of Christian contemplative prayer has become popular in the West, usually known as Centering Prayer. In contrast to all types of petitionary prayer, this practice

involves letting go not only of desire but also of all thoughts. In her book *The Heart of Centering Prayer*, Cynthia Bourgeault describes the process:

Resist no thought  
Retain no thought  
React to no thought  
Return ever so gently to the sacred word

It is difficult to distinguish such prayer from the *zazen* that I learned and practiced as a Zen student. Moreover, although the language is obviously very different from the terminology of Mahayana Buddhism, the fruit of devotion to the Centering Prayer, as explained here by Bourgeault, has deep resonance with the goal of Zen meditation:

As I see it, the purpose of Centering Prayer is to deepen your relationship with God (and at the same time your own deepest self) in that bandwidth of formless, objectless awareness that is the foundation of nondual consciousness. There you discover that you, God, and the world "out there" are not separate entities, but flow together seamlessly in an unbreakable dynamism of self-giving love, which is the true nature of reality and the ground of everything.

## The Only Prayer We Need?

If the only prayer you ever say is "thank you," that is enough.

— Meister Eckhart

According to the Dalai Lama, "the roots of all goodness lie in the appreciation of gratitude," but it has taken me a long time to appreciate the importance of that appreciation. Of course it is good to be grateful, so what is the point of emphasizing something so obvious? Eventually I realized something that had not been obvious before, at least to me: gratitude



is not just something you feel, or not, but another transformative spiritual practice. “The day I acquired the habit of consciously pronouncing the words ‘thank you,’ I felt I had gained possession of a magic wand capable of transforming everything” (Omraam Mikhael Aivanhov). Especially oneself.

The Roman orator Cicero declared that gratitude is not only the greatest virtue but the parent of all the others. The Christian mystic Meister Eckhart said it best: to cultivate gratitude is the best way to pray.

In the Metta Sutta in the Pali Canon, the Buddha recommends *metta* practice. In one popular version, the practitioner radiates *metta* (“may all beings be safe and happy”) in all directions, starting with oneself—“may I be secure and happy”—and afterward extends the focus to include family and friends, followed by acquaintances, then people we dislike, and finally all beings in the universe. As Buddhist teachers like to point out, the one who benefits most from this practice is the person who does it, because it purifies our motivations and therefore our ways of relating to other people.

Something similar happens with gratitude practice. As Sarah Ban Breathnach expresses it, “Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life (is it abundant or is it lacking?) and the world (is it friendly or is it hostile?).” There are two aspects to gratitude: appreciation of something, and thankfulness directed to its source or cause. As we habitually reflect on all the things we can be grateful for, the two merge and become a facet of our character. Psychological studies have confirmed that depressives improve when they end each day by writing down things they are grateful for that happened that day.

In such exercises means and ends, the practice and its fruit, become the same thing. This way of praying is all the more

important because we live in a culture that does not encourage us to be grateful. In fact, we are encouraged—more than that, we are conditioned by advertising—*not* to be grateful: consumerism requires some dissatisfaction, because if people are happy with what they have, then they are less concerned about getting more. But why is more and more always better if it can never be enough? “If a fellow isn’t thankful for what he’s got, he isn’t likely to be thankful for what he’s going to get” (Frank A. Clark).

The English word *gratitude* derives from the Latin *gratis*, meaning “for thanks,” in the sense of “for nothing else in return, without recompense.” We still use the term *gratis* in English today, meaning that something is given freely or free of charge. Insofar as we are thankful, we participate in a gift economy (sharing what we have) rather than the exchange economy (when we pay for what we receive). Exchange emphasizes our separateness: transaction concluded, we go our own ways. Gratitude reinforces our connectedness: appreciation binds us together.

The Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast sums up why gratitude is the best prayer: “We are not grateful because we are happy, we are happy because we are grateful.”

## Two Bodhisattva Prayers

In conclusion, I offer two favorite prayers—which are in fact the same prayer, I think, despite the fact that the first one appeals to God, whereas the second is more a vow to oneself. More important than that difference is that both are expressions of what might be called highest intention. Thomas Keating, one of the founders of Centering Prayer, emphasized that “Centering Prayer is done not with attention but with *intention*.” We are reminded of *bodhicitta*, the wish to attain enlightenment, motivated by great compassion for all sentient

beings. That this concern arises spontaneously—nondually—does not make it any less of a commitment.

The connection with gratitude may not be obvious, but it is deep: the self-transformation that genuine gratitude fosters naturally wants to express itself as a generosity of spirit, a less self-centered way of living in the world. Read together, the two prayers that follow remind us that the ripened fruit of both prayer and meditation can be much the same: the basic orientation and meaning of one’s life changes.

Lord, make me an instrument of  
your peace,  
Where there is hatred, let me sow  
love;  
Where there is injury, pardon;  
Where there is doubt, faith;  
Where there is despair, hope;  
Where there is darkness, light;  
Where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master,  
Grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled, as to console;  
To be understood, as to understand;  
To be loved, as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive.  
It is in pardoning that we are  
pardoned,  
And it is in dying that we are born  
to Eternal Life.  
(attributed to Saint Francis)

May I become at all times, both now  
and forever  
A protector for those without  
protection  
A guide for those who have lost  
their way  
A ship for those with oceans to cross  
A bridge for those with rivers to cross  
A sanctuary for those in danger  
A lamp for those without light  
A place of refuge for those who lack  
shelter  
And a servant to all in need.  
(Shantideva, *A Guide to the  
Bodhisattva’s Way of Life*)



# A Shin Buddhist Perspective on Prayer: Petitionary Prayers and Prayers for Buddhist Awakening

by Kenneth K. Tanaka

***In this realm of saṃsāra (the cycle of births and deaths) we are unable to eliminate all the difficulties of life on the horizontal level so as to get things to go our way. So what is called for is to cultivate the vertical path.***

## Preface

Because prayer is such a personal matter, I feel more comfortable sharing my *personal* thoughts on what prayer means to me as it unfolds in my life. So for this essay, I shall not be doing an academic discussion on what prayer might mean in general for humankind or engage in a comparative analysis of prayer involving other religions.

I would like to define “prayer” as “a mental act of seeking within oneself or asking some higher power for an aim to be fulfilled.” Hence, “prayer” implies a lack and, thus, a yearning to fill that lack. And in this context, prayers can be categorized into two types: (1) petitionary prayers and (2) prayers for Buddhist awakening. These operate on the horizontal and vertical levels, respectively (see illustration below).

## Two Types of Prayer

Petitionary prayers are carried out on the horizontal level, which represents the objective real world in which we live. It includes that part of our lives that involve our family, school, work, community, country, and so on. On this level, things happen to us because of innumerable causes and conditions that

spread out in space as well as extending back in time. And these things that happen to us can be what we like, dislike, or are indifferent to (akin to feelings, or *vedanā*, as found in the early Buddhist teaching of the five skandhas, or aggregates). And when they are what we dislike, we call them difficulties.

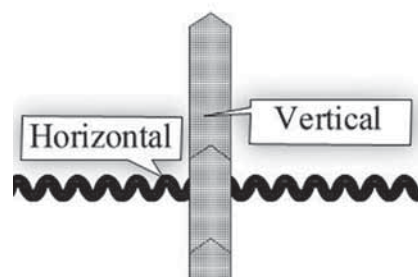
These difficulties include economic recessions, natural disasters, wars, and pandemics such as Covid-19, which has wreaked havoc on the entire world since early 2020 and continues into this year. They constitute difficulties that are societal in nature. Further, on this horizontal level, there is another type of difficulty that is existential in nature, which includes birth, aging, illness, and death. It is these difficulties that the original teachings of the Buddha were most concerned with. However, as Buddhism evolved into a world religion, it responded to both

the societal and existential types of difficulty in order to deal with the suffering (*duḥkha*) they caused.

Today in Buddhist Asia, many people visit the temples to carry out petitionary prayers to deal with both types of difficulty, societal and existential. Some pray for good health for themselves, a cure for their loved one's illness, and a speedy recovery from the pandemic. Others go to calm their anxieties by praying, for example, for success in college entrance exams, realization of a romantic relationship, or victory in their next athletic match.

Critics may belittle these petitionary prayers as deviating from the original intent of Buddhism, but I am more sympathetic. Life is truly a bumpy road. Dreadfully difficult things happen to us that are often no fault of our own. As of the end of 2020, about 84 million people worldwide had been infected by the coronavirus, 1.8 million had died from the pandemic, and billions of people had been severely impacted by the loss of jobs, the reduction of their income, and damage to their physical or mental health.

On a personal note, as I write this essay, my family is facing a situation where a family member who is only in her early thirties is undergoing treatment for a life-threatening illness. Just this week we received very disappointing news that the treatment is not working and she will have to undergo another round. This entails chemotherapy, loss of hair, and nearly a month of hospitalization. And there is no guarantee of







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recovery because the donor blood for the next transplant, just as in the first treatment, is merely a half match and not a full match. The entire family is doing all it can to support her, and she seems optimistic. Nevertheless, at this stage there is nothing that I personally can do except pray. And as I do, I am fully aware that I am engaged in a petitionary prayer.

## Shin Buddhist View of Petitionary Prayer

In Shin Buddhism (also known as Jōdo Shinshū), the orthodox doctrine rejects any act of petitionary prayer, following the clear statements made by Shinran (1173–1263), the founder of the school. Today, at the large Shin temples in Kyoto, you will not find any sales of the amulets, paper fortune slips, or good-luck charms that you often see at temples of other Buddhist schools or at Shinto shrines. Also, no services are conducted to pray for protection from malevolent spirits or for enhancing the chances of worldly benefits. In fact, the Shin organizations have clearly articulated their strong opposition to any involvement in secular benefits and what they consider superstitious activities. They have placed this doctrine at the center of their self-identity as Shin Buddhists. This may surprise many readers, given the image of Shin Buddhism as being devotional in nature for the commoners, and similar to popular religion.

To confirm this, I'd like to share an interesting and somewhat humorous

encounter. In one of the prefectures far from Tokyo, I met a priest of another Buddhist school whose temple was thriving. The temple had hired seven priests to conduct services, with the primary aim of seeking worldly benefits. I knew that this prefecture had a large percentage of Shin Buddhist followers, so I asked the priest, “There are many Shin Buddhists in your area, aren't there?” I was implying that because there were so many Shin Buddhists, the need for a secular-benefit-oriented service would be very low. But the priest's answer caught me by surprise. He replied, “Yes, there are. And that's why the demand for our services is strong. So we are thankful!” The priest explained that because the Shin priests and temples do not provide such services for their members, many Shin Buddhists come to his temple to seek them. So he had, in essence, far less competition. This tells us that even some members of Shin Buddhist families seek to have petitionary prayers done to deal with the societal and existential anxieties experienced in the horizontal dimension of their lives.

I will share another anecdote, this one from a Shin temple in California, US. Stephen was not a member of the temple but had attended bazaars and basketball games at the temple and thus knew the priest there. Stephen came to seek a blessing to be done. The following is the gist of their conversation.

Stephen: Reverend, I'd like to request that you do a blessing for my brand-new car.



*A portrait of Shinran. Hanging scroll, ink and colors on silk. Kamakura period (1185–1333). Nara National Museum. Important Cultural Property.*

Photo: Alamy / PPS

Shin priest: What benefits do you hope to get from a blessing?

Stephen: I want nothing bad to happen to my brand-new car.

Shin priest: We don't normally do blessings, since they go against our teachings, but if you really insist, I shall do it as a pastoral service to give you peace of mind.

A few weeks later, Stephen returns, really upset, to tell the priest that the car was stolen.

Stephen: Reverend, my car was stolen yesterday! I feel that your blessing didn't work.

Shin priest: I'm very sorry to hear that, but that blessing doesn't work for stolen cars; it works only

for preventing the car from getting into an accident.

This episode illustrates the prevalence among many people to turn to religion to ward off potential difficulties on the horizontal level. However, in my understanding, Buddhism—or any religion for that matter—cannot fully control societal and existential difficulties. Yes, it is true that our efforts can influence some things, such as the quality of our human relationship with others, but they pale in comparison with matters that are beyond our control. Thus, what is important in Buddhism is not what happens to us but how we experience life. So in this case, religion cannot prevent the car from being stolen or even from getting in an accident, but Buddhism can help us deal better, mentally and spiritually, with the difficulties that do come our way.

Hence, Shin teachings are concerned with the second type of prayer, which I am calling prayers for Buddhist awakening. This is concerned with the vertical dimension, which helps us cultivate a mind that responds with less suffering to events on the horizontal level. This is reflected in the now popular saying,



Photo: Ben Weller / AFLO

*People tie omikujis, paper fortune slips, at Kawasaki Daishi, a Shingon Buddhist temple in Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture, on January 3, 2016.*

“Difficulties are inevitable, but suffering is optional.”

## Prayers for Buddhist Awakening

This fundamental Buddhist position that difficulties are inevitable is symbolized in the famous story “Kisagotamī and the Mustard Seed.” Kisagotamī was the mother of a young child who suddenly died. She is unable to accept the death

of her child. She goes to the Buddha for help and is encouraged to fetch a handful of mustard seeds from a house that had never experienced death. Kisagotamī finds that all the households had mustard seeds but had also experienced death in the family. No household had escaped death. As the sun began to set, Kisagotamī awakens to the truth that death is universal and no family could escape it.

Here the Buddha does not intervene to carry out a miracle to bring the child back to life. Instead, what did he do? He led the young mother to realize and awaken to the truth of impermanence. The story concludes with Kisagotamī becoming a nun as Buddha’s disciple; this meant that she had acted on her prayer for Buddhist awakening. And her prayer was eventually answered, for the story goes on to tell us that she realized full awakening as a highly accomplished nun. She had fulfilled the ultimate aim of all Buddhists, awakening.

The fundamental Buddhist position symbolized by the Kisagotamī story is also in keeping with the position of Shin Buddhism, which aims to be fully committed to the vertical dimension and motivated by prayers for awakening. This fulfills my definition of prayer as



Photo: AP / AFLO

*A Buddhist priest offers New Year’s prayer service for the traffic safety of vehicles at Kawasaki Daishi, on January 1, 2015. More than two thousand vehicles come for the ceremony on January 1 each year.*



a mental act of seeking oneself. Hence, what I am calling prayers for Buddhist awakening can be understood to be comparable to the Mahayana ideal of raising the aspiration for awakening (*bodhicitta*).

## Golden Chain

In this regard, I wish to share the Golden Chain, which Shin Buddhists in the United States often recite at their temple services. It is uniquely American and, interestingly, is not known in Japan. That is because it was composed in Hawaii in the 1920s. Its composer was not a priest from Japan but an American priest, Reverend Dorothy Hunt. This Golden Chain is probably the most popular and well known among the aspirational statements of American Shin Buddhists, especially among the younger generation. It goes as follows:

I am a link in Amida's Golden Chain of love that stretches around the world. I will keep my link bright and strong. I will be kind and gentle to every living thing and protect all who are weaker than myself.

I will think pure and beautiful thoughts, say pure and beautiful words, and do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends not only my happiness or unhappiness but that of others.

May every link in Amida's Golden Chain of love become bright and strong, and may we all attain perfect peace.

I would like to briefly explain each segment:

"I am a link in Amida's Golden Chain of love that stretches around the world. I will keep my link bright and strong." This segment tells us that each of us is part of a set of interconnected relationships that encompasses the whole world and beyond. And the very nature of this interconnectedness is boundless

compassion, which is represented by Amida, the buddha of immeasurable compassion.

It is noteworthy that this compassion is expressed here as love, a term that Americans find great affinity with. I believe the term "love" has contributed to the enormous popularity of the Golden Chain for a hundred years. The statement also emphasizes the importance of the strong sense of social or spiritual responsibility, in keeping with the bodhisattva ideal of caring for others as one vows to do one's part to sustain this golden chain of interconnection by keeping one's link bright and strong.

"I will be kind and gentle to every living thing and protect all who are weaker than myself." Here one pledges to treat not only humans but also all living beings with respect, including animals, birds, insects, and fish. There is no mention of the "right" of humans to rule over other creatures; rather, humans are to coexist with them. And in so doing, one vows to go to the aid of those in need, whether humans or other creatures.

The next sentence addresses the three actions: "I will think pure and beautiful thoughts, say pure and beautiful words, and do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends not only my happiness or unhappiness but that of others." In Buddhism the worth of a person is determined not by birth or one's class but by one's deeds. So our spiritual happiness depends on how we act and see the world and is not determined by predestination or by chance or by divine beings. We have the ability to determine our happiness through the three actions of what we think, how we speak, and how we act.

"May every link in Amida's Golden Chain of love become bright and strong, and may we all attain perfect peace." The Golden Chain concludes with concern or prayer for the welfare of all others, wishing that all beings reach the ultimate Buddhist goal of attaining the perfect

peace of awakening. This line is rooted in the realization that one cannot be truly happy if others are not also spiritually happy, in the same way that we cannot feel fully safe from the coronavirus until others in the community, the nation, and the world have also overcome it.

## In Conclusion

In the end, the Buddhist aim is that everyone engage in prayers for Buddhist awakening as expressed, for example, in the Golden Chain. However, many in the world, even many Buddhists, are also engaged in petitionary prayers. I personally do not look down on that act or feel that they are not being true Buddhists. I, too, understand how life is so hard at times and how unfair it can feel. I, too, at times want to pray in a petitionary fashion, as I do in the case of our family member encountering a life-threatening illness. Oh, how I wish that there were a buddha or a bodhisattva or heavenly beings that could grant our petitionary prayers! On the other hand, I have no appetite for secular benefits such as Stephen's brand-new car; the car may be dear to Stephen, but it is nowhere comparable to a life of a young adult as she fights for survival.

Further, in my view, in this realm of *samsāra* (the cycle of births and deaths) we are unable to eliminate all the difficulties of life on the horizontal level so as to get things to go our way. So what is called for is to cultivate the vertical path. In so doing, even if we find ourselves engaging in petitionary prayers for such cases as the grave illness of our loved ones, the truth that we come to realize through the vertical dimension will enable us to withstand and override any outcome on the horizontal level. Thus, let us continue practice and actualize the prayers for Buddhist awakening so as to live a life of greater gratitude, deeper meaning, and richer inner peace! □



# The Christian Meaning of Prayer as Intercession

by Juan Masiá

***One aspect of the Christian prayer of intercession [is] the request for divine favor on behalf of another, for instance, asking for recovery of the health of a sick person.***

In this short essay I am going to deal with one aspect of the Christian prayer of intercession: the request for divine favor on behalf of another, for instance, asking for recovery of the health of a sick person. The question I put to myself is, How should I pray or what should I ask for when I pray on behalf of another person who has requested that I pray for him or her?

The traditional definition of prayer in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* contains two points, namely, adoration and request; to put it another way, blessing and petition. “Prayer is the raising of one’s mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God” (Libreria Editrice Vaticana [Geoffrey Chapman, 1994], paragraph 2559, page 544). The Church expresses its faith when reciting the credo (the profession of faith), when celebrating it in the sacraments (the liturgical rites), and when putting it into practice in daily life (morality). The whole section of the *Catechism* about prayer in the Christian life is centered on the Holy Spirit, who instructs the Church in the life of prayer, inspiring several expressions of the same basic forms of prayer: blessing or adoration, thanksgiving, praise, petition of favors, intercessions, asking for forgiveness, and

so on (*Catechism*, paragraph 2644–2649, page 564).

Within this context of Christian teaching, I ask myself, What is the meaning and efficacy of the way of praying that is usually called intercession?

## Should We Ask for a Miracle?

The first time I ever heard the Japanese word *go-riyaku* (divine favor, or benefit from the gods) I was wondering whether the conversation was about religion or about magic. It was in the context of a conversation in which people talked about the advantage of practicing a particular religion rather than another. Someone would say, “There is more *go-riyaku* in my religion.” As I was checking my pocket dictionary for the meaning of *go-riyaku* (benefit, divine favor, divine grace), someone asked me (perhaps joking), “What about your Christian religion? Do you get much *go-riyaku*?” I had a difficult time trying to explain that I cannot agree with such an egocentric view of prayer.

But it was in a more dramatic circumstance that I was confronted with the meaning and efficacy of the prayer of intercession. In that instance, I went to the hospital to see a very close friend

who was waiting for a delicate brain surgery. The prediction of succeeding in saving his life was less than 50 percent. Even if the operation succeeded, serious side effects might put his life in danger. After telling me the information he had received from the doctors, he said: “I need to pray that I make a full recovery after the operation, but I am afraid that my faith is weak and I do not deserve a miracle. I want you to pray for a miracle on behalf of me. You are a good friend and you are a religious person. I am sure that God will listen to your prayer. Promise me that you are going to pray for me.”

“Sure, I said, I am going to pray for you.” Then I added—half joking, half serious—“To pray for only one miracle is not enough, we must pray for two miracles.”

“What do you mean?” he said, amazed.

“Well, you have been informed that there are two possibilities after the operation: first, that your pathology may be cured if the treatment succeeds; second, if your illness is incurable, no treatment will succeed. In the first case, you will need a strong faith to believe that there is within you the power to be cured if you cooperate with the treatment, that is to say, by making use of your will to live. In the second case, you will need much faith, too, so that you may be able to accept the final outcome. Therefore we must pray in both cases for the increasing of your faith.”

Then he smiled and said: “I see; in both cases we need a miracle. But it is



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Photo: Bridgeman Images / PPS

*A depiction of the Christian Holy Spirit as a dove from the illuminated manuscript Munich-Montserrat Book of Hours by Simon Bening (c.1483–1561). Private collection.*

going to be more difficult for the omnipotent God [smiling again] to perform the miracle if the case is the second one.”

Then he seemed to be puzzled and remained silent, but after a while he said: “All right, pray for me and for the increasing of my faith in both cases.”

We shook hands and I promised him that I was going to keep praying for him and for the increasing of the faith that makes him able to put his life in the hands of the merciful God.

Two weeks later I went to meet him at his house. He had been taken home because there was nothing more the doctors could do for him at the hospital. He was being given palliative care while the end of his life was approaching. He made an effort to talk and said: “We have been putting ourselves in the hands of God, and . . . well . . . God must have chosen the second case, what you called the second miracle. . . . Yes, quite a miracle, indeed, for I am at peace now. Is that not unbelievable?”

Both his wife and I were at his bedside, the three of us holding hands while saying the prayer to entrust the dying person to the hands of God: “Father, in your hands I put my spirit.”

## The Efficacy of a Prayer of Intercession

Both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke have transmitted a story that emphasizes the importance and the efficacy of prayer. Matthew writes: “Ask, and it will be given to you. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened. Is there anyone among you who would hand his son a stone when he asked for bread? Or would hand him a snake when he asked for a fish? If you, then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask for them?” (Matt. 7:7–11; this and all following Bible citations are from the New Jerusalem Bible).

The same traditional story is related in the Gospel according to Luke but with a small change in the last sentence. Quoting Luke 11:13: “If you then, evil as you are, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will the heavenly Father *give the Holy Spirit* to those who ask for it.” (italics mine) It is meaningful that instead of saying: “God will *give good things*,” Luke writes: “the heavenly Father will *give the Holy Spirit* to those who ask him.” (italics mine)

In the Christian tradition of spirituality, when we pray asking a benefit from God, we usually add a conditional clause: “if it is according to the will of God.” In a prayer of intercession for the recovery of health of a sick person, we might say, for instance: “May this person receive the grace of recovery, if it is going to be for the greater glory of God and for his or her spiritual good.”

But if the benefit we are praying for is the gift of the Holy Spirit, we do not need to add any conditional clause. There is no doubt at all that the gift of the Spirit is good for that person and that it is for the glory of God. The fulfillment of the promise of God—“ask and you will receive”—is absolutely and unconditionally certain.

## How and What Jesus Taught about Prayer

Jesus taught his disciples to pray united in community. “If two of you on earth agree to ask anything at all, it will be granted to you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three meet in my



*This painting depicts Saint Paul assuring crew and passengers that they will not be drowned when they are caught in a storm on the way to Rome, from religious biblical illustrations by William H. Margetson (1861–1940). Printed in 1906.*

## To Pray according to the Holy Spirit

The apostle Paul taught the faithful to pray according to the Spirit of God, who prays from within us: “All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God; for what you received was not the spirit of slavery to bring you back into fear; you received the spirit of adoption, enabling us to cry out: *Abba*, Father! The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:14). “The Spirit too comes to help us in our weakness, for, when we do not know how to pray properly, then the Spirit personally makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words” (Rom. 8:26).

These words of the apostle Paul give us a key to understanding the prayer entrusted by Jesus to his disciples and to understanding the efficacy of its seven petitions, which could be developed as follows:

### 1. “Hallowed be thy name”

With this petition the faithful pray that the Holy Spirit will help them to address God as a merciful Father and Mother, Fountain of Life—*Abba!*—to whom they can give thanks for their life always and everywhere. Asking the Father that his name be recognized as holy is an expression of thanksgiving for his glory and mercy. “This petition embodies all the others. Like the six petitions that follow, it is fulfilled by the prayer of Christ” (*Catechism*, paragraph 2813, page 597).

### 2. “Thy kingdom come”

With this petition the faithful pray that the Holy Spirit will help them become aware of the coming of the Kingdom of God into the world and answer the call to cooperate with the building of the new world according to the plan of God: a world of peace

and justice, of sanctity and grace, of mercy and love. “Man’s vocation to eternal life does not suppress but actually reinforces his duty to put into action in this world the energies and means received from the Creator to serve justice and peace” (*Catechism*, paragraph 2820, page 599).

### 3. “Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven”

With this petition the faithful pray that the Holy Spirit will heal our wounds of heart and body and help us put our lives in the hands of God in all circumstances of suffering or joy, darkness or light, failure or success. “We ask our Father to unite our will to his Son’s, in order to fulfill his [God’s] will, his plan of salvation for the life of the world. We are radically incapable of this, but united with Jesus and with the power of his Holy Spirit, we can surrender our will to him and decide to choose what his son has always chosen: to do what is pleasing to the Father” (*Catechism*, paragraph 2825, page 600).

4. “Give us this day our daily bread”  
With this petition the faithful pray that the Holy Spirit, Spirit of life and love, will enable us to share our bread with one another. Through this sharing, our way of living becomes a blessing for each other and giving life to one another. We ask the Spirit to give us strength of body and mind and to give us the eucharistic gift: the body and life of Christ.

5. “And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”

With this petition the faithful pray that the Holy Spirit, Spirit of mercy and love, will make them able to forgive one another, even to forgive the unforgivable, because they have first been forgiven, in the way Jesus

name, I am there among them” (Matt. 18:19–20).

Jesus also taught his disciples to pray alone in silence: “Go to your private room, shut yourself in, and so pray to your Father who is in that secret place, and your Father who sees all that is done in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:6).

And Jesus taught his disciples the prayer “the Lord’s Prayer” or “the Our Father,” which contains seven petitions as follows:

“Our Father in heaven,  
May your name be held holy,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today  
Our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we have forgiven those who are  
in debt to us.  
And do not put us to the test  
But save us from the Evil One.”  
(Matt. 6:9–13)



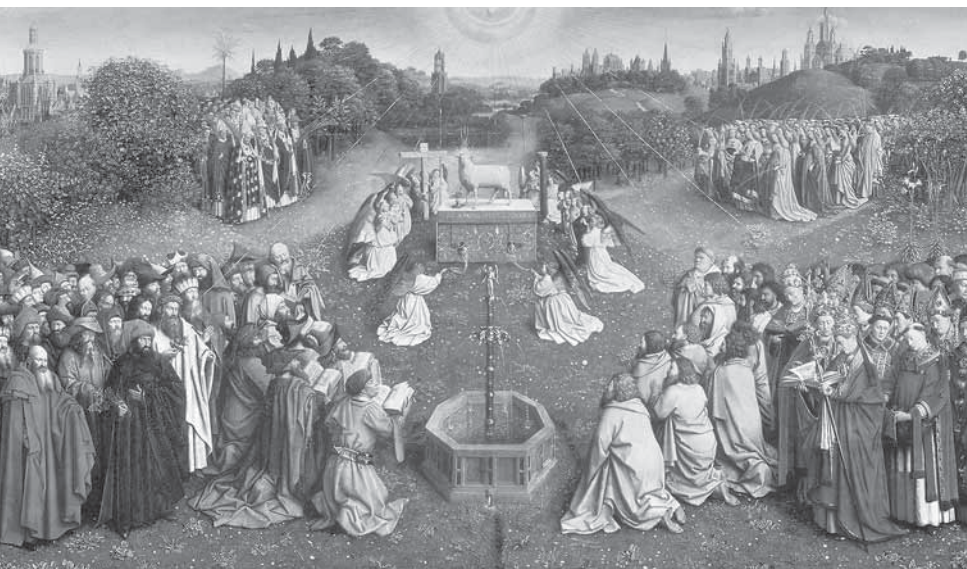


Photo: Album / PPS

*Adoration of the Mystic Lamb by Jan van Eyck (before 1390 or 1395–1441), detail of the Ghent Altarpiece, Cathedral of Saint Bavo of Ghent, Belgium. This panel represents paintings depicting one of the main themes of the Christian sacred art, “Communion of Saints.”*

loved and forgave: “It is impossible to keep the commandment by imitating the divine model from outside: there has to be a vital participation, coming from the depths of the heart, in the holiness and the mercy and the love of God. Unless we receive the Spirit of Love and are strengthened by him, we cannot love and forgive in the way he loved and forgave. Only the Spirit by whom we live can make ours the same mind that was in Christ Jesus” (*Catechism*, paragraph 2842, page 604).

6. “And lead us not into temptation” With this petition the faithful pray that the Spirit of Light will help them to realize their situation when they are lost in darkness and to find the way to an ongoing conversion and return to the center, to the origin and end of their life in God, the Fountain of life. “We are asking God not to allow us to take the way that leads to sin and death . . . ; this petition implores the Spirit of discernment and strength. The Holy Spirit makes us discern between trials, which are necessary for growth of the inner person, and

temptations, which lead to sin and death” (*Catechism*, paragraph 2846–2847, page 606).

7. “But deliver us from evil” With this petition the faithful pray that the Holy Spirit, Spirit of Truth, will enlighten them so as to be free from all egocentric powers that spread death, sin, and lack of compassion in the world. They pray that the Holy Spirit will give them strength and hope to overcome the evil of the world. They are encouraged by the words of Jesus in his prayer before his death: “Father, I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15). “This petition touches each of us personally, but it is always we who pray, in communion with the whole Church, for the deliverance of the whole human family” (*Catechism*, paragraph 2850, page 607).

## Prayer of Intercession and Blessing

The flood of grace and blessing of God as an answer to the prayer of intercession

has been compared with the circulatory system of the blood through the mystical body of Christ that is the Church. When we pray for each other and when we pray for the departed and they pray for us, a flood of grace and blessing of God keeps permeating our intercommunication. We bless God and we bless each other when we pray for each other. “Bless” is a verb that can be used in different directions: God blesses us from above, we bless God from below, and we bless each other. To bless God is to respond to the blessing of God with thanksgiving. To bless each other is to communicate the divine gift. In the liturgical rites for the dead, we pray for their eternal rest in the life of God. But we pray not only *for* them but *with* them, asking them to pray to God on behalf of us. This circulation of the grace and blessing of the Holy Spirit has been traditionally called the communion of holy things, the communion of saints (*communio sanctorum*). Paul starts his letter to the Church at Ephesus with these words, which are a résumé of Christian life as a communion of blessings: “Blessed be God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with all the spiritual blessings of heaven in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

In this way, intercession is a prayer of petition that leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with God the Father on behalf of all persons. His Spirit himself is the one who intercedes for us according to the will of God and “makes our petitions for us in groans that cannot be put into words” (Rom. 8:26). Christian intercession participates in the intercession of Christ as an expression of the communion of saints. The first Christian communities lived this form of fellowship intensely (*Catechism*, paragraph 2634–2636, page 561). Paul writes from prison to the Church at Philippi: “It is my prayer that your love for one another may grow more and more with the knowledge and complete understanding that will help you to come to true discernment” (Phil. 1:9). □

# Revisiting “Homage to Hell, the Great Bodhisattva” Today

by Masaki Matsubara

*Hell does not exist somewhere in a different dimension that we fall into after death but, rather, . . . hell is not far from us: it is based in our own minds.*

Japanese Zen master Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769) introduces a fascinating story in his short missive “Letter to a Sick Monk Living Far Away” (遠方ノ病僧ニ贈リシ書), which is included in his writing *Oradegama* [遠羅天釜], published in 1749, one of the well-known treatises on his teaching and practice. The story refers to a Shingon Buddhist priest who was very sick but who overcame his sickness through a meditative practice. It relates:

Desperately ill of typhoid fever, he lay in bed groaning all day and night. Hearing his moans, one impertinent fellow among his disciples remarked

jokingly: “The priest is not his ordinary self. His words don’t sound the way they usually do when he is scolding us. Just listen to him moan and groan!”

The priest laughed too: “Watch out, young acolytes! Three days ago my groans sounded as though I were suffering the torments of the Hell of Wailing. Today my groans are the mysterious sounds of the Supreme Dharma. If you mock me you will suffer the punishments of those who slander the True Law.”

The young monk then asked: “Can one attain Buddhahood as

quickly as one can turn over one’s hand?”

The priest replied: “That’s why the Buddha spent three endless kalpas to achieve Nirvana for the sake of indolent sentient beings and why he preached that for the courageous among sentient beings, Buddhahood may be attained in one instant of thought. In the past I suffered pains of illness that were difficult to bear, and gradually these shadowy afflictions themselves stirred fears of the pains of my next rebirth, and I wept all night with regret for my actions in my present life. But then I changed my outlook, entered into the contemplation of the non-duality [of myself and] Birushana (Vairocana) Buddha. I shut my eyes and clamped my teeth and continued my contemplation. A marvelous thing indeed! My pains disappeared as though they had been scraped and washed away. My body, which had been prostrate in pain, appeared as the Treasure Seal of the Yoga Mystery. Unknowingly I attained the True Form of the Diamond indestructible. This groaning voice became one with the Great *Dhāranī* of the Three Mysteries. The bed on which I lay became the original great ground [of Enlightenment] of Birushana Buddha. The great mandala of the thousand qualities of the hundred worlds shone majestically before my eyes. What joy I experienced! I realized my cherished desire where beings, sentient and non-sentient,



Photo: Alamy / PPS

*An image of the Vairocana Buddha that is housed in the Great Buddha Hall of Todaiji in Nara.*





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achieve the Way simultaneously; where trees, grass, and lands all attain to Buddhahood.” . . . Later, because of his experiences, the priest was able to achieve unsurpassed accomplishments in Buddhism. (Philip Yampolsky, trans., *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* [Columbia University Press, 1971], 78–79)

Taking an example even from a different Buddhist tradition, Hakuin tries to preserve this story in the Zen tradition because he has something to say to other generations and to people in different contexts. What do we really know about this story? How do we understand this story? For the purpose of this article, I will focus on two aspects of it. One is the idea of one instant of thought that the Shingon priest continued to practice. The other is the idea of meditative practice as a means to the enlightenment experience the priest finally attained.

Regarding the former point, the idea refers to an instant or moment of conscious awareness that emphasizes a single-minded practice with exclusive, high concentration. The story shows the importance of this meditative practice as a method of engaging with what Hakuin calls the ultimate devotion, which he says should be shared not only in the Zen tradition but also in other Buddhist traditions. To have a better understanding of this argument, let’s imagine that there are two practitioners from different schools: one who practices the koan of Chao-chou’s Mu and another who

practices reciting the Buddha’s name (*nembutsu*). On the one hand, if the koan practitioner is not extremely dedicated and if his determination is not firm, even if he has been practicing for ten or twenty years, he will gain no benefit whatsoever. On the other hand, if the nembutsu practitioner has made efforts at reciting without ceasing with firm determination and intense devotion, he will gain the benefit of *samādhi*, achieve the wisdom of the Buddha (仏智, *bucchi*), and attain salvation in the very place he stands, just as in the story the Shingon priest experienced during a shorter period of practice. Therefore, Hakuin teaches, “Whether you sit in meditation, recite the sutras, intone the *dhāraṇī*, or call the Buddha’s name, if you devote all your efforts to what you are doing and attain to the ultimate, you will kick down the dark cave of ignorance, . . . and attain to the understanding of the Great Matter [of the Buddha’s Law (仏法の大事 *buppō no daiji*)]” (Yampolsky, *The Zen Master Hakuin*, 126). He asserts that there is ultimately no difference among these as a means of practice so long as the attitude is right; whether results appear swiftly or slowly depends only on how scrupulously practitioners apply themselves.

Here it is important to clarify Hakuin’s point of view that practicing koans; reciting the Buddha’s name, *dhāraṇī*, or sutras; and contemplating the unification with the Buddha are not themselves the goals of Buddhism but simply the means of leading to the opening up of the wisdom of the Buddha

and attaining the Great Matter of the Buddha’s Law. This is the main reason various buddhas have appeared in this world. In other words, all these practices are ultimately just paths toward seeing into your own nature (見性; hereafter, *kenshō*), which can be understood as enlightenment, and consequently, seeing the Way (見道, *kendō*). Simply put, the goal is more important than the means, and Hakuin asserts the primary importance of the *kenshō* experience over anything else.

In Hakuin’s understanding, this idea of *kenshō* (and thereby seeing the Way) is not some otherworldly experience. As the story tells, ultimate devotion brings us to realize the point that the wisdom of the Buddha becomes present in the very place we are standing, and so, too, does salvation. Hakuin, in another writing, titled *Letter in Answer to the Question: Which Is Superior, the Koan or the Nembutsu?* (念仏ト公案ト優劣如何ノ問イニ答フル書), says,

“[Pure land practitioners] believe only that the Buddha is in the Western Land and are unaware that the Western Land is the basis of their own minds. They are convinced that through the power of the recitation of the Buddha’s name they will somehow leap through space and after they are dead be reborn in the Western Land. But although they spend their whole lives in painful struggle, they will not be able to achieve their vow to be reborn there” (Yampolsky, *The Zen Master Hakuin*, 128).

He then teaches what a true practitioner of the Pure Land should do: “He





Hakuin's calligraphy scroll *Namu jigoku daibosatsu*, "Homage to Hell, the Great Bodhisattva."

does not contemplate birth, he does not contemplate death; his mind does not falter or fall into error. Reciting the name of the Buddha constantly, he has reached the state where the mind is undisturbed.

The Great Matter appears suddenly before him and his salvation is determined. Such a man can be called one who has truly seen into his own nature" (ibid., 129).

To have a better understanding of this statement, the Lotus Sutra says that all existence and phenomena represent the manifestations of truth and reality. This is the teaching of *shohō jissō* (諸法実相), which is also expressed as "the ultimate reality of all things." For Hakuin, if you are not able to see into your own nature, you are missing the opportunity to respond to this teaching. Therefore, he says, "If you wish to attain the Buddha Way, you must first see into your own nature" (ibid., 36). Once we have the eye for seeing into our own nature, then we realize that, as expressed in Hakuin's sutra *The Song of Zazen* (坐禅和讃), "sentient beings are fundamentally all Buddhas" and that "This very place is the Lotus Land of Purity, This very body is the Body of the Buddha" (*Daily Sutra* [Zen Studies Society, 1998], 113–15).

As the story shows, the Shingon priest who became ill and suffered from pain just like "the torments of the Hell of Wailing" realized that salvation was in his very body and his very place. Realizing the idea of the ultimate reality of all things is, I argue, the eye of kenshō, or the eyes that see a thing as it is, that transforms a negative state into a positive one. In other words, these two states are actually two sides of the same coin. Therefore, salvation lies in this very understanding of the kenshō experience. Salvation is here and now. This priest recognized that his experience of the torments of the Hell of Wailing was transformed into his enlightenment experience through the intensity of his meditative practice. This is exactly what Hakuin means by his famous calligraphy *Homage to Hell, the Great Bodhisattva* (南無地獄大菩薩, *namu jigoku daibosatsu*).

Let me explain my understanding of the saying "Homage to Hell, the Great

Bodhisattva." Since April 2020 this phrase has been not just a work of calligraphy but my primary prayer. Wednesday, April 8, 2020, was Buddha's Birthday. It had been twelve days since I started to self-quarantine in Manhattan, living in a building with health care workers who were infected with Covid-19. I started to self-quarantine when I found out they had tested positive just the week before. Even so, there were many areas that we had to share: the building's entrance door; stairs; storages areas for necessary, basic items for living; and the laundry room, where my shower was located. The only good thing was that I had my own separate toilet and kitchen I didn't need to share with my housemates.

At the time, New York State was the epicenter of the American coronavirus outbreak and was hit hardest by the pandemic. Over the following week, it reached a tragic milestone on April 10 when the state alone had more coronavirus cases than in any other country in the world, and soon after that the United States had the highest death toll in the world on April 12, recording more than two thousand deaths in a single day. Every day, the media delivered news about the relentless spread of the virus, with uncertainty about when it would end, and showed rows of refrigerator trucks set up on city streets outside hospitals to accommodate the overflow of bodies of the deceased. The circumstances of the pandemic made it seem as if contracting the virus meant death. Every day was terrifying to me. Every day was survival for me.

Because my housemates had the virus, I put on my mask and gloves when I needed to go to the toilet and kitchen and when I went to pick up food deliveries because I had to pass through shared spaces. Because I have asthma, I took extra precautions, including cutting down the number of orders of meals and groceries. I made my life as simple as I could. What I needed was just enough to eat and wear. I didn't need any

extra or luxurious items or food, and I was not even interested in having those items. I reduced my use of the shower because of its problematic location, and I waited for at least three hours after the other residents had used the laundry machines before I took a shower. I usually took showers around two or three in the morning because this was the safest time to use that room. In the end, I did not go outside for a total of thirty-three days, until I had an antibody test on April 29 and the test was negative. I can say that it was almost a complete quarantine.

The coronavirus outbreak is the most terrifying experience in my life. Every single day, day by day, I had to survive by myself. Because of my self-quarantine, talking to my daughters via Messenger was the only time I could soothe my mind. Nevertheless, because there were reports of scary cases of children with the virus, I was always worried about my daughters' health. Throughout the day the sound of ambulance sirens was always blaring. One night when I went to the bathroom, I could see the glowing neon lights of an ambulance reflected in the windows. I returned to my room and thought that maybe tomorrow it would be my turn to go. This thought was always in my mind every day during the pandemic in New York City, given my living conditions. This thought was also always with me when I invoked the prayer *Homage to Hell, the Great Bodhisattva* almost ceaselessly every day. It was while invoking this prayer that I had a keen realization that there was hope as long as I lived and also that time was the most important thing out of all things. I became keenly aware that hell does not exist somewhere in a different dimension that we fall into after death but, rather, that hell is not far from us: it is based in our own minds—I am in hell now. The governor of New York, Andrew Cuomo, said that we have gone through hell.



Photo: REUTERS / AFLO

*An ambulance drives across a nearly empty East 42nd Street in Manhattan during the outbreak of the coronavirus disease in New York City, on April 13, 2020.*

If hell is based in my own mind, the way to escape hell is to survive in hell. It was with this realization that I came to understand completely the meaning of Hakuin's words "homage to hell, the great bodhisattva." Again, the way to escape hell is to survive in hell, and this keen realization brought me to the clear understanding that the ultimate, eternal truth is manifested in phenomena—the idea of the ultimate reality of all things—while finding happiness in which one finds happiness and gratitude in every thing and in every moment.

Through my experience of reciting prayer, I realized that Zen is living. Zen is life. Living is Zen. It is important to live through each moment given to us, and this is the secret of what it means to live by Zen. This awareness makes me realize that we are always living in impermanence, *ichigo ichie*, or one moment, one meeting, and *en*, or causality. With Zen, every morning is a good morning, every day a fine day, no matter how rainy it is, no matter how stormy it is, and no matter how hellish it is. On April 19 the governor very cautiously said at his news briefing that New York had passed the high

point of the hospitalization rate. That afternoon it rained hard, but it seemed to me it was somehow comfortable and refreshing, as if the rains were washing the virus away. At that time a soft, warm breeze carried the gentle, fresh smells of raindrops and green leaves. I felt as if it were the first time I had ever seen the rain as it truly is. It is in the moment, I realized, that salvation is always here and now, and always with me.

This pandemic has taught us that we must be flexible and prepared to adjust. It has drastically changed our sense of the value of life, time, lifestyle, possessions—basically everything. In light of this awareness, the crisis has been a good opportunity for practice to cultivate the experiences of seeing things as they are. Our efforts to do so, even though most of the time it is not easy to accept our realities, reveal the very fact of the ultimate reality of all things. The rain I saw was a very beautiful one, even in the midst of the extreme difficulties and challenges under the pandemic in New York in April 2020. What saved me? The prayer "Homage to Hell, the Great Bodhisattva." This prayer made me realize that salvation is here and now. □



# Prayer in Shugendo

by Gaynor Sekimori

***Perhaps the easiest way to understand the meaning of prayer in Shugendo is to depersonalize its subject. To offer sutras at a sacred site or kneel before a material representation of the sacred, such as a statue, is to insert oneself by these means into the life force of the universe itself.***

People who travel around May to September in places known for their sacred mountains, such as the Shonai region of Yamagata prefecture or sites in the Kii Mountains that are on the UNESCO World Heritage list, may well hear echoing through the valleys the sound of the conch shell or see figures standing before statues, trees, or some other sacred feature, whose appearance sets them apart from the everyday.

Dressed mainly in white, they wear a small black cap on the forehead, a brocaded and tasselled sash around their neck, and a deerskin over their lower back. They will probably be chanting the Heart Sutra, their heads bowed and their hands in the prayer position, but they are not regular Buddhist priests. (photo 1) They are *yamabushi*, “those who lie down in the mountains,” adherents of Shugendo, the name given to beliefs

and practices associated with sacred mountains. Almost as far back as the written record exist, we have descriptions of pilgrims and ascetics practicing in mountain fastnesses, but Shugendo as a coherent institution dates from the medieval period, around the fourteenth century. It took shape through the esoteric Buddhist sects Tendai and Shingon, and its ritual forms therefore have much in common with the practices of esoteric Buddhism. However, it also has practices that are unique in the way they give form to communication with the sacred.

Such communication is, of course, prayer. To those brought up in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the meaning of prayer seems very simple: asking for God’s blessings. Christian prayer was what I had done as a child, kneeling beside my bed, sending a letter addressed to God. But what happens when the prayer does not have a defined subject, as in Buddhism? Of course there is personal devotion to Amida or Kannon, for instance, but in a group setting, to whom are the sutras we chant addressed? Who is it we ask to extend the blessings of the recitation to all living beings? When I first came to practice Buddhism, initially through Soto Zen and later through Shugendo, the word “prayer” seemed like a misnomer for describing what I was experiencing when reciting sutras or prostrating myself before a statue or standing in reverence before some ancient tree or stone. I could bow to a statue of Monju in the Zendo, directing my attention



Photo: Gaynor Sekimori

Photo 1: Haguro yamabushi at a sacred spring. Kanomiya, Yamagata prefecture.





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and the words of the supplication I was making to an enlightened being whom I hoped to emulate, just as at the beginning of the Autumn Peak retreat at Mount Haguro in Yamagata prefecture, I would place my trust in the founder, Shoken Daibosatsu. But is that prayer?

Perhaps the easiest way to understand the meaning of prayer in Shugendo is to depersonalize its subject. To offer sutras at a sacred site or kneel before a material representation of the sacred, such as a statue, is to insert oneself by these means into the life force of the universe itself. This is symbolized by the Triple Refuge of Buddhism, the recitation of which precedes all Buddhist services. Such actions become a self-directed prayer to attain buddhahood (or as Zen would term it, enlightenment) here and now in this very existence and in this very body. Prayer encompasses aspiration, determination, and dedication and is predicated on total submission of the self to the greater life of which we are all a part. In this sense, all practice becomes prayer.

Shugendo shares a further aspect of prayer with the esoteric sects, what is called *kito*, which has a common purpose with prayers of supplication, petition, and intercession in Christianity, particularly the prayers of intention in Catholicism and Anglicanism. Unlike Christianity, though, *kito* is considered to be the product of powers gained through the ascetic practice of the individual ritualist, which could be interpreted as the manipulation of the divine. This is very different from asking for the intercession

of a benign divinity and raises questions about the relation of prayer to magic. But *kito* can also be thought of as the moving of the sacred dimension within the self that has been revealed by practice and ritual. Nevertheless, there is ample evidence in the historical record of the misuse of *kito* for personal power or profit by unscrupulous people.

The principal ascetic practices of Shugendo revolve around “entry into the mountain” (*mineiri*). Today these practices generally last about a week and involve either a continuous movement from one sacred site to another along a set route, as in the Yoshino-Kumano pilgrimage called *okugake* or seclusion within one site with periodic pilgrimages to sacred sites, such as the Autumn Peak retreat at Mount Haguro. I would now like to center my discussion on the latter, with which I have been associated since 1994. The central theme of the Haguro Autumn Peak retreat is death and rebirth, and its rituals and practices symbolize both ascent through the ten realms from the hells to buddhahood and the descent of the *kami* (deities) to this world. It begins when yamabushi process into the depths of the mountain to the temple of Kotakuji, where they will remain for the next week. On the way they revere a number of sacred sites: Mine no Yakushi, a former temple, now a shrine; the shrine of Hakusan Gongen; the pagoda at the foot of Mount Haguro; and the former founder’s hall at its summit, now called Hachiko Shrine. On the way they also venerate from afar the three mountains most closely associated

with Haguro Shugendo: Mount Chokai, Mount Yudono, and Mount Gassan. At each place they recite the *Sanjo Shakujo*:

I take hold of my staff  
And make this vow for the benefit  
of all living beings:  
To organize great gatherings  
To show forth the true way  
And venerate the Three Treasures.  
Showing forth a pure mind, I venerate the Three Treasures.  
Praying for a pure mind, I venerate the Three Treasures.  
I venerate the Three Treasures so  
that all may meet the Buddha and  
instantly awaken to enlightenment.  
I give honor, reverence, and offerings  
to the vast realm of mountain  
deities, reverence and offerings  
for the protection of the Dharma.  
In your mercy, protect all beings.

This well demonstrates prayer as a vow to the Three Treasures as personified in the protector deities of the mountains.

Pilgrimage to sacred mountains has long been associated with the purification of the six sense organs (*rok-kon shojo*) and this is at the core of the twice-nightly recitation built around the Lotus Repentance Liturgy. The liturgy was developed within the Tendai school and centers on the confession and repentance of sins emanating from the six sense organs as a way to attain enlightenment. This view was inherited by Haguro Shugendo when it adopted the liturgy sometime in the seventeenth century. The recitation, which takes more

than two hours, includes the Amida Sutra, the Hymn to Amida and other verses and formulas that are common to Tendai Buddhism, such as the Hymn to Original Enlightenment, the Verse of the Tathagatas, and Homage to the Relics of the Buddhas. It concludes with the mantras of a wide range of Buddhist divinities and the treasured names associated with Haguro: Amaterasu, the three mountains, divinities associated with particular places on the mountain, and the protector deities of the mountain and of the whole of Japan.

The ambiguity regarding the subject of this confession and repentance is evident in the words of an early nineteenth-century Haguro practitioner called Gien.

This mountain-entry practice is the practice for attaining buddhahood with one's present body. The substance of the Buddha Way is to realize what is the mind and to understand the way of things. What is the mind? It is the truth without beginning or end, the basis from which come the six elements. From the Buddha to common mortals, every existence is formed from the six elements. The Autumn Peak is the sacred place where the defilements of the six sense organs are repented. Lay practitioners will be able to avoid the evils and diseases of this world and attain the peaceful Pure Land of the other world. One should deeply venerate the Amida Buddha enshrined [on the mountain] by chanting his name for the great benefit of this world.

Gien states that enlightenment/buddhahood is attained through the mind, the source of all things, which, however, may be defiled by the erroneous workings of the sense organs. Repentance is to open the mind to the original and eternal truth, which he expresses for the layperson in terms of Amida and



Photo: Gaynor Sekimori

Photo 2: Nikko yamabushi performing the goma ritual. Sannoin, Kanuma, Tochigi prefecture.

his Pure Land. Practice needs a focus of devotion, such as Amida Buddha, and through such veneration we are enabled to open ourselves to the deepest truth.

A second liturgy specific to Haguro is performed during the Autumn Peak. It combines the well-known verse Rokkon shojo oharae (Purification of the six sense organs) with the Hymn to the Three Mountains (*Sanyama shukugon*), which lay emphasis on the kami and buddhas of the mountains that are the heart of Shugendo. The Oharae reads:

The kami and buddhas dwell within our own minds, and we should do nothing to harm our pure minds. Therefore, though the eyes see impurity, the mind does not; though the ears hear impurity, the mind does not; though the nose smells impurity, the mind does not; though the mouth voices impurity, the mind does not; though the body experiences impurity, the mind does not; though the consciousness is aware of impurity, the mind is not. In this condition, the mind is completely pure. . . . Our sense organs are originally pure. Because they are pure, the kami of the bodily organs are tranquil. Because the kami of the

bodily organs are tranquil, we are one with the kami of heaven and earth. Because we are one with the kami of heaven and earth, we are one with all things. Because we are one with all things, all that we hope will come about. This is the supreme teaching of the buddhas and the kami who give us their protection.

Here the kami and buddhas are not some separate other but are in themselves our pure mind. We pray to them for protection but ultimately know they are within us.

The Hymn to the Three Mountains extols the various landmarks in the area as manifestations of the Buddhist teachings.

On the peak of Gassan the mist of ignorance that subdues the power to encourage good and eliminate evil is dispersed by the purification of the six sense organs, and the dew of buddha nature drips on the treetops of the wonderful law of the one vehicle. Gassan's shadow penetrates to the depths of Arasawa, burnishing the jewel of buddha nature within, and the stream of Arasawa fills the pond of the eight merits. The sacred



rock of Yudonosan emits a golden light illuminating the Pure Lands in the ten directions, and the wind of the high mountains is the music of nature.

This well illustrates how Shugendo incorporated Buddhist ideas into the landscape over which yamabushi walked and prayed.

“Shugendo” literally means “the way (*do*) of cultivating (*shu*) power (*gen*).” “Gen” is usually understood as some kind of transcendent power, and in the past yamabushi were required to demonstrate the noumenal power they had achieved through their practice (*genriki*) in some form of physical contest. This was called *genkurabe* (comparing *gen*). The modern Shoreisai (the former Winter Peak) at Haguro preserves this in two rituals: a jumping contest between yamabushi representing crows and a number of competitions between the two principal figures of the festival, for example, who can kindle the new fire first or whose team can pull huge straw torches the fastest.

Traditionally yamabushi served groups of parishioners in various areas around the country. They toured their

parishes annually and performed kito (prayers) to drive away sickness and bring good fortune, the efficacy of which was believed to be directly related to the powers they had acquired through mountain practice. Kito as supplicatory ritual prayer is practiced not only in Shugendo but throughout the esoteric sects. One example that is very close to the prayer of intention in Christianity is the *sengan shingyo*, the recitation of the Heart Sutra one thousand times for a specific request, such as cure of an illness, business prosperity, or exam success. This is a ritual common in Tendai and Shingon, but during the Haguro Autumn Peak its performance by yamabushi in the midst of their training suggests a special efficacy due to the accumulation of *gen*.

The most common form of kito prayer today is the *goma* ritual. Here wooden sticks with intentions written on them are burned over a fire while a ritual liturgy is recited. Virtually all Tendai and Shingon temple halls contain *goma* altars, and Shugendo is no exception. (photo 2) However, the outdoor *saito goma* rituals that Shugendo performs are unique to it, and generally involve fire walking. (photo 3) A

well-known example of such a ritual is performed annually at Takaosan, near Tokyo, but most Shugendo groups incorporate them into their seasonal rituals. Often taking place as the culmination of a seasonal retreat, they can also be considered a form of *genkurabe*, since the yamabushi walk barefoot over hot coals. A bonfire of latticed logs covered with greenery is erected inside a sacred area demarked by saplings, and after a number of ritual acts to expel malign forces, such as shooting arrows in the four directions, the fire is lit. The presiding divinity is usually Fudo. Sticks containing the prayer requests are deposited in the flames, and the talismans, which will later be distributed, are passed through the smoke to purify them and imbue them with the power of the ritual. Once the fire has died down, the coals and logs are spread out and the yamabushi cross them.

Prayer in Shugendo derives from a shared Buddhist doctrinal base. However, Shugendo’s emphasis on the sacred mountain as the particular site for the purification of the mind through ascetic and ritual training, and on the efficacy of prayer deriving from that practice, gives it its distinctive features. □

Photo: Gaynor Sekimori



Photo 3: The fire-walking ritual performed by yamabushi at Takaosan.



# Prayer as Action: Buddhist Priests During COVID-19 in Japan

by Levi McLaughlin

*Prayer is not an isolable element . . . ; prayer is folded into a larger framework of devotion, and that devotion is best understood in terms of action.*

## Prayer in the Pandemic

Shortly after the turn of the new year in 2021, Japan faced another upsurge in coronavirus infections. This marked the third wave of COVID-19 the country had endured since the first Japanese cases were confirmed in February 2020. This latest wave threatened Japan's global reputation as a nation that had escaped the worst the pandemic had to offer and undermined its status as an alternative model against which to compare global outliers, such as the United States and the United Kingdom. In mid-January 2021, Japan's hospital capacities were strained and worrisome reports about rising numbers of infections and deaths filled broadcast news and social media feeds. Vaccine approval remained delayed, with distribution stymied by restrictions imposed by the country's restrictive medical system. Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide and Tokyo Governor Koike Yuriko nonetheless stubbornly insisted that the Olympic Games would proceed that summer, even as fears escalated about new and potent mutant viral strains that had been detected in Japan. The urge to repel dangerous incursions clashed with mandates to welcome the world to Tokyo and reinvigorate Japan's devastated economy by restarting trade and tourism.

The encroaching one-year anniversary of a once-in-a-century pandemic was certainly a time to consider prayer. From the middle of January 2021, I contacted Buddhist priests in Japan that I have been communicating with since early in the COVID-19 outbreak to ask them about how they were reflecting on their year of pandemic practice. I sought their insights into how they positioned prayer in the context of their other activities, and I wanted to know if they had devised specific pandemic prayer strategies. It quickly became obvious that for these temple-based Buddhist activists, prayer is not an isolable element. They made clear that prayer is folded into a larger framework of devotion, and that devotion is best understood in terms

of action. Action as proactive reflection, action as reworking rituals and community engagements to new settings, and action as aid provision. Their corona-era initiatives can perhaps best be called prayer as action.

From early spring 2020, almost all of Japan's Buddhists exercised *jishuku*, or "self-restraint." With the exception of social welfare outreach, clergy canceled almost all in-person gatherings and moved many of their regular services online. The few services still held at temples were severely limited by strict social distancing measures. Death-related rituals, which comprise a large percentage of temple events, were mostly restricted to a scant number of family members. This necessitated wrenching workarounds, such as priests streaming funerals to bereaved loved ones through their portable phones. Because temple income depends to a great extent on donations from parishioners in exchange for ritual services, many priests face dire financial



Stores close their doors in response to the state of emergency declared by the Japanese government at Nakamise Shopping Street in the Asakusa area in Tokyo, amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, on May 3, 2020.

Photo: Zuma Press / AFLO



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straits; the comparatively few temples that attract tourists have also been devastated by a catastrophic drop in visitor numbers.

In spite of these daunting challenges, the priests I introduce here did not express wholly negative reactions to the pandemic. COVID-19 has afforded opportunities. It has given Japan's Buddhist activists a chance to reflect conscientiously on karmic causality and human responsibility in order to identify root causes of systemic prejudices. It has granted Buddhist clergy opportunities to identify parishioner needs and expand their engagements beyond temple-based interactions. And it has served as a call to put compassion to work by coming to the aid of those in dire need, be they longstanding parishioners or marginalized outsiders. These priests invite us to think of prayer primarily in terms of devotional acts in the interest of others.

## Prayer as Reflection

Throughout the pandemic, I received lengthy and thought-provoking missives from Reverend Asahikawa ("Reverend Asahikawa" is a pseudonym). She is head priest of a Shingon temple in Wakayama Prefecture, in a community that is down the mountain from her sect's headquarters atop Mount Kōya. In response to my request that she reflect on a year of pandemic practice, Reverend Asahikawa sent me a characteristically magisterial essay. In it, she treated the ongoing waves of infections as a chance to link



Photo: Science Source / PPS

*In the wake of the Great Kantō earthquake of September 1, 1923, many of the Japanese people falsely attributed the fires that raged after the quake to the actions of Korean residents.*

the current catastrophe to disasters of the past century. Notably, the Reverend connected responses to the 2020 coronavirus outbreak to the racist rhetoric and attacks on ethnic minorities in the wake of earthquake disasters in Japan in the twentieth century. She picked up on telling details in COVID-19 coverage to highlight incipient injustices within Japanese society:

"Coronavirus infections are out of control. Within this situation, a particular Japanese principle takes shape. This is *gen'in kyūmei*, or 'tracing a cause back to its origin.' The Buddha taught that origins cannot be attributed to other people; it is only through karma that we can understand causes.

"Yesterday (January 17) was the memorial anniversary of the 1995 Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake disaster. As I think back to the time of that earthquake, I recall anguish-ing devastation. During the Hanshin

disaster, as with the Great Kantō earthquake of September 1, 1923, and also after the earthquake in the Tōhoku region ten years before that, false rumors circulated. Even as people understood logically that earthquakes are caused by natural processes that trigger cataclysm, their sense of loss and a mindset that places blame on other people's sins led them to falsely attribute the fires that raged after the quakes to the actions of Korean residents. After that, Japanese people prejudicially attacked Asians of all sorts, physically and spiritually (Japanese consciousness of themselves as Asian is weak).

"These deep-rooted racial prejudices have lingered. From about two weeks ago [early January], a curious phenomenon began to take shape. Television and radio broadcasts started including the phrase 'in 2019, the first coronavirus infection in Japan was confirmed in a

Yokohama man with Chinese citizenship.’ In about 30 percent of the news bulletins on coronavirus infections, this kind of wording was evident. Genomic analysis of the virus confirmed that the first wave of infections in Japan (from January to March 2020) revealed characteristics of the Wuhan coronavirus that spread throughout Asia. This original viral stock, however, was depleted in Japan by April 16. After that, the European mutant variant replaced it, even as ‘this infection originated in Wuhan’ went into operation.”

Reverend Asahikawa made clear that the way to confront structural inequities is to cultivate Buddhist understanding. By deftly fusing careful attention to scientific data with analysis of reportage, she pointed to a racist pattern that is triggered when Japan faces disastrous conditions. Her reflection certainly speaks beyond Japanese specifics: 2020 has been a year of pronounced xenophobia, a year of violence and bigotry, most obviously in the United States but also in other places. By pointing out how we must attribute causes to the karmic seeds planted by our actions, Reverend Asahikawa laid a path away from retreat into chauvinism. The pandemic is an opportunity to take stock of where we place blame. She called on us to break with the impulse to stoke fear of the other and instead reform our actions through compassion as the means to transcend calamity.

## Prayer as Adaptation

Reverend Asahikawa was not alone in discerning the pandemic’s positive potential. Reverend Ōmori, a True Pure Land (Jōdo Shinshū) Buddhist priest based at a temple in rural Yamaguchi Prefecture, the southernmost end of Japan’s main island Honshū, devoted most of a recent message to reflections on how his schedule of rituals and lectures was affected by the shutdown. The

Reverend is a priest of some renown; he publishes regularly in Buddhist periodicals and daily newspapers, has authored numerous books, and had a busy schedule delivering talks across Japan. That is, until COVID-19.

Reverend Ōmori (“Reverend Ōmori” is a pseudonym) is a prominent example of a priest who has successfully transferred activities from in-person to online engagement. He noted that the popularity of rituals remained in question; clearly, the full sensory experience of praying with priests in a temple cannot be replaced by a Zoom call. However, he expressed enthusiasm about ways dharma talks, one-to-one counseling, and other forms of teaching might develop through new forms of engagement, thanks to transformations occasioned by Covid conditions. His work remains one of planting karmic seeds, but the pandemic has meant moving his planting to new soil:

“From now, the decision to carry out services in person or online, or to perform them in hybrid fashion, will be tough going, I think. I have to point out that I have received almost no requests for online ritual services. The requests have been for dharma talks. Before the coronavirus, I was giving about one hundred lectures per year across the country. At first these were all completely canceled. However, from August 2020 I began receiving invitations for online lectures, and as a result I have become very busy once again.

“In this era of the coronavirus, every priest is groping for solutions to how best to transmit Buddhist tradition. The number of priests who are delivering dharma talks via YouTube is going up quite a bit, and there are diverse examples of an increasing number of net-based consultation services as well. There’s a realization that we cannot continue doing things in the same ways that we have been doing them up to now,

and I think this is a positive development, thanks to Corona.

“However, I don’t think the need for face-to-face meetings will change. There will be people for whom face-to-face is good, for those who are older or for whom the net-based environment is difficult. In fact, for services I’ve held at my temple in the countryside, I thought at first that only about ten people would come, but fifty will take part on the day. This is more than attended before the start of the pandemic. When I ask, the attendees confirm that their chances to meet up with other people have diminished and they have grown lonely.

“Up to now, I’ve only been able to meet those who attended my lectures when I traveled to see them, but now, thankfully, I’m able to speak with many people across Japan all at once. Also, previously many of my presentations were at temples, but I’ve been speaking more at companies and for local governments. Recently I gave an online presentation for a major corporation. There’s a feeling that Buddhism offers latent potential. There’s a renewed realization that Buddhism is useful, no matter the person who practices it and no matter the time.

“From now, the Buddhist world, and I, will have to adapt flexibly, but the important thing is that even if people are separated physically, our work must be to shorten the divides between people’s hearts.”

Ōmori offers us a heartening take on the pandemic experience. He may, however, represent a minority of Buddhist clergy who possess the technological savvy, resources, and energy to adapt their activities to new platforms and pivot Buddhist teachings toward new audiences. We may start to see a generational gap in the post-Covid era, a divide between older generations and



a new constituency of priests who can make the transition to hybrid delivery of the dharma and presentation modes that suit online and in-person corporate and governmental settings. It remains to be seen how many clergy will be able, or willing, to undertake this shift.

## Prayer as Action

Though they were forced to adapt their efforts to new safety protocols, Buddhist activists continued to make significant contributions to social welfare. The pandemic shutdown erected major obstacles to aid provision, against which providers persevered to give supplies and solace to the homeless and other marginalized populations. A prominent example of Buddhist efforts in this regard is the One Spoonful Association (Hitosaji no Kai), an outreach initiative begun in 2009 at the Pure Land (Jōdoshū) temple Eishōin in Asakusa, a neighborhood in Tokyo near Ueno Park and the historical prostitution zone Yoshiwara. The temple's head priest, Reverend Yoshimizu Gakugen, mobilizes volunteers that include parishioners, priests from his own sect and others, and other religion-affiliated participants to prepare meals and clothing for the homeless and impoverished (Because Reverend Yoshimizu and the One Spoonful Association appear in numerous media reports, I do not anonymize him or his organization here). They see to funeral arrangements for people without means, host a food pantry for children (many from single-parent households), and reach out to migrant populations, among other services. From late February 2020, One Spoonful cautioned its volunteers not to linger too long with each homeless person in order to protect the aid recipients, and themselves, against possible infection and also required those who distributed food and supplies to wear masks and goggles. The temple was flooded by hundreds of masks carefully handcrafted by volunteers, which clergy distributed as part



*Vietnamese volunteers prepare packages of food and protective masks for Vietnamese people in need and living in Japan at a Buddhist temple in Tokyo, which has been turned into a shelter for young Vietnamese workers in Tokyo. Photo taken on May 2, 2020.*

of the care packages they provided the *ojisan*, or “uncles,” the affectionate term used by Reverend Yoshimizu and his helpers for the homeless population in the streets around his temple, almost all of whom were elderly and male. That is, until conditions changed with COVID-19.

Japan's religious aid providers afford us an alternative history of Japan's experience with COVID-19. It is a history in which the country's most precarious residents are main characters. In his frequently updated blog, Reverend Yoshimizu noted a rise in homeless numbers from early 2020 onward, and how this increase included a new population: displaced men and women from Southeast Asia. He described how his temple aided recent immigrants, mostly from Vietnam, who were forced from their accommodations when the businesses where they worked were forced to close by the pandemic lockdown. From that time onward, the Reverend undertook comprehensive efforts not only to see to the needs of the Vietnamese workers but also to forge sustained ties with Vietnamese Buddhist clergy and temples. His reports combine descriptions of meals for displaced workers and his

Association's efforts to help them find housing with explanations for Japanese readers about Vietnamese Buddhism and accounts of his ecumenical engagements with these fellow Mahāyāna practitioners, such as celebrations of the lunar new year and other key events in the Vietnamese Buddhist calendar.

Reverend Yoshimizu and his One Spoonful outreach can perhaps best be characterized as putting into practice what Reverend Asahikawa cautioned that we must all do: treat calamity as an opportunity to move beyond the impulse to fear the unfamiliar and instead reach out to offer help. Instead of retreating into isolation, we must channel devotion toward karmic transformation. Action can be a form of prayer. Prayer as action requires a willingness to adapt to daunting circumstances, as Reverend Ōmori's account tells us. It requires challenging introspection about deep-seated structural biases, as Reverend Asahikawa identified. And it requires a willingness to take action, even in the most difficult of times, as Reverend Yoshimizu shows us. Prayer as action lets us greet changing circumstances as opportunities to cultivate a better future. □

# What Is Prayer?

by Tomoshi Okuda

***Prayer . . . is not a human act; it is the act of a deity. It begins not with praying to God but with being prayed for by God. It is this reversal that lies at the heart of prayer.***

## Fulfillment of Petitions: The Answered Prayer

Being a pastor, prayer forms a part of my everyday life. There are generally considered to be three kinds of prayer in Christianity: prayers of gratitude, prayers of request, and prayers of intercession. While prayers are often thought of as requests for something, in Christianity an emphasis is placed on prayers of intercession; in other words, on prayers for other people.

That at least is the theory. In practice, however, people inevitably pray for themselves when they are beset by sickness, disasters, and other hardships in life. Religion might in such instances be criticized for being rooted in self-interest. However, praying out of self-interest is not in itself a bad thing, as God would prefer that our honest thoughts emerge in prayer.

Unfortunately, our prayers are not necessarily fulfilled no matter how fervently we might pray. Vulnerable in our suffering, we begin to entertain doubts when told that such and such a god is more effective. That is why some people become attracted by cults and wander from one religion to another out of self-interest. For the most part, though, what they will find is that things consequently just go from bad to worse.

You can tell whether a religion can be trusted by looking at its attitude to prayer. Does it use prayer as a tool of self-actualization, or does it see prayer as an opportunity to discover the will of a deity? The question, in other words, is who or what is the subject of fulfillment of a petition: is it the self or is it some transcendent being? It is understandable that people seek out and pray to the god that suits them, but whether that is the right thing to do is another matter.

Among the Ten Commandments of Moses that appear in the Old Testament may be found these words: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image.” This is typically regarded as prohibiting idolatry and may be perceived as making the arrogant monotheistic claim that “our god is the one true god and all others are fakes.” The key words to note here, however, are “for yourself.” Humans have a tendency to create gods for themselves, and it is these that are the fakes or idols. But gods that grant our requests are no more than slaves of humans. Instead, prayer should allow us ultimately to ascertain the will of a deity in the process of our making a request to that deity. This may sometimes transcend and run counter to our own wishes. Shortly before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed, “may this cup be taken from me.” So even Jesus prayed to escape the cross. However, this wish was not granted, which is why he finally prayed, “not my will but yours be done.” He prayed for God’s will to be done, which is the crucial point about prayer.

There is a well-known poem of unknown authorship called A Creed for Those Who Have Suffered. It can be found on a wall at the Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, and it illustrates what it means for a prayer to be fulfilled.

I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;  
I was made weak, that I might learn humbly to obey.  
I asked for health, that I might do greater things;

Photo: Alamy / PPS



Part of the All Souls Deuteronomy, containing the oldest extant copy of the Decalogue. Discovered in 1952 in a cave at Qumran, near the Dead Sea, it dates to the early Herodian period between 30 and 1 BCE.



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I was given infirmity, that I might  
do better things.  
I asked for riches, that I might be  
happy;  
I was given poverty, that I might  
be wise.  
I asked for power, that I might have  
the praise of men;  
I was given weakness, that I might  
feel the need of God.  
I asked for all things, that I might  
enjoy life;  
I was given life, that I might enjoy  
all things.  
I got nothing I asked for,  
but everything I had hoped for.  
Almost despite myself, my unspo-  
ken prayers were answered;  
I am, among all men, most richly  
blessed.

## Recognition of Weakness: The Serenity Prayer

The essayist and Tokyo Institute of Technology professor Eisuke Wakamatsu has written as follows about prayer: “I believe that prayer is the most passionate act that a person can perform in this world. A prayer is not a request. A request may convey our wishes or desires to God, but a prayer involves listening to a transcendent, silent voice. Prayer takes as its starting point a recognition of our weakness. Engaging in prayer more deeply means reflecting upon our own weakness. People who believe they are strong and take an ‘I’m all right’ attitude probably don’t pray



*Mother Teresa during her prayers at the Missionary of the Pure Heart in Calcutta (Kolkata).*

much” (Tomoshi Okuda, “*Nigeokureta*” *bansōsha* [An escort runner who was “left behind”] [Honnotane Press, 2020], 168). For Wakamatsu, prayer is a recognition of weakness. Prayer is therefore deepened by a realization of one’s own personal weakness.

If recognizing our weakness is where prayer begins, then there is something fundamentally contradictory about praying to become stronger and richer. Prayer as a recognition of weakness means accepting that the reality in which we find our poor selves is not what we can change as we would like it to be. Such prayer liberates us from egoism. When we pray to become stronger and richer, we are moving in the direct opposition to what prayer is, in essence, all about.

At this point, I would like to introduce a prayer by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971).

God, give us grace to accept with  
serenity

the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,  
and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,  
Enjoying one moment at a time,  
Accepting hardship as a pathway  
to peace,  
Taking, as Jesus did,  
This sinful world as it is,  
Not as I would have it,  
Trusting that You will make all things  
right,  
If I surrender to Your will,  
So that I may be reasonably happy  
in this life,  
And supremely happy with You for-  
ever in the next.  
Amen.

What impresses many people about this prayer is its honest acceptance of the self as living in a reality that cannot be

Photo: Raghu Rai / Magnum Photos / AFLO



changed and its desire for the grace to accept what cannot be changed rather than the strength to change it. It also does not call for the elimination of hardships but, rather, sees them as a pathway to peace and trust in God's plan. The blessings bestowed by the prayer stem from the recognition of weakness observable here.

## Already Prayed For: The Lord's Prayer

Wakamatsu says that prayer is the act of listening to the "transcendent voice" of a deity and listening to that being's wishes. Mother Teresa put it this way: "The first requirement for prayer is silence. People of prayer are people of silence" (José Luis González-Balado, ed., *Mother Teresa: In My Own Words* [Liguori Publication, 1997], 8). She went on to say, "Prayer is not asking. Prayer is putting oneself in the hands of God, at his disposition, and listening to his voice in the depth of our hearts" (ibid., 9). Mother Teresa says that silence is needed in order to enter into prayer. This is simply because prayer is "listening to his voice in the depth of our hearts."

We used to think that prayer was what people did to request something from a deity. On the Internet, too, prayer is defined as "to entreat a deity" and "to sincerely hope." At heart, however, prayer is deeper. This is because it is not a human act; it is the act of a deity. It begins not with praying *to* God but with being prayed for *by* God. It is this reversal that lies at the heart of prayer.

On the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus told Simon Peter, the most senior of his disciples, "but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32 [New Revised Standard Version]). When Jesus informed his disciples that he would be crucified, Peter alone insisted that he would never disown him, even if it meant having to die for him. Jesus

told Peter, however, that "the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me" (ibid., 22:34). That is what happened, and it is shortly before it did that Jesus spoke the above words to Peter.

"I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail." The words had barely been spoken before Peter had disowned Jesus three times, and Peter recalled them in despair. Unable to find the words even to pray, the realization that he had been prayed for brought him to his feet again. The words had been uttered in the past tense—"I have prayed for you"—signifying that Peter had *already* been prayed for. Jesus, that is to say, God, had already prayed for such a frail human being as Peter.

The most famous prayer in Christianity is the Lord's Prayer, and the following words are familiar even to many who are not Christians.

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
your kingdom come.  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And do not bring us to the time of  
trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.  
For the kingdom and the power and  
the glory are yours forever.  
Amen.

(Ibid., Matthew 6:9–13)

The title "Lord's Prayer" is normally considered to signify the prayer that Jesus taught to his disciples, but is that really so? In Japanese the words *haha no inori* (a mother's prayer) signify a prayer said by a mother for her child. It is not a prayer taught by a mother to a child. The words "a mother's prayer was answered" likewise remind us of how fervently a mother prayed for her child. The child is the one who was prayed for and who receives the prayer's blessings. The same may be said in the case of the Lord's Prayer. It is a fact that Jesus has already prayed for us, and it is when we realize this that we discover the profundity of prayer.

There are times in life when we find it impossible to pray, perhaps because the hurt is too great or because we have just experienced some catastrophe. That is what befell Peter. But we should still not be afraid or anxious. Everything will be all right because we have already been prayed for. What our deity is telling us is, "When you feel better, it will be your turn to lend courage to those who are unable to pray." □



The Denial of Saint Peter (1610) by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (1571–1610).

Photo: Alamy / PPS

# Zen Prayer? Maybe, Maybe Not

by Pamela D. Winfield



***There is a certain internal irony to the Zen tradition that technically eschews language and any form of prayer to a higher power yet in actual practice delights in language and broadly prays for individual and collective well-being in the form of kitō prayers.***

## Prayer in the Zen Context

Depending on the definition used, it can be said that prayer does, and yet does not, exist within the Zen tradition. Zen practitioners do not pray to a god or gods in the traditional sense, but they do pray for individual boons and collective benefits in the form of *kitō* prayers, as many other Buddhist sects do. In addition, if prayer is defined in a more generalized, expansive sense that encompasses forms of contemplative practice, then one could conceivably speak of Zen prayer, but the tradition's own terms "meditation," or simply "zazen," should be used instead. As a result, whether prayer is defined in either a narrow or a broad sense, its applicability to the Zen context is still an equivocating yes and no in both cases.

### *Narrow Definition of Prayer*

If prayer is traditionally defined as "a form of communication between humans and higher powers" (Carl Olsen, *Religious Studies: The Key Concepts* [Routledge Press, 2010], 188), and if one were to ask if this kind of prayer exists within the Zen tradition, then the answer would be theoretically no but institutionally yes.

Theoretically speaking, the Zen tradition does not recognize any divine power above or beyond the human realm. In contradistinction to other sects of Buddhism that, for example, recognize and celebrate the salvific compassion of Amida Buddha's "other power" (*tariki*), Zen practitioners do not pray to a heavenly Buddha god to swoop down and escort them to be reborn in a postmortem existence as a buddha (*hotoke*) in the Pure Land of Bliss and Repose (Jpn., Jodō, Skt., Sukhāvati). Rather, Zen emphasizes the importance of self power (*jiriki*) to achieve awakening right here and now.

Unlike the fundamentally vertical cosmological gap between heaven and earth in other traditions, the cosmology of Zen is radically horizontal, with Buddha nature squarely located in and as the material realm. Consequently, no one can enlighten you; only you can enlighten yourself. No scriptures, doctrines, devotional acts, or prayers to self-constructed higher beings external to you can enlighten you. At least in terms of its own rhetoric, Zen prides itself on not relying on words or letters but on directly pointing to the mind, seeing into one's true nature, and becoming a buddha. Of course, Zen temples

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do display Buddhas and bodhisattvas as models and reminders of human potential, but Zen is a nontheistic tradition that technically eschews any higher power populating a metaphysical realm distinct from our own. For example, when asked "What is Buddha?", Zen master Tozan (Chn., Dongshan Liangjie, 洞山良价, 807–69) responded that Buddha is the "three pounds of flax!" that he was then using to make a Buddhist robe. His meaning? Buddha is always right before your eyes. You just have to wake up to see it.

Without a higher power per se, in Zen there can be no form of communication between humans and this presumed metaphysical realm. Because there is no cosmological gap between us and the gods, there can be no reverential supplication or worshipful propitiation

through prayerful language. Zen in fact deemphasizes language, at least in its more theoretical moments. As I have argued elsewhere,

[In Zen,] the object itself is always primary. One's first encounter with the sensate forms of the real world naturally precedes and necessarily informs all subsequent words and concepts about it. Physical entities constitute a sort of prelinguistic, non-essentialized substance semantics that exist prior to human-invented words and concepts, and these arbitrary sounds and intangible ideas are but secondary representations of the thing itself in the mouth and mind of the beholder. Stripping away such secondary accretions and returning to the baseline grasp of suchness is the definition of awakening" (Pamela D. Winfield and Steven Heine, eds., *Zen and Material Culture* [Oxford University Press, 2017], 39).

At the same time, however, it must be recognized that Zen's rhetoric of immediacy, to borrow Bernard Faure's titular phrase, is mostly theoretical (*The Rhetoric of Immediacy* [Princeton University Press, 1994]). In actual practice, Zen greatly values linguistic wordplay, blistering repartee, poetic and calligraphic expression, and the mysterious power of invocation. These are all the result of Zen's cross-pollination with Sino-Japanese literati culture, Pure Land devotionism, and esoteric Mantrayāna at various points in its long pan-Asian history. This has produced Zen's voluminous literary record and rich repertoire of prayers called *kitō* that set intentions, express gratitude, appease spirits, and generally ensure this-worldly benefits (*genze riyaku*). Zen monks, for example, recite daily prayers in the training monasteries before eating, bathing, and all other quotidian activities that are opportunities for practice, and they

also recite them for lay penitents who commission them for specific boons. Learning how to recite *kitō* for individual and collective well-being in both life and death is a critical aspect of all Zen training, for such prayers provide a significant source of income for most ordained Zen priests today. However, these prayers are not directed to any personified supernatural deity, *buddha*, or *bodhisattva* but, rather, vaguely invoke all the karmic causes and conditions that may come together to promote general health and well-being.

As a result, there is a certain internal irony to the Zen tradition that technically eschews language and any form of prayer to a higher power yet in actual practice delights in language and broadly prays for individual and collective well-being in the form of *kitō* prayers. This double standard may create a certain cognitive dissonance for those who struggle to reconcile the old "pure Zen" ideals of D. T. Suzuki with the explicitly ritualistic, smells-and-bells form of contemporary Zen Buddhist prayers, but as Tim Graf explains,

*Zazen* (meditation) and *kitō* (prayer) are interactive and complementary aspects of Zen monastic training. . . . *Zazen* became the best-known Zen practice in the modern world, [but] Sōtō Zen Buddhist prayer rituals for this-worldly benefits are hardly ever observed anywhere else but at Japanese prayer monasteries ("Brands of Zen: *Kitō jii*n in Contemporary Japanese Sōtō Zen Buddhism" [Ph.D. Dissertation (unpublished manuscript), University of Heidelberg, 2017], 6).

Graf indicates that these Zen prayer temples (*kitō jii*n) are popular sites of religious tourism, civic engagement, and brand marketing. For example, penitents may travel to a specific Zen temple and offer prayers for the victims of 3/11 (Japan's triple disaster of

earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear meltdown). They may purchase protective amulets (*omamori*) and perhaps even stay in temple lodgings when available. Just as with almost every other Buddhist temple in Japan, the economic viability of the Zen temple depends on prayer offerings and on how well it can promote its niche-brand identity within the larger prayer economy of competing religious institutions. From a theoretical standpoint, a narrow definition of prayer does not really apply to the Zen context; but from a pragmatic, institutional perspective, Zen prayer definitely does exist and is indeed crucial to the sect's economic survival.

#### *Broad Definition of Prayer*

The narrow definition of prayer therefore does—and does not—apply to Zen. Likewise, a broader definition of prayer both might—or might not—apply to the Zen context. A more functional and expansive explanation of the term may more fully characterize prayer as a ritual act and "a network of symbols related to sense experiences, moods, emotions, and values . . ." that reinforces one's identity and membership in a community (Olsen, *Religious Studies*, 188–190). If this expanded definition were applied to *zazen* in particular, and if one were asked if this form of prayer exists in the Zen tradition, then the answer would be technically "maybe" but critically "no." *Zazen* might fulfill the criteria of Olsen's definition above, but this definition is problematic in and of itself.

One may conceivably perceive the discipline of *zazen* seated meditation as a form of ritualized, daily prayer insofar as it evokes the experience of awakening and provides the basis for community identity. Olsen's "network of symbols" that are designed to facilitate the "experiences, moods, emotions, and values" of Zen would certainly include all the material, visual, and embodied cultures of the *zendō*. The visible identity markers of the practitioners'



robes and shaved heads symbolize the value of Buddhist renunciation as well as the unbroken lineage of mind-to-mind transmission stretching back to Sakyamuni Buddha himself. The monitor's compassion stick (called the *kyōsaku* staff in Sōtō Zen, *keisaku* staff in Rinzai Zen) whacks unfocused meditators back into alertness, symbolizing the Zen values of compassion and the use of expedient means to elicit the experience of awakening. The erect cross-legged posture of the lotus position itself, with hands folded and eyelids lowered, also evokes a mood of calm concentration that is said to embody and manifest the buddha dharma in its very form. A sculpted image of the sword-wielding Manjuśrī in the zendō reminds meditators to cut away their delusions through insight (Jpn., *kan*; Skt., *vipassana*), while the bodhisattva's lion mount reminds them to tame their wild passions through calm meditation (Jpn., *shi*; Skt., *śamatha*). The zabuton mat and zafu meditation cushion become symbolic of the universe itself; when one sits, the four-cornered mat becomes one's entire world. Infinite time is also telescoped into set time periods within the zendō; it is measured out by the burning incense stick and by the bells and wooden clappers that signal the start and end of each meditation period. Taken altogether, the *materia liturgica* of ritual objects, visual displays, bodily dispositions, fragrant smells, percussive soundscapes, darkened interiors, and fellow ascetics facing the wall (in the Sōtō tradition) or away from it (in the Rinzai tradition) all conspire to create a distinctly solemn and earnest microcosmic environment that could well be described as prayerful. Anyone entering the zendō at this time would automatically know not to disturb the practitioners and instead to respectfully honor the interior work of the meditators' religious training.

At the same time, however, from a critical metacognitive perspective,

slotting the Buddhist practice of zazen seated meditation into the Western European category of prayer is reductionistic and politically incorrect, as it does a certain colonizing violence to the Zen tradition on its own terms.

The theological category of "prayer," like the invented category of "religion" itself, is a foreign, historically contingent Western European construct that does not fit zazen well at all. Jason Ananda Josephson-Storm has already written about this socially-constructed nature of "religion" at length in his critically-acclaimed monograph, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* [University of Chicago Press, 2012]. In addition, Michael Marra has written about a similar phenomenon in the field of art history, when turn-of-the-century scholars attempted to universalize fundamentally Euro-American ideals of "aesthetics" (see Michael F. Marra, "The Creation of the Vocabulary of Aesthetics in Meiji Japan" in *Since Meiji: Perspectives in the Visual Arts of Japan 1868–2000*, ed. J. Thomas Rimer [University of Hawaii Press, 2016], 193–211).

The concept of prayer (like the concept of aesthetics) presents itself as a universal given, but these pretensions to universality are only the logical fallacy of Euro-American hubris. The very concept of prayer is founded on the presupposition that since Christians pray to a universal God, all prayer in the world must therefore also be universal as well. It asserts that all religions must have some form of prayer; prayer must exist within all traditions; prayer itself must be as universal as the concepts of God and religion are. We know that this presupposition is fundamentally unfounded and that in nineteenth-century Japan, for example, a Japanese word literally had to be invented to translate this completely new and foreign concept of religion: *shūkyō*, made up of the kanji compound for "sect" and "teaching." As described previously, premodern Japanese ritual specialists did have the

term *kitō* (prayers, blessings) for this-worldly benefits, and the verb *inoru* (to pray) has been used to address Shintō *kami* ever since its first mention in the *Kojiki* (712 CE), but the methods, aims, and goals of zazen significantly differ from these kinds of prayers.

Olsen's vaguely worded broad redefinition of prayer's traditional sense itself attempts to generalize and universalize this culturally specific category to the point where it becomes essentially meaningless. It subtly grafts the deity-directed model onto indigenous forms of religious praxis and glosses over important epistemological and soteriological differences. All forms of contemplative practice are not the same; meditating on the *mu kōan* or focusing one's attention on the breath is not the same as devotional recitations of the Hail Mary or recollection of the ninety-nine names of Allah, for example. Likewise, the soteriological aims of zazen seated meditation are not the same as those of monotheistic prayer. Although both can be said to generally evoke experiences, the experience of emptiness (*satori*) is not the same as the experience of divine union with God or being saved by accepting Jesus Christ as one's Lord and Savior. This kind of thinking smacks of the all-too-familiar yet outdated claim that all paths ultimately lead to the same summit and that different forms of prayer (in the broader sense) somehow ultimately meet up to accomplish the same ends (Stephen Prothero, *God Is Not One: The Eight Rival Religions That Run the World* [Harper One, 2011]). This is patently false: it is evident that zazen seated meditation for self-and-other awakening differs greatly from shamanic trance for communication with ancestors, which in turn differs from spirit possession for psychophysical healing and/or drug-enhanced visions for community bonding.

*continued on page 38*

# Prayer in Rissho Kosei-kai

by Dominick Scarangelo

***In Rissho Kosei-kai, prayer is an aspiration, an expression of the fundamental vow of Mahāyāna Buddhist bodhisattvas to help liberate all beings. A vow is not simply a hope that remains locked within our hearts, it is also a promise. Like all promises, a vow is something that we aspire to by working to accomplish what we have pledged to do.***

Today people of faith are coming together as perhaps never before to pray for the earliest possible end to the novel coronavirus pandemic and for the repose of the millions of lives that have been lost. This includes Rissho Kosei-kai, an international lay Buddhist movement with members throughout the world. The pandemic has presented a great challenge to religious groups, forcing them to substantially change the patterns of their lives of faith. But even if people of faith cannot meet in the ways they did before the onset of the pandemic, they continue to pray. In light of our present circumstances and the theme of this issue of *Dharma World*, in this piece I will explore prayer in the Buddhism of Rissho Kosei-kai.

## Is There Buddhist Prayer?

For me the topic of prayer brings to mind the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach's insightful observations in the chapter he devoted to prayer in his influential work *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach suggests that we can know the human phenomenon of religion by focusing on prayer,

writing that “the ultimate essence of religion is revealed by the simplest act of religion—prayer” (Feuerbach 2008, 82). This is the approach I will take in this piece, calling attention to essential aspects of the Buddhism of Rissho Kosei-kai by exploring its understanding and practice of prayer.

However, I'm guessing that some readers may question the very notion of Buddhist prayer. Today Buddhism is often treated as a kind of outlier among religions, described as a philosophy, a science of the mind, or simply a way of life because it is said to lack many of the features we commonly associate with religion. This stance, which distances Buddhism from other faiths, is a hallmark of Buddhist modernism—a general trend of thought originating in various revitalization movements that sought to defend Buddhism facing the challenge of European culture, thought, and technology. Evan Thompson calls this view of Buddhism “Buddhist exceptionalism” (Thompson 2019, 24):

There is a popular idea that Buddhism is inherently rational and scientific. People say that Buddhism isn't so much a religion as it is a philosophy

or a way of life. Some scientists have described it as “the most science-friendly religion.” It dispenses with the concept of God, upholds direct observation, understands things in terms of cause and effect, maintains that everything constantly changes, and says that there is no essential self or soul. The religious parts of Buddhism are supposed to be extraneous and not too difficult to remove. Once you get rid of them you can see that Buddhism at its core is really a psychology based on meditation. Buddhist meditation isn't like prayer or other kinds of religious contemplation or ritual; it's an applied mind science. These are the reasons people give for thinking that Buddhism isn't really a religion, or that if it is, it's different from and superior to other religions. (Ibid.)

Notice that Thompson specifically mentions prayer as one of the religious practices that is negated or extricated. I am of the firm opinion that Buddhists indeed engage in practices that can be considered prayer, and this is something they share with people of other faiths. At the same time, Buddhist prayer is uttered within its wider system of practices and beliefs, predicated on its own unique understanding of how the universe functions. But this is the same as any other religion; none is more unique than the others.

Before we go any further, I should offer a definition of prayer, for which I will return to Feuerbach.



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In prayer, man [sic] addresses God with the word of intimate affection—Thou; he thus declares articulately that God is his alter ego; he confesses to God, as the being nearest to him, his most secret thoughts, his deepest wishes, which otherwise he shrinks from uttering. (Feuerbach 2008, 83)

I will add more from Feuerbach later, but for now this will suffice. In prayer, Feuerbach tells us, human beings face an aspect of themselves in the divine, draw close to it, express contrition for their wrongs to it, and also speak their inner musings, especially the things to which they deeply aspire. While his definition's use of "God" is not applicable to Buddhism, I suspect that many people would also point to much of the remainder of Feuerbach's definition, asking, "Do Buddhists address the buddhas and bodhisattvas with words of affection? Do Buddhists confess to the buddhas and bodhisattvas?" I have chosen Feuerbach's definition from his study of Christianity because, in addition to its insightfulness, it can also point us toward lesser-known aspects of Buddhist practice that are obscured by the discourse of Buddhist exceptionalism but very important in Rissho Kosei-kai. It will also allow us to think about Buddhism comparatively and discover points of intersection with other faiths.

## Varieties of Prayer in Rissho Kosei-kai

Keeping Feuerbach's definition in mind,

I would like to highlight two practices in Rissho Kosei-kai that I think qualify as prayer. First, practitioners in Rissho Kosei-kai do voice their deepest wishes to the Buddha, whether these be for themselves or others. This is called *kigan*, usually translated into English as "prayer." *Kigan* is a compound made up of two words, *ki* (祈), which means "to pray," and *gan* (願), which can mean "prayer," as in a request, hope, or desire, as well as a vow, or "to vow," and to resolve to do something. Prayer may be offered for various reasons, first and foremost world peace and the awakening of all people, but also more personal concerns such as recovery from illness, to purify and bless a residence or a vehicle, success in an endeavor, and so forth. However, in these trying times of the novel coronavirus pandemic, the prayer for the earliest possible conclusion to the pandemic is of course the most fervent in Rissho Kosei-kai, as in faiths the world over.

A second activity we can find in Rissho Kosei-kai that I think accords with Feuerbach's description of prayer is a form of confession (Jpn., *sange*, 懺悔) that is translated as "repentance" or "acknowledgment and remorse," as rendered in the new translation of the Threefold Lotus Sutra. Repentance and rites of contrition have a long history in East Asian Buddhism and are a salient feature of the tradition of the Lotus Sutra because it is the primary subject of the Sutra of the Method for Contemplating the Bodhisattva Universal Sage, the closing text of the Threefold Lotus Sutra. The importance of confession in the

Buddhist tradition is its purifying mitigation of karmic obstructions, which is a very prominent idea in Mahāyāna Buddhism, but it is also indicated by admonitions to confess a fault as a fault in the Pali Nikāyas, some of the earliest Buddhist texts (Hiraoka 1991, 512). In Rissho Kosei-kai there are two forms of repentance. The first is to recognize one's shortcomings in the presence of others, such as fellow practitioners in Dharma-circle discussion groups, and the second is to perform repentance with the Buddha as one's witness. It is this latter practice of repentance that I discuss in this essay.

## Who Is Addressed in Prayer?

Whereas in Islam, Judaism, or Christianity, prayer is offered to God or perhaps Mary, the mother of Christ, or other saints in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, prayers in Rissho Kosei-kai are offered primarily to the Eternal Original Buddha revealed in chapter 16 of the Lotus Sutra. We can think of the Original Buddha as the personification of the ultimate truth that permeates all things in the universe and guides the arising and development of everything. In prayer, the Original Buddha is invoked (Jpn., *kanjō*, 勧請), that is, petitioned to be present, but not only the Original Buddha. Other buddhas and bodhisattvas that appear in the Lotus Sutra, including Manjuśrī, Universal Sage (Skt., Samantabhadra), and Maitreya, are also invoked, as well



as great practitioners within the lineage of Lotus Sutra Buddhism, such as the Japanese monk Nichiren (1222–82) and the various guardian deities and spirits (Jpn., *shugojin*, 守護神; *shoten zenjin*, 諸天善神) who protect Buddhism and its practitioners. The invocation is an entreaty to a kind of sacred cosmos of the faith.

It may be surprising that the invocation includes deities or spirits. While Buddhism does not posit an absolute, almighty creator deity who exists external to time and space, outside the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*), it does recognize the existence of mighty celestial beings possessing what we would think of a supernatural power. According to Buddhism these heavenly deities are, just like human beings, finite existences who are born into this world and eventually pass away. They are different from human beings only in a relative sense. Some are believed to live many eons, sometimes so long that they forget their own mortality. Stories of the Buddha teaching and interacting with heavenly beings are common even in the earliest layers of Buddhist literature, with many of them pledging to protect the Buddha and his followers so that the Dharma prospers in the world. Buddhist-protecting deities that one often encounters in Buddhism include South Asian gods such as Indra (Jpn., *Taishakuten*) and *Sarasvati* (Jpn., *Benzaiten*), as well as various indigenous or hybridized deities. In Japan Dharma protectors include *gongen* (literally, “provisional manifestations”), who are thought to be avatars of particular buddhas or bodhisattvas.

## What Is Requested?

The Rissho Kosei-kai invocation of this sacred cosmos concludes with a request for these personas to bear witness to the practitioner with the words “May you all be present among us and know our deep devotion” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 21), and it is common to conclude

prayer with the entreaty “We earnestly pray that with the help of divine guidance and protection, all living beings may awaken to their buddha nature and world peace may be achieved” (ibid., 87). In the case of prayer for specific purposes, such as recovery from disease, and especially at this time of the novel coronavirus epidemic, practitioners ask that the Buddha and beings invoked extend their hands of compassion to human beings. In the case of repentance, a more private, less ceremonial form of communication with the Buddha, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, teaches that acknowledgment and remorse is “acknowledging our shortcomings and expressing remorse for them directly to the Buddha,” accompanied by the acts of “revering and paying homage to Shakyamuni Buddha and the buddhas throughout the universe” (Niwano 1989, 692).

## Prayer as Realizing Our Awakened Alter Egos

As entreaties for aid from the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and even heavenly beings and spirits that populate Rissho Kosei-kai’s sacred cosmology, prayer demonstrates a recognition that powerful beings can indeed help human beings. However, for practitioners of Lotus Sutra Buddhism, all events and encounters in life are aspects, faces, or the workings of ultimate truth—the Original Buddha—and if properly grasped and accepted as such, they nurture and guide people toward buddhahood. In this light, the supplication of prayer establishes a view of the entire universe and all within it as manifestations of the great teacher, the Buddha. Daily repetition of these petitions is essential to renewing this way of looking at the world with a heart of humility, gratitude, and inquisitiveness.

The most basic meaning of the term “invocation” in Buddhism is the act

of asking the Buddha to remain in the world and teach, which has its origins in the traditional story that following Shakyamuni’s enlightenment under the bodhi tree, the god Brahma petitioned him to refrain from entering nirvana and instead to remain in the world and teach living beings the truth to which he had awakened. In both daily sutra recitation and special prayers, invoking the personas in the sacred cosmos of the Lotus Sutra reaffirms one’s eagerness and openness to learn from all situations and all people one meets as good spiritual friends who are guides on the Buddha Way.

Seen from this perspective, the personas of the sacred cosmology are highly symbolic, and we can even think of them as archetypes. As Taigen Daniel Leighton explains with regard to bodhisattvas, all “have their own psychological approach and strategy toward practice and their own function as spiritual resources” (Leighton 1998, 3). Let’s consider the three bodhisattvas invoked in Rissho Kosei-kai prayer: Manjuśrī, Universal Sage, and Maitreya. In Rissho Kosei-kai’s understanding of the Lotus Sutra, Manjuśrī is the archetype of wisdom, and Maitreya of compassion. When Manjuśrī speaks in the Lotus Sutra, the subject is wisdom, and the times when Maitreya becomes the interlocutor the topic is compassion. Universal Sage appears in the sutra’s final chapter to show how to bring both wisdom and compassion together in the practical application of Buddhist teachings in praxis. In Buddhism the Buddha is an ultimate example of human perfection, and bodhisattvas serve as models for specific virtues, manifesting what we, at our very best, can be. In this way, the Buddha and the other personas that are invoked in prayer are, in Feuerbach’s terms, our alter egos.

Acknowledgment and remorse is also a way of interacting with the buddhas and bodhisattvas as alter egos, but in a comparative way, by using them as

a mirror to reflect oneself and expose one's own shortcomings, and to provide a standard for self-reflection. The more one focuses on the Buddha as an exemplar of what one can and should be, the greater the awareness of one's own shortcomings becomes. This remorsefulness in turn stirs a greater yearning for the Buddha. Expressing remorse to the Buddha is not the same as receiving forgiveness from the Buddha, however. The Buddha does not punish people, nor would his forgiveness open anyone's eyes to the truth. According to Buddhism's principle of cause and effect, when people's actions are unskillful and harmful those actions result in suffering, but if people's actions are skillful and beneficial those actions can spur them toward liberation. Performing acknowledgment and remorse breaks down the impediments of unwholesome habitual energies that lead to unskillful and harmful actions, and it also polishes one's buddha nature, the embryonic buddha within that sees its fullest expression in the Buddha outside oneself.

## Emulating the Bodhisattvas

When it comes to the topic of prayer and the Lotus Sutra, prayer to the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Sounds of the World (Chn., *guanyin*; Jpn., *kannon*) immediately comes to mind. Sometimes called the Bodhisattva of Mercy, the liberating activities of the Sound Regarder are described in the twenty-fifth chapter of the sutra, which became so popular in East Asia that it circulated independently as the Sound Regarder Sutra (Jpn., *Kannongyō*, 観音経). In this chapter Shakyamuni Buddha responds to an enquiry about the reason for the bodhisattva's name by describing how she compassionately watches over living beings in our world and responds to their cries of suffering and distress. The Sound Regarder is said to help people encircled by fires or inundated by



*A statue of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Sounds of the World holding a stem of a blossoming lotus flower in her left hand. Located in the Fumon Area of the Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters' complex in Tokyo.*

floods; to safeguard people from malevolent beings; protect them from attack by swords and sticks; rescue them from misjustice and cruel punishments; and so forth. The verse portion of the chapter also says that the bodhisattva helps people eliminate the influence of the fundamental afflictive emotions that cause our deluded existence—the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance—manifesting herself in the various forms that people need to meet in order to attain liberation. The powers of the Sound Regarder explained in the chapter have contributed to the widespread popularity of this bodhisattva throughout Asia and to the tradition of invoking the name of the bodhisattva as a form of prayer to eliminate suffering and misfortune.

However, when it comes to this chapter, Rev. Nikkō Niwano poses an interesting question. On the face of it, the Buddha's teaching here seems out of sync with the general message of the Lotus Sutra. If all we have to do is invoke the Sound Regarder's name in order to attain liberation, wouldn't this negate the Buddha's teachings up to this point in the sutra, which called us to dedicate ourselves to bodhisattva practice for both ourselves and others? Pondering this apparent contradiction,

Niwano surmises that when the sutra encourages calling out the name of, invoking the name of, keeping in mind and revering, and calling to mind the bodhisattva, it is telling us to be mindful of the Sound Regarder by making her vow our own and emulating her teachings by applying them practically in our lives. He writes of the great bodhisattvas as follows:

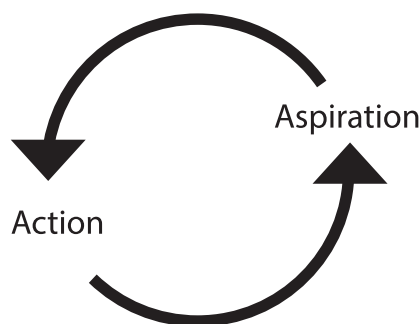
Striving to ease the sufferings and confusion of living beings is certainly one form of the relief bodhisattvas provide, but there is another, far more important work they perform: acting as the Buddha's emissaries by transmitting his teachings and demonstrating how to lead the life of faith. This is the true task of bodhisattvas: guiding us to liberation through their good example. (Niwano 1989, 626–27)

While not denying that the Sound Regarder brings people aid and comfort, Rev. Niwano emphasizes that even the great bodhisattvas such as the Sound Regarder help people first and foremost by showing them what to aspire to and how to realize those vows. When people revere and are mindful of the

Sound Regarder, their hearts open to her transformative influence. Rev. Niwano explains this as a resonance or sympathetic response from the bodhisattva that allows people to get on the same wavelength with the bodhisattva.

“Resonate” in this case means to spontaneously attain the same state of mind as Bodhisattva Regarder of the Sounds of the World. The phrase “sympathetic response” is often used to characterize this sort of phenomenon. If we call to mind the Regarder of the Sounds of the World, pondering all her qualities, we can make her mind our own. (Ibid., 638)

Perhaps the best way to envision the communication between the Sound Regarder and practitioners is to liken it to the harmony that is achieved with a tuning fork when tuning a musical instrument. The bodhisattva can guide us, but it is our responsibility to do the spiritual work of modulating our hearts to her frequency. We can think of attuning to the proper frequency as making the Sound Regarder’s vow our own; the resulting resonant vibration would then be the natural manifestation of the efforts required to fulfill the vow. Furthermore, the harmonious sound issued forth can be understood as the practitioners’ wholesome influence on their surroundings. This is how the Buddha’s liberating power reaches the world.



## Prayer: The Oneness of Vows and the Effort to Realize Them

Rissho Kosei-kai’s interpretation of the role of the Bodhisattva Regarder of the Sounds of the World and other great bodhisattvas leads us to what I think can be described as Rissho Kosei-kai’s basic understanding of prayer. Prayer is two-fold, consisting of a vow, or aspiration, and the perseverance to fulfill that vow.

### *The Vow*

As Rissho Kosei-kai President Nichiko Niwano explains in a recent article, “Prayer corresponds to the aspiration in Buddhism that all people be liberated, which arises from the most profound depths of life [itself]. By realizing this fundamental aspiration that everyone possesses, and also by sharing it, people naturally become as one, affirm one another, cooperate, and take steps toward a harmonious world” (Niwano 2020, 5).

Prayer in Buddhism is a nondualistic phenomenon, that is, it transcends the differences of self and other because people are really not separate from one another; our lives are inextricably connected with each other and everything else on earth.

Originally, in prayer there is no distinction between oneself and others, the noble spirit of yearning for the happiness of all people, and devoting oneself to it, far and away transcending the selfish aspirations [for oneself]. (Ibid.)

As President Niwano describes, it is this compassionate aspiration of prayer, from the depths of the heart, that manifests as Rissho Kosei-kai members’ practice in their homes, the wider society, and even on the global level.

*Enacting Prayer: Translating Vows into Action*

It is here that we discover a major distinction between Feuerbach’s understanding of prayer and prayer in Rissho Kosei-kai’s Buddhism. Like many people today, Feuerbach thought prayer to be quietist and passive, an act of withdrawing from the world. In contrast to those who pray, he held that the person engaged in the world “does not pray: he only works; he transforms his attainable wishes into objects of real activity” (Feuerbach 2008, 83). I think prayer can indeed be a resigning, quietest exercise, but as we have seen, in Rissho Kosei-kai, prayer is an aspiration, an expression of the fundamental vow of Mahāyāna Buddhist bodhisattvas to help liberate all beings. A vow is not simply a hope that remains locked within our hearts, it is also a promise. Like all promises, a vow is something that we aspire to by working to accomplish what we have pledged to do. Absent the perseverance to make it come true, a vow becomes really nothing more than an empty promise. It follows that sincere prayer is something aspired to through action in the world in order to bring into existence our heartfelt wishes. Aspiration within the heart and working in the world are not opposites, they are inseparable.

This is Rev. Nikkyo Niwano’s understanding of prayer that Rissho Kosei-kai preserves today. Because the aspirations of prayers are the outgrowth of the bodhisattva’s great vow, they cannot but accompany dedicated efforts to realize it. Rev. Niwano made this clear when speaking of prayer for world peace, perhaps the most pressing prayer of Rissho Kosei-kai members and of people of faith throughout the world.

We human beings simultaneously inhabit the world of the mind and the manifest world of form. So, if we leave this world of form as it is, no matter how hard we pray for peace and how much we try to move toward it, I have to call it an incomplete effort. (Niwano 1979, 89)



Rev. Niwano's framing here is important, and we should not pass it over. He reminds us that we live in a world of mind and form. In the Lotus Sutra Buddhist tradition, the mind and the body, that is to say, the psyche and material reality, are interrelated components of a totality that mutually influence one another. Thus, not only is prayer that fails to translate into action ultimately ineffective, it is not true prayer. Prayer must arise in the mind and manifest in the body through actions that seek to transform the world in order to realize the aspiration of prayer. We can also think of prayer and action as two aspects of a total phenomenon that reinforce and give birth to one another. Prayer generates action and action generates prayer. As Rev. Niwano elaborated in one of his Dharma talks, "True prayer is not prayer alone. Prayer comes true precisely because it is accompanied by earnest action. Pray by acting, act by praying" (Niwano 2000, 82).

So far, I have been considering prayer as aspiration and action for others or for society, but I also think this self-reinforcing cycle of vows and action is similarly at work in the more private prayer of repentance. Acknowledgment and remorse that is not accompanied by any efforts to correct one's faults and shortcomings cannot be considered true repentance. If one sincerely feels regret for the wrongs and shortcomings that one confesses to the Buddha, one cannot help but be moved to action. This is why it is said in Rissho Kosei-kai that remorse must be translated into spiritual practice. "Reflect and correct" is how one Rissho Kosei-kai minister describes the practice in readily understood terms. Having the courage to change oneself is the vow of the prayer of repentance; the personal work and discipline needed to change oneself is the action of the prayer of repentance.

## Conclusion

There is an obvious question that I must consider before concluding. If the

buddhas and bodhisattvas are archetypes that we should accept into our hearts and manifest in our actions, praying by confirming our aspirations and then endeavoring to realize them, does this mean that instead of the buddhas and bodhisattvas helping us, we are actually just helping ourselves?

Rissho Kosei-kai's understanding of prayer opens up space for a symbolic grasp of the sacred cosmos of the Lotus Sutra and prayer. But viewing the buddhas and bodhisattvas as archetypes and models does not have to negate their existence nor the reality of their assistance. As theologian James W. Fowler proposed, beyond an interpretive and analogical religiosity there is another that is "postcritical," that is "aware of the organic and interconnected character of things" that "distrusts the separation of symbol and symbolized, sensing that when we neutralize the initiative of the symbolic, we make a pale idol of any meaning we honor" (Fowler 1981, 187). In other words, there is a spirituality that can step back and avail itself of the insights of symbolic analysis but return in order to enter into communication with the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spirits of the sacred cosmos as subjects. In a previous article discussing the anthropomorphization of the Eternal Original Buddha, I explored the transformative potential of doing just this (Scarangelo 2019, 33–35).

Both modes of spirituality nurture and elevate us, but they are not exclusive, and one can move between both as one's practice and progress on the path dictate. As readers also probably know, "existence" is a category that Mahāyāna Buddhism problematizes. Seizing on either existence or nonexistence as absolute or as mutually exclusive is unnecessary and only brings one into the error of reifying and clinging to one perspective. A single perspective can never be anything more than a localized and conventional truth, not the holistic ultimate

truth that reconciles all viewpoints. In the words of the Lotus Sutra, this is distorted thinking that makes "such distinctions as, / All things are existing or nonexisting, / Real or unreal, / Or produced or unproduced" (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 248).

I would also like to mention a teaching in East Asian Buddhism that can enable us to harmonize the notion of the buddhas, bodhisattvas, and spirits aiding us with the necessity of our own efforts. In the Lotus Sutra we find many instances of the term "to be kept in mind" to speak of how the buddhas protect practitioners of Buddhism (Chn., *hunian*, 護念; Skt., *parigraha* or *adhiṣṭhita*). Historically, the notion of the protection of the Buddha was also translated into Chinese using a compound of the two characters "apply" and "uphold" (Chn., *jiachi*; Jpn., *kaji*, 加持), which led to the following understanding of the protection of the Buddha: the Buddha will apply his protection of blessing upon us, but it is our responsibility to uphold the Buddha's blessing. This is done by practicing spiritual disciplines that make us a suitable vessel for accepting this application of the Buddha's power. Receiving the protection of the Buddhas is a collaboration, transcending complete reliance on either ourselves or the Buddha, and living beings cannot neglect their part.

Last, I would like to turn to part of Feuerbach's definition of prayer that I have yet to touch on, that in prayer one "addresses God with the word of intimate affection—Thou" (Feuerbach 2008, 83). This is probably the part of Feuerbach's description that readers are most resistant to applying to Buddhism. It may strike readers as totally unrelated, even antithetical to the attainment of gnosis that is the essence of liberation and awakening in Buddhism. However, I think the kind of intimate affection and a sense of oneness conveyed by the word "Thou" are strong distinguishing elements of Nikkyo Niwano's

religiosity and reflect the humanistic Buddhism of the Lotus Sutra.

Rev. Niwano often spoke of awakening to the original oneness of living beings and the Buddha as “becoming conscious of always being together with the Buddha” (Niwano 1989, 433). He described this in terms of physical expressions of tenderness, such as “awareness of the Buddha’s embrace” (ibid.). Other ways he put this were “to race straightaway into the arms of our true parent, the Buddha” (ibid., 146), “to be held firmly in the compassionate arms of the Buddha” (ibid., 638), and to “feel the warm caress of the Buddha’s hands of compassion” (ibid., 361). These are not romantic metaphors but allusions to the affection of the parent-child relationship. Inspired by the stories and parables of the Lotus Sutra, which often use parent-child relationships to describe the unity of the Buddha and living beings, Rev. Niwano regularly portrays the Buddha as our father. Feuerbach also saw the metaphor of the parent-child relationship at work in prayer, expressing the oneness of the supplicant and the hearer, as “father” is the most “intimate epithet” because it “is the expression of the closest, the most intense identity” (Feuerbach 2008, 85). The intimate affection of the parent-child relationship is also a powerful motivating factor in repentance.

The reason we perform acknowledgment and remorse is not that we fear the Buddha. We do this practice to bring joy to him and bask in the words of praise we receive from the Buddha, whom we “cherish and long for,” and to whom we are always “looking up with thirsting hearts.” The intent of the Buddha and the practitioners’ yearning for the Buddha imbue the expression “The buddhas, the tathagatas, are your compassionate fathers.” (Niwano 1989, 722)

In this quote, Rev. Niwano is alluding to one of the most famous passages of the Lotus Sutra, which says that in order to see the Buddha one must “cherish and long” for the Buddha, “looking up to him with a thirsting heart” (Rissho Kosei-kai 2019, 281). In Sanskrit recensions of the sutra, this word “thirsting” is *trṣṇā* (or related terms), which can also mean the craving or desire for existence or sense experience, as in the eighth of the twelve causes and conditions (twelve limbs of dependent origination). This exemplifies how the teaching of the Lotus Sutra does not reject or suppress human emotions but makes use of them as the very means of awakening.

In Rev. Niwano’s words, to “cherish and long” for the Buddha, “looking up to him with a thirsting heart” means “to adore and yearn for the Buddha in the same way that a thirsty person searches continually for water” (Niwano 1989, 413). Expressing this adoration and yearning by speaking within one’s heart words of intimate affection to the Buddha is a distinctive facet of Rev. Nikkyo Niwano’s religiosity that many practitioners at Rissho Kosei-kai have inherited and practice today. □

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*continued from page 31*

### **Zen Prayer? Maybe, Maybe Not**

All these ritual acts may indeed evoke experiences, moods, emotions, and values that reinforce membership in a community, but then again, so do fraternity-house hazing rituals. Should they all be classified together as forms of prayer? Obviously not. In this sense, to extend the metaphor, rather than imagining that all paths somehow lead to the same summit, we should instead envision many paths leading to many summits. To reduce the varied contours of the world’s expansive religious landscape to a one-size-fits-all catch-all category of prayer—even and especially in its broader universalizing sense—lacks imagination and actually flattens the view.

Zazen seated meditation, therefore, should not be subsumed under the category of prayer. Rather, distinct terms for distinct forms of contemplative practice should be maintained. To be clear, this is not a case for the exceptionalism of zazen seated meditation—just a call for the appreciation of difference and variety. In this sense, there can be no such thing as Zen prayer. Just zazen. Just seated meditation. Or as Zen master Dōgen (1200–53) advised, “Just sit.” □

# People Who Bring Joy to Others

by Nichiko Niwano



A wondrous power that transcends human knowledge is often referred to as a “transcendent power,” which we usually think of as a special ability that we ourselves cannot attain.

It’s no wonder that we think this, since Buddhist scripture states that incredible abilities like “being able to see all things in every realm” and “emitting brilliant light from every pore of the body that illuminates the world” are due to transcendent powers. I do not think, however, that Shakyamuni expounded anything that we ourselves cannot do. In that case, what is the meaning of the “transcendent powers” referred to in the scripture?

In my understanding, the greatest transcendent power of human beings is that we have minds. In other words, the human mind is a transcendent power. Because we have minds, we understand the feelings of other people—we can understand what they are seeking. Because we have minds, we are able to comprehend the truth revealed to us by Shakyamuni.

Founder Niwano said, “If you get wisdom, in the true sense, through the Mahayana teachings, that’s the same as gaining transcendent power.” What he meant is that instead of assuming that transcendent power is some extraordinary ability, we should say that the everyday functioning of the mind exerts a power that can be called transcendent when it’s used to show consideration for others. For example, many Rissho Kosei-kai members say that thanks to the support of friends who know the Buddha’s teachings

and have grown close to them, they have been born anew while living the same life. Indeed, sometimes we can only use the word “amazing” to respond to these changes of heart—they show us that our minds are capable of anything.

This is also proven by the ruthless murderer Angulimala, who, through the care and guidance of Shakyamuni, became one of Shakyamuni’s foremost disciples. So, transcendent power is also sincerity in the part of the mind that thinks of other people, and the power released through that part as it functions.

## Happiness Is Bringing Joy to Others

Once when I was talking about transcendent powers, someone said, “Kosei-kai is full of people who demonstrate transcendent power through their sincerity,” and I certainly believe that is true. This is because, according to chapter 21 of the Lotus Sutra (“The Transcendent Powers of the Tathagata”), transcendent powers are used to bring people joy. To quote from that chapter, the buddhas, “in order to bring joy to living beings, / Demonstrate their immeasurable transcendent powers.” Therefore, it is important to interact with others cheerfully, kindly, and warmly, and to make every effort to care for them. If you bring them even a little joy by putting into practice your consideration for them, it is none other than the demonstration of your transcendent power.

Incidentally, manga artist Takashi Yanase (1919–2013), who was best

*Nichiko Niwano is president of Rissho Kosei-kai and an honorary president of Religions for Peace. He also serves as an advisor to Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan).*

known as the creator of the *Anpanman* series, wrote in his book *Mo hitotsu no Anpanman monogatari* [Another story of Anpanman] that “the greatest / joy / is bringing others / joy.” He elaborated on this by saying that people are happiest when they make others happy, that the greatest pleasure in life is to please people, and that he became a manga artist because he wanted to give his all to making people happy. When I read this, I felt that this man was a bodhisattva who brought people joy through his manga and, at the same time, taught us that if we’re dedicated to a way of life that makes others happy, we can all become bodhisattvas right where we are.

Even someone who is bedridden can bring joy to others by smiling and offering words of gratitude—this, too, is a transcendent power and the work of a bodhisattva.

As the final verse of chapter 21 states, people who share the Dharma in this way “cause countless bodhisattvas / To at last abide in the One Vehicle.” We are, each and every one of us, building a world in which everyone can live together in harmony. I hope that Rissho Kosei-kai will always be full of people who, at all times, with heartfelt sincerity, are happy to make others happy. □



# The Three Pillars of the Lotus Sutra

by Nikkyo Niwano

*In March 1999 an autobiography by Rev. Nikkyo Niwano (1906–99), the founder of Rissho Koseikai, was published in Japanese under the title Kono michi: Ichibutsujo no sekai o mezashite (The path that we have walked: Aspiring to the world of the One Buddha Vehicle). The book is a lively account of the life of Founder Niwano as a leader of a global Buddhist movement and a pioneer of interreligious cooperation who dedicated himself to liberating all people from suffering with firm faith in the Lotus Sutra. Dharma World will continue to publish excerpts from the book in installments.*

Professor Shuyu Kanaoka of Toyo University in Tokyo said this about the spirit of the Lotus Sutra: “The Lotus Sutra is regarded widely throughout the world as a scripture possessing a spirit of reconciliation toward others. This is its first pillar. The most important, yet most difficult, way of thinking about a religion is to know the nobility of one’s own religion as well as that of others. Religious cooperation becomes a possibility when people join forces in the belief that religions with different beliefs from their own are ultimately in accord.”

This is, in other words, the spirit of the One Vehicle—that all religions spring from the same source. This is because the Lotus Sutra is a scripture of reconciliation.

Professor Kanaoka continued. “The second pillar of the Lotus Sutra is the pervasive sense of mission, which might at first glance seem directly opposite the first pillar, reconciliation. If religious cooperation is a single possibility, there are many bottlenecks on the road to achieving it. Who will open the way? If we merely say ‘someone will do it,’ it will never get done. However, if we

take it upon ourselves to do so, moving spirit into action, then we also have to bring in others. This again is not something that someone elsewhere will do but something that we ourselves must bring to fruition, in this place, in this society, in this world.”

The Lotus Sutra is a scripture of action, giving us a sense of mission. This is typified by the verse in chapter 13, “Encouragement to Hold Firm”: “We will not love body and life but only care for the supreme Way.”

“The third pillar of the Lotus Sutra combines the other two, which in themselves are apparently opposites. This is the spirit that seeks to realize both within the stream of eternal time. If we are attached to just what we see in front of us, we will become impatient and refute any opposing position and so fall into the error of trying to force a surrender. Buddhism teaches both effort (*virya*) and patience (*ksanti*). Effort is to strive, not wasting even a moment for what you have to do. Lotus Sutra practitioners are neither impatient nor negligent but have a sense of great security in that they have been promised the protection of the Buddha,

whatever the difficulties, if they do their best.”

The life span of the Tathagata is immeasurable, and every one of us is supported to live within that great eternal life.



*Founder Nikkyo Niwano's first portrait, taken in 1920 at a photo studio in Tokamachi, the nearest town from his birthplace, Suganuma, in Niigata Prefecture.*



*Nikkyo Niwano, the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, was an honorary president of Religions for Peace and honorary chairman of Shinshuren (Federation of New Religious Organizations of Japan) at the time of his death in October 1999. He was awarded the 1979 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.*

People often say, “You must have gone through a lot of difficulties to get where you are today.” When I look back over my life, I don’t think I have had any specially great hardship. It is not a matter of where the gods and the buddhas are but of their workings. I believe that when we work to benefit others, there the gods and the buddhas appear to work with us. This is how I have led my life.

## My Feelings about This Autobiography

In November 1995 I turned ninety. I received congratulations from a large

number of people, some of whom felt that this would be a good time to collect together my memories and organize them into an autobiography.

Indeed, my previous autobiography, *Lifetime Beginner*, which related the first half of my life, had come out in 1984. It started with my life in Suganuma, where I was born and brought up, and continued through to my decision to make a new start after the loss of Myoko Naganuma (1889–1957), my companion in religious practice and cofounder of Rissho Kosei-kai. In it I described my resolve to go to Tokyo, my meeting with Mr. Sukenobu Arai in 1935 and my encounter

with the Lotus Sutra, and the founding of Rissho Kosei-kai, and then the early period of the organization when many people witnessed the wondrous power of the Dharma and joined in the organization. I ended the autobiography there.

This was what might be called a precursory period for Rissho Kosei-kai. It was only later that it went on to seriously develop its training as an organization based on the Lotus Sutra and extend its activities both at home and abroad. All this came about through the working of the gods and the buddhas. While accepting the working as it is, Rissho Kosei-kai members made the



*Founder Nikkyo Niwano addresses an assembly of local members in the Utsunomiya area, Tochigi Prefecture, during his Dharma guidance tour in February 1958.*



*Founder Nikkyo Niwano poses together with President Nichiko Niwano (right) and President-designate Kosho Niwano (left) on July 15, 1994 in the Horin-kaku Guest Hall of the Rissho Kosei-kai headquarters' complex in Tokyo.*

greatest efforts to walk the path shown to them by the gods and the buddhas simply, honestly, and sincerely. That has been the history of Rissho Kosei-kai.

Ven. Etai Yamada, the head of the Tendai Buddhist denomination, said to me, "Mr. Niwano, all the members come to you because you are sincere."

It is not that I alone am sincere. It is the sincerity of all the members that makes Rissho Kosei-kai as it is today. I believe sincerity is everything.

It is not that we are those who studied Buddhism as a specialty at university or those who confined themselves on a mountain to do religious training. It is that we are lay Buddhists, and that is why we devote ourselves to guiding members, visiting from one place to another conducting devotional services for those who are suffering, sharing right view with those in trouble, and encouraging those who are disheartened. We thus didn't spare time even for rest to put into practice the *brahmaviharas*, the four infinite virtues

of loving-kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity.

Gradually local people came to acknowledge the activities of members and cooperate with them. Furthermore, people of religion from around the world combined their efforts with ours.

Perhaps Rissho Kosei-kai's ongoing course would be better documented by the records of the bodhisattva practices of members, the work of local leaders who have promoted the Brighter Society Movement, and the records of the activities of religious people who have commended Religions for Peace. Therefore, it could be presumptuous of me to bring these things together in my own autobiography, but I decided to compile them on behalf of all those involved in order to highlight the thinking behind the various activities and the process by which they were carried out. It seemed appropriate to do so.

In 1991 I passed the presidency of Rissho Kosei-kai to Nichiko Niwano as our second president. On November 17,

1994, he appointed his eldest daughter, Mitsuyo, as president-designate of Rissho Kosei-kai, with the Buddhist name Kosho, based on the organization's constitution. Kosei-kai leading members had urged him to do this early on, but remembering his own experience, Nichiko did not agree. Then I happened to be advised of scholars outside Rissho Kosei-kai who had looked closely at the history of traditional Buddhist organizations. "The run-up should be as long as possible. This ensures stability for the organization," I was told.

I confirmed the nomination for the third president, believing this would serve to deepen Kosho's own understanding and that it was in accordance with the wishes of members.

I grew up learning many things from my grandfather, and Kosho was always by my side from the time she was born. I never said anything that sounded like a sermon to her, but I am sure she learned from me, in her own way, how I lived my daily life, and absorbed it. I hope that she will be able to broaden her perspective as much as possible in the period before she becomes president and learn the importance of serving others.

As I found myself with less pressure, both spiritually and officially, I set down as a single volume the various things I had written and spoken about, as well as the records of our various activities.

What kind of activities has Rissho Kosei-kai developed since the beginning of the Age of the Manifestation of the Truth in 1958? What were the hopes that lay behind the birth and growth of the Brighter Society Movement and Religions for Peace? There is a tendency to consider such activities to be like a skyrocket, here today and gone tomorrow, or as mere bragging, but for me all these activities are no more or less than the straight road that is the practice of the Lotus Sutra. This is something I want the next generation to know.

*To be continued*



# The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law

## Chapter 28

### Encouragement of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (2)

*This is the 135th installment of a detailed commentary on the Threefold Lotus Sutra by the founder of Rissho Kosei-kai, Rev. Nikkyo Niwano.*

**TEXT** Wherever such a one walks or stands, reading and reciting this sutra, I will at once mount the six-tusked white elephant king and with a host of great bodhisattvas go to that place and, showing myself, will serve and protect [him], comforting his mind, also thereby serving the Dharma Flower Sutra.

**COMMENTARY** *I will at once mount the six-tusked white elephant king.* This contrasts with the Bodhisattva Manjushri, who rides a lion.

The lion is the symbol of the Truth (the Wonderful Dharma). The lion, called the king of the beasts, has control

of the other animals and rouses awe in them. Therefore, it can roam freely on the plain. Like the lion, the Truth governs all things in the universe and is itself under the control of nothing else. It cannot be moved. The Truth is, so to speak, the king of the universe, and it appears freely in all phenomena of the cosmos.

**Thoroughgoing actual practice.** By contrast, the elephant represents “actual practice.” Wherever this animal with its gigantic body forges ahead, nothing can obstruct its progress. If there is a great tree in its path, the elephant knocks it down. When it finds a rock in its way, the elephant rolls it

aside. When it fords a stream or pond, it walks steadily on the bottom. Therefore, the elephant is the symbol of thorough practice with a firm foundation.

Moreover, the elephant on which the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue rides is pure white. This pure whiteness signifies that the bodhisattva's practices for the benefit of self and others are entirely for the liberation of all living beings and are pure, with not the slightest element of self and seeking no reward of any kind.

The six tusks symbolize the teaching of the Six Paramitas, or Perfections. This teaching, needless to say, is the teaching that shows us the six models of the bodhisattva practice, that is, the actual practice of benefitting both oneself and others.

In this way, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue is a practitioner of and also a protector and guardian of the Dharma who sweeps away any obstacle to him. It is entirely appropriate that he appears riding a white elephant with six tusks.

- *Also thereby serving the Dharma Flower Sutra.* It is for the sake of serving the Dharma Flower Sutra and being grateful for its teachings that he protects one who receives and keeps the sutra. This is certainly deep in meaning. In other words, it means protecting the person who reads and recites the Dharma Flower Sutra for the sake of caring for the sutra, being grateful for its teachings being preached, and helping to disseminate them, rather than for the sake of protecting such individuals themselves.

Some people think self-righteously that they must have divine protection because they are practitioners of the Lotus Sutra. This is mere conceit, for however one may practice the Dharma in form, unless one truly practices the teachings, there is neither divine protection nor merit. This line is considered an admonition against individualistic arrogance.

**TEXT** Wherever such a one sits, pondering this sutra, I will at once again mount the white elephant king and show myself to him.

**COMMENTARY** To sit quietly, pondering the teaching of the Lotus Sutra, is the practice of meditation, one of the Six Paramitas. Whenever anyone practices meditation, the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue mounts the white elephant and shows himself to that person.

This means that because the Lotus Sutra is a teaching of actual practice, if one concentrates one's thoughts on the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, those thoughts will naturally settle in actual practice. This being the case, one cannot help remembering the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, who is the leader and exemplary model of actual practice. Then one will of one's own accord become determined to practice

completely the Six Paramitas, with a pure mind that seeks no reward, just like the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, who rides the white elephant with six tusks.

This in itself is the appearance of Universal Virtue.

**TEXT** If such a one forgets [be it but] a single phrase or verse of the Dharma Flower Sutra, I will teach it to him, read and recite it with him, and again cause him to master it.

**COMMENTARY** The words "If such a one forgets [be it but] a single phrase or verse of the Dharma Flower Sutra, I will teach it to him" should be understood as meaning that if one cannot grasp the true meaning of the teaching despite much thought, he or she must first think of its practice, and as a result will be sure to arrive at the true meaning.

As repeated many times, since the Lotus Sutra is the teaching of the actual practice, if we forget its practice and only try to go deep into the mountain of its profound doctrine, it often happens that we lose our way. This is because we will become bewildered by its subtlety and profundity, if we consider it from the theoretical viewpoint alone.

At such a time, if we pause calmly and recall again that the Lotus Sutra is after all the teaching of the practice for liberating ourselves, others, and the world, then the mist before our eyes will immediately clear and the broad path will open up before us.

Hence the next words follow quite naturally.

**TEXT** Thereupon he who receives and keeps, reads and recites the Dharma Flower Sutra on seeing me will greatly rejoice and renew his zeal.

**COMMENTARY** *On seeing me.* This means nothing other than recalling to mind the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue, the leader and exemplar of the actual practice of the Wonderful Dharma. When one recalls the bodhisattva, the great path of actual practice of the teachings will open up before one's eyes, so one will obtain great joy and new courage, thus becoming ever more assiduous.

**TEXT** Through seeing me, he will thereupon acquire the contemplation and dharanis named the dharani of revolution, the dharani of hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of revolutions, and the dharani of skill in Dharma-sounds; such dharanis as these will he acquire.

**COMMENTARY** *The dharani of revolution.* This is the power of virtue with such nature of dissemination that the strength to promote all good and stop all evil revolves endlessly, one after another.

- *The dharani of hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis*

*of revolutions.* This is the strong power of virtue that provides hundreds of thousands of myriads of kotis of people with the strength to promote all good and stop all evil.

- *The dharani of skill in Dharma-sounds.* This is the strong power of virtue that renders the strength to preach the word of Truth (Dharma-sounds) freely in expressions suited for other people and to promote good and stop evil.

**TEXT** “World-honored One! If in the latter age, in the last five hundred years of the corrupt and evil age, the bhikshus, bhikshunis, upasakas, and upasikas, seekers, receivers and keepers, readers and reciters, or copiers desire to put in practice this Dharma Flower Sutra, they must with single mind devote themselves to it for three times seven days.

#### COMMENTARY

##### Forming spiritual habits

We do not have to take literally the figure of three times seven days, but we should occasionally devote ourselves to religious discipline for a set period of time. Just as athletes in various sports who seriously desire to improve their abilities participate in training camps for certain periods of time, it is necessary for a person who seriously aims at practicing the Way of the Buddha to do the same.

In today’s busy world, lay people find it difficult to confine themselves in a mountain temple or retreat to perform religious disciplines for a certain period, but the benefits of doing so are always worthwhile. Precisely because the world is so busy, it is even more important to do this.

Those who are unable to do this should take one day—say, on a Sunday—and on that day try to forget all worldly affairs, positively devote themselves to the study of the teachings, contemplation, reciting or copying the sutras, or talking with fellow believers about the Dharma.

Why is this necessary? Because just as repeated deeds become a habit, we can form spiritual habits; repeated deep pondering or earnest thinking will become a habit of mind before we know it. Let us suppose that we hear someone report, “Students marched through the streets in a demonstration.”

Even though they do not know the reason for the demonstration, some people will disapprove and think, “Ah, they’re at it again.” On the other hand, others may be glad and think, “Great! Something must be up.” An educator will immediately become concerned about the situation of university education. A stock-broker will immediately think of the potential influence on stock prices. That such responses are so different is due to the variance in people’s spiritual habits. Spiritual habits have just such remarkable functions.

When we try to forget worldly affairs for a fixed period of time and concentrate our mind on a single object, such

a practice becomes a spiritual habit. Suppose that a person continually thinks for a period of three weeks, “I myself and others are all caused to live by the Buddha.” For a while, that person will have formed the habit of immediately thinking on every occasion, “Wait a minute. They and I are caused to live by the Buddha.”

The strength and persistence of such a habit differ according to how earnestly and how long we have persevered. If we absent-mindedly think of something for a mere hour and allow our attention to be distracted, our thinking will never become a habit. If we try to continue thinking deeply of only one thing for a day, such a spiritual tendency may continue for several days. From the standpoint of forming religious habits, it is certainly a quite profoundly meaningful custom that believers in Christianity go to church once a week—on Sunday.

If we devote ourselves single-mindedly to one object for three weeks, a spiritual habit thus cultivated will last at least a half year. Should we repeat this several times, the habit may last an entire lifetime. This is the significance of the various practices in the Buddhist disciplines.

An outstanding believer may unexpectedly receive a great revelation deep within his or her mind while doing these various practices, but that is only of secondary importance. The primary significance lies in the cultivation of a superior spiritual habit.

Those who are too busy to set aside a specific period of time should try to be deeply devoted to the teachings of the Buddha for even an hour a day as often as possible. The results of doing this will be inestimable.

We should understand that this is what is meant by the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue advocating this three-week devotion.

**TEXT** After the three times seven days are fulfilled, I will mount the six-tusked white elephant and, together with countless bodhisattvas surrounding me, appear before those people in the form all the living delight to see, and preach to them, revealing, instructing, benefiting, and rejoicing them.

**COMMENTARY** The purified mind and religious exaltation that we feel after devoting ourselves to religious disciplines are certainly like the feeling of seeing the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue appear mounted on the white elephant.

**TEXT** Moreover, I will give them *dharanis*, and obtaining these *dharanis*, no human or nonhuman being can injure them, nor any woman beguile them. I myself also will ever protect them. Be pleased, World-honored One, to permit me to announce these *dharani* spells.”



**COMMENTARY** The words “nonhuman being” in our modern age may refer to such things as money, material things, and fame.

If these things are sought rightly and used for the right purpose, they never become an obstacle to faith, and they will never destroy the mind of walking the Buddha Way. But an excessive desire for them is apt to disturb one’s mind.

The expression “nor any woman beguile them” here reflects the male standpoint, but the converse expression applies from a female standpoint. The expression simply indicates the opposite sex.

Conjugal love between man and wife is, of course, a foundation in forming the individual family and thus an important factor in the structure of human society as a whole. However, people have a tendency to become attached to such love and to become selfish in their affections. They are apt to forget the much larger love they should have for all human beings. Others often abandon themselves to sexual love and perform various dishonest acts.

Therefore, whatever the case may be, we must recall the practice of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue. If we do so, our daily lives, which tend to become defiled by greed, will become pure like the white elephant and moreover we will come to possess an imposing power of actual practice like that of the elephant.

Our minds, which are liable to be bewildered over the opposite sex and to be drowned in the river of shallow affection, will be devoted to a deep human love, and like the white elephant, which treads firmly upon the stable river bottom, we will be able to pass steadfastly through life.

**TEXT** Then in the presence of the Buddha he uttered a spell, saying:\*

“[1] *Atan-dai* [2] *tandaha-dai* [3] *tanda-hate* [4] *tanda-kushare* [5] *tanda-shudare* [6] *shudare* [7] *shudara-hachi* [8] *boddaha-senne* [9] *saruba-darani-abatani* [10] *saruba-basha-abatani* [11] *shu-abatani* [12] *so-gyaha-bishani* [13] *so-gyane-kyadani* [14] *aso-gi* [15] *so-gyaha-gyadai* [16] *tere-ada-sogya-torya-arate-harate* [17] *saruba-so-gya-sammaji-kyarandai* [18] *saruba-daruma-shu-hari-sette* [19] *saruba-satta-ruda-kyo-sharya-ato-gya-dai* [20] *shin-nabikiri-daite*.”

**COMMENTARY** As we noted in the previous chapter, “Dharanis,” dharani spells consist of impenetrable, profound, mysterious meanings so that at best the following should be considered as tentative translations.

- [1] *Atan-dai*. This means non-self. Taking away the punishment cane (the cane used to administer punishment on humans) of selfish views. (*adande*)

- [2] *Tandaha-dai*. This means exempting self. Removing the punishment cane of the small self. [*dandapati*]
- [3] *Tanda-hate*. This is to remove the punishment cane of the self as a tactful means. Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “means of revolving the self.” [*dandavarte*]
- [4] *Tanda-kushare*. This is translated as “peace.” Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who is well skilled with the rod [punishment cane]!” He also identifies it as “practicing forgiveness through respect.” (*dandakushale*)
- [5] *Tanda-shudare*. This means being extremely pliable—in terms of mind and heart. A mind which does not put forth self, but obediently follows truth. Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who holds well the rod!” (*dandasudhare*)
- [6] *Shudare*. This means being very flexible—in terms of actions. The attitude of one who regularly yields to others and listens to what others have to say. (*sudhare*)
- [7] *Shudara-hachi*. There are numerous interpretations of this, but it seems that the translation of “smooth” seems to be appropriate. Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who holds well!” [*sudharapati*]
- [8] *Boddaha-senne*. This means regarding the Buddha. (*buddhapashyane*)
- [9] *Saruba-darani-abatani*. This means rotating all *dhara-nis*. Extending one after another the various powers of cultivating good and preventing evil. [*sarvadarani avartane*]
- [10] *Saruba-basha-abatani*. This means not revolving all opinions. This should be taken as “consistency of speech and action.” Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who turns all the teachings!” [*sarvabhashyartane*]
- [11] *Shu-abatani*. Everything spins round. Preaching goes round and round, hence the teachings are transmitted from one to another so that many people are instructed. Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who turns well!” [*su-avartane*]
- [12] *So-gyaha-bishani*-. This means that the samgha is consumed, but this is interpreted as meaning overcoming the crisis of the samgha becoming extinct or imposing such a trial. Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who destroys the Samgha!” [*samghaparikshani*]
- [13] *So-gyane-kyadani*. This is to destroy the faults of the samgha. Removing the bad factors in the samgha. [*samghanirghatani*]
- [14] *Aso-gi*. This means “innumerable.” [*asamge*]
- [15] *So-gyaha-gyadai*. This means eliminating the attachment to the samgha. Even in religious groups, which in the beginning are formed out of a purity of feeling, there comes a time when the small self (ego) or attachment to the group springs up. Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who is apart from phenomena!” [*samgapagate*]
- [16] *Tere-ada-sogya-torya-arate-harate*. This means that the number of the three temporal worlds of the past, present, and

future is equal, that is, infinite. [*tri-adhvasamgatulyaprapte*]

- [17] *Saruba-so-gya-sammaji-kyarandai*. This means that the entire samgha surpasses conditioned things (phenomena) brought about by the contact of causes and conditions. “Conditioned things” refers to the view of things swayed by phenomena. Therefore, surpassing conditioned things means to attain the way of seeing things that is not swayed by phenomena. [*sarvasamgasamatikrante*]
- [18] *Saruba-daruma-shu-hari-sette*. This means learning all teachings. [*sarvadharmasuparikshite*]
- [19] *Saruba-satta-ruda-kyo-sharya-ato-gya-dai*. This means awakening to the voices of all living beings, in other words, perceiving the voiceless voice as to what all sentient beings suffer from and what they wish for. [*sarvasatvarutakaushalyanugate*]
- [20] *Shin-nabikiri-daite*. This means that the lion plays, in other words, being unrestricted, there is nothing to be afraid of. Dr. Tsukamoto identifies it as “Oh, she who frolics as a lion!” (*sim[h]avikridite*)

**TEXT** “World-honored One! If there be any bodhisattvas who hear these *dharanis*, they shall be aware of the supernatural power of Universal Virtue. If while the Dharma Flower Sutra proceeds on its course through Jambudvīpa there be those who receive and keep it, let them reflect thus: ‘This is all due to the majestic power of Universal Virtue.’

**COMMENTARY** *Who hear these dharanis.* In the English translation of the Sanskrit text, we find “whose organ of hearing is struck by these talismanic words” for the phrase, which should be interpreted as being heard as a voice from above. In other words, it is to become aware, accepting that spirit as a revelation. This is precisely why the words “supernatural powers of Universal Virtue” come to life.

• *If while the Dharma Flower Sutra proceeds on its course through Jambudvīpa there be those who receive and keep it, let them reflect thus: ‘This is all due to the majestic power of Universal Virtue.’* The Bodhisattva Universal Virtue is the bodhisattva of actual practice. Hence, he is entrusted with the great task of having the teachings of the Lotus Sutra be practiced throughout Jambudvīpa (the saha-world). Therefore, when a person receives and keeps the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, that person must become aware that it is because the divine powers of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue have extended to him or her.

**TEXT** If any receive and keep, read and recite, rightly remember it, comprehend its meaning, and practice it as preached, let it be known that these are doing the works of Universal Virtue and have deeply planted good roots under

numberless countless buddhas, and that their heads will be caressed by the hands of the tathagatas.

**COMMENTARY** There are three invaluable phrases here. The first of the three is “these are doing the works of Universal Virtue.” Those who receive and keep the teachings of the Lotus Sutra, read and recite them, rightly remember them, comprehend them, and practice them as preached are doing exactly the same works as those of the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue. In other words, they become Universal Virtue. How wonderful it is to be able to have such an awareness! This is a stage of great confidence that none but a religious believer can obtain.

The second is “have deeply planted good roots under numberless countless buddhas.” In this way, those of us who have been able to receive and keep the Lotus Sutra have in the course of past lives under the various buddhas accumulated practices of religious disciplines and planted good roots. Considering this, we are able to have even greater confidence. We can have the awareness that we ourselves are children of the Buddha, regardless of what our position or occupation is in the present world. This is also truly remarkable. We can from this time forth proudly stride down the path of life.

The third phrase is “their heads will be caressed by the hands of the tathagatas.” Interpreted from the standpoint of Japanese customs, being caressed by the hands of the buddhas means to be praised by them. This interpretation is to a large degree acceptable. Interpreted from the standpoint of Indian customs, it means being trusted by the buddhas. This is also truly something to be grateful for. Whichever the case, to be praised and trusted by the buddhas is an unsurpassable joy, a wonderful state of religious exaltation.

It would be desirable to remember these phrases rightly so that we will always be able to repeat them from memory.

**TEXT** If they only copy it, these when their life is ended will be born in the Trayastriṃśa Heaven; on which occasion eighty-four thousand nymphs, performing all kinds of music, will come to welcome them, and they, wearing seven-jeweled crowns, will joy and delight among those beautiful nymphs;

**COMMENTARY** Though this is not the realm of religious exaltation, suffering is removed from their minds and they are able to lead happy, pleasant lives.

Trayastriṃśa, while it is a heaven, is still within the triple world. It is the second of the six heavens in the realm of desire, so it is a realm of pleasure still founded in desire. While it is a comfortable world in comparison with the saha-world, there is still the chance that one may go astray



The Paradise of Maitreya, Bodhisattva of the Future. Basalt bas relief from the Shotorak monastery, Kapisha region, Afghanistan. First-second centuries.

and fall again into a lower realm of existence. When we think about the world, comparing this with our own present daily life, it is of great interest.

**TEXT** how much more those who receive and keep, read and recite, rightly remember it, comprehend its meaning, and practice it as preached! If there be any who receive and keep, read and recite it, and comprehend its meaning, when their life is ended the hands of a thousand buddhas will be proffered, that they fear not, neither fall into any evil destiny, [but] go straight to Maitreya Bodhisattva in Tushita Heaven.

**COMMENTARY** We may either interpret this literally or take it as symbolizing that through faith the spiritual state will become stable. In other words, we may take the passage in the literal sense that innumerable buddhas will extend their hands to us so that in our last moments we will experience no fear of death and will not fall into evil ways. Or we may take it as saying that when we encounter some major incident on the path of life, if we believe firmly in the great mercy and great compassion of the Buddha, we will not be afraid nor will we fall upon a wrong path.

Going straight to the Bodhisattva Maitreya means that believers will possess compassionate minds like the Bodhisattva Maitreya and will be assiduous in their bodhisattva practice daily. The three bodhisattvas who represent three important points in the teachings of the Lotus Sutra have already been mentioned: the Bodhisattva Manjusri

(wisdom), the Bodhisattva Maitreya (compassion), and the Bodhisattva Universal Virtue (practice). Because the Bodhisattva Maitreya represents the compassion of the Buddha, this bodhisattva is regarded as the successor to or representative acting on behalf of the Tathagata Shakyamuni. This bodhisattva has the mission of liberating this saha-world and is called “the bodhisattva who is in the position to be a buddha next to Shakyamuni.”

Therefore, Maitreya lives in Tushita Heaven (in the realm of desire within the triple world), waiting for the time when he will come down to this saha-world as a bud-

dha. In a sense, he can be said to be the highest bodhisattva.

Because he is such an honorable bodhisattva, being able to go straight to the Bodhisattva Maitreya represents that those who perform religious disciplines will become the kind of people who continue the practice of compassion in the saha-world, and feel the greatest worth of life and the greatest joy in continuing to do so.

\* These *dharanis* have been given in the Japanese reading and have been numbered to facilitate a smoother reading as numbered in the original Chinese translation. The original Sanskrit words for the *dharani* spells invoked in this chapter cannot be specified because there is no extant version of the Sanskrit text that the translator Kumarajiva used as a basis for translation, which also makes it difficult to clarify the original meanings of these words. In his book *Source Elements of the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Integration of Religion, Thought, and Culture* (Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Co., 2007, pp. 403–6), Dr. Keisho Tsukamoto gives the equivalent Indic readings closest in pronunciation to Kumarajiva’s found in Sanskrit manuscripts, and when there are discrepancies in the pronunciation of equivalent Indic forms, the presumed Prakrit form has been appropriated. The Sanskrit words are put in parentheses, and those presumed to be Prakrit are in brackets. He also gives meanings conjectured from the originals. These meanings are inserted when necessary.

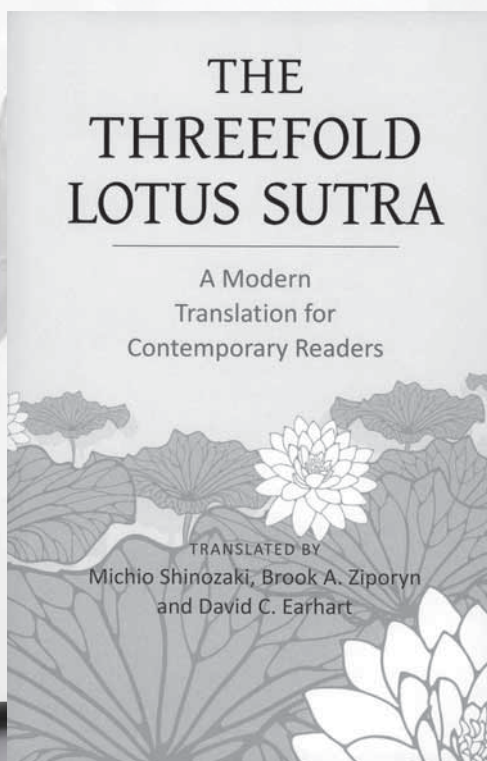
*To be continued*

In this series, passages in the **TEXT** sections are quoted from *The Threefold Lotus Sutra*, Tokyo: Kosei Publishing Company, 1975, with slight revisions. The diacritical marks originally used for several Sanskrit terms in the **TEXT** sections are omitted here for easier reading.



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