

SEPTEMBER 2004

The Only Thing I Know in Life is Gratitude

The highlight of this past summer was our Jr. YBA, or high school age youth group's tour to Japan. This was the first time we have conducted such a tour, and it was a very wonderful trip and experience. A group of 24 young people and 11 adults, 35 in all, traveled to Kyoto, Japan, at the end of June. The purpose of the trip was to visit our mother temple, the Nishi Honganji, in Kyoto, and to experience the religion and culture of Japan.

In addition to visiting the Honganji, and attending the morning service there, we also went sightseeing to some of the famous

temples and sites in Kyoto.

One of the most famous temples in Kyoto is called, "Ryoanji." Ryoanji has one of the most famous rock gardens in the world. You might have seen pictures of it before. It is a most simple garden, consisting of mostly white rocks that are meticulously raked in a pattern, and a few other larger rocks. It is so simple, that you initially fail to see the beauty of the garden. One of the kids in our group, upon seeing the garden asked me most honestly, "Sensei, is this it?" I laughed in response, and said, "Yes, this is it." I couldn't blame the young person, because I think most people initially think there must be more to the garden because it is so strikingly simple.

Although I had been to Ryoanji several times before, this time I noticed something that was most interesting. In the back, in a corner that most people simply walk by, there is a beautiful little stone fountain, with a Buddhist saying on it. The Buddhist saying is, *Ware, tada taru o shiru*, which means something like, "All I know in life is to be contented, to be grateful." When we reflect on this statement, it is a most profound and amazing statement.

In life, we rely on our intelligence to carry us through life and to advance our careers. Our whole education from the time we are young, is focused on the learning of "things", like math, science, history, or English. We go from elementary levels of math, like arithmetic, and then learn more difficult levels like algebra or even calculus. My friend in college was a math major, and I couldn't believe the difficult and lengthy equations he had to memorize in his courses.

Even in religion, or in the study of Buddhism, one ends up learning a lot of "things," like the eightfold path, the six paramitas, the five precepts, the teachings of karma, impermanence, and interdependency. We might even study Buddhist philosophers like Nagarjuna, and his teaching of "Emptiness," or Vasubandhu's teaching of "Mind Only."

However, this statement by this Zen monk written on the fountain at Ryoanji, says, "I don't know a lot of things. In fact, I really know nothing in this world. I don't know history, or science, or

math. I don't know philosophy, psychology, or metaphysics. I only know one thing. I know how to be contented, how to be grateful."

When you think about it, what an amazing statement that is. To really and truly know gratitude, and how to be grateful – maybe that is the most important thing to know in life.

A person who only knows gratitude is unaffected by the events of the world around him. You could get a huge pay cut, but instead of being bitter or upset, you could still be grateful. "At least I still have a job." You could be severely criticized by others, and be unfazed. "I am so grateful for others who have shown me what I did not see in myself." You even could be told by the doctor that you have a terminal illness and only months to live and find a way to be grateful. "I am so fortunate that I now know there are only a few months to express my gratitude to so many people."

Really, someone who knows gratitude, knows everything that is necessary to know in life. In knowing gratitude, the ultimate source of happiness is known. In knowing gratitude, all relationships with others are harmonious, even with your enemies. In knowing gratitude, there is nothing that you lack in life. Rich or poor, sickness or health, large home or tiny shack, big Mercedes or little Pinto, it doesn't matter, because you can be grateful for whatever you have or don't have in life.

This simple saying from the Ryoanji temple, gives me a wonderful lesson in Buddhism and in life. More than the knowledge of philosophy or difficult doctrines, more than the knowledge of history or science, more than knowing politics or government, to simply know how to be contented, how to be grateful, is perhaps to know the most important thing in life.