Rev. Kakei Nakagawa, Rinban

Ocean and Shinran Shōnin: continuation of February article...

Last month, I shared the story of Soldier Takashi. He experienced the process for attaining the state of Anjin (mind in peace and joy) awareness through a horrible accident during WWII, in the middle of the southern Pacific Ocean. After changing his thinking after hearing and being reminded of the Nenbutsu (Myōgō), his experience was so precious that even the dangerous and frightening ocean became a friend who embraced and supported him.

Interestingly, Shinran Shōnin (1173-1263), the founder of the Jōdo-Shinshū school, was extremely fond of the ocean imagery. He coined the original 34 Ocean-related words and those words appeared 104 times in his works, such as “Ichijō-Kai (Ocean of the One-Vehicle wisdom)”, “Shinnyo-Kai (Ocean of Such-necessity)”, “Shinjin-Kai (Ocean of true awareness)”, “Hongan-Kai (Ocean-like original Primal Prayer)”, Daihō-Kai (The great treasure Ocean of Dharma)” as well as “Shōjī-no-Ku-Kai (Ocean of painful existence)”, “Gunjō-Kai (Ocean-like pitiable world)”, “Mumyō-Kai (Dark Ocean of ignorance)”, “Bonnō-Kai (Ocean of blind passion)”, “Aiyoku-Kai (Ocean of loves and greed)” etc., etc., etc.

All 34 words are key terms for reading Shinran Shōnin’s interpretation of Buddha-dharma in thirteen century Japan. When Shōnin uses Ocean-related coined words, each word expresses a certain aspect of “the world of Buddha” or “the world of sentient beings”. If ‘Buddha’s’ world is “Ocean”, ‘Our’ world is also “Ocean” likewise. There are no two Oceans. Much more, there never will be thirty-four different Oceans in Shinran Shōnin’s view. The world of sentient beings could turn into the world of Buddha by the inconceivable working of the Dharma on the Nenbutsu.

Looking at Shinran’s life, he was exiled to Niigata Prefecture, old-time name “Echigo” and stayed there for about 8 years. He lived in the coastal area of the Japan Sea with his family. Shinran Shōnin was supposedly held as an intense image to an Ocean. Winter violence isn’t ordinary in the Japan Sea but at the same time, same sea brings rich marine products.

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Rev. Matthew Hamasaki

This past week, I was able to make it to the movies where I saw the latest Walt Disney Animation movie, “Moana.” I had been wanting to see this movie because I love Disney movies in general and I had heard good things about it. There was quite a bit of buzz in the media as well since one of the songwriters is Lin-Manuel Miranda, the star of the hit musical “Hamilton.” I was especially excited because I felt like the studio was on a roll after “Frozen” and most recently “Zootopia,” both of which I really enjoyed.

For those of you who have not seen the movie and plan on seeing it, perhaps you should wait to finish reading this article until after you’ve viewed it as I am about to reveal potential plot spoilers. The movie is about the daughter of a chieftain of a Polynesian island and her journey to both save the people of the island and her journey to find herself. What I am concerned with in the writing of this article is the latter; how the titular character, Moana, discovers who she is.

In the beginning of the movie, there is a song where Moana’s father teaches her about the island and how the people utilize all of the resources to create a sustainable life. Since everything they need is on the island, there is no reason for anyone to leave. However, when Moana’s grandmother begins to sing she says,

“You are your father’s daughter
Stubbornness and pride
Mind what he says but remember
You may hear a voice inside
And if the voice starts to whisper
To follow the farthest star
Moana, that voice inside is
Who you are”

Although Moana does not fully understand where this advice will lead her, she ends up leaving the island and goes on an adventure that offers its different trials and tribulations, and at her lowest point in the movie she is ready to give up the task she was given the responsibility to complete. At this time, the spirit of her grandmother visits her and, in song form, asks her now, if she knows who she is.

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Shinran contacted natural rage and gentleness in each season and certainly arose an image of Ocean in depth of his consciousness. Two faces of nature, the rage and the gentleness, have produced an image of Ocean as the world of sentient beings and Ocean as the world of Buddha.

Shinran Shōnin mentions in his “Shoshin-ge” for use in these two aspects of “Ocean”;

“The reason why Śākya-muni was appeared in this world and became one and only “Nyorai (Dynamic-Buddha)” , was solely to expound the Ocean-like Primal Prayer, broad and deep. In this pitiable Ocean-like world of five defilements where even a single “Hotoke (Static-Buddha)” could not be appeared, must rely on Buddha’s natural voice (Nenbutsu) as a guide and remind his intent as the real Dynamic-Buddha.”

[“Shoshin-ge” Chapter of Sakya-muni, (First 4 Phrases)]

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Moana tries to answer back with,

“Who am I?
I am the girl who loves my island
I’m the girl who loves the sea
It calls me
I am the daughter of the village chief
We are descended from voyagers
Who found their way across the world
They call me
I’ve delivered us to where we are
I have journeyed farther
I am everything I’ve learned and more
Still it calls me
And the call isn’t out there at all
It’s inside me
It’s like the tide, always falling and rising
I will carry you here in my heart
You’ll remind me
That come what may, I know the way
I am Moana!”

After this revelation, Moana finds her strength to carry on and...if you would like to know what happens, you’ll just have to see the movie!

What I found compelling about these two excerpts was that Moana had a voice inside her that whispered to her when she needed guidance. It had always been inside her and when she quieted her mind, she could hear what she needed to in order to take the next step in her life. And, at the same time, there were many things outside of her that called to her: her home, the sea, her family, and her ancestors. All of these things were important to her and helped make her who she was, but her breakthrough was when she realized that this whisper from the inside and these calls from the outside were one and the same.

I think all of us can relate to Moana in the sense that we all have a voice inside us that helps guide us when we are troubled. And I think that we all have calls from outside to us that drive us and push us to be who we are. Of course, these are different for each person and so everyone is unique in their personalities. But, there is a universal call to all beings, a voice within everyone that resonates together: the call of the Buddha. When we hear the Buddha calling for the happiness of all beings, it is the compassion of the heart of the Buddha reaching out to the compassion in all of our hearts. And when we quiet the ego of our minds and hear our hearts whisper to us to be compassionate, we know who we are, and we respond to the call with acts of kindness. And out of the gratitude we feel, with the spontaneous recitation of “Namu Amida Butsu.”