

## **Spirituality and Spiritual Care: a Buddhist Perspective**

### **Seigen Yamaoka**

Spirituality is an interesting word. It is a word that is fully abundant and empty at the same time.

Too often we seem to know objectively what the word means, but subjectively we are in the dark. In Buddhism this term introduces the concept of “to know is not to know.” Somehow we have to come to the point that “not to know is to know.” But, how do we do this? This is the dilemma that we face when we study for Buddhist ministry or chaplaincy.

In the general process of teaching and learning in our society, we are taught and seek to learn the objective nature of things. Similarly, in religious studies, we learn about the objective facts, theories, and teachings of religions. The end result is an understanding of religious teaching as an objective, clearly defined process—often known as doctrinal truth. We come to know abundantly about objective truth, but there is a subjective emptiness.

This is an area where ministers and chaplains often must fend for themselves. I personally faced this struggle. I knew objectively about the doctrine and teachings of Buddhism, but it was not meaningful to the people with whom I was ministering. I was spouting the academic, scholarly doctrine I learned and the final, critical conclusion of the teaching, but I did not know the process for coming to understand that teaching for the members or even myself.

In time, I recalled my teacher’s advice to me. He said, “Learn the doctrine and teaching, then set it aside as you work with your people, listen carefully to what they say and need, then respond to their needs and relate the teaching in a way that they can best understand.”

Thus began a long journey of filling my mind with more academic studies in various subjects while at that same time facing the traumatic issues of working with death and dying members. At that point I recalled a saying by the eighth head priest of the Shin Buddhist tradition, Rennyō, who said this: “rather than pouring the water (of enlightenment) into the basket (of the ego) one should put the basket in the water.” In working with the members, I noticed after a brief moment of time listening to their thoughts and responding minimally to what they were saying, they transformed their thoughts from self-centered to other-centered. I was not sure what happened, but I was given a hint as to what my ministry needed to be. The dharma-side and the person-side

For myself, I needed to establish a process through which to understand the workings of both what we call the “dharma-side” and the “person-side.” In the traditional teaching of Shin Buddhism, the two sides are considered as “One” and studied as being a part of the dharma-side.

The dharma-side is the Enlightened-Truth of dependent-Origination, with its dynamic work and constant movement of the Truth to awaken beings to the reality of their lives. The dynamic movement of Enlightened-Truth is identified with such terms as Wisdom-Compassion, Light-Life, Amida Buddha, Buddha power, Other-power, and as Buddhas and Bodhisattvas who constantly work to awaken persons who are absorbed with their own afflictions.

The person-side is the ignorant, ego-centered person who cannot see the workings of the dharma-side in their lives because they are caught in their own afflictions. people preoccupied with the person-side cannot see or understand the cause of their own reality that is referred to as a world of suffering.

As a consequence, Buddhist studies focus on articulating the dynamic workings of the dharma-side. We do not study the person-side because its complexity makes it more difficult to retain the authenticity of the dharma-side. This approach in our study of Buddhism is still prevalent today. Because we do not study our subjective experience, we are not likely to see it in the other, the patient. If we focus solely on the objective or dharma side, we cannot listen well enough to hear what the patient is saying or come to know their experiences.

Attending to the person-side:

#### The Contribution of Shin Buddhism

In the thirteenth century, Shinran, the designated founder of Shin Buddhism, introduced a new approach based on his own religious journey. He articulated that the human journey to religious understanding has to be person centered, though scholar-priests tend to think he was strictly doctrine centered because he is considered to be the founder of Shin Buddhism and his major writing clarifying his thoughts were presented in a highly doctrinal manner. Over time and history, the academic study became the foundation for the institution of the Shin Buddhist tradition. Through a careful study of the person-centered process of working with the person's issues and life, it was possible to find the truth of how the dharma-side relates to those issues. Shinran clarified both the workings of the dharma-side and the issues of the person-side and showed how they became one. He used the classic word "Shinjin" to connect the two polar sides into one experience. Shinjin is often translated as faith, entrusting, or is not translated at all because of its complexity. It is a key word that connects the dharma-side and the person-side as one, even though they appear to be polar opposites. In formation, we have to be able to see polar opposites. This is essential to see the totality of one's experience. *It is in the balance of two opposites that everything begins.* What Shinran points to is that the dharma-side is abundantly full. It is important to awaken persons to the reality of their true life process because persons do not understand the totality of their true human life process. When people are able to see their own emptiness, they are filled with the dynamic workings of the dharma-side in their lives as they are. This inconceivable transformation toward becoming one is an ongoing process of "awakened entrusting or Shinjin" in Shinran's teaching. As we study to find meaning for our ministry or chaplaincy, we need to study seriously both the dharma-side and the person-side and see how they become one in the dharma. It is a process of learning to see that which connects the two sides for ourselves, so that it will be the source of our religious life that continues to grow with meaning with each experience we encounter in our lives. It is journey to find what is abundantly full and empty and find a growing process with fullness in the emptiness that we feel and trust. Here, the question may arise, "How does this growth toward oneness while still living the paradox influence the practice of spiritual care?" It is in being abundantly full *and* empty that caregivers are truly able to hear, learn, guide, and feel the workings of universal wisdom and compassion simultaneously working through ourselves and through the patient. And the possibility of this growth is enhanced when the caregiver and the patient are one in a shared experience of life and growth, yet each in their own way.

Seigen Yamaoka is a core graduate faculty member at the Graduate Theological Union and professor of Shin Buddhist Thought at The Institute of Buddhist Studies, 2140 Durant Ave., Berkeley, CA 94704 (Email: saeemi@aol.com).