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Contemporary Zen Buddhist Tracts for the Laity: Grassroots Buddhism in Japan

Ian Reader

The translations in this section are samples of the popular literature such as leaflets and pamphlets distributed by Buddhist sects in Japan to their followers. All of the items given here have been produced by one major established Buddhist sect, the Sōtō Zen sect, in the 1980s, but their style and the themes they express can be regarded as typical and representative of the contemporary popular literature of Japanese Buddhism in general. All were published by the sect's head office and governing body in Tokyo, and they reflect the messages that the sect leaders wish to impart to people affiliated to temples of the sect, as well as the basic orientations of Buddhist followers at the grass roots in Japan. Visually attractive and often containing bright photographs and colorful illustrations, such pamphlets and other sect literature are sent (as were numerous other pamphlets and booklets) to the sect's fifteen thousand or so temples throughout Japan, where they are, at least in theory, distributed to sect members and to temple visitors. In practice, whether they are widely distributed depends on the temple priest; it is a reasonable supposition to say that only a small number of those produced actually are read by members of the sect.

Although these pamphlets may not be widely read, and although in terms of content they can hardly be said to offer influential new contributions to Japanese religious understanding, they are important documents because they clearly express, in simple and atmospheric language designed to capture the emotional attention of their Japanese readers, the concerns, nature and orientations of established Buddhism in late-twentieth-century Japan, and which have, indeed, been crucial and central to Buddhism's development and the ways in which it has been assimilated by and permeated into the lives of the Japanese populace over the centuries. Written in language that will be readily understood by ordinary Japanese, and eschewing the use of complex Buddhist terms or philosophical speculation, such pamphlets seek to convey messages and impart emotional feel-

ings that create an empathy between the reader and Buddhism, and that will make him or her feel the need and desire to remain loyal to the sect and (a vital element in the economic and social structure of Japanese Buddhism) to continue to hold the memorial services for their ancestors at sect temples. To some extent this use of plain, direct language and of easily understood pamphlets and other forms of popular media to convey messages (among which, in recent years, can also be included the use of videos, glossy magazines, and even music and song) has been assimilated from the new religions that have been extraordinarily successful in Japan, not just in terms of recruitment but in putting their teachings across to large numbers of people through extensive use of the media and popular tracts, and through their use of straightforward language and images.

Though the translations all come from one sect, they reflect many of the basic concerns of Buddhism in general in Japan. As will be discussed further below, these revolve particularly around the salvific powers of the Buddhas, the virtue of faith, the need to venerate one's ancestors, and the importance of maintaining the bonds and relationships that have historically developed in Japan among the Japanese people, their ancestors, and the Buddhist temples. As these translations demonstrate, such concerns are as important in Zen Buddhism as in any other Buddhist sect in Japan. Although Zen, in doctrinal terms at least, holds that meditation is at the core of Buddhism and emphasizes "self-power" (*jiriki*) and its importance in the quest for enlightenment (in contrast to the faith-based concepts of salvation through "other-power" (*tariki*) as expressed in the Pure Land sects), such teachings aimed at the ordinary members of the sect make virtually no mention of meditation or enlightenment, instead emphasizing the salvific powers of the Buddha(s) and the ethical duties and practices concerned with venerating the ancestors and maintaining right relations with them through the medium of Buddhism. What these contemporary Zen Buddhist publications show, then, is that, whatever Buddhism might appear to be doctrinally and in terms of goals and spiritual practice, and although Buddhism has developed numerous schools of thought and spiritual practice in Japan, it is as a religion concerned with the concerns, needs, and worries of ordinary people, particularly in the realms of faith, intercession, and the relationship between the living and the spirits of the dead, that it has made its mark upon the lives of the Japanese.

The first translation provided here, *Trust and Dependence* (*Kie*), affirms the importance of faith in the Buddhas as a means of enabling one to lead a happy and peaceful life and tells people to "entrust everything to the Buddhas." It was published by the sect as part of its gesture of worship (*gasshō*) campaign in the 1980s: the *gasshō* gesture is a prayerful one in which the two hands are held with palms together, fingers pointing directly upward. It signifies both veneration and greeting, and in Sōtō Zen literature and contemporary teaching the gesture and posture are considered to have immense symbolic meaning, representing purity of heart and mind, correctness of form, and right behavior. These themes are reflected in the pamphlet translated here, whose comment that followers should express their faith by vowing to say that "I shall live from now on as the child of Buddha" reflects a general understanding, shared by priests and laity alike, that

Buddhism and the Buddhas venerated in it serve most clearly as a means of emotional support that provides "peace of mind" and happiness. As such, the basic preoccupations of the Japanese with regard to Buddhism are squarely focused in this world and in personal happiness: concepts such as enlightenment are barely mentioned. The pamphlet also emphasizes the importance of causal or karmic relations (*en*), a term that affirms the notion of interdependence. This is especially important in Japanese terms, suggesting among other things the karmic bonds that tie the living and their ancestors together—a bond that, as will be discussed further below, is vital to Buddhist temples and rituals, and to the involvement of the Japanese with Buddhism. Underlying the emphasis on causal or karmic relationships, then, is the implicit affirmation of the relationship that has arisen between the Japanese and Buddhism and which this and the other translations given here seek to maintain and continue.

Besides its focus on faith, grace, and happiness, Buddhism has become most deeply ingrained in the lives of the Japanese through its role in providing a framework of interpretation and practice through which to deal with death and with the spirits of the dead. From the seventh and eighth centuries onward, Buddhism became the medium through which the processes and problems of death were dealt with: Buddhist funerals and memorial services came to be used as the ritual means whereby the spirits of the dead have been transformed into benevolent ancestors guarding over the living members of its household and kin. In taking on this role, Buddhism in Japan thus assimilated basic Japanese concepts about the soul after death, namely, that it continued to exist as an entity that had a potential influence in this world. As a result, Buddhist philosophical concerns about the nonexistence of a fixed soul or permanent self, or about rebirth, have been of little importance in Japan. The Japanese words for dead person and Buddha are the same (*hotoke*), reflecting a commonly accepted gloss between the two states, and it is fair to suggest that, for the large majority of people, concerns about the attainment of Buddhahood have largely been transposed from the world of the living to that of the dead, and are closely connected to the Buddhist rites that transform the soul into a peaceful and benevolent ancestor.

One of the most central and pervasive elements in the social, cultural, and religious lives of the Japanese, namely, venerating and paying homage to their ancestors, thus became expressed through the ritual medium, and became the preserve, of Buddhism. This close relationship between the Japanese and Buddhism developed over centuries but was formally established in the Tokugawa era (1600–1868) when laws were enacted to mandate that everyone become Buddhist and be affiliated with a Buddhist temple, which in turn provided them with their sectarian affiliation. Belonging to a sect thus was often more a matter of convenience or circumstance, dependent on the sectarian affiliation of the temple nearest to one's home, than it was to any particular volition on the members' part, and this factor remains much the same today. People are members of a sect not so much because they prefer a particular form of sectarian teaching but because tradition and historical and family circumstances have made them so.

Although the laws enacted by the Tokugawa were subsequently repealed, Bud-

dhism has continued, at least in the eyes of most Japanese, to be closely associated with the extended series of mortuary rites and practices that follow death and with the veneration of ancestors. Calendrical Buddhist festivals, such as the summer Obon Festival, when the living members of the family gather to make offerings to their ancestors and to have memorial services said for them at the family temple, continue to be among the most widely attended of all religious events in Japan. Many households have a family Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) at which the ancestors are enshrined, and large numbers of Japanese grow up accustomed to the practice of making offerings to the ancestors, visiting Buddhist temples and reciting Buddhist prayers for their souls.

This deeply ingrained social relationship has long been a mainstay of Buddhism in Japan. Indeed, many Japanese, even while openly stating that they have no religious faith, despite not knowing much if anything about Buddhism, and despite eschewing any interest in other Buddhist practices, consider that they will "die Buddhist" and that, should a death occur in their family, they would naturally become involved in Buddhist rites and call for the services of a Buddhist priest.

This deep relationship has had profound effects on the shape and nature of Japanese Buddhism and has conditioned the perspectives of the Japanese and of the Buddhist sects active in Japan. Buddhism for most Japanese is a religion of death and the ancestors, and what ritual and spiritual practices it espouses, and moral and ethical teachings it professes, are intimately bound up with these aspects. Neither philosophical concerns nor the desire to undertake meditational or similar spiritual practices have conditioned the reasons why most people belong to their sect, and consequently they are barely touched upon in the popular literature of Buddhist sects. In contrast, the importance of rites concerning the ancestors, and ritual behavior before the family Buddhist altar, are very important and figure prominently in Buddhist publications such as those translated here, and in the religious practice that they advocate.

The second translation, the *Ten Articles of Faith* (*Shinkō jūkun*), a one-page text that has appeared in many Sōtō publications over the years, shows how central such issues are to Sōtō Zen Buddhism. Faith here, as indeed in the first translation, is closely equated with practice and with the performance of actions connected with the ancestors, and with the bonds that tie people to Buddhist temples. Such bonds are strengthened through the ritual calendar, with various festivals marked out as days when the obligation to attend the temple is stressed. Observances of the ritual and festive calendar are a central feature of Japanese religion, and much of the activity at Buddhist temples is linked to this cycle. The Obon Festival and other occasions (such as the spring and autumn equinoxes, when people visit their ancestors' graves) concerned with the memorialization of the dead are probably the most commonly performed religious activities in Japan, in which (according to contemporary statistics) close to 90 percent of the Japanese participate either regularly or occasionally. Indeed, for most people such ritual and festive times are the only occasions when they might visit a temple. Buddhist organizations such as Sōtō are thus acutely aware of the importance of this calendrical

cycle of religious events within the life patterns of the people, and their publications dwell very much on encouraging the observance of such events. Indeed, as the third translation also shows, they may well focus almost entirely on the emotional and cultural significance of such calendrical events for the well-being and continued happiness of the people.

The articles of faith do not, save in the final article, mention meditation; even here it is only brought in as something to be done twice a year. What they emphasize are the importance of the correct observance of etiquette (in bowing to the temple, making a gesture of worship before eating, telling the ancestors the family news) and of paying homage to the ancestors. In this there is a basic morality that centers on paying homage and showing gratitude to the ancestors for what the life they have bestowed on the living, and of recognizing that such benevolence creates obligations that have to be repaid through observing the correct rituals for the ancestors—a theme that is emphasized in the last translation. One could say that in this respect the Buddhist notion of "right action" has, in Japanese Buddhism, been well and truly transformed into and interpreted as "the correct ways of memorializing the dead, and of venerating the ancestors."

This concern with form and with the way in which things are done is endemic in much Japanese social behavior, and in the contemporary teachings of the Sōtō sect this concern can be seen most clearly in the constant references made to the gesture of worship (*gasshō*) that occur in these, and numerous other, Sōtō publications. Most of the people who are affiliated, through their parish temple, with the Sōtō Zen sect have never taken part in meditation. Meditation, indeed, is, in the eyes of the laity, regarded as something for religious specialists, while the priesthood and leading lights within the sect recognize that the sect's growth has historically been a result not of its meditational practices but of the rites it has conducted for the ancestors. Instead of emphasizing meditation, then, one finds other physical forms of posture that can be performed easily and in everyday life emphasized, almost, one might suggest, as alternatives. As the first translation affirms, the gesture of worship allows one to become peaceful and to express a simple but strong faith. Faith is thus expressed through form. Though the shorter *Heart Sūtra* (*Hannya shingyō*), widely recited in Japanese Buddhism and highly popular in Sōtō rituals, states that "form is no other than emptiness" (*shiki soku ze kū*), it is clear from the perspective of the religious etiquette and ritual symbolism illustrated in these texts that form has a specific significance of its own, regardless of any philosophical equation with emptiness.

The third translation, *Peace of Mind in Human Life* (*Jinsei no yasuragi*), provides a further insight into the perspectives and needs of contemporary Buddhism. The circumstances that lie behind the nostalgic imagery brought out in such publications are that in the contemporary era numerous encroachments have been made into the grass-roots support structures of established Buddhism. The growth of the new religions has helped to transfer the allegiance of large numbers of individuals and at times whole families away from the established Buddhist sects, while the processes of secularization and urbanization have contributed to weak-

ening the hold of established and traditional religions such as Buddhism on their followers. For sects such as Sōtō, whose traditional base of support has been more in rural and agricultural areas than in urban areas, demographic change has weakened its base further.

All this has caused Buddhist sects such as Sōtō to do what it can, not so much to gather new converts as to retain the loyalties of its current adherents, many of whom have little or no doctrinal involvement in the sect, and whose affiliations are centered on the ancestors. Thus great emphasis is placed on the importance of the traditions that bind families to particular temples, and on the deep connections between the temple and the ancestors. This often is expressed through the use of powerful nostalgic imagery that seeks to play on the emotional feelings of, and to create a sense of empathy in, the reader that will cause him or her to withstand the social pressures of change and the lure of the new religions that offer the individual a path to salvation. Often these are tied into important festive events in the yearly calendar. This pamphlet, for instance, relates to and was issued prior to the summer Obon Festival.

Such literature often, as here, makes use of idealized images of the past, identifying Buddhism with such images while simultaneously criticizing the modern world, which is depicted as materially rich yet spiritually poor. In contrast to the turmoil of the modern world, Buddhism, its temples, and its deep connections with the ancestors represent a "Japanese spiritual homeland" (*kokoro no furusato*), in which the Japanese can feel at home with themselves and make contact with their culture. Within this nostalgic imagery, too, a strong emphasis on morality is maintained through the concepts of gratitude (to the ancestors) and obligation, which requires one to repay their favors by performing memorial services and attending the temple.

These three short translations, then, indicate much about the actual nature of Japanese Buddhism today and about what it means for the Japanese people: the relationship between the living and the dead, the importance of the correct ritual procedures and postures, the importance of performing memorial services for the ancestors, the importance of faith and of the supportive and sustaining power of the Buddhas that enable people to live happily. These, rather than the philosophical constructs or even the monastic practices such as meditation and teachings focused on the nature and attainment of enlightenment, are the things that dominate the relationship between the Japanese and Buddhism, and these are the themes that have driven and sustained Buddhism through the centuries, and that remain at the heart of its action in contemporary Japan.

Further Reading

William M. Bodiford, "Sōtō Zen in a Japanese Town: Notes on a Once-Every-Thirty-Three-Years Kannon Festival," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 21, 1 (1994): 3–36; Kawahashi Noriko, "*Jizoku* (Priests' Wives) in Sōtō Zen Buddhism: An Ambiguous Category," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*

22, 1–2 (1995): 161–183; Kenneth Marcure, "The Danka System," *Monumenta Nipponica* 40, 1 (1985): 39–67; Ian Reader, "Transformations and Changes in the Teachings of the Sōtō Zen Buddhist Sect," *Japanese Religions* 14, 1 (1985): 28–48; Ian Reader, "Zazenless Zen?: The Position of Zazen in Institutional Zen Buddhism," *Japanese Religions* 14, 3 (1986): 7–27; Ian Reader, *Religion in Contemporary Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991), esp. 77–106; Ian Reader, "Buddhism as a Religion of the Family" in *Religion and Society in Modern Japan*, ed. Mark Mullins, Shimazono Susumu, and Paul Swanson (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1993): 139–156; Robert J. Smith, *Ancestor Worship in Contemporary Japan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

Trust and Dependence: For the Sake of a Correct Foundation for Your Life

WHY IS THE WORLD FULL OF UNEASE?

The scientific civilization of the current age has in many ways greatly fulfilled our expectations. Our homes are full of electrical appliances, and thanks to air conditioners we can enjoy cool summers and warm winters. Communications have developed so that we can get to distant places quickly and in comfort. The audiovisual world of televisions and videos relays information and entertainment to us, while in our stores and supermarkets, foodstuffs and clothing from all over the world are widely available. The development of medical knowledge and techniques has had an immense effect on our lives, extending life expectancy greatly.

From such perspectives, the present world has satisfied human expectations and appears to be extremely rosy. However, one has to ask the question: have we become really happy?

In fact, it could be said that, to the extent that our material desires have been fulfilled, people's minds in the present world have slid into an extraordinarily famished state. Human desires have no limit. As soon as one desire is fulfilled, the next one rises up in our heads. Thus, however much we progress materially, we are never satisfied but are caught up in a trap of unsatisfied desires.

If, in all of this, we happen to look into the depths of our minds, we are liable to be stricken with an indescribable isolation and unease and become aware of the vacuity of just satiating our material desires.

WHAT ARE THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES BY WHICH WE LIVE AT PRESENT?

On a daily basis we uphold our spirits by thinking about various things, such as our position in our company, our academic record, money, our house, or our family and friends. There may also be those who say that having a good healthy body is foundation enough for a satisfied life.

But please think a little about this. All these things are ephemeral. One has to leave one's company when one reaches retirement age. However good one's

academic record is, if one does not have a suitable job to go with it, it is of little use. Money, too, can rapidly disappear and lose its value in times of economic crisis and inflation. There is always the fear that the home that one has striven so hard for may disappear in a fire. We cannot even rely on our families. The number of cases of people who want to get divorced from their wives as soon as they retire is growing. Although living a long, healthy life is a good thing, there are many people who end up having to spend the last years of their lives alone and without sufficient support and protection. . . . This is contemporary reality.

You are probably aware of all this. In truth, everything is impermanent. And so you come to the terrible realization that all the things you thought would sustain you in reality have no foundation. What, then, are the things that we ought to have as our correct spiritual foundations?

THE PRAYERFUL GESTURE (GASSHŌ) OF FAITH: A BEAUTIFUL AND PEACEFUL FORM

Trust is something immense that unites body and mind and allows us to live in peace. We usually think we live our lives under our own strength, and everyone lives seeking their own personal happiness. However, if we are asked, "Are you really happy?" why is it that so few people are able to answer, "Yes, I am"? Most people are living in anguish, enveloped in all sorts of problems, forms of unease, and situations that are not what they wished. How, then, can one become happy?

One of the most important teachings of Buddhism is that of karmic relations (*en*). This word expresses the underlying reality that all things, from human beings to animals, minerals, water, and the air we breathe, exist in a state of mutual interconnection and interdependence. One never lives by one's strength alone. Even if you do not recognize this, and think you will be able to act solely on your own, doing just what you want, if the karmic connections (*en*) around you are not properly ordered, you will not be able to achieve any of your wishes. Being aware of this interconnectedness and thinking not just of yourself, but of the happiness of all around you at the same time, and nurturing good relations . . . that is the way to happiness.

Humans are foolish and it is totally impossible for them—even with computers or the advances of science—to control all the infinite and spreading threads of karma. Therefore we, as followers of Buddhism, even while striving with all our might to cooperate and maintain good karmic relations, have to trust in and leave the results up to the Buddhas [*omakase suru*, "to leave the results up to, entrust someone with a task," a term that is widely used in Japanese religious contexts (especially by religious practitioners and people praying at religious centers) to indicate acceptance of fate and of human dependence on spiritual beings such as deities and Buddhas].

In this life, true peace of mind is attained by receiving and accepting the "fate" that the Buddhas give to us. Is this not the true spirit of trust?

THE GESTURE OF WORSHIP (GASSHŌ)

This is the form that manifests one's deep trust [in the Buddhas]. Moreover, for human beings it is the most beautiful and indispensable form of action. The gesture of worship is not just a posture to adopt when performing acts of worship and faith before the family Buddhist altar or in front of the Buddha image at a temple. It is also the gesture one uses to pay homage to the Buddha nature that lies within each and every one of us. This includes respecting and acknowledging with this gesture of worship your own Buddha nature, for, as the *Dhammapada* states, "you yourself are your own friend; if you spurn yourself, you are the friend of no one; if you do not regulate and put yourself in order, it is truly difficult to be friends with someone else." Making this gesture of worship is the basic form and way of putting ourselves in order. Therefore, whenever and wherever our minds are seized with unease or suffering, or at any time of crisis or trouble, let us first quietly join our hands together and make the correct form of the gesture of worship.

This is truly marvelous. When your spirit is enveloped in this gesture of worship, don't you feel that all the vexations that have bothered up till this point start to dissolve? As soon as one makes this gesture of worship clearly, a soothing wind can be felt blowing through one's mind.

THE IMPORTANCE OF VENERATING THE THREE JEWELS

There are three elements necessary for the development of Buddhism. One is Śākyamuni, the Buddha, who attained the highest form of human nature and perceived the truth (enlightenment). The second is the Law that Buddha taught. The third consists of those people who seek to follow the true path established by that teaching. In Japanese the word used for such people (*sō*) is nowadays considered to refer to priests, but in the original Indian language it signified the *sangha*, a word referring to the whole community of Buddhist followers who performed Buddhist practices together. In this sangha there were not just people who had become monks, but also lay people as well.

These three basic elements from which Buddhism was formed (Buddha, Law, sangha) are known as the "Three Jewels." And for we followers of Buddhism these "Three Jewels" provide the greatest foundation of all. The first step for followers of Buddhism is to have trust in, and pledge oneself, to the Three Jewels; this is not just in Japan, but among all those who have faith in Buddhism, in India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Tibet, and elsewhere. In these different countries, the words used to recite this item of faith vary, but they all mean the same:

> I pledge my trust in the Buddha.
> I pledge my trust in the Buddhist Law.
> I pledge my trust in the sangha.

Zen Master Dōgen [the principal founder of Sōtō Zen in Japan and the sect's main textual authority] exhorted all people to venerate the Three Jewels, and he said the following:

> I place my trust in the Buddha because he is a great teacher. I place my trust in the Law because it is good medicine. I place my trust in the sangha because it is an unsurpassable friend. You should know the great virtues of the Three Jewels, which are the most unsurpassable, deepest, and wonderful." (From the *Shushōgi* [The Principle of Practice and Enlightenment].) [This text was edited, compiled, and published by the sect in 1890, using sections from many of Dōgen's writings, and has ever since been used in the sect as a cardinal text and basis of faith and sect teachings.]

These are the correct principles to enable each of us to spend this human life, which does not come to us twice, without regret and with a rich spirit.

To express one's trust and dependence in the Three Jewels is none other than to vow that "I shall live from now on as the child of Buddha." That alone is sufficient. Whoever we are, we are all children of Buddha, and if, while expressing our trust in the Three Jewels, and if we mutually respect and greet each other with a gesture of prayer and worship, we shall be able to walk strongly forward along the road to Buddhahood together.

The Ten Articles of Faith

1. Let us always clean the family Buddhist altar (*butsudan*) every morning, and, by making a gesture of worship (*gasshō*) and venerating them, let us give thanks to our ancestors.
2. At the dining table, let us make a gesture of worship before eating.
3. At the temple, as we stand before its Main Hall, we should without fail make a gesture of worship and bow.
4. Let us enshrine our household mortuary tablets (*ihai*) at the temple and without fail visit it on the various death anniversaries [of our ancestors]. [These tablets have the posthumous name of the ancestor engraved on them and represent the ancestor's presence. It is normal for one tablet to be placed in the family altar, but a second may also be placed at the Buddhist temple as well. The Buddhist sects exhort their followers to do this as it makes the bond between family members and the temple stronger and encourages them to visit the temple more often.]
5. On the first morning of every month, let us all go to the temple to pray for the safety of the family.
6. When our children are born, let us have them named at the temple, and on the one hundredth day [after the birth] visit the temple and report this news to our ancestors. [While it is most common for parents to take their newborn babies to Shintō shrines to place them under the protection

of the Shintō gods, there has also been a tradition of asking the Buddhist priest to bestow a name on the child. This is a practice that still may be found today, and one that Sōtō encourages as it is believed to foster a particularly strong karmic connection among the child, family, and temple.]

7. When our children enter school and come of age, let us without fail visit the temple and report this to our ancestors.
8. Let us celebrate weddings [more commonly celebrated at Shinto shrines or, in recent years, at specialized wedding halls] before our ancestors at the temple. On occasions when this is not possible, let us visit the temple afterward and report the news to our ancestors. [It is customary to report family events to the ancestors at the family Buddhist altar. This injunction, and the injunctions in the previous articles, to report family events to the ancestors also at the temple, thus seeks to further affirm and cement the bonds of loyalty and karmic relationship between the temple and its members.]
9. On Buddha's birthday (*Hanamatsuri*) [in Japan celebrated on April 8, an important date in the Sōtō calendar], let us visit the temple together with our children and commemorate this by drinking sweet sake [*amazake*, which on this occasion is usually a nonalcoholic beverage, or a sweetened tea (*amacha*) given out to those who visit temples].
10. On Enlightenment day [*Jōdō-e*, December 8 in Japan, the most widely celebrated observance in the Zen sects] and on the day of the commemoration of the Buddha's death [*Nehan-e*, February 15 in Japan], let us all gather at the temple and, listening to talks about Buddhism and doing Zen meditation, remember the Buddha.

Peace of Mind in Human Life

Whenever the time of the Obon Festival [which commemorates the ancestors and takes place in most parts of Japan in August] comes around, I think of the way of life of the countryside. I am enlivened by memories of this enjoyable festival, memories of visiting the graves together with one's family and doing the Bon dances and then eating delicious watermelon cooled in the well. When I see melons, eggplants, and deep red tomatoes in the same fields that my ancestors tilled, I instinctively want to offer them to the ancestors. In recent times, one has been able to eat cucumbers and tomatoes at all times of the year, and one can gaze through the windows of flower shops at all sorts of flowers and plants that bloom throughout the four seasons. This is convenient, but, on the other hand, I feel that thoughts of a seasonal nature, in which one felt the texture of things seen by the eye and tasted by the tongue, are gradually becoming less and less. Even for someone who lives in a city, however, seeing the vegetables and fruits arranged outside the greengrocer's shop is a reminder

of one's dead ancestors [and the gratitude that is owed to them].

It is often said that forgetting to express gratitude is a normal human trait, but gratitude is an essential part of recognizing where we come from. As you know, the ideogram used to express the term gratitude (*on*) is made up of the ideogram for mind (*shin*) beneath the ideogram for cause (*in*) of origin or source (*gen'in*). If one asks the questions how have I come to be born here and how have I continued to live so far, one will see that this whole process is one that involves one in debts of gratitude. Such debts are not, of course, contractual or materially fixed; rather, they are debts that should lead us to recognize a sense of obligation that one has toward one's parents and ancestors, and that should be recalled whenever one thinks of them. This is I consider a natural human emotion, and Buddhism enables us to reflect on such things by paying homage to and thinking about the dead at the Obon Festival. Not only the dead, however: in the sūtras it is taught that one should also venerate one's living parents. The Obon Festival is a time for respecting one's living parents and one's ancestors. By doing this at the Obon Festival one expresses the wish to be peaceful, to return to one's original self, to think of one's own past and future, and to think of one's ancestors and also one's parents.

This is what in Buddhism we call attaining peace of mind. True peace of mind will never come from worrying or from not being satisfied with anything. When one sees a Buddha statue, one naturally becomes calm, and the turbulence of the mind subsides. At such times we should quietly calm our minds and join our hands together in a gesture of worship (*gasshō*). Without fuss, one should sit quietly and still: this is the mind and form of Zen meditation. The Obon Festival is an important event that occurs once a year to allow us to get such peace of mind.

Peace of mind is one of the greatest blessings of life. For a husband and wife, the real issue is not whether their characters are compatible, or whether they have the same character. Is it not, rather, the question of whether they can be relaxed with each other and can live together in a peaceful state of mind? The problem is that in contemporary society we have lost sight of this peace of mind that enables us to live in true happiness.

This celebration of the Obon Festival has in fact continued for almost 2,500 years according to the teachings of Buddha. Through this festival, which is a vital spiritual home (*kokoro no furusato*) of the Japanese people, we wish to restore our peace of mind and, especially among young people, to cultivate satisfied minds.