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**What is Most Essential for Us?
by Shaku Horaku (Eric Matsumoto)**

Introduction: Play theme song from “Atsuhime/Princess Atsu.”

Did the music sound familiar? It’s been about a year and half since the NHK Drama “Atsuhime” or Princess Atsu concluded, but I hope some of you still remember it. As a preface to my message I would like to share where I got the hint for today’s message. In a dramatic episode near the end of the show, Atsuhime or Lady Tensho-in, the widow of the 13th Tokugawa Shogun, is faced with announcing to all the women who live in the Ooku or Inner Chambers of Edo Castle and work at the Castle, of which we are told there are over a 1000 of them, that in less than one month they will all have to leave the castle. As she makes this announcement she assumes the responsibility of looking after the welfare of all the women, promising that she will see to it that every single person has a (new) home, while also trying to peacefully without bloodshed make the transition of power to a new regime. As she takes on this challenge, she makes one final request of the women as their leader as she says to them “Although they must leave this castle which has been the home of the Tokugawa’s for over 200 years, she tells them not to forget “Tokugawa no Kokoro.” She was told by her late husband that the real “home” of the Tokugawa’s is not this physical structure of the Castle, but wherever you are, for it is you who has the “kokoro” of the Tokugawa’s within you. Again, as her final request, she asks the women, whom she considers to be a part of her family (or Ohana), to, with pride, dignity and honor, pass on to future generations the legacy of the Tokugawa’s. When I heard her say this, I thought to myself, as a Jodo Shin Buddhist, what is our legacy? What is most important for us to pass on and/or share with others?

As I thought about it, the words of Sakyamuni Buddha came to mind. As Sakyamuni Buddha was about to transition into the Great Nirvana he said “Make my Teachings your light. Rely upon them...Respect each other, learn together, practice my Teachings together...the true Buddha is not a human body, it is Enlightenment. A human body must die, but the Wisdom of Enlightenment will exist forever in the truth of the Dharma...after my death, the Dharma shall be your teacher. Follow the Dharma and you will be true to me.” Sakyamuni Buddha with his last breath is pointing out what is the most important or essential. And thus what has been passed on for over 2500 years from ancient India to the rest of the world including our own Hawaii is the Dharma or Teachings. For, we, of the Pure Land Tradition, it is the Nembutsu.

Deeply reflecting, it is not enough to only pass on the physical structure of the temple.

What is most essential is our sharing the Nembutsu Dharma with others by living it as exemplified by the lives and aspirations of Honen Shonin and Shinran Shonin. Honen Shonin was once asked (by a disciple named Horenbo) “From olden days, memorial temples were built for distinguished masters. However, there are none in praise of your great achievement. Where shall we build a temple for you?” Honen Shonin replied, “The Nembutsu Teachings will not permeate among the people even if you build a temple in my honor. I have devoted my entire life to spreading the Dharma because I want people everywhere to receive the Nembutsu teachings. Therefore, any place, whether a king’s palace or a thatched hut, any place where people recite the Nembutsu is my temple.”

Shinran Shonin probably inherited this tradition from Honen Shonin for he did not build any temples nor did he consider others as his personal disciples. Shinran Shonin’s understanding was that we are all disciples of the Buddha, and fellow travelers along the Nembutsu Path. What is most important is living the life of Shinjin-Nembutsu that is realizing the Awakened Mind of True Entrusting and reciting the Nembutsu of Gratitude. For Shinran Shonin too, for people everywhere to rejoice in Amida Buddha’s warm embrace was most important and he is known to have fondly said “If you are rejoicing in the Nembutsu know that there are two people rejoicing, if there are two people know that there are three, for that other shall be I, Shinran.” Shinran Shonin’s unending gratitude and dedication to sharing Dharma, in response to Amida Buddha’s Great Compassion, is expressed by his words known to us today as “Ondokusan.” “Such is the benevolence of Amida’s great compassion, That we must strive to return it even to the breaking of our bodies; Such is the benevolence of the masters and true teachers, That we must endeavor to repay it even to our bones becoming dust.” It is the conviction that these Nembutsu Teachings, Amida Buddha’s Wisdom and Compassion, is too priceless to lose and must be passed on to future generations that has motivated Followers of the Nembutsu to establish and preserve temples as places to hear the Dharma and, I will add, share the Teachings with others.

Reemphasizing, what is most essential is to become awakened to “Hotoke no kokoro”, or the Buddha’s Heart and Mind as expressed in the saying “Learning the Great Compassionate Heart of the Buddha.” Let us realize, Amida Buddha’s Heart and Mind, “Mida no Kokoro,” or Go-Hongan-Amida Buddha’s Vow, aspiration to equally embrace and save one and all! At first glance, this may not seem so earth shattering, but when you think about it carefully it is a mind boggling declaration. The Peace and Happiness that the Buddha speaks of is not a peace and happiness for only a few, or select, but all forms of life/all existence, equally! While fully realizing that it is impossible for me, a foolish being or bonbu to exhibit anything close to the Buddha’s compassion, may we at least embrace in our hearts and minds Amida Buddha’s aspiration of peace and happiness for all existence and take to heart the words of Shinran Shonin from which the theme for the 750th Memorial is

taken “May there be peace in the world and may the Buddha’s Teaching spread.”

To continue, I would like to now focus more on the significance, meaning and purpose of the Sangha. As you know, the Sangha is one of the Three Jewels or Treasures of Buddhism, the other two being the Buddha and the Dharma. In order to be free of suffering, we need to rely upon someone who has already attained freedom from suffering or enlightenment, and that “someone” are the Buddhas. The Buddha is like a mapmaker who shows us how to reach our goal or destination of nirvana/enlightenment/freedom from all suffering. The Dharma, the Teachings, is like the map that shows how we get to our final destination. The Sangha is all of us, fellow companions on this journey, if you will to our final destination of enlightenment known as the Pure Land in Jodo Shinshu. Generally, in Jodo Shinshu, we define the Kyodan or Sangha as those who rejoice in the Compassion of Amida Buddha, but there is another aspect to the Sangha. As members of the Sangha we support each other in our understanding of the Dharma and especially the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. The purpose of a Sangha is that each member of the Sangha helps and is being helped by fellow members of the same Sangha. The Sangha is not merely a social organization, or only a charitable organization or simply bound by a common interest, its primary purpose and significance, reason for being, is to provide support to one another in our quest for enlightenment. The Sangha is a spiritual organization. For us, Jodo Shinshu Buddhists, the Sangha exists to encourage one another and others to understand the Jodo Shinshu Teachings and encourage us to live the life of Nembutsu. The very basic purpose of the Sangha is to support one another spiritually.

Further in the Sangha, people firmly trust and support each other. Let us ask ourselves, “Are we going to the Dharma for guidance?” “Are we allowing the Dharma to nurture us?” Simply hearing the words of the Dharma will not bring about any change or transformation. The Dharma needs to be integrated into our life and for a bonbu, or foolish being like myself change comes very slowly if at all and in the end it may be more of an awareness of my foolish nature than anything else.

I think it is important for each one of us to try to live the Dharma (even if we are not able to do it perfectly) and realize that others are looking at us as role models, observing how we exemplify the Dharma in our lives even in the case of a bonbu. How can we sustain a vibrant Sangha? One way is that we each must start with ourselves by looking at our own faults and responding appropriately to all challenges. As humans, we all have flaws. No one is perfect. For example, if someone is rude to us, how do we respond? Do we do what the rest of the world would most probably do by reacting angrily, sarcastically, or hold a grudge? Or do we try to understand the situation or circumstances by reflecting on the causes and conditions realizing that we shouldn’t add fuel to the fire and try to be patient and understanding? I am not saying it is easy. If we respond with patience, respect, love and

compassion, eventually those qualities will radiate out and benefit all those around them. Each person in the Sangha should realize that others are looking at us as to whether we are trying to follow/live the Dharma. All three, the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are very important and related and connected. If there was no Buddha, there would be no Dharma that we would know of, if there was no Dharma to be known, there would be no Sangha who follows the Dharma as shared by the Buddha. If there is no Sangha, there is no need to share the Dharma. If there is no need for Dharma, there is no need for a Buddha to explain the Dharma to the Sangha. Got it? Anyway, all three are important and are not separate entities.

As the concluding sharing I would like have you remember the story of the one eyed monk? Once a long time ago, a little young monk lived in a temple with an older monk who was his teacher. One day, a middle aged monk came to the temple to ask if he could study the Dharma with the older monk. The older monk said, I don't know if there is anything I can teach you, but if you want to meet the young monk that lives here with me and then decide whether you want to stay or not, he is in the back garden, so go and meet him. The middle aged monk went into the garden to look for the young one-eyed monk. As he walked to the garden, he thought I have to show how smart I am, so I can study here. So he decided that instead of verbally talking with the young monk, he would challenge him with sign language. So he told himself, he would not talk (with his mouth) and instead only communicate with his hands. Well, when he finally met the young monk, the middle aged monk, held up one finger. When the young monk saw this, he right away put out two fingers. Not to be outdone, the middle aged monk showed three fingers. No sooner had he done that the young monk closed his hands into a ball. When the middle aged monk saw the last sign he became very sad and without saying a word he hurriedly went back to the older monk and said he would be leaving. He said, "I am no match for such a brilliant student as that one eyed young monk." The old monk was very confused and asked "What happened?" So the middle aged monk said. "We held a contest using sign language. I first showed him one finger (like this) to represent the Buddha, the Enlightened One, the Buddha who is full of Wisdom and Compassion. But, he then showed me two fingers (like this) to show me, the Buddha and the Dharma. So, then I showed him three fingers (like this) to show Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. Then immediately, he showed me his hand in a ball (like this), to tell me that although Buddha, Dharma and Sangha are different they are or should be together or one. The one eyed monk is very wise for his age. I cannot match his wisdom so I will go elsewhere." And he left. The older monk understood what happened now that he heard the story, but he was still confused.

Just then, the one eyed young monk came running up from the garden, huffing and puffing. He loudly asked "Where is that middle aged monk?" He was so rude (to me)! He came down to the garden and when he saw me, without saying a single word, he made

fun of me by pointing to my one eye. I thought I should be polite, so I put out two fingers to tell him how wonderful that you have two eyes. But he wasn't grateful or happy at all. He put out three fingers to tell me that between him and me, we only have three eyes. I was so mad, I made a fist (like this) and wanted to punch him in the face, but he ran away. This humorous story shows us the relationship between the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and how they are united in oneness.

It is said, "Thousands of people may live in a community, but it is not a true community until everyone knows each other and has empathy for one another. A true community has faith and wisdom that illuminate it. It is place where people know and trust one another and where there is harmony." A person who emphasized this harmony was Prince Shotoku whom Shinran Shonin revered. Prince Shotoku is known to have said (in his 17 Article Constitution) "Let the rage in your heart subside, put away your angry looks, do not grow indignant over your differences with others. People all have hearts, and hearts are bound to have their preferences. What they are inclined to like is the very thing we reject, and what we are inclined to like is the very thing they reject. Just as surely as we are not sages ourselves, we can be just as sure that they are not fools, the both of us, being merely ordinary mortals." In another section of the Constitution he says "Sincerely revere the Three Treasures. The Three Treasures are: Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. This is the homeland to which all four walks of life return, this is the highest ideal by which all countries should be governed. There is no age in which people cannot find the Dharma to be noble. Those who are extremely wicked are few, but when they are taught the Dharma, they can follow it. Unless they align themselves with the Three Treasures, on what basis can they correct their mistaken ways."

Gomonshu Koshin Ohtani restates the above passage in part by saying "The Three Treasures are the Buddha, his Teaching, and the community (Sangha) that gathers to listen and live by the teachings of the Buddha. To live and let live is, in the final analysis, the highest form of religion for any nation. No matter the era or person, there is none who does not respect the Buddhist teachings. (Omit) If properly taught, they can learn to follow the teachings. Short of taking shelter in Buddhism, how else can their twisted minds be made straight?" Here we begin to see the importance of hearing or listening and Gomonshu Koshin Ohtani says "In order to hear the voice of the Buddha calling you, it is important you strain the ears of the heart to catch the sounds that you usually do not hear. By doing so, you are able to hear the wish that the Buddha places on you, and the world opens up. This experience is what Jodo Shinshu calls, "listening with the ears of the heart." This is the basic meaning of this chinese character Choo or kiku which means to listen, but to listen with ears of your heart and witness an ever so slight change or transformation of yourself happening in which we begin to understand how we are all, Amida Buddha and all existence, interconnected and interrelated (actually how I being able/allowed to live this life).

Gomonshu continues by saying “In the past, Buddhism was thought to teach that if a person piled up effort, it was possible for the person to become a Buddha. Shinran Shonin also followed such thinking, and did practices to that end on Mount Hiei for a period of 20 years. By the time the 9-year old boy who ascended Mount Hiei became the 29-year old Shinran Shonin, he met Honen Shonin. Honen Shonin’s teaching overturned the conventional Buddhist thinking he had held up to then. It was not that a person piled up efforts to become a Buddha, it was rather a wish coming from the Buddha toward man, which asked “How can I make a Buddha out of you?” –Shinran Shonin believed this was true Buddhism.

This, then, is the Vow, or wish of the Buddha.

In Buddhism, there are many buddhas. A Buddha is a being who makes a wish or vow and then carries it out, with each of the various buddhas making their own individual vows. (In Amida Buddha’s Vows there is) “The 18th ...of...which the Buddha (Amida) vows to save all living things. This is known as Amida’s Primal Vow.” “Amida Buddha is saying when I become a Buddha, people everywhere will, with believing hearts, wish to be born in my (Pure) Land (of Enlightenment) though saying the Nembutsu (Namo Amida Butsu) as few as ten times, and if they are not born (in the Pure Land), may I never proceed onward to enlightenment.” Amida Buddha is saying “I cannot stand to leave my Vow unfulfilled. Know for a fact that I will come to your rescue!” This is the Buddha’s deepest wish.”

To conclude, Robert Thurman renowned American Buddhist says “The Buddha said that every intelligent being could understand the truth that such understanding would lead to direct experience of reality, and that such experience would result in freedom, happiness and transformation. The greatest gift one could give others thus was teaching” Dharma “it could help others come to understanding, freedom and happiness.”

Please join me in anjali/gassho for a closing reflection.

“How joyous I am, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sakyamuni! Rare is it to come upon the sacred scriptures from the westward land of India and the commentaries of the masters of China and Japan, but now I have been able to encounter them. Rare is it to hear them, but already I haven able to hear. Reverently entrusting myself to the teaching, practice, and realization that are the true essence of the Pure Land way, I am especially aware of the profundity of the Tathagata’s benevolence. Here I rejoice in what I have heard and extol what I have attained.”

From Shinran Shonin’s,
“The True Teachings, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way”

Namo Amida Butsu= Entrusting in the Buddha of Immeasurable Life and Infinite Light.

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HONGAN

(AMIDA BUDDHA'S)

PRIMAL VOW