

Shōzōmatsu Wasan 1

In 1257, on the ninth day of the second month, during the hour of the tiger, I was told in a dream:

*“Entrust yourself to Amida’s Primal Vow.
Through the benefit of being grasped, never to be abandoned,
All who entrust themselves to the Primal Vow
Attain the supreme enlightenment.”*

THE HOUR OF THE TIGER

This verse is a preface to the collection entitled ‘Hymns of the Dharma-ages’ (*Shōzōmatsu Wasan*). Now located at the beginning, it originally appeared in the body of an early manuscript of this work. Accompanying it was a note, in which Shinran said:

I was given this *wasan* in a dream, and I write it down out of joy.

Eventually, Shinran moved this verse and made it the preface to these hymns. Its joyous expression is obvious; and it clearly arose in his consciousness as an affirmation to resolve the existential dilemma that confronts us in this last dharma-age. As Shinran says, the verse is inspired and was given to him in a dream. He received it in the ‘hour of the tiger’, which is the last period of the day.

In Shinran’s time, the day was reckoned to begin at sunrise, and the hour of the tiger (roughly between four and six o’clock in the morning) comprises the last two hours before the night ends and gives way to the dawn. In terms of his own life-cycle, Shinran was in the ‘hour of the tiger’ when he received this verse. But the true significance of the timing of this dream, and the joy it gave him, was that the dharma-ages were also coming to an end.

How apt it is that the last period of the day should be the hour of the tiger. For there is, indeed, a tiger that stalks us throughout our lives. When we are young, we’re unlikely to be aware that he is hiding, camouflaged, in the bushes or the undergrowth of the intriguing forests to be found in the endless business of our lives. But he watches us, growing lean and hungry, as we occupy ourselves with the demands that life imposes on us. He watches as we play, work and strive to find solutions to the difficulties of everyday existence.

The ‘tiger’ waits as we turn to the dharma. Each of us turns to it for our own reasons; most of us probably because we feel the pain of the world and do not know what to do about it. We strive to grow, to understand. The tiger watches and, from time to time, we see his eyes glimmering in the darkness of our souls. We begin to sense that he is there, this destroyer of everything. Gradually, it begins to become clear to us that he will soon begin to tear us to pieces, and we can hear a low growl. This is heard as we delve more deeply into ourselves, only to discover the depth of our inner pain and confusion.

When we have grown older – and as we continue on our way through life and strive in the dharma – a day comes, on which we turn a corner ... and find him, standing before us in the road. For all our walking, our accrued knowledge, our effort to reach the goal, we find the way blocked ... by the tiger of time. Our life is passing, and the dharma is disappearing into the mists of the past, soiled by a million hands of selfishness. We open a book, and the pages are blank. We call out for help but no one can hear. We ask for advice but no one understands *our* questions.

Now, faced with the onslaught of impermanence which consumes everything, we listlessly seek to relive those moments of old that we so enjoyed, that meant so much to us. We turn to retrace our steps, looking for all that we have lost upon the way. Turning back, we discover that the tiger is stalking us. With soft footfall, he is always there.

This verse came to Shinran Shōnin during the last hour of the dharma, while he languished in the claws of time. It also came to him (and to us) as a gift from the wisdom that transcends the temporal flow of life – a reminder that we have no other choice. The tiger of time blocks our way and pursues us if we try to turn back, but the infinite light continues calling to us regardless. And we then come to see that this is the only way.

Remorselessly, the tiger pounces. We feel the weight and warmth of his body. Eventually, opening our questing eyes, we discover that we are being held, not in blood-red claws, but in the arms of Mercy.

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*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 endeavour to repay it, even to our bones becoming dust.*

ONDOKUSAN

*Nyorai daihi no ondoku wa
mi o ko ni shi to mo hōzu beshi
shishu chishiki no ondoku mo
hone o kudaki te mo shasu beshi.*

In Shin Buddhist temples and meeting-places, these words are often sung together at the conclusion of dharma meetings.

Ondoku, the key word here, means ‘blessing’. This is a verse based on the writings of Shan-tao:

For kalpas upon kalpas – stacked high and linked together – you should crush your bodies and break your bones to return in gratitude the Buddha's compassion.

Clearly, this is the joyful task of teaching the dharma after becoming buddhas and returning to the world of birth-and-death. But it also has relevance for the time between the attainment of shinjin and birth in the Pure Land. This gratitude is spontaneous and there is no doubt that it's expressed as *Namo Amida Butsu*:

True and real shinjin is unfailingly accompanied by the Name.¹

Gratitude abides as a defining characteristic of nembutsu living. In any case, since Shan-tao suggests that an expression of gratitude involves a crushing effort, how can it be the nembutsu of Amida Buddha's shinjin, which requires no effort on our part?

I have heard of the many ways in which people attempt to impose on others their view of how this gratitude ought to be expressed. It is easy, for example, to think that the phrases ‘crush our bodies’ and ‘break our bones’ may indicate a form of ascetic practice. Perhaps it refers to the

¹ CWS, p. 107.

‘effort’ (Sk. *vīrya*) spoken of in relation to one of the six *pāramitās*. In any case, this does not suggest cruelty towards oneself and Shinran certainly doesn’t propose anything like that.

I have also seen it mentioned that gratitude is expressed by taking up the five ‘right’ practices that were outlined by Shan-tao. These are: reciting Pure Land sutras; meditation on Amida Buddha and the Pure Land; worshipping Amida; saying the nembutsu; and making offerings to the Buddha. While this sounds feasible, it isn’t advocated by Shinran either.

Sometimes, too, it is said that we should show our gratitude by being morally upright. But Shinran did not advance a set of precepts that we must follow. He did, however, counsel ethical behaviour but it was usually with a view to casting off the ‘evil of this world’. His strongest admonition in support of proper conduct appears in the sixteenth letter of *Lamp for the Latter Ages*. He summarizes his position in this way:

One must seek to cast off the evil of this world and to cease doing wretched deeds; *this* is what it means to reject the world and to live the nembutsu.²

Truly, the basis of the world is greed, anger and folly. Shinran is actually suggesting that those who live the nembutsu way, naturally lose, over time, any lawless inclinations; any tendencies to act out anti-social impulses. His tone is cautionary, and he is careful to remind us that Amida Buddha embraces us, who are full of evil passions, even though we may wonder how this is possible.

However, in the nineteenth letter of *Lamp for the Latter Ages* he says that after many long years of saying the nembutsu, the main ‘sign of rejecting the world’ is ‘the change in the heart that had been bad, and warmth for friends and fellow-practicers’.

In any case, ‘signs of rejecting the world’ does not address the questions that arise from the notion of gratitude, which is expressed in terms of ‘crushing our bodies’ and ‘breaking our bones’: a massive, grinding effort.

Interestingly, it is Eshinni, Shinran’s wife, who gives the most unequivocal quote from Shinran that explains how gratitude expresses

² CWS, p. 547.

itself in the life of a nembutsu follower, apart from saying the Name itself. In one of her letters, she quotes him as saying:

... the repayment of the Buddha's blessing is to believe the teaching for oneself, and then to teach others to believe (*ji-shin-kyō-nin-shin*) ... this is the most difficult of all difficulties.³

In addition to this, Eshinni mentions that Shinran said: 'The saying of the nembutsu is sufficient in itself.' So, apart from nembutsu, returning gratitude to the Buddha is believing the teaching for oneself and then teaching others to believe. Furthermore, Shinran explicitly taught that other practices are irrelevant and unnecessary. For example, Eshinni's letter tells us about a time when Shinran recited the Larger Sūtra over and over again 'for the benefit of sentient beings', but realized that it was a dreadful mistake.

This, then, lies at the heart of our gratitude for the Buddha's benevolence. As soon as this is understood, we can also see why our bodies will be crushed and our bones broken. What is there in the universe, and throughout eternity, that is more onerous than this? The nembutsu we say is 'the call of the Vow' and gratitude is manifested, beyond this, when we explain the way of nembutsu to others – the most difficult of all difficulties. This is the crushing debt that we owe to the Buddha and our dharma masters.

³ *The Life of Eshinni Wife of Shinran Shonin* by Yoshiko Ohtani, pp. 95f.