



## THE SAMSARIC ILLUSION

the article was previously published in "Metta", May 1995

I have often had occasion to listen to criticisms of individuals presenting the Dharma. People observe a Buddhist teacher and often look very disappointed if they hear something that does not accord with their preconceptions. Let us endeavour to examine this common reaction.

A basic illusion lies at the heart of the relationship between the individual who teaches the Dharma and Buddhahood itself. The Dharma talk one gives is not one's own. It is the teaching of the Buddha which one does one's best to transmit - learning for oneself as much as teaching others.

I do not feel as though I am the author of any Dharma talks I deliver. I feel very much a listener of them. In a true Dharma talk, the only speaker is the Dharma itself. All people, including teachers, are students of the Dharma. The very moment in which I am writing or delivering a Dharma talk is an occasion for listening to the Buddha. I have often been quite surprised at what I have said in my talks, as if I were not really the author.

It would have been exceptionally good karma to have been taught, directly and personally, by a teacher like Sakyamuni Buddha. People no longer have this precious opportunity. But this does not mean that the people of today are separated from the Dharma. The Buddha's teaching continues to be transmitted in a great variety of ways. One such way is through people of *shinjin*.

People of *shinjin* are not perfect Buddhas, though they are able to listen to the Buddha directly and are ensured of attaining the supreme enlightenment sooner rather than later. Such people are qualified to see their own life, and those of others, in a special manner given to them by the Buddha through the *nembutsu*. However, because they are still samsaric creatures, they cannot act in the way a Buddha can. This is what it means to be in *samsara*. They live samsaric lives, though their minds have been transformed and prepared for

their ultimate liberation. To attain Buddhahood, it is not enough to understand most of the teaching; for this purpose, we have to eliminate all our ignorance and delusion (*bonno*), and replace it with the Buddha's merits. In Jodo Shinshu, we participate in the Buddha's merits by the practice of calling His Name (*nembutsu*). Buddha transforms our *bonno* and enables us to reach an identity with His Mind. This transformation is the only possible way to become spiritually mature.

Whatever authority we may be able to command, whatever social or ecclesiastical position we might hold, we are not yet fully enlightened Buddhas. **To live still in our human bodies we need some bonno, we need some attachments keeping us in samsara, we may have karmically-conditioned emotions, we may react like just ordinary people.** Even if we knew all the Buddha's teaching perfectly (which is, in fact, quite impossible without a completely pure mind), we would still carry our human *bonno* thus rendering us unfit, both emotionally and physically, to act as **a perfect Buddha.**

Shinran often confessed that he found *samsara* attractive. He thoroughly understood human nature and recognised the necessity of *personalizing* the Dharma. Only through adopting an individual approach to Buddhahood, people are able to transform their minds and leave *samsaric* values behind. If you do not feel the Dharma as your own living experience, then there will always be a gap between your Buddhist knowledge and you as you really are. Your perception of the teaching remains only theoretical and is not able to really change you. Shinran insisted on not follow the teaching as theory only, but to approach the Buddha in a very tangible manner through the *nembutsu*.

The *nembutsu* enables us to realize the illusion of *samsara* as well as our own hypocrisy. It helps us to recognize and accept our true possibilities and as well as our limitations. If we truly practice *nembutsu*, we do not thereby believe we have improved the state of the world or even the lives of others. We are constantly preoccupied with the issue of who we are and who the Buddha is. This is our basic lifetime's task and it requires all our dedication. If, instead of listening to the Buddha and being mindful of ourselves, we only try to influence our external circumstances, we get nothing but confusing frustration. This confusion is not brought about by Buddha or any Dharma teacher, but by our human *samsaric* way of thinking. We, as ordinary people, are enthralled by *samsara* and its endless fascinations.

We are human because we are immersed in *samsara*. Of course, we are not pleased by *samsaric* pain, but we enjoy *samsaric* pleasures enough to remain attached to our human condition. One of our most fundamental illusions is the belief that *samsara* can somehow be improved to provide us with a trouble-free life. Many people have sacrificed their lives for such a goal. Most people start to listen to the Dharma only to improve their lot in life rather than from any desire to understand the way things really are. This misguided perspective aims to improve that, which will always remain imperfect, rather than trying to acquire the right point of view in life.

Without true *nembutsu* practice no one can honestly realize the human egocentricity that forms the core of one's existence. Good-hearted and

well-intentioned people usually 'do the right thing' and take care of others in the belief that they are working for the common good. However, without the Light of Buddha to illuminate us, nobody can see the self-centeredness that lies at the heart of many altruistic and virtuous activities. Shinran realized this cruel reality and said: 'Buddha Amida made His Vows only for me, Shinran'. In the Light of then *nembutsu*, we can see that all our efforts, no matter whether they are right or wrong, have only ever had one aim - to make us feel better. We want our family to give us no trouble, rather than genuinely wishing them well. If we love somebody, we want this person to serve our own benefit and we get angry, if he or she does not give us what we expect.

We prefer the recognized teachers of the Dharma to make our life easier and we criticize them for our problems. We try to deprecate the Dharma as not good enough for us, taking the example of somebody's else life for reaching such a conclusion. But what can we know about the life of another ? We do not even know our own lives well enough.

In this way, we prefer to stay as we are, but we want to live among bodhisattvas who serve our personal advantage. We do not consciously think in such a way, but we clearly behave like that. To improve everything around us instead of ourselves actually means to expect others to make our life better.

It is obvious that ordinary samsaric people act to support *samsara*, and that those with aspiration for Enlightenment want to leave *samsara* altogether - their aims are entirely opposed. Why should samsaric society expect religious people to be amenable and useful to the samsaric world ? There is no warrant for such a view. Have a look at human history: 1) Sakyamuni Buddha deserted his family to seek the own spiritual path; this left his family distraught and, from a strictly social point of view, his decision could be seen as a reprehensible act; 2) Jesus Christ caused much trouble for the authorities in his time, so they decided to kill him; 3) Mohammed was forced to escape to avoid being killed by his own people; 4) Shinran was considered a criminal by Japanese authorities and exiled; 5) the Dalai Lama is viewed as a dangerous individual by the Chinese government.

Samsaric people only understand religion, in all its forms, as an ornament of *samsara*, as a social or cultural tradition, something that may make people think better of themselves. 'Religion makes the human more human'. This is a thoroughly samsaric point of view.

If we like to be human, we cannot be Buddha. First, we must realize how awful it is to be human, how miserable it is to be human ! Unless we practice (*nembutsu*) we do not have any chance of seeing our true human condition. Without the insight into our own *bonno*, we are unable to effect our transformation into Buddha.

Shinran is criticized by Westerners because, superficially seeing, he does not fit the samsaric human ideal of a saint. He left his monastery, he was married twice, and was considered a criminal for some time. It is true - he did all these 'awful' things. He did what he did in order to discover who he really was and in order to encounter the shining face of the Buddha, no matter what. He never sought any followers or disciples. He understood there was no reason to follow

any karmically-bound being. The Buddha was the only one to follow.

Realizing that in order to listen to Amida he had to write about the Dharma, he finally left his wife, Enshinni. He did not write about his religious realization for the sake of mankind. He did it for himself. He was the first student of his own writings. If people found his writings useful, it was only because of the impersonal power of the Dharma that perfumed them. No person of *shinjin* is a thinker. All are listeners. The Dharma is about hearing and *be-ing*.

Only the well-established Buddhist practice of the *nembutsu* can enable us to hear the Dharma. Only in this way we are able to realize that whatever we do, we do for ourselves. We convince ourselves that we act for somebody else, for mankind, for the planet, for the Dharma, for the Buddha, but we are really seeking our own benefit. This profound limitation is intimately connected to the samsaric nature of our existence. We engage with others and we all are inter-related, but watching others around us, we see only ourselves. This shortcoming in our human state does not allow us to properly understand other people, no matter who they are. If we try to understand Shinran's teaching without practicing *nembutsu* and realizing *shinjin*, then we are wasting our time. Without *shinjin*, we can only view the world through the filter of our own karmic blindness and miss the point of our existence altogether. Through *shinjin*, however, we may come understand the way things are for we are then able to view the world through the eyes of Buddha..

Alas, in spending so much of our time and energy in pursuing illusory samsaric goals, we fail to attend to the one thing that truly matters - awakening to the Buddha's mind through the realization of *shinjin*. But how can those who are totally intoxicated with false promises even begin to believe in the possibility of a life free from such crippling delusions?