



The Answer

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Q @ A for Shinshu Buddhists

VOLUME 02 No. 10

October 2007

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In this issue, I will be covering various questions & answers as posed by this website: <http://www.akshin.net/pureland/jodoshinshu-two.htm>

Who are Ordinary People?

Indeed, Shinran Shonin was convinced that the rules and regulations intended for the monastic community were neither effective, nor appropriate for 'ordinary people'. Consequently, Shin Buddhism focuses its attention primarily on those people who want to live their everyday-life to the full. The great majority of us are not sages and saints. Ordinary people cannot manage the demands of heavy and intensive meditative and ascetic practices. Not succeeding in the realization of enlightenment we keep on being condemned to the world of suffering.

Therefore, the 'priests' of the Jodo-Shinshu are neither monks nor priests in the sacramental meaning of the word, but only teachers, pastors, guides, 'fingers pointing at the moon'.

In this way Shin-Buddhism emphasizes the possibility for 'ordinary people' to attain the certainty of realizing perfect Nirvana in the course of their present existence. Not by their own 'meritorious deeds', but by way of surrendering themselves to the natural activity of the Infinite Light and Life : Amida Buddha's Compassionate Vow-Power that is present in all beings.

But who or what are these 'ordinary people'?

They are the weaklings, the sinners, fools and cowards. That is, all those people who, in spite of their deep awareness of their unworthy state, can't

succeed in elevating themselves to the subtle and sublime heights of meditation; neither do they succeed in completing the demanding moral or long ritual practices, nor even in being 'merely good'. Not counting the few exceptional people that are able to achieve Enlightenment by their own power, these 'ordinary people' are the majority of mankind. These 'ordinary people' are US.

The only and fundamental cause for 'Birth in the Pure Land' is thus neither moral nor ritual practices nor meditative experiences, but the one moment of total and sincere, deep and joyous surrender to Amida Buddha's salvific activity.

Why or what, then, is the Amida Buddha?

It is difficult to give a brief and concise answer to this question without involving the totality of Buddhist teachings written down in the Great Mahayana sutras, and the numerous comments devoted to them for more than 20 centuries.

Firstly we should take into account that Amida is neither a God who punishes and rewards, gives mercy or imposes tests, nor a divinity that we can petition or beg for special favors.

Historically important is the fact that in India he was given two names: Amitabha or Immeasurable Light, and Amitayus or Immeasurable Life. Light and Life in this context are used as synonyms for Wisdom and Compassion as seen in their Infinity. Therefore it is not wrong to describe Amida, as the summary of Amitabha and Amitayus, as Infinite Buddhahood expressing itself in our mind as Light/Wisdom and Life/Compassion.

In this way we could also say that Amida Buddha represents the nature of the Absolute: formless, inexpressible, beyond all relativity and discrimination, an Absolute of benevolence and energy. Amida Buddha is unimaginable.

People need to be able to conceive of things in their minds. The ideal conceptualization still accessible to human thought and feeling is the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha - Buddhahood - reduced to an image that we can see depicted in statues, reliefs, paintings or calligraphies.

Moreover, Buddhahood also has a historical embodiment: Sakyamuni, who taught people the way to non-suffering.

How about the Pure Land?

One should certainly not look for it in the sense of a geographically or astronomically situated 'heavenly kingdom'. As has already been mentioned before, the Pure Land is nothing other than Final Nirvana. In contrast to most Buddhist schools who approach Nirvana mainly in a negative way (via negativa), the Pure Land School has a clear and positive image of it.

The 'Pure Land' is not an imaginary paradise as one could be led to believe after a first reading of its description. It is better to depict the Pure Land as a kind of spiritual force-field. The source of the salvific activity in this force field is Amida Buddha. Amida here stands for Infinite Buddhahood, or in other words, all qualities and characteristics of all Buddha's. The 'Vow-Power' of Wisdom/Compassion is directed towards the Birth of all beings in the Pure Land: the realization of Enlightenment.

What then does the follower have to do in order to realize this Birth?

Well: Nothing!

Under the influence of Sakyamuni's charisma it was possible for many to realize Enlightenment. However, when the distance in time to Gautama Buddha became wider, it also became more difficult to realize this objective. The charisma of the historical Buddha weakened with time, and his followers were confronted with increasing difficulty in walking the Path to Enlightenment. For this reason we speak of the 'Age of the Decadent Dharma' (mappo), in which people are no longer capable of realizing the Pure Land as a result of their own efforts, unless of course they want to be saints.

What brings us to Birth in the Pure Land is thus not our own effort or our moral, ritual and meditative practices, but solely the Vow-Power of the Infinite Buddha. This Vow-Power can be seen as a natural Loving-Kindness that leads the follower to Nirvana, just as gravity pulls us towards the center of the earth, or as the water in a river inevitably flows back towards the ocean.

It is thus not through man, but through Buddha's salvific power that the whole process of liberation is accomplished.

We can understand this when we realize that Amida's Loving-Kindness is per definition infinite, limitless and measureless and therefore not dependent on our actions. How could the 'good-and-evil' of man be compared with this?

Our own volition, just like our whole life, is conditioned by our own variability. We are centered around an illusory 'ego' to which we ascribe a power that is obviously just as illusive. It is from this ego-centeredness that humankind draws its visions and calculations. We experience these individual calculations as an ego-screen that darkens the Light of Wisdom/Compassion.

We don't SEE this Light because we prefer not to see it. After all, we find our own visions and plans more important than the Universal activity of Buddha's Compassion.

However, if we realize our true place in this world of suffering, we can he

let go of all our meddling and illusions on a spiritual level. Only then can we distance ourselves from our ego-thought, no longer considering ourselves as center and standard of the Universe. In this 'letting go' we leave our own calculations and worries behind, we leave all dualistic and fragmented thought.

The great realization is thus not experienced as the final result of our own volition or our own striving, but as the result in time-and-space of the infinite activity of Amida's Vow-Power to liberate all beings from their world of suffering.

In a practical sense, it is thus more an 'abandoning' of all our ego-views, rather than a 'believing' in something or a set of ideas.

This 'abandoning' or 'letting go' is expressed in Sino-Japanese by the word 'Shinjin' which literally means 'Entrusting-Mind'. As a religious concept however it is virtually impossible to translate.

It is correct to say that it is an inner attitude of complete or perfect entrusting. However, it is certainly not a blind belief nor an intellectual or emotional attitude.

Shinjin is the decisive - be it unique - moment in which the "I" surrenders.

Shinjin, the sincere, deep and joyous surrender of our own salvific calculations to the tidal wave of Amida's Compassion, is the decisive and definitive awakening through which we are suddenly - sometimes even brutally - confronted with the close mutual bonds that are binding us to all beings and things in the Universe.

Together with this new awareness of forming an infinite unity, an immense feeling of humility awakens in our mind. Accounting for the true position we take in this world and, finally, realizing how futile and illusory our spiritual struggle has been, a boundless gratitude and respect grows in us, not only in relation to Amida Buddha and all that he represents, but also in relation to all beings who no longer are experienced as separate from Buddhahood.

It is these feelings of humility and gratitude that become predominant in our daily life.

This spiritual complexity of unity, co-

responsibility and gratitude is expressed by Shin Buddhists in the wording of the Name of the Infinite Buddha:

NAMO AMIDA BUTSU

Gobunsho: Hunting & Fishing 1-3

The important point of the settled mind in our tradition does not lie particularly in remaining from veil thoughts or keeping delusory thoughts and attachments from arising.

We may just carry on trading, working as servants, hunting or fishing. If we deeply realize that the Primal Vow of Amida Tathagata promises to save such worthless people like us, who are absorbed, morning and evening, in our daily engagements, deluded under the influence of our evil karma, and if we single-heartedly entrust ourselves to Amida Buddha's compassionate Vow without any doubt, while having firm assurance of our emancipation - since such a single thought of entrusting is sincere, we will certainly be saved by the Tathagata.

Beyond this, in what state of mind should we say the nembutsu? We should say the nembutsu as long as we live, acknowledging our deep indebtedness to the benevolence of Amida who saves us by settling our birth through the endowment of the power of entrusting which we thus receive.

Such people are called practicers with the entrusting heart who have attained the settled mind of our tradition.

Humbly and respectfully.

18th day of the 12th month of Bunmei (1471) - Letters of Rennyo, published by Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, Japan, 2000

A Final Note:

Many things have happened to me in the month of September, much of which I would like to forget. These incidents led me to include the articles and reading in this issue. I have always liked this letter of Rennyo Shonin, it points to the smallness of ordinary people, the need for the Amida to save one such as I, from my self-absorbed self. I read this because it is the realization that I cannot follow the 8 fold path, the 6 paramitas, the 5 precepts, for I am just a foolish foolish being. NAMO AMIDA BUTSU