

The Dharma in a Single Phrase

*Those who realise the entrusting heart, which is Other Power,
'Revere the dharma and greatly rejoice in it,
And therefore, are my true companions.'
Such is the praise of the World-honoured one, the master of the teaching.
(Shozomatsu Wasan 58)*

Dharma Talk for Ho-onko, 2009

Today we meet once again, as we do every year at this time to give thanks for the light, which appeared in the world for ninety years from 1173 to 1263. That light is Shinran Shonin.

I begin each day with a most significant activity. When I sit down with my first cup of tea, I open the morning paper at the 'Peanuts' comic strip. The author, Charles Schultz died in 2000 at the age of 77, but it is great that the comic strips are still being published every day, and we are currently cycling through stories from decades ago. I am looking forward to catching some stories that I missed before.

As you will know Peanuts is about a group of children, each with a distinct character. Schultz introduced one of them, Lucy van Pelt, later than the others, and she develops into a bit of a bossy little bully. At one stage when Lucy was growing up she was learning to draw. I once heard that in an episode, which I myself have not encountered yet, Lucy was sitting at her little desk, drawing something, which she often did. Charlie Brown, the main character, came over and had a look to see what she was doing. 'What's that you are drawing, Lucy,' he asks. 'I'm drawing God,' answers Lucy. 'But Lucy,' says Charlie Brown, 'no one knows what God looks like.' Lucy replies, 'Well, they will in a minute.'

Well, of course, 'dharma' is not necessarily the same thing as 'god' and I think it is best not to confuse them. In any case, can dharma be seen in a way that we can recognise and relate to? Can we know what the dharma looks like, as Lucy obviously knew what God looked like?

The verse that I read at the beginning of this talk says that true companions of the Buddha, 'revere the dharma and greatly rejoice in it'; so, how is it possible to 'see' the dharma so that we can revere and rejoice in it?

In the *Samyutta Nikaya* of the Pali scriptures Shakyamuni is reported to have said, 'He who sees the dharma sees me. He who truly sees me sees the dharma. Seeing the dharma, one sees me; and seeing me, one sees the dharma.' (*Buddha Dharma*, p.426f.)

Now that Shakyamuni Buddha is no longer with us and we can't see him, where else can we look? Shakyamuni made it clear that the dharma goes on forever. Just as he was about to pass away, he said,

'After my death, the dharma will be your teacher. Follow the dharma and you will be true to me.' (*Mahaparinibbana-sutta*)

We all know of the eternal dharma body. This is what Shakyamuni was talking about when

he said 'He who sees the dharma, sees the Buddha.' Is it the dharma body he is talking about when he says that we should make the dharma our teacher? But everyone acknowledges that the dharma body cannot be seen or known by ordinary people like us; only great and enlightened sages, like many who lived during the first five-hundred years after Shakyamni's *parinirvana*, can know it in a deep meditative state, or *Samadhi*.

Perhaps we could understand dharma in the sense of 'the teaching'. The dharma also refers to the teachings of the buddhas and the way of life that it describes. Is the 'true companion of the Buddha' a person who has studied all of the sacred writings in the Tripitaka?

The complete edition of the Tripitika, the Buddhist scriptures, comprises 3,360 works in nearly 12,000 books (fascicles). It is impossible for anyone to assimilate that amount of information. Hence, I can understand the Zen aspiration to awaken to the dharma body directly, without the mediation of sacred texts.

What about dharma as a way of life? Is there anyone who has fully understood the dharma as teachings, and fully followed their instructions?

One such person that we know about is Shakyamuni Buddha because he told his disciples about his previous births or *Jatakas*, which outline the perfect rendition of dharma. These stories are most inspiring and show us the way of dharma at its most realised and practical.

Well, I certainly could not encompass either the depth of the dharma body with my mind or the depth of the teaching in my practice. In practical terms, that is not how the Buddha dharma works. The fact is that if you really understand just one word of it and experience its truth, you know all that you need to know, and see all there is to see.

The *Dharmapada* says

'Better than a hundred verses is one single dharma statement that brings the hearer a heart at peace.' (*Buddha Dharma*, p.433)

The 'heart at peace' (*anjin*) is the entrusting heart, *shinjin*; to know that your attainment of Buddhahood is certain and that you live in the embrace of the compassion of the Buddha. In order to follow dharma, it is not the unfathomable dharma body that we need to keep in mind, nor do we need to hear all of the vast dharma teachings. 'One single dharma statement' can encompass everything.

Instead of Lucy in the 'Peanuts' comic strip, picture Shinran, sitting at his desk, writing. One of his dharma friends comes up to him and says, 'What's that you are writing Shinran?' Shinran says, 'I'm writing the dharma.' 'You're writing out 3,360 works in nearly 12,000 books?' 'No,' says Shinran, 'I'm writing Namo Amida Butsu; the dharma in a single phrase.'

Renny Shonin said, 'All the sacred scriptures indeed are solely meant to make us entrust ourselves to the six-character Name, 'Na-mo-a-mi-da-butsu.' (*Op.cit.* p.91)

Shinran is the Buddha's true companion because after meeting Honen Shonin, he attained the entrusting heart and 'revered and rejoiced in the dharma' – in just a single dharma-phrase, Namo Amida Butsu. He found the single phrase, which is the dharma in its entirety. In all his writing, this is all he is telling us about.

When Shinran speaks of the substance that is the dharma as teaching he tells us about Namo Amida Butsu; when he talks of it as our heart, the inner, invisible reality, like the dharma body, he tells us about the entrusting heart or *shinjin*.

Ratifying in his own experience the insight of the Chinese dharma master Shan-tao, Shinran really only knew, practiced - and wrote about - the two deep elements that characterise the single entrusting heart, which in its outward form is Namo Amida Butsu:

Firstly, 'To believe deeply and decidedly that you are a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation.'

And, 'To believe deeply and decidedly that Amida's Vow grasps sentient beings, and that allowing yourself to be carried by the power of the Vow without any doubt or apprehension, you will attain birth (nirvana).'

Such is the entrusting heart, of the Other Power, expressing itself as just one dharma phrase 'Namo Amida Butsu', the heart of the dharma and the Buddha's teaching. This single, two-fold heart is nothing less than the very dharma that framed Shakyamuni, that he came to teach and that he implicitly spoke about in every word he uttered.

In knowing this, Shinran's life, teaching and writing, is nothing more or less than 'revering and greatly rejoicing in the dharma.' He is the Buddha's true companion; the light of the world.

We can be sure that this dharma phrase is everything we need. If we accept it, and the heart that trusts it as the single dharma phrase that is itself the dharma, we will join Shinran as a true companion of the Buddha.

Namo Amida Butsu.