

Understanding Nembutsu

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The Pure Land path in Buddhism is frequently described as the way or life of Nembutsu. But what is the meaning of Nembutsu?

Nembutsu as meditation is the Japanese term which means to think on or contemplate the Buddha. It has a long history in Buddhism and has been considered the central core of practice to gain enlightenment. Sakyamuni Buddha used this practice in order to gain enlightenment.

Over its now 2600 year history various forms of meditation evolved in Buddhism. Essentially they are the Vipassana-Samatha practice of the Theravada tradition; Ch'an or Zen (Son in Korea) developed in China and East Asia; and Tantric meditation in Tibet.

Meditation may aim at visualization, thereby creating an image of a spiritual object in one's mind with which you identify and absorb the qualities of the object. The purpose of meditation is to transform your mind and transcend all discriminations and attachment or bondage to our egos and desires.

In the Zen form of meditation, the process is to bring the mind to the limits of our attachment to words and concepts which constitute our grasp of reality. Meditation, with the guidance of a teacher and sometimes the use of a riddle-like story called Ko-an, confronts the mind with a dilemma in order to highlight the limits of our rational, conceptual categories and understandings in the realization of truth. Breaking through the boundaries of thought and word, our spirits open to experience our true nature and reality as it is. The world is not abolished, but experienced in a deeper way, essentially re-ordering the values governing our attitudes and relationships. This approach has been influential in China and Japan in the arts and even in martial arts such as swordsmanship.

As Buddhism developed over centuries, it took shape in monastic institutions where people could devote themselves to meditation and pursue enlightenment. Ordinary people, the lay community and general society, supported these institutions for the spiritual and magical benefits they augured for the country. In Japan monasteries such as the Tendai establishment on Mount Hiei was placed at a danger point in northeast Kyoto to prevent the entry of evil spiritual forces into the city. Monasteries were often in mountains because they believed divine power was concentrated there as abodes of gods.

In the context of shifting social and political conditions in China and later in Japan, together with natural disasters, plagues, famines and fires, sensitive, compassionate monks responded to the yearnings of the people for assurance and a way of salvation from the world of suffering. They interpreted scriptures in a way to discover a fast, easy and secure way for the ordinary person to gain enlightenment.

The traditional path in Buddhism required many transmigrations and lives until one cultivated sufficient merit to be able to enter the monastery and focus on the way to enlightenment. In those days people were generally locked into their social roles without the mobility we have in modern times. They might support monasteries but not be able to enter them for practice. Therefore, it would take aeons of time for an ordinary person to acquire the spiritual capacity to practice the rigorous disciplines for enlightenment.

The yearning for a surer way came to be expressed in a theory of the decline and disappearance of the Buddhist teaching and practice. As the influence of the Buddha's

presence waned in the world, people's spiritual capacity diminished. Where there was practice and full realization during the Buddha's life and in the years following, as history unfolded, there was only the semblance of Buddhist teaching and practice. In the last age there is only the teaching but no one practices it or attains realization. This was the teaching of Mappo, the last age of the Dharma.

Though the sacred texts depicted Buddhism in decline, ironically, they believed the Buddha also taught that a new path would arise in the last age with a universal teaching, enabling all people, including ordinary people, high or low, to ultimately attain enlightenment through birth into the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. This became known as the Pure Land gate or teaching. The gate is the entryway into the supernal world where the saving Buddha resides. Initially the teaching advocated various methods of meditation, particularly visualization of the Pure Land, while also proclaiming that ordinary people could use the recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha—*Namu-amida-butsu*—to acquire merit for birth into the land. The practice of reciting the Name eventually became known as *Nembutsu*, and the way of *Nembutsu* became the central practice of the developing Pure Land tradition. Its contrasting path was called the Saintly or Sage path involving all the monastic disciplines and practices current in traditional Buddhism.

The practice of chanting the Name of Amida Buddha spread widely through the various Buddhist schools as a secondary means for salvation. The non-sectarian *Nembutsu* could be recited anywhere and under any condition by anyone. It became a means of hope and perhaps the most widely employed Buddhist practice in the world at the time. The monks used it to attract the masses to Buddhism.

Pure Land Buddhism arrived in Japan in the earliest transmission (6th cent). Interest and devotion to Amida grew from the noble class down to the peasant. It reached its peak when the monk Genshin (9th-10th cent.) painted images of Amida descending to welcome devotees as they approached the Pure Land. He also organized special services for the nobility on Mount Hiei. Genshin is famous for his writing the *Treatise on the Essentials of Rebirth* (into the Pure Land). He scoured the scriptures for passages portraying the Pure Land and also hells, compiling a manual for preachers about the afterlife. Artists illustrated its depictions in graphic scrolls. Kuya Shonin, famed as the 'monk of the market place', carried the recitation of the Name into Kyoto and spread it among the general public. Perhaps the acme of development in the Heian Period (794-1285) came with the construction of the Byodoin temple in Kyoto by Fujiwara Michinaga and Fujiwara Yorimichi (1052-1053) with Amida as the central Buddha. They hoped to secure birth in the Pure Land through donations to the Buddhist Order and construction of temples paralleling the beauty of the Pure Land. A replica stands at the Valley of the Temples in Kaneohe.

With the overthrow of the Taira clan by the Minamoto a new period in Japanese political development took place called the Kamakura Era (1185-1332). Feudalism became the pattern for political relations and a more dynamic society focused on the warrior class resulted. In this context there was a religious upsurge which expressed itself in various movements. There was the renewal of precepts and discipline by the monk Myoe (Koben) Shonin (1173-1232). Zen Buddhism flourished, led by Eisai (1141-1215) in the Rinzai tradition and later Dogen (1200-1253) in the Soto tradition. Honen led a popular movement of Pure Land teaching which established the teaching as an independent sect in Japan. He had several leading disciples, most notably Shinran (1173-1263), the founder of the Jodo Shin sect. Later Ippen (1234-1289) appeared as a grand-disciple of Honen, founding the Ji-sect. The Pure Land teachers all focused on the *Nembutsu* as the path to enlightenment. Nichiren (1222-1289) exalted the Lotus Sutra as the final teaching of the Buddha for the last age. Each of these teachers selected one aspect of Buddhist teaching and practice as most appropriate or the truth for that age. They simplified teaching and practice to enable the ordinary person to receive the benefits of Buddhism in the context of daily life. In their

appeal to the masses, the various movements represent the last stage in the Japanization of Buddhism.

Honen is the pioneer in the establishment of Pure Land teaching and practice as an independent movement. According to Honen, Amida Buddha had designated the vocal Nembutsu as the practice of the eighteenth Vow for all people in the last age. In an eloquent statement in his major work: *Treatise on the Nembutsu of the Select Primal Vow* he makes it clear that Amida Buddha's Vow did not require building temples or carving images, as well as any moral or intellectual achievements as the basis of salvation and birth in the Pure Land. Only the recitation of the Name with simple faith was required.

His perspective was not altogether different from the popular teaching of Pure Land that pervaded all the sects at the time. The difference was Honen's declaration that the Nembutsu was the only way among all the forms of practice that could bring the people, monks and lay people, to sure enlightenment in this last age. In effect, Honen implied that the grand ceremonies and rigorous monastic disciplines were not necessary for salvation. This view challenged the traditional establishment which was deeply connected to the aristocratic class and political leadership. The result was the prohibition and persecution of Honen and his followers. Honen was banished to Tosa in Shikoku. Shinran was sent to Echigo in the area of Niigata.

The Nembutsu advocated by Honen was a combination of Other-Power and Self-Power. That is, the Name, which is the core and essence of the recitation practice, was invested with Amida Buddha's aeons of practice and acquired virtue. This Name was given to sentient beings as the basis for their birth in the Pure Land through recitation. It is like throwing someone a life preserver. The life preserver represents Other-Power, but the drowning person must grab hold of it to be lifted to safety. Essentially based on the Scripture, the recitation of the Name accumulates virtue and purifies one of aeons of defilement, enabling the foolish being as he is to attain birth in the Pure Land.

Honen had several major disciples who also carried on his legacy. In Hawaii we focus on Shinran the founder of the Jodo Shin sect. Shinran's teaching carried forward Honen's spirit and ideal, while developing a distinctive approach of his own. His interpretation became a major religious and social force with the appearance of Rennyo (1415-1499), the 8th successor. His eloquence and determination revitalized the movement to become the largest and most powerful Buddhist sect in Japan and the West.

Shinran's central principle makes clear that sentient beings cannot, because of their deep defilement and egoism, contribute to their own salvation in any way. It is the working of Amida Buddha. Other-Power is the only reality. Self-Power is an illusion. Trust in Amida's Vow is not self-generated but comes about through the working of the Buddha in each person's mind-heart. Salvation is by faith alone. The recitation of the Name expresses gratitude for what the Buddha has given us and not to achieve merit for ourselves. Trust in the Vow is a transforming personal experience and the Nembutsu a lens for understanding life.