

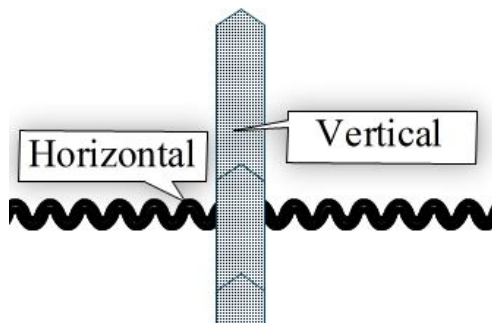
A Shin Buddhist Perspective on Prayer:  
Petitionary Prayers and Prayers for Buddhist Awakening

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Preface

Because prayer is such a personal matter, I feel more comfortable sharing my *personal* thoughts on what prayer means to me as it unfolds in my life. So for this essay, I shall not be doing an academic discussion on what prayer might mean in general for the humankind or engage myself in a comparative analysis of prayer involving another religion.

I would like to define “prayer” as, “a mental act of seeking of oneself or asking some higher power for an aim to be fulfilled.” Hence, a “prayer” implies a lack and, thus, a yearning to fill that lack. And in this context, prayers can be categorized into two types, 1) petitionary prayers and 2) prayers for Buddhist Awakening. These, then, operate on the horizontal and the vertical levels, respectively. (See illustration)



Two Types of Prayers

The petitionary prayers are carried out on the horizontal level, which represents the objective, “real” world in which we live in. It includes our lives that involve our family, school, work, community, country, etc. On this level, ‘things happen to us’ due to innumerable causes and conditions that spread out synchronically in space as well as extend diachronically back in time. And these ‘things that happen to us’ can be what we like, dislike or neither (akin to feelings or *vedanā* as found in early Buddhist teaching of

Five Skandhas or Aggregates). And when they are what we dislike, we call them “difficulties.”

These difficulties include economic recessions, natural disasters, wars, and pandemics, such as Covid-19 that have wreaked havoc on the entire world starting in 2019 and continuing into this year. These constitute difficulties that are “societal” in nature. Further, on this horizontal level, there is another type of difficulties, which are “existential” in nature; they include birth, aging, illness, and death. It is these difficulties that the original teachings of the Buddha were most concerned with. However, as Buddhism evolved into a world religion, it responded to both the societal and existential types of difficulties in order to deal with the suffering (*duḥkha*) they caused.

Today in Buddhist Asia, many people visit the temples to carry out petitionary prayers to deal with both types of difficulties, societal and existential. Some pray for good health for themselves, a cure for their loved ones’ illness, and a speedy recovery from the pandemic. Others go to calm their anxieties by praying for success in college entrance exams, realization of romantic relationship, or victory in their next athletic match.

Critics may belittle these petitionary prayers as deviating from the original intent of Buddhism, but I am more sympathetic. Life is truly a bumpy road. Dreadfully difficult things happen to us, which are often no fault of our own. At the end of December 2020, about 84 million worldwide had been infected by the coronavirus, 1.8 million had died from the pandemic, and billions of people had been severely impacted by the loss of jobs, the reduction of their income, and the damage to their health.

On a personal note as I write this essay, my family is facing a situation where a family member, who is only in her early 30s, is undergoing a treatment for a life-threatening illness. Just this week, we received very disappointing news that the treatment is not working and that she will have to undergo another round of treatment. This entails another round of chemotherapy, loss of hair, and nearly a month of hospitalization. And there is no guarantee of recovery because the donor blood for the next transplant, just as in the first treatment, is merely a half match and not a full match. The entire family is doing all it can to support her, and she seems optimistic. Nevertheless at this stage, there is nothing else that I personally can do except *to pray*. And as I do, I am fully aware that I am engaged in a petitionary prayer.

In Shin Buddhism (also known as Jōdo Shinshū), the orthodox doctrine rejects any act of petitionary prayers, following the clear statements made by Shinran (1173-1263), the founder of the school. Today, at the large Shin temples in Kyoto, you will not find any sales of amulets, paper fortune lotteries, or good-luck charms that you often see at temples of other Buddhist schools or Shinto shrines. Also, no services are conducted to pray for protection from malevolent spirits or for enhancing the chances of worldly benefits. In fact, the Shin organizations have clearly articulated their strong opposition to any involvement in secular benefits and what they consider ‘superstitious’ activities. They have placed this doctrine at the centerpiece of their self-identity as Shin Buddhists. Many readers might be surprised by this fact, given the image of Shin Buddhism as being devotional in nature, for the commoners, and similar to popular religion.

To confirm this fact, I’d like to share an interesting and a bit humorous encounter. In one of the prefectures far from Tokyo, I met a priest of another Buddhist school, whose temple was thriving. The temple had hired seven priests to conduct services with the primary aim of seeking ‘worldly benefits’ as described above. I knew that this prefecture had a large percentage of Shin Buddhist followers, so I asked the priest, “There are many Shin Buddhists in your area, aren’t there?” I was implying that because there were so many Shin Buddhists, the need for secular benefit oriented service would be very low. But the priest’s answer caught me by surprise. He replied, “Yes, *there are*. And *that’s why* the demand for our services is strong. So, we are thankful!” The priest explained that because the Shin priests and temples do not provide such services for their members, many of them come to his temple seek them. So, he had, in essence, far less competition! This tells us that even some members of Shin Buddhist families seek to have petitionary prayers done to deal with the societal and existential anxieties experienced on the horizontal dimension of their lives.

Let me share another anecdote, this one from a Shin temple in California, U.S.A. Stephen, who was not a member of the temple but was someone who had attended bazaars and basketball games at the temple and thus knew the priest there. Stephen came to seek a blessing to be done. The following is the gist of their conversation.

Stephen: Reverend, I’d like to request that you do a blessing for my brand new car.

Shin priest: What benefits do you hope to get from a blessing?

Stephen: I want nothing bad to happen to my brand new car.

Shin priest: We don’t normally do blessings since they go against our teachings,

but if you really insist, I shall do it as a pastoral service to give you a peace of mind.

(A few weeks later, Stephen returns, really upset, to tell the priest that the car was stolen.)

Stephen: Reverend, my car was stolen yesterday! I feel that your blessing didn't work.

Shin priest: I'm very sorry to hear that, but that blessing doesn't work for *stolen* cars; it works only for preventing the car from getting into an accident!

This episode is meant to point out the prevalence among many people to turn to religion to ward off potential difficulties on the horizontal level. However in my understanding, Buddhism, or any religion for that matter, cannot fully control the societal and existential difficulties discussed earlier. Yes it is true that our efforts can influence some things, such as the quality of our human relationship with others, but they pale in comparison to matters that are beyond our control. Thus, what is important in Buddhism is not what *happens* to us but how we *experience* life. So in this case, religion cannot prevent the car from being stolen or also from getting into a car accident, but Buddhism can help us mentally and spiritually to deal better with the difficulties that do come our way.

Hence, Shin teachings are concerned with the second type of prayer, which I am calling "prayers for Buddhist Awakening." It is concerned with the vertical dimension, which helps us to cultivate a mind that responds to the events on the horizontal level with less suffering. This is reflected in the now popular saying, "Difficulties are *inevitable*, but suffering is *optional*!"

### Prayers for Buddhist Awakening

This fundamental Buddhist position is symbolized in the famous story of "Kisagotamī and the Mustard Seed." Kisagotamī was a mother of a young child, who dies suddenly. She is unable to accept the death of her child. She goes to the Buddha for help and is encouraged to fetch a handful of mustard seeds from a house that had never experienced death. Kisagotamī finds that all of the households had the seeds but had experienced death in the family. No household had escaped death. As the sun began to set, Kisagotamī awakens to the truth that death is universal and no family could escape it.

Here, the Buddha does not intervene to carry out a *miracle* to bring the child back to life. Instead, what did he do? He had led the young mother to come to realize and awaken to the truth of impermanence. The story concludes with Kisagotamī becoming a nun as a Buddha’s disciple; this meant that she had acted on her ‘prayer for Buddhist Awakening.’ And her prayer was eventually answered for the story goes on to tell us that she went on to realize full Awakening as a highly accomplished nun. She had fulfilled the ultimate aim of all Buddhists, the prayer for Awakening.

The fundamental Buddhist position symbolized by the Kisagotamī story is also in keeping with the position of Shin Buddhism. Its aim is fully committed to the vertical dimension and motivated by the ‘prayers for Awakening’ that fulfill my definition of prayer as “a mental act of *seeking of oneself* ... for an aim to be fulfilled.” Hence, what I am calling, the ‘prayers for Buddhist Awakening’ can be understood to be comparable to the Mahayana ideal of ‘raising the aspiration for Awakening’ (*bodhicitta*) .

### “Golden Chain”

In this regard, I wish to share “Golden Chain,” which Shin Buddhists in the United States often recite at their temple services. It is uniquely American, for interestingly it is not known in Japan. That is because it was composed in Hawaii in the 1920s. Its composer was not a priest from Japan but an American female priest, Reverend Dorothy Hunt. This “Golden Chain” is probably the most popular and most well known among the aspirational statements of American Shin Buddhists, especially among the younger generation. It goes as follows:

*“I am a link in Amida’s Golden Chain of love that stretches around the world. I will keep my link bright and strong. I will be kind and gentle to every living thing and protect all who are weaker than myself.*

*I will think pure and beautiful thoughts, say pure and beautiful words, and do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends not only my happiness or unhappiness but that of others.*

*May every link in Amida’s golden chain of love become bright and strong, and may we all attain perfect peace.”*

I would like to briefly explain each segment:

*“I am a link in Amida’s Golden Chain of love that stretches around the world. I will keep my link bright and strong.”*

This segment tells us that each of us is part of a set of interconnected relationships that encompasses the whole world and beyond. And the very nature of this interconnectedness is boundless compassion, which is represented by “Amida” (the Buddha of immeasurable compassion).

Here, it is noteworthy that this “compassion” is expressed here as “love,” a term that Americans find greater affinity with. I believe the term “love” has contributed to its enormous popularity for over hundred years. Also stressed here is the importance of the strong sense of social or spiritual *responsibility*, in keeping with the bodhisattva ideal, for caring of others as he or she vows to do one’s part to sustain this Golden Chain of interconnection by keeping one’s link bright and strong.

*“I will be kind and gentle to every living thing and protect all who are weaker than myself.”*

Here one pledges to treat not only humans but also all living beings with respect, including animals, birds, insects, and fish. There is no mention of the “rights” of humans to rule over other creatures, but rather humans are to co-exist with them. And in so doing, one vows to go to the aid of those in need, whether humans or other creatures.

The next sentence addresses the three actions:

*“I will think pure and beautiful thoughts, say pure and beautiful words, and do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends not only my happiness or unhappiness but that of others.”*

In Buddhism, the worth of a person is determined not by birth or one’s class but one’s deeds. So our spiritual happiness also depends on how one acts and sees the world, and is not determined by predestination or by chance or by divine beings. We have the ability to determine our happiness, through the three actions of what we think, how we speak and how we act.

*“May every link in Amida’s golden chain of love become bright and strong, and may we all attain perfect peace.”*

It concludes with one’s concern or prayer for the welfare of all others, wishing for all beings to reach the ultimate Buddhist goal of attaining perfect peace of Awakening. This line is rooted in the realization that one cannot be truly happy if others are not also spiritually happy, in the same way that we cannot feel fully safe from the coronavirus until others in the community, the nation, and the world have also overcome it.

In Concluding

In the end, the Buddhist aim is to have everyone engage in the ‘prayers for Buddhist Awakening’ as expressed, for example, in the “Golden Chain.” However, many in the world, even many Buddhists, are engaged in petitionary prayers. I personally do not look down on that act or feel that they are not being “true” Buddhists. I, too, understand how life is so hard at times and how unfair it can feel. I, too, at times want to pray in a petitionary fashion, as I do in the case of our family member encountering a life-threatening illness. Oh how I wish that there were a Buddha, Bodhisattva, or heavenly beings that could grant our petitionary prayers! On the other hand, I have no appetite for secular benefits such as Stephen’s brand new car; the car may be dear to Stephen, but it is nowhere comparable to a life of a young adult as she fights for her life.

Further, in my view, in this realm of *saṃsāra* (cycle of births and deaths) we are unable to eliminate all the difficulties of life on the horizontal level so as to get things to go our way. So, what is called for is to cultivate the vertical path. In so doing, even if we find ourselves engaging in petitionary prayers for such cases as the grave illness of our loved ones, the truth that we come to realize through the vertical dimension will enable us to withstand and override any outcome on the horizontal level. Thus, let us continue practice and actualize the ‘prayers for Buddhist Awakening’ so as to live a life of greater gratitude, deeper meaning, and richer inner peace!

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Born in 1947 in Japan, he moved with his family to Mountain View, California at the age of 10. After attending public schools, he received his education at Stanford Univ. (B.A., Cultural Anthropology), a temple in Thailand (as a monk), Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS), Berkeley, California (M.A., Buddhist Studies), Tokyo University (M.A., Indian Philosophy), and Univ. of California at Berkeley (Ph.D., Buddhist Studies).

After serving as Associate Professor and Assistant Dean at IBS for 10 years and a resident priest for three years in a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist temple in California, he taught as Professor of Buddhist Studies at Musashino University for 20 years.

He currently serves as Chairman of the Editorial Committee of the Chinese Buddhist Canon English Translation Project sponsored by the Society for the

Promotion of Buddhism (BDK). Adjunct Researcher at the Hongwanji Comprehensive Research Center.

He is the Past President of the Int. Assoc. of Shin Buddhist Studies as well as the Japanese Assoc. for the Study of Buddhism and Psychology.

His publications in English and Japanese include *The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine* (The State Univ. of New York, 1990), *Ocean: An Introduction to Jodo Shinshu Buddhism in America* (WisdomOcean Publication, 1997), *Amerika bukkyo* (in Japanese, meaning “American Buddhism”) (Musashino University, 2010), *Buddhism on Air: Kaleidoscope of a Growing Religion* (Buddhist Education Center, 2015) . The most recent book is *Jewels: An Introduction to American Buddhism for Youth, Scouts and the Young at Heart (With a Bit of Humor)* (BDK America: 2020). His English books have been translated into Japanese, Chinese, and Portuguese.

Dr. Tanaka is the 2017 recipient of the 27th Nakamura Hajime Eastern Study Prize, awarded by the Eastern Institute and the Indian Embassy in Tokyo to scholars who distinguish themselves in the field of Indian and Buddhist studies. He was the object of a one-hour NHK (public television in Japan) Educational Television documentary series entitled “The Age of Kokoro (heart/mind)” on April 8, 2018.

His three grown children reside in the U.S., whose occupations are in social justice, education and medical research, respectively. Finally, he recently became the proud grandfather to Paxton, who represents the sixth generation of Tanakas in America.