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Hearing and Gate

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Goeidō 御影堂

Self-help or Self-harm?

Knowing oneself is the greatest challenge that any person may face. And being a never-ending process of learning and practice, few can ever claim to have known themselves completely. Yet this same elusive self has become, in recent years, a supposedly clear-cut object that we are supposed to worship and follow as the highest authority in our lives.

These days we are surrounded by messages of so-called “self-help” that urge us: “Set yourself free.” “Be yourself.” “Love yourself.” “Find your passion.” “Follow your heart.” “Never give up.” Whether it’s short motivational maxims and memes that people share online, or entire books that claim to teach us how to achieve huge success in anything we want, the underlying idea is the same: there is no problem that can’t be solved by feeling good

about ourselves.

Nobody can deny that helping people feel better in their lives is a noble cause. But we should ask ourselves whether doing so under the banner of self-love can actually achieve that goal.

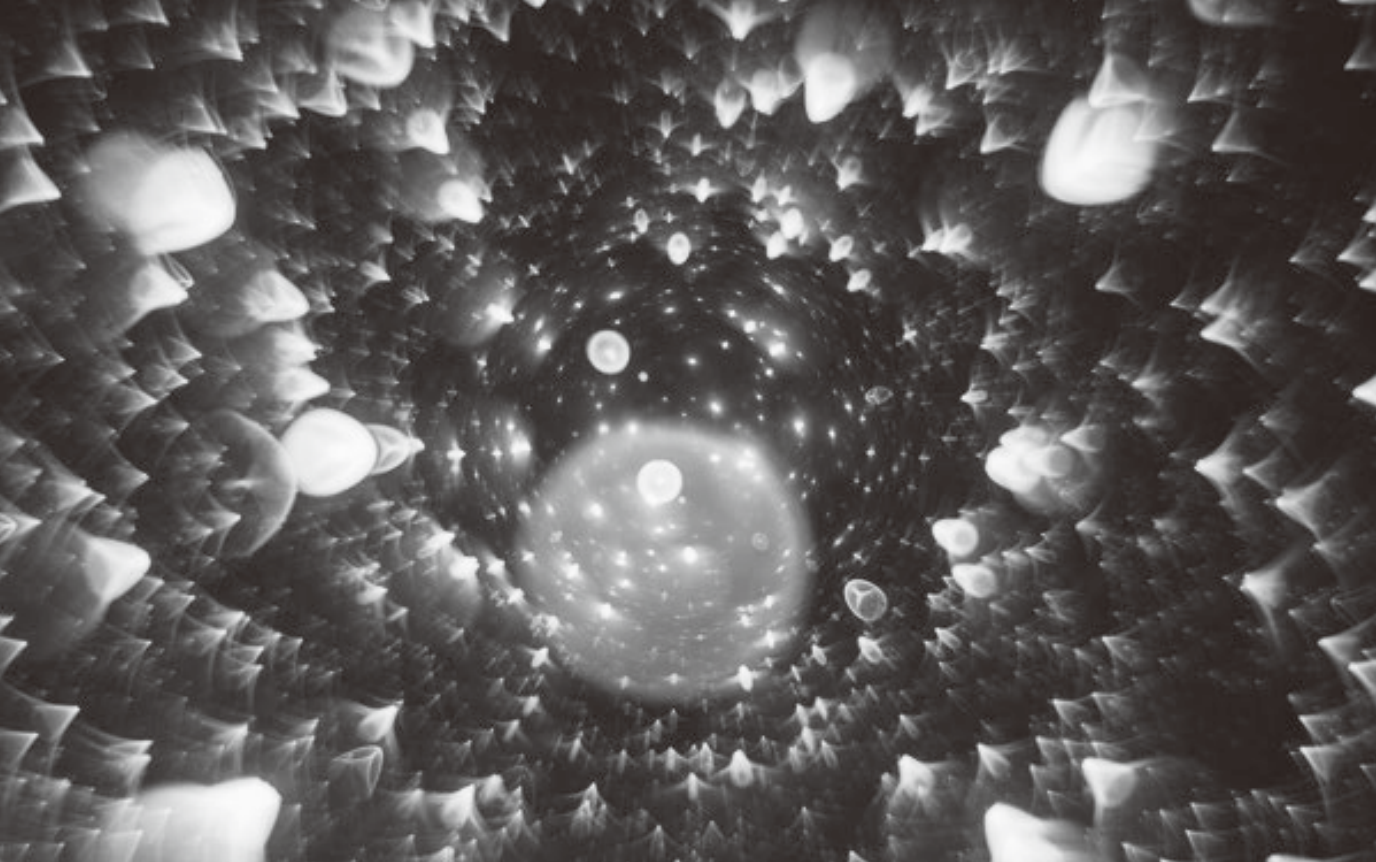
While it’s comforting to think of the self as an innocent victim of suffering, all too often the self is also the one who originally causes much of that suffering. Unless the self learns to stop creating its own problems, loving ourselves unconditionally will not only be unhelpful, but may even harm us—by rewarding and encouraging the bad behavior of an unreformed self whose highest pleasure is to make its owner miserable.

So when we say “self-help,” we first need to consider what it is that we want to help the self to do. Are we aiming to be better—or do we merely want to feel better? Being better is about how we

act toward others; feeling better is about how we see ourselves. Obviously, these are two very different directions with two very different outcomes.

To face outward and be good, rather than to face inward and feel good, ultimately requires that the self no longer remain the highest point of reference in our life. We need to recognize something higher than that as the source of our meaning and direction. True self-help is, then, one that makes us aware that the self only means something within a certain context, and helps us find that context. Instead of having us sit in front of the mirror, it makes us get up, open the door, and step outside—into the world.

(Dan Bornstein)



Leaves of Scripture

If not for the most favorable karmic combination in one's past lives, how could one ever come to cherish a faith in the Pure Land and live it accordingly?—*Kyōgyōshinshō*

Daisetz Teitarō Suzuki, trans., The Center for Shin Buddhist Studies under the supervision of Sengaku Mayeda, eds., *Shinran's Kyōgyōshinshō: The Collection of Passages Expounding the True Teaching, Living, Faith, and Realizing of the Pure Land* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

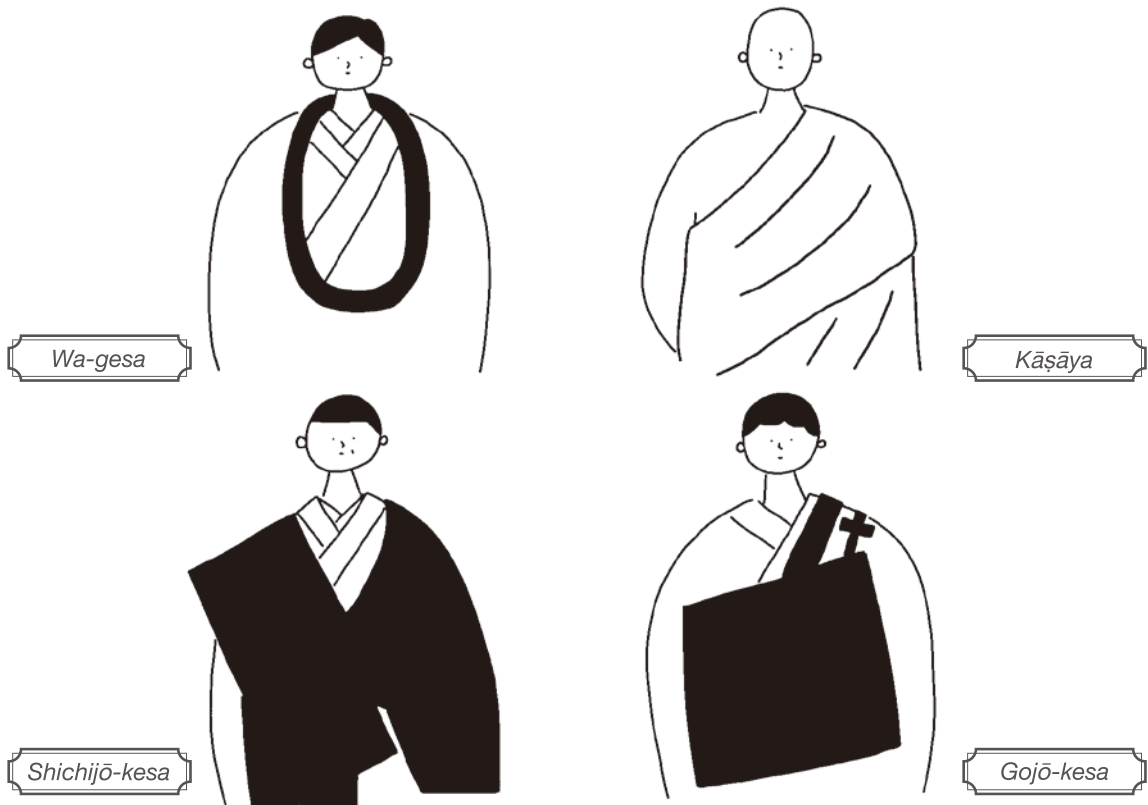
When Our Life Starts to Shine of Itself

Śākyamuni Buddha awoke to the teaching that everything in our life exists due to conditions. The myōkōnin Asahara Saichi of Shimane Prefecture, a Shin Buddhist poet who took great joy in the nenbutsu teaching, also expressed this truth that Śākyamuni realized, saying, encountered with the words, “Oh how lucky I am! / Thinking of how conditions make us what we are, now I know the conditions that have been mediating everything in my life. / Even this Saichi you see here, I too only barely came about as the result of just the right conditions.”

The “me” that is alive in this present moment and in this present place, as someone who was born thanks to an infinite number of conditions—this sheer fact is something we simply cannot fathom. Innumerable conditions had to give rise to the “me” you see here in the mirror. The fact that I was born in this era of this country, to this family, in short, the fact that “I” am this “I” of the present moment is something our mind simply cannot grasp. It transcends intellect. The fact that “I am standing right here in this place,” is a result of our having been able to encounter just the right set of condi-

tions of family, friends, and so on who are essential to our coming into being. This is all beyond the ability of our human intelligence and devices mind to grasp.

This I that I am, this me just as I am, my being the same old me—when we deeply understand just how truly precious this all is, it is like a light just went on somewhere inside. This light shining of itself, brightening my life, shares with me this truth—and what up to now seemed like insignificant daily events over which I have no control all of sudden begin to assume



Things Worth Knowing about Shin Buddhism

importance. I am made to realize that even things I dislike, even things I find, well, boring as anything, they are all the shining conditions that are making me what I am.

What is a *kesa*?

Kesa is a formal piece of clothing that Buddhist monks wear above their attire when they present themselves before the Buddha. The Japanese word *kesa* has its origin in the Sanskrit word *kāṣāya*. In ancient India, the robes that Buddhist monks wore were called *kāṣāya*. These robes were made of old scraps of

cloth that the monks sewed together. Monks were not allowed to possess any personal belongings or any valuables. This also applied to their clothing.

Because the climate in India is warm, they only wore this one simple robe, but when Buddhism was transmitted to more northern countries,

monks who lived in these colder regions wore warmer clothing beneath their *kesa* to protect themselves against the cold. In Japan, the robes that are worn beneath the *kesa* are called *hō-e*, literally, dharma robes.

What kinds of *kesa* are used?

In contemporary Japan, a variety of different *kesa* are worn, depending on the denomination and the occasion. In the case of the Shinshū Ōtani-ha, there are six kinds of *kesa* in usage: *wa-gesa*, *tatami-kesa*, *sumi-kesa*, *ao-kesa*, *gojō-kesa*, and *shichijō-kesa*. The *shichijō-kesa* is the most formal version of *kesa* and is

worn during funerals or memorial services for the founder of our school. The *gojō-kesa* is worn for regular memorial services and the *wa-gesa* is for everyday use.

Modern *kesa* are made out of new fabric, but because of their origin as humble clothes for Buddhist monks, who sewed them together themselves,

using only old clothes, new *kesa* are also consist of small pieces of clothes. A vertical row of these clothes is called *jō*. *Kesa* which are made of rows of seven (“shichi”) pieces are *shichijō-kesa*, those made of rows of five (“go”) rows are *gojō-kesa*.

Temple Services Reception Center Gallery

In the northern part of the Higashi Honganji grounds is a Temple Services Reception Center, which is used as a reception and rest area for followers and visitors alike from throughout Japan and the world. Here, Shin followers can apply to have their remains interred and undergo a confirmation ceremony, as well as purchase images for home altars.

There is also a modern white-walled gallery between this center and the Founder's Hall (Goeidō). This gallery is the "above-ground" floor of the Audio-Visual Hall, which extends three floors below ground. The Hall has cutting-edge acoustics as well as a state of the art audio-visual system. It is mainly lit with sunlight, which streams through its moon-shaped glass ceiling. This structure was designed by leading Japanese architect Takamatsu Shin, who is also a professor at Kyoto University. It was built in 1998 to mark the 500th memorial service held for Rennyo Shōnin (1415–1499), the eighth leader of the Higashi Honganji who revived the school and explained Shinran Shōnin's teachings in easy-to-understand letters.

In an effort to have this facility be in harmony with the wooden buildings that surround it, the large hall itself was placed below ground with only a simple gallery visible above ground. It has received high acclaim as an example of modern architecture that fits in well into a historical setting.

In addition to lectures, the "underground" hall hosts talks on Buddhism that any visitor to Higashi Honganji can attend. Various events are held in the above-ground gallery to share Shin Buddhism with as many people as possible. English-speaking individuals are invited to attend the multilingual exhibit on Shinran's life. Other exhibits have been held on Shinran's poems (called *Shōshinge*) as well as in celebration of a poetry collection by the author Fujikawa Kōnosuke. Last year, visitors enjoyed an exhibit of the flower arrangements offered on Buddhist altars. Also equipped with rest-rooms, the Temple Services Reception Center Gallery offers a place to followers and visitors where they can rest and experience Buddhism's teachings.

