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No pain, no gain

If we had to find one idea that almost anyone would agree on, it would probably be the importance of being happy. The pursuit of happiness has become the overarching theme of modern life, and pretty much everything we do seems to be aimed at finding that supposed holy grail of human existence.

What we tend to miss, however, is that there are several possible definitions of happiness. The usual understanding of the word these days is in terms of immediate sensual or mental gratification: if I feel good right now, I am happy. But what happens when the same thing that creates a good feeling in the present moment also causes long-term harm? Someone who is eating candy may feel just great, but his teeth may have quite a different perspective about it.

If we stick to the definition of happiness as raw pleasure, we may end up destroying ourselves while enjoying every minute of it. On the other hand, if we define happiness more broadly as some state of harmonic well-being, we must be prepared to go through trials and difficulties to reach that higher goal. We may even have to experience outright suffering in order to solve certain problems that could cause us even greater suffering.

It may sound like some mysterious paradox, but it is actually a very simple fact of life. Any kid who got a shot in the arm (or in another, more painful place) knows the deal: this momentary pain is necessary to avoid something much more prolonged and painful.

The role of Buddhism is essentially to shine a light on the same choice when it

comes to issues of mind. That is probably why it is widely, but incorrectly, described as a pessimistic worldview. Yes, it is indeed hard to listen to unpleasant truths that force us to stop partying and roll up our sleeves to start fixing things. But if we understand that by sacrificing superficial and momentary versions of happiness we can gain real, long-lasting happiness, Buddhism turns out to be anything but pessimistic. It represents the optimism of preferring hard but rewarding work, instead of remaining at the mercy of whatever we happen to feel right now.

(Dan Bornstein)



Leaves of Scripture

Be Aware of Death to Be Alive

We all understand intellectually that everyone has to die one day. But we go through life everyday as if death does not concern us. Buddhism teaches that birth, old age, sickness, and death are a set we are dealt. Thinking on death does not mean rejecting life. Realizing we will die one day, rather, leads us to live a more fulfilling life. Being aware of death makes us reconsider our lives. What if I were to die right now? Was my life not completely meaningless? If so we must ask ourselves how well we are living our life? These questions makes us appreciate the fact that Life does not always conform to our wishes. That is, it is Life that is living out this life of ours. This is the first step toward a deeper appreciation of our own lives. In this way we are constantly being called upon to live life as seen in the light of the Buddha's teachings.

(Dōbō, May 2015. Kyoto: Higashi Honganji Shuppanbu, p. 33.)

Things Worth Knowing about Shin Buddhism

Obon

One of the most important seasonal festivals in Japan is Obon. Since it falls in the heat of mid-summer, it provides a kind of balance to New Year, which is in mid-winter. Just as

at New Year and at the high season of the spring and autumn equinoxes, it is usual to pay a visit to the graves of the ancestors at this time. In Tokyo you may be told

that Obon is celebrated in July, but in many parts of Japan the old calendar is still followed and it therefore falls in August. In this case it is referred to as kyū-bon, that is, bon



according to the old calendar (kyūreki). The idea of “old bon” has a nostalgic flavor about it that fits with the custom of returning to one’s ancestral village or town at this season.

Indeed, Obon is much more than visiting graves, important though that is. In rural society it is a time of entertainment, when the ancestors are invited back to join in the fun of the village. The main focus of interest is the bon-dance (bon-odori) held outdoors in the warm summer air, in which people of all ages participate. Of course, Obon can also be a sad time for recently bereaved families, but it is at the same time a community festival when all the ancestors celebrate together with the living.

When Obon falls after a recent death in the family it is known as “new bon” (shinbon). On such an occasion the deceased is honoured at a private Obon altar set up in the home, with various offerings set before them and cheerful lanterns to complete the scene. The first action is to invite the ancestors into the house. This is done by lighting a very small fire outside for which a

little bundle of dried reeds may be purchased just at that season. The leading male person of the family, for example the eldest son, then says “Obon-sama kite yo.” This means something like “Come in please, Obon guests” Among the offerings on the Buddhist altar, apart from something nice for the recently departed, a cucumber and an eggplant are prominent. In popular belief these vegetables are thought of as the preferred vehicles for the ancestors to ride on when travelling to the Obon party. The slightly curved form of the cucumber and eggplant are often emphasised in light-hearted posters dealing with Obon, and this curve may also be reflected in the calligraphy for bon 盆 when handwritten.

In the Kansai region there is another special observance known as Jizō-bon which takes place a little later in August. Jizō-bon is celebrated in local neighbourhood communities with street parties held in front of roadside shrines of the bodhisattva Jizō, who saves people from the hells. A sutra is usually recited before the shrine. This local Jizō-bon is sometimes said to be “for the children,” but the grown-ups seem to

enjoy it too.*

Shin Buddhists have a flexible attitude towards these popular practices, but at the same time they understand Obon to express a special relationship with our ancestors. The Obon season should be taken as a timely reminder of the Buddhist teaching of birth, old age, sickness, and death (shōryōbyōshi). In general, people sometimes think that our ancestors offer protection to us, or that in the event of things going wrong in this world it may be because our ancestors are themselves lost and need our assistance. But this seems to be a self-centered way of thinking of how to take care of our ancestors (senzokuyō). Rather, Obon should be used as an opportunity to reflect on our own real perspective on life as a whole.

* The above formulations are drawn from Michael Pye, *Japanese Buddhist Pilgrimage* (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2015) and another related unpublished text.

The Ōtani Mausoleum

Ten years after our Founder Shinran, died in 1262, his youngest daughter Kakushin-ni had a mausoleum built in Kyoto's Higashiyama area and installed an image of him therein. After she died, her son Kakue took over its management, who was then followed by his son Kakunyo. In 1321 Kakunyo turned it into Honganji, or The Temple of the Original Vow. It would become the center of Shin Buddhism. Eventually, the Honganji was moved to the north of where Kyoto Station now stands, and its original site came to function primarily as Shinran's gravesite. It is now referred to as the "Ōtani Mausoleum." Its notable structures are as follows:

1. A main hall built in 1701 in which an image of Shinran is enshrined. The floor of the hall's inner sanctum is painted vermillion, which may have been used to indicate the special status of these grounds as the site of Shinran's grave.

2. A Mausoleum that contains the remains of Shinran, the other Shin Buddhist leaders, and its followers.

3. A tiger-shaped rock which Shinran is said to have been fond of. It was found in a well at Kyoto's Zenbōin temple, where Shinran passed away.

4. The Mausoleum's office built in 1976. Here, applications can be made to have remains interred and sutras read for memorial purposes. With the number of graves without family members to look after them increasing throughout Japan, followers can also apply to have their remains placed in a communal gravesite that will be taken care of by Shin priests.

Various events are also held at the mausoleum, such as Buddhist talks and services, a lecture series, and a flower festival. Everyday many people from throughout Japan come to the Ōtani Mausoleum to pay their respects to the deceased and recall the teachings of Shinran, who compassionately pursued the Buddha-way alongside people from all walks of life.

