

Dharma Message Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin

12 May 2019 10:00 hrs.

Buddhology 101b

Let's join our hands in gassho and recite the Three Treasures: *Namo Kie Butsu, I go to the Buddha for guidance, Namō Kie Hou, I go to the Dharma for guidance, Namō Kie Sou, I go to the Sangha for guidance.*

Namo Amida Butsu...!

Good morning and thank you again for coming to today's 10:00 morning service. Howzit? Today happens to be a special day and that is Mother's Day.

To all of you here who are mothers, grandmothers, great grandmothers, mothers to be and mothers of the future, I wish you a very happy and special day. I hope you all have expressed your love and appreciation for your mothers today, especially those whose moms who are living away from them, e.g. other islands, the mainland, Japan, and other countries. I called my mother this morning but she didn't answer her phone. She has advanced Alzheimers' disease, it's so sad that I'd rather not talk about Mother's Day

today.

It is very admirable of you all to give a portion of your precious time every Sunday morning to come to this temple to listen to the Buddha Dharma. The

Sunday service at the temple is, for most of us Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, a time we set aside from our busy, everyday life of working for a living, taking care of children and grandchildren, or studying to secure a better future. We renew ourselves spiritually and meet friends, both old and new, when we attend the weekly Sunday services. So, over tea and refreshment after the service, we talk story, share whatever interesting things happened in our lives during the past week, and, very important, discuss the teachings among friends and fellow Nembutsu followers.

The importance of attending the Sunday services to listen to the Dharma cannot be overemphasized. The Hongwanji temples here and throughout the whole state endeavors to meet the spiritual needs of Shin Buddhists here in Hawaii through religious services and education classes. It is an organized effort to provide an opportunity not only for us but for our children as well in

their search for a right way of living. Instilling the Buddhist values of compassion, kindness towards others, non-violence, mutual respect and harmony, and gratitude, through Dharma school prepares the minds of young children to live life in oneness and appreciation for the many gifts that they receive from parents, and others, that nurture and sustain their lives and help promote a more peaceful world in the future. Some, if not most of you, have probably gone through Dharma school at one time in your lives and together with the nurturing of your parents, you are Shin Buddhists now. You come to the temple for the Sunday services to hear the teachings and apply them in your daily lives. Although Jodo Shinshu Buddhism is a sect of Japanese Buddhism with its own unique ways of doing rituals, understanding of the Dharma, and propagating, most of us know what general Buddhism is and the basic core teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. General Buddhism is the foundation which enables us to understand correctly the teachings specific to our Jodo Shinshu sect of Buddhism. We know what Buddhism is, but I wonder if we ever thought of what Buddhism is not? After Shakyamuni Buddha passed away, Buddhism evolved into 2 major branches and several sects and denominations within those major divisions of Theravada and

Mahayana Buddhism. As Buddhism spread through several countries outside of India elements of local folklore and religious practices specific to each country where Buddhism took root became incorporated into the teachings. This naturally lead to confusion and misunderstanding of what Buddhism really is, especially when it reached the predominantly Judeo-Christian western culture.

I remember right around this time of the year back in 1994 in Kyoto, Japan, I first entered a Buddhist temple – the Nishi Hongwanji Honzan and from that one encounter, my religious life changed and I converted. As a convert to Buddhism, I myself, had misunderstandings and confusion when I first began studying Buddhism from scratch. I have compiled a few of these misunderstandings, some from the internet, some from remarks I heard from my non Buddhist friends and family. Let's examine some of them, one by one.

First Misunderstanding: Buddhists Worship the Buddha like a god.

The historical Buddha Shakyamuni was a human being not a god.

Shakyamuni Buddha was a man, a living, breathing human being. Among the founders of the world's major religion, he was the only one who emphasized this fact. He attributed all of his attainments to human endeavor, not divine inspiration from god or some other external factor. However, the Buddha did not specifically teach that there are no gods, just that believing in gods was not useful to realizing enlightenment. The iconic image of the Buddha and other enlightened beings, like Shinran and Rennyō Shōnin, that we have here in this temple, are objects of devotion and reverence, but not as gods. We revere, not the statues or the portraits themselves but what they represent. We do not worship them like some religions worship their saints or deities. Buddhas and other enlightened beings do not demand worship, or order us to follow commandments, that is contrary to their nature because, as enlightened entities, they do not derive any sense of gratification or pleasure when ordinary mortals worship or make offerings to them. Our acts of making offerings and reverence is out of respect and appreciation for their spiritual guidance in leading us to enlightenment. There is no such thing as the Buddha saying: “Worship me or I'll throw lightning rods at you or make your life miserable”. That is not the trait of a loving, compassionate, and

enlightened being. Amida and the other Buddhas treat us like adults, they just point to us the right way to alleviate the sufferings inherent in our unenlightened state of minds and it is up to us to follow it or not.

Second Misunderstanding: Buddhists Believe in Reincarnation

If one were to define reincarnation as the transmigration of a soul into a new body after the old body dies, then the Buddha did not teach that doctrine. The Buddha actually taught that there was no soul to transmigrate. However, there is a Buddhist doctrine of rebirth. According to this doctrine, it is the energy or conditioning created by one life that is reborn into another, not a soul. The Theravada scholar Waipola Rahula wrote and I quote “The person who dies here and is reborn elsewhere is neither the same person or another.” That one is kinda difficult to understand. However, one does not have to “believe” in rebirth to be a Buddhist. Many Buddhists are agnostic – meaning they neither believe or disbelieve - on the matter of rebirth.

Third Misunderstanding: Buddhism Teaches That Nothing Exists

Non-Buddhists would argue that “if nothing exists, who is it that imagine

that something does not exist?” This is another misunderstanding, of the concept of emptiness or shunyata in Mahayana Buddhism. Buddhism does not teach that nothing exists, but rather, challenges our understanding of how things exist. It teaches that beings and phenomena have no intrinsic existence. It does not teach that there is no existence at all. Things and phenomena exist because of causes and conditions that came about to bring things and phenomena into existence. For example, we have these incense burners we see here in front because someone made them out of metal, the pews that you are sitting on right now were made by someone, a carpenter perhaps,, out of wood. The cars that we drive everyday, were made from many components and assembled to function as vehicles. All of these things that we just mentioned did not miraculously come out of the air and appeared before our eyes. When we say a thing is “empty” it does not mean it doesn't exist. It means that without the parts that make up an object or the conditions that brought about the parts to come together and become the unit, the unit itself will not exist.

Fourth Misunderstanding: Karma Punishes People Who Deserve It

Karma is not a cosmic system of justice and retribution. In Buddhism, there is no supreme deity that judges and metes out punishment according to wrong deeds done in someone's lifetime. Buddhism teaches about the law of cause and effect, which is, good deeds bring good results, bad deeds bring bad results, what you do is what happens to you. It is not about batchi, for something unwholesome that we did, if it is so, who is giving the batchi? Karma is not the only force that causes things to happen. The disasters of earthquakes and tsunamis that happened a few years ago in Japan, for example, do not mean that the people living in the damaged areas and those who died, deserved to be punished for past misdeeds. Unfortunate events can happen to anybody, anytime, even to the most righteous and good person. On the other hand, karma is also a force that results in something positive and happy.

Fifth Misunderstanding: Buddhism Teaches That We're Supposed to

Suffer

The First Noble Truth that the Buddha taught upon attaining Enlightenment is often translated in the books as “Life is Suffering”. People

read that and think that Buddhism regards life as always miserable. Well, the Buddha didn't speak English and so did not use the English word “suffering”. The actual word was “dukkha”, which in the Pali language that the Buddha spoke during his lifetime, has many meanings. It can mean ordinary suffering, but can also refer to anything that is temporary, incomplete or conditioned by other things. So even the joy and bliss that we sometimes feel in our ordinary human life, are dukkha, because they come and go, not permanent and thus become the seed of future suffering when we no longer experience this temporary joy and bliss and crave for more. Some translators use “stressful” or “unsatisfactory” to translate dukkha. To say that Buddhism teaches that we're supposed to suffer is incorrect. Even if we accept the translation that the Buddha said that life is suffering, as the First Noble Truth, **the Buddha did not stop at that.** He went on to teach the second, third and fourth noble truths which identified the cause of suffering, that suffering can be minimized or eliminated and the ways to achieve this, that of course is the Noble Eightfold Path. So, Buddhism, rather than being pessimistic about life, is actually realistic and offers the solution to relieve or minimize suffering.

Sixth Misunderstanding: Buddhists Are Supposed To Be Vegetarians

Vegetarianism, because of its refraining from the taking of life of animals for food, is encouraged by most schools of Buddhism but at the same time, it is a personal choice, not a commandment. Some schools do insist on vegetarianism. In our own Jodo Shinshu tradition, there is no issue as to the eating of animal flesh. We acknowledge our being foolish, ignorant, filled with bonno or blind passions and we have to take animal life in order to live. In becoming aware of this, we entrust to Amida Buddha's Primal Vow to extinguish the negative karma generated by our killing and eating animals for our survival. Monks during the early times and even today, in some parts of the Buddhist world begged for their food and the monastic rule was that meat as an offering is allowed for consumption unless the receiving monk knew that the animal was slaughtered specifically for him to eat.

Seventh Misunderstanding: Buddhism Is Not A Religion

I purposely placed this on the latter part of the list because it requires further discussion and explanation. Is Buddhism a religion or a philosophy, a way of life? My answer is: it is both a religion and a way of life. To proclaim

oneself to be Buddhist but not putting into practice the Eightfold Path and other teaching, in one's daily life, is hollow Buddhism. It has to become a way of life for the true seeker of truth and liberation from the suffering brought about by the 3 poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance. And for us Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, Buddhism is definitely more than a way of life. For the core of Jodo Shinshu is Shinjin, a word difficult to directly translate into English, but something similar to “faith” or “entrusting” in other religions. Because we entrust ourselves to the workings of the Primal Vow of the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light, Amida Buddha, Jodo Shinshu Buddhism cannot be just a way of life or philosophy. Entrusting, hearing the name of the Buddha, and responding to the call by saying Namu Amida Butsu is something outside of philosophical thinking. But also because the essence of Buddhism is emptiness, general Buddhism is whatever one makes it or whatever one wants it to be.

The Eight and last and most common misunderstanding of Buddhism, especially Japanese Buddhism is that it is solely for the purpose of doing funerals and memorial services for dead people.

Nothing could be more absurd and untrue than this notion of Buddhism as

serving only the needs of those who have passed away. Shakyamuni Buddha during his time, taught the Dharma to living people, not the dead ones. How and why Buddhism became associated mostly with funerals and memorial services, I have no idea. But it is really silly to think that such a profound religion and way of life is for the purpose of the non living. Buddhism teaches about overcoming or relieving suffering. The dead are dead, they are no longer suffering, not in a physical sense at least. If Buddhism is meant for the dead people, then logically we should conduct our Sunday services at the columbarium, not here.

There are many more things about general Buddhism that many people do not clearly understand, that can lead to misconception about Buddhism as a spiritual path. It is said that the Buddha taught 84,000 paths to enlightenment, and taught them according to the mental and spiritual capability of his listeners, so inevitably some misunderstanding developed after his passing away and his remaining disciples couldn't resolve the differences in their understanding of the teachings. I hope that the few misunderstandings that I had just presented can help clarify some of the incorrect views that some people have about Buddhism. In conclusion let us now put our hands in

gassho and recite the nembutsu: Namo Amida Butsu, Namo Amida Butsu,
Namo Amida Butsu....!