

## Mottainai - July 2009

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When you eat at an all-you-can-eat restaurant, oftentimes you pile a lot of food on your plate and end up throwing away what you could not finish. This is like having a free day but spending the whole day without accomplishing anything. How are these situations expressed in Japanese? The phrase is *mottainai*, referring to when something useful, such as food or time, is wasted.

The 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmentalist, is a promoter of *Mottainai* as an environmental protection concept through the English phrase, "Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle".

*Mottainai* is a Japanese term meaning "a sense of regret concerning waste when the essential value of object or resource is not properly utilized." *Mottainai* is a compound word, *mottai+nai*. *Mottai* (もったい) refers to the essence of thing or the quality of entity; in other words, it is the function of body or thing. *Nai* (ない) indicates lack or negation. Therefore, the original meaning of *Mottainai* is, "the essence of the thing or body does not exist."

Let me give you an example. I have a bowl and two pencils. The function of this bowl is to serve soup or noodles, but if I put this bowl on my head like a hat, I am butchering the function or quality of the bowl, thus depicting *mottainai*. Similarly, these pencils' function is to draw a picture or to write a letter, but if I use them to pick my nose or scratch my ear, it is *mottainai*. *Mottainai*...what a waste!

When I look around this hall, I can see many people, chairs, flowers, floors, walls, electric fans, window blinds, and so on. Through the window, I can see trees, buildings, birds, the ocean, and more. Each of these beings and things has its own individual characteristic and its own reason for existence. However, if we ignore these characteristics and use the things only for our convenience, we are killing the life in them — *Mottainai*. Therefore, we must think about the individual significance and meaning in all beings and things.

As a next step, we must consider our own life's individual significance and meaning. Have you ever thought about why you were born into this world? Such a tough question we are better off asking Shinran Shonin. According to Shinran Shonin, the meaning of birth in this world is to encounter the Nembutsu Teaching, which is Amida's Universal Vow, and to encounter the decisive cause of birth into Pure Land. The Pure Land was described in many ways in Sutras as the Peace Land, Happy Land, Flower Land, Western Shore, Precious Home, and The Land of no conflict. Buddha also says that the Pure Land is the destination of life, future life, home town of life, and the returning place of life. As Shinran Shonin said, "If we fail to encounter the decisive cause of birth into Pure Land, it is the truly *mottainai* of our life."

I see the Pure Land as a place to return for eternal life. In daily life, we wake up, eat breakfast, go to work or school, and then return home. However, if we do not have home as a place to return to, even if we work hard or study hard, we cannot end a day peacefully or meaningfully; rather, our life would be like an endless journey or trip. After you prepare for a trip and head to Hilo airport, if you meet a friend who asks, "Where are you going?" you can easily answer, "Las Vegas." If anyone asks, "After this world, where are you going?" I wonder how many people could answer as easily.

Before, I thought that a journey's destination was a designated place. However, a Mr. Tomisaburo Hasegawa, a woodblock artist, said that a journey's destination is where you return to because a journey does not end until you return to your place of departure. The places you visit during a lifetime are only places to pass through on your journey.

Many Hawaii people like to go to Las Vegas for casinos, shows, shopping, and other fun activities. They enjoy themselves, maybe hoping to hit a big jackpot of \$1 million. But if they lost Hawaii as a place to return to, what would they do? Only because they have Hawaii to return to, they can enjoy their stay in Las Vegas. Likewise, no matter how great, famous, powerful, or rich you may become in this world, without a place to return to, you cannot have a peaceful, meaningful life. Life might instead be miserable, or "Mottainai...what a waste!"

September 7, 2009, is a great opportunity to attend the Shinran Shonin Commemoration Service at Hilo Betsuin, a once-in-a-lifetime chance. For Catholics, a visit or service by the Pope is of holy significance. For Buddhists, the Dalai Lama is reborn as the Buddhist leader. Similarly, for Jodo Shin Buddhists, our Monshu Eminence Ohtani is a direct descendant of Shinran Shonin and thus, is inherently our spiritual leader. Missing this precious opportunity is truly *mottainai*, so let us participate in these events and encourage friends to join us.

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