

Bishop Eric Matsumoto  
Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii  
Hawaii Betsuin 2016 Ho'onko Message (website version)

*Bishop Matsumoto presented this dharma message at Honpa Hongwanji Hawaii Betsuin's Ho'onko service (Shinran Shonin memorial service) on January 9, 2016. The Bishop has made a few edits to the text to prepare it for sharing online.*

## **The Joy of Namo Amida Butsu**

Please join me in anjali/gassho for an Opening Reflection, I would like to share an adapted partial quote of Shinran Shonin.

*...it would be splendid if all people who say the nembutsu...do so not with thoughts of themselves, but...Those who feel uncertain of (their) birth (in the Buddha's Pure Land of Enlightenment) should say the nembutsu aspiring first for their own birth (in the Pure Land). Those who feel that their birth (in the Pure Land) is completely settled should, mindful of the Buddha's benevolence...say it (the nembutsu that is) to respond in gratitude to that benevolence, with the wish, "May there be peace in the world, and may the Buddha's Teaching spread!" Please consider this carefully.*

*(From "The Collected Works of Shinran)*

To one and all, a Happy Hoonko or Gathering to express our gratitude to Shinran Shonin! (See picture of Shinran Shonin) Thank you for coming to today's Service which is traditionally considered the most important and auspicious service in Jodo Shinshu as we take the time to honor our sectarian founder Shinran Shonin.

However, this year, I would like to highlight our current Spiritual Leader, the 25<sup>th</sup> Gomonshu, His Eminence Kojun Ohtani. His Eminence ascended to the position of Gomonshu in June of 2014 when the 24<sup>th</sup> Spiritual Leader or Gomonshu, His Eminence Koshin Ohtani announced his retirement and expressed his wish that His Eminence Kojun Ohtani succeed to the position of Gomonshu as the 25<sup>th</sup> Spiritual Leader (of Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji Denomination).

Thus, as I mentioned in my New Year's Message, 2016 is a significant year in that it is the start of "The Commemoration of the Accession of the Jodo Shinshu Tradition" by our 25<sup>th</sup> Spiritual Leader His Eminence Kojun Ohtani. As we know, His Eminence is heir to a blood lineage and also a spiritual lineage which goes back to Shinran Shonin who lived 800 years ago. This year 2016 and continuing into 2017 there will be a series of commemorative services which will be held at the Main Temple, Nishi Hongwanji, in the ancient capital of Kyoto and people from all over Japan including Overseas are anticipated to attend. From Hawaii, we are planning two Pilgrimage Tours, one in October 2016 and the other in March-April of 2017. I hope that you will consider attending as a Jodo Shinshu Nembutsu follower.

Even a hundred years, people flocked to the Main Temple for special services to the point that literally there was standing room only. If you can imagine this Main Sanctuary/Hondo of Hawaii Betsuin filled with people and the whole parking lot in front is, also, jammed with people. We are told, in the days before high rises and heavy traffic, you could hear people reciting the Nembutsu from 2 blocks away.

We are truly fortunate that we have an unbroken succession of Spiritual Leaders who have guided us through the centuries. Some of the more well-known Spiritual Leaders are the 3<sup>rd</sup> Monshu Kakunyo Shonin who established the name "Hongwanji" for us, the 8<sup>th</sup> Monshu Rennyō Shonin who we respect as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Founder or Restorer of the Hongwanji, the 11<sup>th</sup> Monshu Kenyō Shonin, the Monshu during the Golden Period or the Height of the Hongwanji, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Monshu Myōnyō Shonin, the Monshu during which Hawaii Kyodan was established, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Monshu Shōnyō Shonin or His Eminence Kosho Ohtani from whom many of you received your Buddhist Name, and the 24<sup>th</sup> Monshu Sokunyo Shonin or His Eminence Koshin Ohtani, today, known as Zenmonsama or Monshu Emeritus who came to Hawaii as recently as 2009 for Hawaii's 750<sup>th</sup> Memorial of Shinran Shonin. And thus we find in "The Creed" on page 4 of our Service Book, the words "*We also acknowledge gratefully the benign benevolence of our Founder (Shinran Shonin) and the succeeding Masters (The Successive Monshu) who have led us to believe in this profound teaching...*" (From Praising Amida's Virtues, Jodo Shinshu Service Book)

Earlier in June 2014, when the first announcement of his ascending to the position was announced, His Eminence the 25<sup>th</sup> Gomonshu Sennyō Shonin shared part of his vision in a proclamation letter. He stated and I quote "*The nembutsu teachings that is based on Amida Buddha's Primal Vow remains unchanged,*

*regardless of the changing times and society. However, the methods for transmitting and sharing it needs to evolve and adapt according to social changes. Now is the time for our Hongwanji institution to utilize our collective wisdom and knowledge for considering approaches to convey the Buddha Dharma to our contemporaries today.”*

His Eminence acknowledges how our society has changed and recognizes the need for our organization to recognize those changes and adapt to them. The great task is to decipher what is essential and thus should be retained and what can be changed and how to adapt. Under the guidance of our new Spiritual Leader, in a sense, it is the start of a new beginning. In Hawaii, our theme and slogan for 2016, in part, reads “...we create a new vision which will plan for the future, and create engagement with our members and the community.” Thus, the official Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii New Year’s Card for this year has the depiction of a sunrise scene, picture provided courtesy of Alan Kubota, and contains one of poems/hymns of Shinran Shonin and I quote “*The light of wisdom exceeds all measure, and every finite living being receives this illumination that is like the dawn, so take refuge in Amida, the true and real light.*” (From “*The Collected Work of Shinran*”) It express that this is the dawn of a new age. We are looking at changes.

As our Spiritual Leaders, the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Gomonsu, have often repeated if we don’t change in many areas we will continue to decline. Therefore in Hawaii, we have begun to revisit ourselves from our religious services to the structure of our organization including the general atmosphere of our temples by asking ourselves “What is a Sangha?” “How does a Sangha think, speak and act?” “What is the purpose of a Sangha?” We must find the answers to these questions in the Dharma. Unless, we do our temples will slowly disappear one by one and one day there will be no Hongwanji in Hawaii and the same fate may also befall the other Buddhist temples in Hawaii. As Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, I ask “Have we really understood the gravity of our situation? Or are we in denial?”

Unless we do something now, in the not too distant future, even 10 years from now many of our temples will no longer exist because we will not have the physical and financial support and resources to maintain our temples and programs. Our membership in Hawaii has been steadily declining, but in many cases we are carrying on business as usual (as we have done in the past) and it is becoming harder and harder to continue. Our sources of income are dwindling and because very few new people are becoming part of the temple organization those of us who

are active must take on more and more responsibilities which is leading to burnout amongst both laypeople and ministers.

We, Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, have some wonderful worthwhile programs and projects like Project Dana, Living Treasures of Hawaii, Peace Day, Committee on Social Concerns and Pacific Buddhist Academy and our Affiliated Organizations like the BWA and YBA have helped to make our society a better place for all of us. We are very proud of these programs and organizations, but these alone will not carry us through. There is another area that we must become stronger in. It is the bringing forth and expressing the joy and gratitude that each individual member/person experiences and wants to share with others, not limited to family members that is going to make a bigger difference. Unless each of us shares the Teachings, shares the Hongwanji, shares the temple, shares the Joy of Nembutsu with others it will be difficult for us to grow. As a parent, grandparent, great grandparent or friend encourage your family and friends to come to temple and be a part of the Sangha. The temple probably needs this kind of help the most. The truth of the Dharma will exist forever, but a temple, an organization without help and support cannot continue. “Who is going to succeed us?”

Today, though fewer in number, we do have younger members. Let us treasure them! Let us encourage them! Let us respect them! Let them be an integral part of your temple and Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii. We need to work together by communicating, discussing, supporting and nurturing each other. Some advice from *“The Teaching of Buddha”* shares that we should 1) gather frequently to listen to the teachings and discuss them, 2) we should mingle freely amongst each other and respect one another, 3) elder and younger members are to treat each other with courtesy, 4) let sincerity and reverence mark our bearing and 5) we should love all people, treat visitors cordially, and console the sick with kindness. As the Golden Chain of Love says we are all an important link in Amida Buddha’s Golden Chain of Love that stretches around the World. We may have different functions and roles, but we are all equally a part of the Buddha’s Golden Chain.

The greatest change which has to take place, regardless of our age, is a personal growth or development. It is a spiritual growth or maturing which happens when we truly encounter Amida Buddha’s Wisdom and Compassion and find ourselves embraced by it. Then, a transformation takes place. As the late Rev. Jitsuen Kakehashi, a Kangaku or one of the Highest Authorities on Spiritual Matters of Jodo Shinshu, shared, based on a saying by Shinran Shonin in one of his

Letters, when a person becomes awakened to Amida Buddha's Wisdom and Compassion, a person

*...begin(s) to live a new life, refraining from committing selfish deeds and trying to respond to the Tathagata's great compassion." "Shinran points out that there must be necessarily be a big difference in the condition of person's mind between before he heard the teaching of the Primal Vow and after he became a nembutsu practitioner guided by the Primal Vow, and that there must certainly be a difference in behavior before and after the person became a nembutsu practitioner.*

*In our daily life, we are liable to be dictated to by self-centered thoughts, but in the mind of nembutsu practitioners who are saddened and pained by this reality, there is a recurring transformation in which, with the heart and mind of the Tathagata's great wisdom and compassion, we come to look back at our own thoughts and behaviors. When we look at the world with an ordinary human mind, it is distinctly divided into things we love and things we hate, but with the mind of the Tathagata, we are made to know that everyone is equally the Tathagata's indispensably important child. From that standpoint, we realize that we are all brothers and sisters and fellow human beings. Then slowly but steadily, we come to reflect on our self-centered thoughts, reject our blind passions and make efforts to see things and live our lives in a way that can be approved by the Tathagata.*

(From *Hearing the Buddha's Call* by Rev. Jitsuen

Kakehashi)

Of course, as an ordinary foolish being, it is impossible (for me) to be completely free of the Three Poisons, but we are being nurtured and encouraged by the Buddha of Immeasurable Life and Infinite Light to be better and we respond in gratitude by trying to be better that is live according to the Teachings. The bonbu is still a foolish being, but there is a deep lament and wish to change that has been awakened in the person of True Entrusting. There is an increased awareness to especially one's own thoughts, words and actions, but also a caring sensitivity towards others. There is, I believe, a change in the person's thinking process and the person does become more reflective, more aware, more respectful of others and keener to what is happening within and without and this overall helps in the nurturing of peace and harmony in one's own life, family, community, nation and the world.

Rennyō Shōnin, our 8<sup>th</sup> Spiritual Leader said,

*If you have acquired Faith, you will abstain from speaking harsh words to your fellow-believers and be tender-minded. Hence, the Vow that those touched by Amida's Light will have tenderness in body and mind (the Thirty-third Vow). Without Faith, one will become self-assertive and speak rough words; hence, disputes are bound to arise. What a pity! You should be well aware of this.*

(From *Thus I have heard from Rennyō Shōnin* by Rev. Hisao Inagaki)

In this way, what is most essential is for each person to listen to the Dharma and become aware of Amida Buddha's Great Wisdom and Compassion and experience that Compassion that unconditionally embraces and nurtures us thus transforming us to become that genuine person of the Nembutsu. A person who is not completely perfect in that the 3 Poisons still arise, but it is tempered by Great Compassion and while an overt change does not take place, a change, slowly, but steadily does occur in the person of Nembutsu as gratitude and joy also become manifest to a very noticeable degree. In fact to such an extent that other people notice it and begin to wonder "Why?" "How?" A person's inevitable response will be "It's not me. It is the working of Great Wisdom and Compassion." It is the working of Amida Buddha's Great Wisdom and Compassion which enables a bonbu, foolish being to be born in the Pure Land and also brings about this kind of new life and joy. Hence, I believe, Rennyō Shōnin was able to say "*The true prosperity of the denomination is not the large number of people that gather for an occasion, but is rather the awakening of True Entrusting in a person even if it is only one person.*" This awakening to True Entrusting is prosperity in the truest sense of the word. Hence, Kakunyo Shōnin was able to say "*Prosperity is dependent on the quality and depth of the Faith of the Followers.*"

At this time, I would like to introduce a term, we have all heard of at one time or another, "Choomon" which is usually translated as "Listening to the Dharma." Let me attempt to express the depth and significance of this listening expressed by the word Choomon." The word "choo" is made of 3 parts: the extreme left has the Chinese character for "ear" associated with listening or hearing, the upper right part has the character for "to heal, to correct" and the lower right part has the character for "heart-and-mind" and so in essence what happens is when one truly hears or listens there is a healing or changing of the heart. Now, the second Chinese character "mon" means "to hear." It is comprised of two Chinese characters, one of which means "gate" and again, "ear." Literally, what happens when we bring our ears to the temple gate? In our case, what happens when we

come to the temple and listen to the Dharma? We hear sounds. We hear a voice. We hear the Calling Voice of Amida Buddha. The critical part, nuance, of this Chinese character is that we hear a sound or voice that is not one's own, but that which is coming from another source and in our case it is Amida Buddha or the Dharma. It is Namu Amida Butsu or Myogo, the Buddha's Name that Calls. Furthermore and very significantly this character also has the meaning of "to understand." So one does not only hear, but one also understands. This is faith in Buddhism. It is not blind faith and/or only hearing words as in intellectually knowing, but a true understanding in which a transformation of the heart-and-mind occurs. In this way, when we really "hear" and truly "listen" to the Call of Amida Buddha or Namu Amida Butsu, our life begins to change.

I remember reading a book called "The Gift of Nothing." It is a story about two best friends Earl-a dog and Mooch-a cat, in which Mooch-the Cat was trying to figure out what to give Earl his friend as a present. To make a long story short, Mooch's present to Earl was not a physical present, but reaffirming the bond, their friendship. For a person of Nembutsu, this would be the bond or relationship one has with Amida Buddha. A bond that cannot be severed for Amida Buddha has vowed "Once I embrace you I will never forsake you." This is my thought, but "Why do you think people flocked to the Main Temple?" as we saw in that earlier picture. People are responding to the Great Compassion of Amida Buddha. "Why could you hear the Nembutsu being recited 2 blocks away?" It was because people were so grateful. In an age, when the commoner was nothing, in an age when there seemed to be no hope, here was a Buddha whose Light is said to illuminate the Universe who says I embrace you, now and forever, and a person named Shinran Shonin who is saying you are important, you do matter. Can you imagine how people must have felt? Here, the greatest Buddha there ever was, Amida, calling out with compassion, "Please entrust yourself to me reciting my name, Namu Amida Butsu." And people did!

Another important element in the story of Mooch and Earl is that even if you had everything in the world or everything you wanted it would not be meaningful if you didn't have anyone to share it with. It is when you can share something with someone that you are really happy and things become most meaningful. When you think of it that is Amida Buddha. Amida Buddha's greatest Joy is sharing the Gift of Enlightenment with all others. This is what Shinran Shonin became aware of and this also became Shinran Shonin's greatest joy. The sharing of the Joy of Namu Amida Butsu. Hence there is the saying recorded by Kakunyo Shonin about Shinran Shonin in which Shinran Shonin is known to have said, *"If there is one person rejoicing in the nembutsu know that there are two, if there are two people*

*rejoicing in the nembutsu know that there are three, for that other shall be I, Shinran.*” Amida Buddha’s gift is not tangible, but it turns out that this intangible gift is the greatest gift there is! Just as in the story of Moch and Earl, “The Gift of Nothing” as far as physical objects are concerned turns out to be the gift of everything. According to Jodo Shinshu, Amida Buddha’s promises to always be with us! This is Amida Buddha’s promise that no matter what happens the Buddha will always be with us as “Namo Amida Butsu” and promises to lead us to the Pure Land of Peace-Enlightenment. Now this may not sound like very much, but believe me it is! Actually, it is the ultimate gift, the gift of All-Inclusive Wisdom and All-Embracing Compassion. It is a gift that supports us in the here and now, as we live day to day, and also in the future when we attain birth in the Pure Land at the end of this finite life and even further when we return from the Pure Land to share the Dharma with others.

An aspect that is often understated is that Great Wisdom and Compassion wants to share itself with others and I believe a person who has encountered this Wisdom and Compassion is also not content with only one’s own happiness and wants to share that Joy. The life of a Shin Buddhist incorporates into one’s life the wish that the Teachings spread and together with it is the aspiration for world peace and endeavoring towards this goal by trying to make a difference or be that difference perfectly realizing the challenge as a foolish being. The wisdom of Interdependence shares that we will all be affected by what we do or do not do. Further, as we embark the Dharma also stress the importance of how we carry out our endeavors. The Buddhist emphasis would be collaboration, non-coercion and without violence. This is the Wisdom of the Buddhas and reflected in the life of Shinran Shonin. The Compassion of Amida Buddha and life of Shinran Shonin shows that peace must be for all people, all life, all existence.

Again, this might be the most important area of change for us. It is our becoming even more Dharma centered and sharing our Joy. It is not only our visibility and the outward expressions of services, programs, organizational structure, but our attitude, our perspective, how we think, how we speak and how we act, how we interact with each other that will make the biggest difference. Programs and activities are important too, but just as important is the “feel” of our temples or the Sangha. We must live the Dharma. As the Hongwanji Sangha, let us go to the Dharma for guidance. If the Dharma isn’t being expressed at the temple, how can we expect it to be expressed in the larger community? Let us ask ourselves, “Why do we have a temple? What is the purpose of the temple and the role of the Sangha? What does it mean to be a member?” These are important

questions which we need to reflect on and answer. Again, the answers are found in the Teachings.

And so, finally, today as we gather to remember and express our gratitude to Shinran Shonin, let us receive the guidance of our 25<sup>th</sup> Spiritual Leader His Eminence Kojun Ohtani Gomonshu. He encourages us, “Jishinkyoninshin” or to “*Secure one's own entrusting heart to the Dharma, guiding others to the same path.*” Let us share our Joy of being embraced by Amida Buddha with others! Let us gratefully rejoice and respond in gratitude to Amida Buddha and Shinran Shonin.

To conclude, I ask you to please join me in gassho/anjali, for a closing reflection.

*The Hongwanji school is a community of people joined together revering the teaching of Shinran Shonin and saying the Nembutsu. We seek to share with others the wisdom and compassion of Amida Tathagata. By doing so, we shall work toward the realization of a society in which everyone is able to live a life of spiritual fulfillment.*

*(From “Praising Amida’s Virtues, Jodo Shinshu Service Book”)*

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

*Bishop's note: Words or expressions in parenthesis which have been added are mine. Also, in certain sections decision to omit are also mine.*