



Mantō-e 万灯会

## The Moral of the Story

One of the most central concepts in Buddhism is karma. This concept means that we are bound by the spiritual effects of our actions. If we do bad things, our life is affected by our choices and takes a negative course. If we do good things, we are often rewarded for them. This thinking also extends to the Buddhist belief in reincarnation: karma decides what kind of existence the soul will be reborn into, so the effects of actions aren't only felt in one life, but over multiple lives.

Buddhism is often described as being uninterested in issues of morality. Since it considers everything to be temporary, relative, and having no fixed value of its own, Buddhism is all too easily mislabeled this way. And yet, karma is clearly based on a distinction between good and evil. This brings up an interesting question: who decides what is good or

bad, and according to what standards? Without a fixed moral standard that is used to judge actions, there could be no karma. Everything would be completely arbitrary from our point of view, and as far as our understanding of morality goes, there would be no point in trying to do the right thing and stay clear of evil.

Since the whole system of Buddhism is based on karma as a rational and predictable mechanism, it follows that Buddhism does believe in some kind of morality. It also means that someone, or something, must be in a position to judge the actions of all beings, decide whether or not they meet the moral standard, and give them their proper punishment or reward. Of course, the typical view in Buddhism is that this whole process simply happens on its own, as a sort of natural law, with no one to direct it. But this doesn't explain how moral and immoral actions

come to be identified as such and distinguished from each other.

So, who might that be? Who stands outside karma and looks on it from a neutral point of view, as any impartial judge should? One possible answer is that it may be a Buddha—a person who has managed to defeat karma and be finally released from it. But it can go even further than that; karma itself may be a thinking, judging entity that makes those decisions. While Buddhism has a reputation of being an “atheistic religion,” the question of morality in karma could show that this isn't quite so. Buddhism may, after all, be pointing in the same direction that some other religions do; and it is our job to look in that direction and decide for ourselves what we see there.

(Dan Bornstein)

人と生れた悲しみも  
知らないものは  
人と生れた喜びも  
知らない

## Those who do not know the suffering of human life, do not know its true happiness.

Kaneko Daiei

Born as a prince of the Śākya clan, Śākyamuni Buddha grew up in a palace, surrounded by pleasure and not aware of the miseries of life. One day, he decided to leave the palace to see the world outside. At the east gate, he saw an old man, suffering from his age. At the south gate, he saw a sick person, suffering from his illness. At the west gate, he saw a congregation of mourners, suffering from the death of a loved one.

Then, at the north gate, he saw an ascetic monk, who seemed to be completely at peace with himself. This incident became Śākyamuni's motivation to leave the palace and enter the path of religious practices.

Old age, illness, suffering, and the fact that we cannot choose the place and time in which we are born freely, are causes for our suffering. No matter how privileged we are, everybody, without exception, will become old, suffer from illness and die. Although it is important to be aware of the sufferings of human life, this is no reason to become fatalistic or pessimistic. On the contrary, just like Śākyamuni Buddha, the awareness of suffering can become our vehicle to find real happiness.

In Shin Buddhism, it is very important to listen to the Buddhist teachings. Not just listening with our ears, but listening with our hearts. When we then

reflect on the teachings in our everyday lives, we become aware of our sufferings and that of our fellow beings. And we recognize the difficulty in overcoming these sufferings by our own willpower. This awareness helps us in letting go. Letting go of our ego, our self-centeredness, our desire to have everything going exactly the way we want it to, and our attachments.

This is when, for the first time, we are able to truly entrust ourselves to the dharma with our whole being.



## Things Worth Knowing about Shin Buddhism

### Shaving the Head

I thought that priests had to shave their heads, but it seems that those in the Jōdo Shin Buddhist school do not. What is the reason for this? Also, what is the meaning of shaving one's head in Buddhism?

In Buddhism, priests and monks shave their head when entering the Buddhist order, leaving behind vanity in order to eliminate delusions, which are impediments to their religious training.

This originated in Śākyamuni

Buddha having cut off his hair with a sword upon leaving home for the religious life. Buddhist renunciants would shave their head as proof that they were his disciple.

### The Ordination Ceremony

In the Ōtani branch of the Shin Buddhist school, male candidates shave their head when they are ordained as priests. Women tie up their hair into a bundle, and are not required to shave it. One can become ordained in the Shin school after turning nine, the age at which Shinran entered the Buddhist order. During summer vacation in August, one finds many school-age children with shaved heads at the branch's Higashi

Honganji head temple. However, they do not have to keep their heads shaved after being ordained.

This differs from other Buddhist schools in Japan. Priests in them often keep their heads shaved throughout their life. Some, however, choose not to.

In the Jōdo Shin Buddhist school, while one becomes a priest after undergoing ordination, priests do not renounce the secular world. While

living the same lives in society as other Buddhists, they spread the Buddha's teachings. This is the reason why there are no rules requiring them to shave their head.

Next time you are at a temple, pay attention to whether or not the priests have shaved heads. If they do not, then they probably belong to the Jōdo Shin Buddhist school.

### The Kikyōshiki and Head Shaving

In the Kikyōshiki, Shin Buddhists vow to be a disciple of the Buddha. When doing so, the person leading the

ceremony touches a razor to participants' heads three times. While the leader does not actually cut their

hair, just like the ordination ceremony, this is done as a sign that one is now a disciple of the Buddha.

## Honganji's Fountains and Water Pipe

Just in front of the Goeidō-mon, the big gate on Karasuma Street, there is a large median filled with greenery. On it there stands a lotus-shaped fountain designed by architect Takeda Goichi based on a design by the Nihonga painter Takeuchi Seihō. The area around the fountain is a resting spot where one can enjoy different sights depending on the season. With its plentiful flowing water, it provides a nice cool respite from the heat on hot summer days.

This fountain used to be connected to Higashi Honganji's novel fire prevention system that was designed by engineer Tanabe Sakurō, who constructed the Lake Biwa Canal. Fires had destroyed the temple four times between the turn of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth century. In 1897, a French-made cast iron water pipe was laid to supply water from Lake Biwa so that future fires could be prevented.

Work on the pipe began in July 1894. It covered a distance of approximately 4.6 kilometers and ran through the center of Kyoto. The water flowed through the pipe thanks to natural water pressure resulting from elevation difference, and was used to create a curtain of water around the Goeidō and Amidadō halls. In 1895 piping construction on the temple's grounds went into full swing, and faucets were constructed around both of its halls. In the following year pipes were installed on their roofs, serving as drenchers. In the case of a fire, hoses running from these pipes would be attached to the faucets.

The Honganji's water pipe was later extended to the Goeidō-mon after its completion in 1911, then supplying water to the nearby lotus-shaped fountain. With Lake Biwa's water also filling the temple's moat, as well as the pond at Shōsei-en (the Higashi Honganji garden near the temple's main grounds), the ecosystem of Shiga prefecture's Lake Biwa was alive at the temple for a good part of the twentieth century. However, in 1979, the pipe ceased to be used due to deterioration, and today the lake's water is no longer found at the Higashi Honganji.

