

How grateful!
 While others die,
 I do not die;
 Not dying, I go
 To Amida's Pure Land

It is easy to talk about life as being precious and unrepeatable, but unless we truly know the reason, the words can be empty and hollow. Only by being awakened by the timeless working of true compassion can we fully appreciate each living instant as filled with infinite worth. Such an awesome reverence for life must become the basis of a new ethic in order to effectively cope with the manifold, complex problems facing the world today.

MY GRANDMOTHER

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I have been very fortunate in my life. Due to various good karmic strands coming together, I have been able to study with eminent scholars of Buddhism and have encountered many Shin teachers and lay men and women who shared with me the gift of nembutsu. Adding immensely to my world of understanding are all kinds of friends from various religious and philosophical persuasions—wise, thoughtful, cynical, brusque, humorous—from whom I have learned much. But the greatest impact on my spiritual life has been my grandmother who died at the age of eighty-six in 1964.

A simple and unaffected woman, “namu-amida-butsu” came spilling out of her mouth, like little Buddhas competing to get out of her tiny body that could not contain the joy she felt of having been embraced by Immeasurable Light

and Immeasurable Life. Hers was not an easy life, but she lived it with spiritual exuberance and vigor.

My grandfather was the twelfth generation priest of a Shin temple in Fukuoka. A vigorous man with a fiery temper and a booming voice, he was nicknamed *kaminari*, "thunder and lightning." My grandmother was his third wife, a fact she was to discover after they got married. The first two, unable to stand my demanding grandfather, just ran away.

The first relative that my grandmother met, when she made a round of courtesy calls, was his aunt. Her opening remark was not a cordial greeting but a challenge: "Have you settled the matter of the afterlife?" This was a common question posed to Shin followers. It is asking whether one has successfully resolved the question of death and dying. The answer reveals the degree to which a person has realized the Buddha Dharma and, consequently, appreciates the meaning of this life. The Zen equivalent would be the koan: "What is your original face before you were born of father and mother?"

My grandmother was taken aback by the totally unexpected greeting. She froze, unable to say a word. But later she was determined to find an answer. It was not easy for a young housewife, maintaining a large household, cooking three meals a day, catering to the demands of my grandfather, meeting the social needs of a temple wife, and eventually bearing five children. In order to find time for the Buddha Dharma, she would sneak out of the house early in the morning before sunrise and before my grandfather woke up. She then would go to a famous Shin temple, Manpukuji, where daily morning services were held at 6 A.M. She would participate in chanting, dharma talks, and question-answer periods. When the session concluded, my grandmother would run home and prepare breakfast for the family before they got up. This, of course, was

years before the convenience of electricity, gas, and running hot water.

My mother remembers as a pre-schooler when she and her younger brother were taken to these early morning services, bundled up by my grandmother on cold winter mornings and sitting in a temple through freezing temperature. When the service ended, they would dash home before my grandfather came down for breakfast. They were always afraid of what might happen if he ever found out. She lived the advice of one of her favorite teachers, Daiei Kaneko: "Receive material gifts with your heart; receive the Buddha Dharma with your body." My grandmother engaged in deep hearing using both her body and mind, walking daily to attend temple services in the early morning hours and never accepting anything without relentless and thorough questioning.

Having resolved the question of death and dying in the middle of her life, grandmother lived the nembutsu. Her every movement expressed deep joy and appreciation. When she sat down, she would say, "namu-amida-butsu." When she stood up, "namu-amida-butsu." When she sipped a cup of tea, "namu-amida-butsu," and when she finished, "namu-amida-butsu." When she greeted guests, before any formality, "namu-amida-butsu." When she said good-bye, "namu-amida-butsu." She lived out Shan-tao's exhortation that had a decisive impact on the founding of the new Pure Land school by Honen in 1175:

Repeat the nembutsu with a single-hearted devotion, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, without question of the length of time, never ceasing for a single moment. This is truly the ultimate practice which without fail results in emancipation, for it accords with the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha.

But she was not the stereotypical pious follower. I remember visiting her one winter in Fukuoka, when she got very upset and angry at a visitor. My grandmother and I were seated around a charcoal brazier, keeping our hands warm, when someone came to the entrance door. My grandmother stood up and went to the door. Although I could not see the two, I heard my grandmother arguing with an elderly man, both shouting and yelling at each other. Soon I heard the door slam shut, and my grandmother came back, huffing and puffing. She was very, very upset.

When I asked her what happened, she glared at me, saying, "That scoundrel goes around fooling old folks, swindling their money, and thinks nothing of it. That beast, he gets me so angry!" Immediately following this flowed out the nembutsu, "namu-amida-butsu, namu-amida-butsu." To call someone a "beast" is our equivalent of shouting S.O.B. This is the worst thing one can say of another in the Japanese vernacular. It refers to a person being subhuman, one of the lower realms of the wheel of transmigration. Unlike the English language, spoken Japanese has no profanity and almost no obscenity; therefore, to call another person a beast is the harshest opprobrium.

My grandmother's fiery temper almost exploded but was immediately defused by the nembutsu. Boundless compassion permitted her to manifest her karmic passions but immediately extinguished the erupting anger. If sudden transformation had not occurred, the situation could have invited dire consequences. Following this incident, she immediately took concrete steps, informed the authorities about the scam artist, and mobilized other victims in order to get him arrested.

My grandmother died a natural death at the age of eighty-six, her body weakening and her senses declining, but her mind was sharp and clear to the very end. I asked my spinster aunt who took care of her to write down any thoughts that my

grandmother might express in her last moments. About a week before she passed away, my aunt tried to comfort her by saying, "Grandma, when you leave this world, I'm going to be left all alone, but you're fortunate, because you'll be going to the Pure Land where you'll see Grandpa, your sister, all your old friends!" Lying in bed, Grandmother replied, "No, no! There's no such place called Pure Land . . . namu-amida-butsu, namu-amida-butsu."

For my grandmother there was no separation between this temporal world of samsara and the timeless life that is the Pure Land. Her "no, no" negated the Pure Land as an object of dualistic thinking, but her saying of nembutsu affirmed the Pure Land here and now, the here and now "both in and out of time." Saichi would have fully agreed with my grandmother:

O Saichi, where is the Land of Bliss?
 My Land of Bliss is right here.
 Where is the line of division?
 Between this world and the Land of Bliss?
 The eyes are the line of division.

Having been touched and blessed by Immeasurable Light and Immeasurable Life, my grandmother lived a full and rich life. While being a person karma-bound, she relished the life of unbounded freedom. With Saichi she could sing:

Although my defiled body remains unchanged,
 By the tireless working of Amida's compassion
 My self-power turned into Other Power,
 I play in the Pure Land of Amida.