

Do Buddhists Pray?

A panel discussion with Mark Unno, Rev. Shohaku Okumura, Sarah Harding and Bhante Madawala Seelawimala

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Buddhadharma: Perhaps we could begin our discussion of the role of prayer in Buddhism by considering the Pure Land tradition, which is renowned for supplicating or invoking what it calls “other power.”

Mark Unno: One of the primary practices of the Pure Land tradition is intoning the name of Amida Buddha. In the Shin school, we say *Namu Amida Butsu*, which roughly translates as “I take refuge in Amida Buddha,” or “I entrust myself to Amida Buddha.”

Saying this name is understood as an act of taking refuge, or entrusting. This concept of entrusting, known in Japanese as *shinjin*, is widely regarded as a key to the Shin religious experience. *Shinjin* is often rendered in English as “true entrusting.” Understanding true entrusting can be helpful for understanding the nature of supplication or devotion in this tradition.

On the one hand, *shinjin* means trusting oneself to the Buddha Amida, through saying the name. On the other hand, true entrusting is an expression of the practitioner’s truest, deepest nature. For that reason, one of the primary teachers in the Shin tradition, Shinran, taught that true entrusting is also none other than one’s own buddhanature. The force of true entrusting is the nature of Amida Buddha itself, something beyond the merely human, and it is one’s true nature.

The Shin tradition is sometimes considered to be very individually oriented—the perception is that the individual seeks salvation in Amida Buddha. Actually, the religious significance of saying the name and of true entrusting is to open up or partake of the vow of Amida Buddha—originally made at the time of being a bodhisattva—to bring all beings to enlightenment and liberation.

Buddhadharma: Aside from representing one's true nature, does Amida Buddha offer assistance to the practitioner?

Mark Unno: On the philosophical level, what it really offers is the vow to bring all beings to liberation or enlightenment. If one wants to address what actually happens in individuals' lives, one will find that followers of the tradition supplicate for a variety of goals that may or may not be addressed by the deeper philosophical understanding I described.

There are people, for example, who will invoke the name *Namu Amida Butsu* in the hope of fulfilling all the usual human hopes and desires, such as health, wealth, and in pre-modern times, successful crops. Just as one might find in any tradition, not all followers have necessarily attained the philosophical understanding of devotion to Amida Buddha. People may supplicate for the fulfillment of various needs, and the Shin tradition does not deny these needs. Every human being has desires. Whether we express them in an explicit form of practice or not, at some level we are hoping—and in a sense praying—that we and others, especially those who are close to us, are healthy, that we can pay our bills, and so forth. The Shin tradition does not deny this. In fact, it addresses this quite specifically.

The story of Amida Buddha, and the story of the Pure Lands, is a story of a world in which *all* levels of suffering are addressed. On the one hand, there are ordinary human needs and they are included in the specific vows of Amida Buddha—vows for a world in which there is no illness, a world in which everyone has enough food, a world in which everyone is liberated from all kinds of suffering. But ultimately, all these conditions can only truly come to fruition by conforming to the vow to liberate all beings.

It is better to illustrate this than to explain it philosophically. Consider a community of people who want to create a wonderful place to live and they all share this same desire. They will achieve all their ends—including financial stability, education, medical needs—only if there is the right spirit of cooperation, of interdependence, of mutual awareness. So even though many people wish for the fulfillment of ordinary desires, ultimately we can only achieve them with the right spirit.

The Shin tradition addresses all levels of human needs, and I sense that all of the other traditions also address all of these issues. Such ordinary desires are part of our human experience. The tradition does not say, "You must not wish for good health; you must not wish for long life." We understand these wishes as part of everyone's life. Yet, as our awareness deepens, perhaps we can come to a deeper, truer understanding of our nature.

Buddhadharma: Reverend Okumura, in the Zen tradition there doesn't seem to be much reference to prayer. Are there practices of prayer, devotion or supplication in Zen?

Reverend Shohaku Okumura: Many think of Zen in opposition to Shin or Pure Land Buddhism. People sometimes think of Zen as a "self power" practice. I think, however, we must be very careful about the meaning of "other power" and "self power." As Dogen Zenji said, "To study the Buddha way is to study the self." But he also said, "To study the self is to forget the self." Dogen called our practice of meditation *shikantaza*, which means "just sitting." This "just sitting" is actually the way we study the self, but this is also the way we forget the self.

This self is not really the self as an individual, which is separate from others or from other power. When we sit, we sit on the ground that is beyond the dichotomy of self and other. In that sense, our sitting practice is a prayer to give up the self and to put our entire being on the ground of interdependent origination.

We see ourselves as individuals separate from the other, based on a distorted belief or assumption. Then we sit on the cushion and we just sit, with an upright posture and our eyes open. We don't use any visualization or mantra or even counting or watching breaths. We merely sit. In that way, the self can give up—we can put more emphasis on reality rather than on this fixed individual self. In that sense, this is a prayer. It does not mean that the self prays to the other for some benefit, but rather we place our entire being on the basis of interdependent origination. That is an essential meaning of prayer in Buddhism.

Buddhadharma: Who or what is it a prayer *to*, then?

Reverend Okumura: We would have to say it is to the self-existing, but this self is not the self that is opposed to other.

Mark Unno: This way of thinking is very resonant with the sense of “other power” in the Shin tradition. The “self power” is considered illusory because it is based on the ego, which doesn't exist as an entity. “Other power” in that sense means *other than ego*. One's true nature is the nature of Amida Buddha, which is none other than the universe itself. When one speaks of one's own true nature, that nature is not separate from other natures.

In our daily lives, however, we are usually not aware of our own nature at that level. Rather, we must see and recognize and grapple with the karmic self, the delusory self. In talking about human beings, therefore, the Shin tradition generally focuses on the karmically problematic self. But ultimately the deepest nature of the self is none other than Amida Buddha. In terms of actual practice, though, it is important to emphasize grappling with the karmically evil self.

Reverend Okumura: In Pure Land Buddhism or Shin Buddhism, the other power equals the self. We know in practice that the self includes all beings, who exist as interdependent origination, which is the universal self. There is basically no difference, then, between Dogen and Shinran.

Buddhadharma: Dogen goes on to say, “When you forget the self, you are enlightened by the 10,000 dharmas.” Are the 10,000 things the same as the other power?

Reverend Okumura: It is the power beyond self and other. In Pure Land Buddhism, it is called “other power.” In Zen, we call it something like “Ten Direction World.” In that sense, the self and the other are not opposed to each other.

Buddhadharma: Bhante Seelawimala, what is the Theravada tradition's view of other power and self power, and of supplication and prayer generally?

Bhante Wadawala Seelawimala: In Theravada Buddhism we don't get into the discussion of self power or other power. We don't use the notion of “power” in the same way to begin with. We believe our minds are weak in certain areas of our thinking. The ordinary mind is not working to its fullest capacity, but we can correct its drawbacks by proper mental exercises, by following the step-by-step guidance of the Buddha. Gradually, the mind starts to work properly and see things clearly. As a result we can overcome our suffering, frustration and fear.

Prayer is not a necessary part of the process of mental exercise as taught in the Theravada tradition. We discuss these matters in completely different terms than we have heard from Reverend Okumura and Professor Unno. The language is quite different.

Buddhadharma: In Theravada, are there any deities or universal buddhas or other such principles?

Bhante Seelawimala: That is not part of our language. We don't regard the Buddha as

universal spirit, or self as universal self, or personal self. We don't discuss things in those terms. We don't have any power beyond dhamma. Dhamma means things as they really are, the power of cause and effect, *dhammata*—real knowledge of how things are. That genuine knowledge—knowing what causes what—can be used to improve our condition.

For example, if we understand that we are ignorant of how things work, we see what causes the ignorance. That help came from the Buddha, to be sure. We appreciate the Buddha for that and we appreciate the dhamma, which is the knowledge given by the Buddha. We appreciate other people who use the knowledge and thereby improve their conditions. That is called sangha. We respect Buddha, dhamma and sangha as our model and our support system, but the actual work is done by ourselves. We don't have the notion of praying *to* someone or asking for help *from* someone.

Buddhadharma: In the Vajrayana tradition, there is strong emphasis on blessings and connection to the lineage of buddhas, bodhisattvas and teachers, who have the power to assist practitioners on the path. What, then, is the Vajrayana view of prayer and seeking the assistance of outside beings?

Sarah Harding: Vajrayana is famous for having quite possibly more deities than any other religion on earth. I'm a little reluctant, though, to make this dichotomy between self power and other power. Making that distinction between self and other is what is problematic in the first place. The one thing that seems to run through all traditions of Buddhism is that the problem of something either existing or not existing—something being either inside or outside—is in itself the problem. All the different ways of looking at that are just different language to get at the same thing.

Vajrayana accepts all of the views that have been mentioned already, and includes for instance, supplication to Amida Buddha. It also accepts formless meditation, looking directly at just what is. In Vajrayana, all the traditions are seen as skillful means. In fact, if there is one thing that Vajrayana defines itself as, it is as a vehicle of skillful means.

So all of the ways of practicing previously mentioned are seen as different kinds of skillful means, as efficacious for different kinds of situations. I agree that if there is too much emphasis on the self, just on following oneself, that could be problematic, because most people tend to feel weak and incapable of extracting themselves from their conditioned existence simply through the power of meditation. In that case, it might be very good to open that up to the interconnectedness that exists beyond the self.

As Master Dogen says, if you try to find the self, you find everything. Vajrayana allows there to be vast and myriad ways of approaching the interconnectedness, while all the time accepting that you're not going to find it to be either other power or self power.

Buddhadharma: So if there is no self and other, why are there practices of supplication at all? Why is that a skillful means?

Sarah Harding: It is skillful means for the very reason that we are conditioned to a certain dualistic way of thinking, as Professor Unno mentioned at the beginning. When you are praying to Amida, ultimately that may be buddhanature. That is not to say, though, that one view takes superiority over the other—that this is the absolute truth, whereas the other is relative truth, or one is definitive whereas the other is interpretive. All these means are quite possibly a way to get past that kind of dichotomizing. In the meantime, they provide effective language, effective mind sets, which work for different kinds of people.

Mark Unno: The language of self power and other power in the Shin tradition—and the practices associated with that language—arose precisely to dissolve, transcend or liberate

the practitioner from these implicit dichotomist assumptions in daily human life, which are themselves the source of suffering.

The language was not formulated in order to establish self power and other power as entities, but to do precisely the opposite. The language is there to address the fact that, either explicitly or implicitly, people live their lives as if they are separate beings. As Ms. Harding said, this language is an expression of skillful means. In the Shin tradition, Shinran himself addresses Amida Buddha as the Buddha of Skillful Means.

Sarah Harding: I agree completely with that, and of course we certainly do behave as if there is a self.

Buddhadharma: Bhante, all of our panelists are discussing prayer in a very nondual way. Is there anything the Theravada tradition comparable to this particular approach to prayer?

Bhante Seelawimala: If any practice that leads to ultimate purity, or unlimited perfection, is defined as a prayer, then Buddhism is a prayer. Because that is what Buddhism is: it is a practice that leads to an end. There are two areas, theory and practice. Practice is what you really do, and theory is why you do what you do, and what you are going to get by doing what you are doing. What is the goal, the end result of the practices? In that sense, perhaps we could say it is prayer.

Sarah Harding: There is another way of seeing prayer. It can be seen as aspiration, as setting your mind in a certain direction. Whether you have a particular other being or other power in mind is not necessarily the main thrust of it; the main point is that you are putting your mind in that direction.

For instance, if you send a Christmas card that says, “May there be peace on earth,” you are not necessarily asking someone to bestow it; you are simply making that aspiration.

Bhante Seelawimala: I agree with that. That is very clear from our tradition also. We constantly remind ourselves what our goal should be. That comes in many different ways, in many kinds of language.

Mark Unno: When one makes that aspiration, which can be considered as the working of bodhichitta—the aspiration for enlightenment—one is tapping into the path. In vernacular terms, the path may be understood as the bringing of all beings to enlightenment. In that sense, even if there is a specific object, it embraces the whole world in an awareness of this larger path.

Buddhadharma: In his book *Secret of the Vajra World*, Reginald Ray talked about the importance of “unseen beings” in Vajrayana Buddhism. He says that while ultimately the buddhas, bodhisattvas and enlightened teachers are not distinct from our own true nature, that this is also true of all beings in the universe. Therefore, these cosmic or unseen beings have at least as much relative existence as the other beings we relate to. So the question is, are the beings or forces we may relate to through prayer or supplication any less real than you or I?

Sarah Harding: To attribute degrees of existence to beings based on whether they are seen or not seen is, I would think, a product of scientific thinking. I wouldn't want to try to do that. At the same time I wouldn't want to either refute or prove the existence of any such beings. How could you eliminate all forms of energy and force just because you don't see them? In that sense, I agree that maybe ultimately they are our own nature, but that wouldn't be reducing them in any way. Our tendency to reduce something by saying, “Oh, it's *only* in the mind” is a mistaken approach.

It is not *only* the mind; it is everything. It would be foolish to single out what you see with your eye sense and not to relate to the whole universe of energy. Whether they have more existence or less existence—or whether you even want to relate to them or not—it would be limiting to make those kinds of judgments. The dichotomy is the whole problem. Whether it is inside your mind or outside your mind is a problematic way of thinking about it.

Mark Unno: Recently I had an opportunity to speak to a Shin Buddhist congregation, and they asked me to address the children first. On such occasions, I often ask the children questions, and most children who responded were between five and ten years of age. I started by asking them, “Where is Amida Buddha?” The first child said, “Everywhere.” And then I asked, “Where is everywhere?” The second child said, “Here.” I asked, “Where is here?” The third child said, “In *your* heart.” And I asked, “Where is *my* heart?” The fourth child said, “In *my* heart,” and pointed to his heart.

Of course, in the Shin tradition an awareness in the heart, however profound, remains insufficient. Practice requires the full manifestation of body-mind-heart, in which Amida Buddha as formless compassion becomes manifest through the embodied act of saying the name.

Buddhadharma: People often talk about praying “from the heart,” and perhaps every human being has an elemental need to do something called “pray.” Is Buddhism’s approach to prayer to try to direct that powerful impulse toward enlightenment?

Bhante Seelawimala: In the Theravada tradition, we are very reluctant to use the word “prayer” when we speak English. We don’t even think of it as a Buddhist word. In the early Buddhist traditions, in the canonical texts, there is nothing related to prayer. But nowadays, as you said, prayer is a human need. I think that’s why people in all traditions have used certain verses and stanzas and mantras.

Still, we are reluctant to use the words “prayer” or “pray.” I never say, “I’ll pray for you” or “I’ll think of you in my prayers.” Even the phrase “prayer meditation” is not used when we speak in English. The main reason is that in the Theravada tradition, we don’t have bodhisattvas or other deities we pray to, as in the Mahayana tradition.

Sarah Harding: In that light, what is the significance of the Theravada practice of reciting sutras?

Bhante Seelawimala: We recite the sutras often to remind ourselves what the teaching is; and sometimes as opposed to prayer, we say, “I will send you some blessings.” I recite the sutta and then at the end of the recitation, I think of the person who might need help, and I send a blessing for that person for better health, or for whatever they need. That is my personal thing; I do it for them. But the recitation of the sutta is not the prayer itself. Mainly, we recite the suttas to remind ourselves what the dhamma is, not as a prayer.

Sarah Harding: You are setting the mind in a certain direction, then?

Bhante Seelawimala: Yes. I understand it as that.

Buddhadharma: In the Vajrayana tradition, there are supplications that many sanghas recite as part of their daily liturgy, such as this one attributed to Gampopa:

*Grant your blessings so that my mind may be one with the dharma.
Grant your blessings so that dharma may progress along the path.
Grant your blessings so that the path may clarify confusion.
Grant your blessings so that confusion may dawn as wisdom.*

Ms. Harding, what is the nature of these blessings being asked for, and when you are doing supplications like this, who are you addressing?

Sarah Harding: Anybody who will listen! I would think you are reciting these lines to set your mind in a certain direction. Just as with reciting sutras, you are reminding yourself of the teachings. You are wishing that *you* may have the realization you are praying for.

In terms of another being granting the blessing, if you come from a tradition, there are the ancestors of the tradition. If they have had an effect on you through their teachings, you couldn't say that they do not exist now. You are the accumulation of all of their wisdom, because they have passed it on through the teachings.

You acknowledge that presence just because it's there. You don't have to think that they are alive as people somewhere. This is talking about wisdom that you acknowledge, just as you acknowledge the Buddha's wisdom. Again, however, I don't want to reducing it by saying "Oh, it's *only* in my mind." You acknowledge all of the wisdom that has come from the various ancestors and that may exist currently in a variety of ways. That is who you are supplicating—whomever will listen.

Buddhadharma: In the Japanese tradition, there is a strong sense of reverence for the patriarchs and ancestors. In Zen, what is the relationship between the current practitioners and the ancestors?

Reverend Okumura: In one sense, those people are models of our practice. They are the predecessors who practiced the way we are following. To study and practice, we follow the same motives they followed. People who practiced this way in such difficult situations, because of their bodhisattva vows, also serve as a kind of encouragement for us. We remind ourselves that our dharma teaching and practice has been transmitted from Sakyamuni Buddha to us through those people. We also express our gratitude; because of their practice and teaching, we can continue to practice.

Buddhadharma: This seems similar to what Bhante Seelawimala described as the Theravadan understanding.

Reverend Okumura: I think so. I was once asked by some Catholics to talk about prayer in Buddhism. In Japanese, the word "prayer" translates as "*inori*." But there is no *inori*, or "prayer," in the Buddhist dictionary. Originally, there was no such thing as prayer in Buddhism. I did find the equivalent of *inori* in the Mahayana Buddhism tradition, which is "vow," or "bodhisattva vow."

Mark Unno: In the Shin tradition, we also don't use the word "prayer." That term has a specifically hopeful association, which may not be helpful to the understanding of Shin or other Buddhist traditions. At the same time, the common understanding of prayer in Western culture is often not an accurate representation of what prayer is properly understood to be in the Christian tradition. It is a reduction, a popularized notion that doesn't carry deeper significance. It could be helpful for us to appreciate that Buddhism also has a contribution to make to the ongoing meaning of the term "prayer," since meanings are always changing.

Bhante Seelawimala: This might be a good opportunity for us to define what prayer is from the Buddhist perspective. As people have been saying, in this culture when you hear the word "prayer," it has a different connotation than what we have been talking about.

Buddhadharma: It seems we have not used "prayer" so much to denote a relationship between a suppliant and a higher being but a process of opening or surrendering.

Bhante Seelawimala: If you have some word that represents a non-being, that also might be helpful. Can it be something other than a being? Like a power, an other power, a power in general, what we call *dhammata*?

Mark Unno: What is known as “other power” in Shin Buddhism is an expression of the *dharmakaya* and *dharmata*. They are very similar.

Sarah Harding: Ultimately, everyone would agree with that. Since we are getting into terminology, I would like to add that there are two words in Tibetan that relate to this area. One is *mönlam*, which is the “aspiration” that we were talking about, directing the mind. There is another term, *solwa dep*, which means supplication, something very much like prayer in the Christian tradition. This is the skillful means of acknowledging that we live in a world of relationship, that a human being is a relating being. Beyond aspiring, it can be very effective in our practice to use the tendency we have to be relational. Prayer is an expression of that tendency.