

Shin Sutras to Live By

(Available from the [Honpa Hongwanji Bookstore](#) and the [Buddhist Churches of America Bookstore](#).)

Ruth Tabrah and Shoji Matsumoto, eds.

Sutras are the threads that weave the Buddha's many teachings into everyday life. "Shin Sutras to Live By" is a collection of the three primary sutras that guide, inspire, and are a source of spiritual strength and courage for Shin Buddhists everywhere.

To those who have not previously encountered the Nembutsu teachings of Shin (Jodo Shinshu), this collection of three basic sutras can serve as an excellent introduction.

To those American Shin Buddhists who have been used to chanting the sutras in Sino-Japanese, these clear, contemporary English versions can infuse the traditional chants with new meaning.

Why These Transmissions: A New Century Effort

The word *sutra* originally meant 'thread' so that literally, today, a sutra is the thread that ties the teachings of the Buddha into our lives. The historical Buddha, Sakyamuni, who lived in northern India more than 2,500 years ago gave many teachings, hundreds of which were repeated, handed down, and later written by his followers as either Sanskrit or Pali. Each sutra traditionally begins with "Thus have I heard" and does not claim to give anything like the exact words of the Buddha, but to convey the teachings as his listeners heard and understood them.

As Buddhism spread from India to Southeast Asia, and later to Central Asia, China, Korea, and Japan, the sutras were translated – not word by word but teaching by teaching, with imagery suited to the new language, the new culture, and changing times. Buddhism originally came to Japan from Korea, but Japanese Buddhist monks for many centuries also made voyages to China to copy sutras and commentaries, and to study under Chinese masters.

Shinran, whose profound spiritual insights are the basis of Shin Buddhism, based his teaching on Sakyamuni's teaching of the nembutsu in the Pure Land and the Nirvana sutras. He traced his nembutsu lineage on from Sakyamuni to the great Indian masters Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, then on through the writings of the Chinese masters Tao Ch'o, T'an Luan, and Shan Tao to the Japanese Pureland master Genshin to Shinran's own beloved 'nembutsu only' teacher, Honen.

Shinran's account of his nembutsu way, and his indebtedness to the writings of these great teachers of the past, is powerfully presented in his *Shoshinge, Hymn of the True Nembutsu*, which is a bridge between his chapters on Shin (entrusting) and Sho (enlightenment) in his six-chapter masterpiece *Kyo-Gyo-Shin-Sho*. This collection of passages and Shinran's commentaries on them, is the major resource for understanding Shinran's teaching. In most Shin temples, *Shoshinge* is chanted as a sutra each morning.

During the first century of Shin Buddhism taking root in Hawaii and other western, English-speaking areas, *Shoshinge*, like *Sanbutsuge* and *Juseige*, continued to be chanted in Sino-Japanese. Although *Shoshinge* is not in the strict sense a sutra, it can be considered a Shin sutra for it expresses the heart and spiritual lineage of Shinran's 'true nembutsu way,' Jodo Shinshu or Shin Buddhism.

For issei and nisei, the Japanese of Shoshinge and the Sino-Japanese of Juseige and Sanbutsuge presented no problem of comprehension. But as Shinshu begins its second century in the west, and expands to a cosmopolitan sangha, the magnificent meaning conveyed by these sutras is lost to many who enjoy the deeply satisfying rhythm of the traditions' chants but have little or no idea of the timeless relevance and existential depth these sutras can weave into ones life.

English is not an easily chanted language. It does, however, have its own very different and powerful rhythms. Many, like Shinshu follower George Gatenby of Australia, and ministerial aspirant Midori Kondo of Hilo, have come to prefer using the English transmissions here presented.

Shinshu is a personal experience, an individual discovery, encounter, and commitment that transforms one's life. Ritual, to be meaningful, must be understood or it becomes an empty set of habits. This small book is designed to convey the richness of Shin sutras to sansei, yonsei and gosei (third, fourth, fifth generation youth) who are not familiar with Chinese or Japanese, and to introduce the living thread of Shinshu as expressed in these three sutras to the broad range of other races and ethnic groups who are increasingly drawn to the great natural way of Shinran 's nembutsu path.

— *Ruth Tabrah*

Practicing Shinshu

Shinran says, "A Buddha is an empathetic person who experiences his (or her) oneness with everyone he (or she) meets, and a person of wisdom who experiences one-ness with the timeless cosmic reality we know as Amida Buddha."

Having had these two experiences, the Buddha is capable of teaching us to find those experiences also, in order that we may become Buddhas like him (or her). Shinshu, which is Shinran's Buddhist discipline, teaches that we ourselves are responsible for the realization of the Buddhahood which is our universal endowment through the timeless, ongoing fulfillment of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow.

We must see, feel, and deeply understand Shinshu to carry out that responsibility. We must see, feel and become deeply aware of the dynamic, transforming power of the Primal Vow, which assures universal enlightenment to all.

No matter who we are, young or old, male or female, rich or poor. Buddhist or non-Buddhist, we are all Shinshuists because we all seek to experience what is true and real. We live to become Buddhas, fully awakened, supremely enlightened ones.

We wrongly assume we can achieve this without changing our present interests and habits, without opening ourselves to inner change. We should ask ourselves whether we want to settle for a human existence in which discrimination, bigotry and ignorance abound, where hate, racism, sexism and selfishness flourish, where we live as if we believe that we will never die.

Or, whether, instead, we would rather feel an all-embracing love and respect for all of our fellow beings (including ourselves), where we live in a daily awareness of the transient nature of life, living fully each precious unrepeatable moment.

We cannot possibly settle for a blind, hateful existence, for we would be surrendering the ideal of what we know we can become if we become a Buddha. When we are willing to remove all prejudice from our thinking, and when we are willing to see the truth, to love to

be at the same time both free and responsible, the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* can contribute to the realization of our ideals.

In any well-considered list of the dozen great Oriental books, the *Larger Pure Land Sutra* is certain to appear and yet, reading it now, during the Space Age, one may wonder at first why this should be so. Since the sutra was originally written in India during the early part of the first century, the gist of what the author meant became more and more obscure with time. This was due partly to the result of the changes in words' meanings, partly the result of translation, and partly that of having been copied innumerable times.

Many of us in the modern world may read this sutra for the first time only to exclaim, "What in the world is the author talking about?!" Yet, though we may smile away the ancient world view, we somehow cannot dismiss the sutra itself. Its power to move us persists. What remains constant as we read it here and now is the profound myth of Amida Buddha which Sakyamuni, the historical Buddha, relates in this sutra on which Shinshu is based.

It goes like this. Once upon a time, when Amida Buddha was an unenlightened man called Dharmakara, he vowed that all human beings would experience their one-ness with him. Our (human) wishes are only desires unaccompanied by action, but his vow is a desire expressed in successful effort. Amida Buddha of infinite Light and Eternal Life, his Buddha land called the Land of Bliss (the Pure Land), and the name of Namuamidabutsu are the means by which we can understand the true human ideal behind all three.

These three – Buddha, the Buddha land, and Namuamidabutsu (the nembutsu) – are symbols applicable to the human condition as it exists everywhere and at all times.

So, today, we read the Sutra not as a historical description of how Dharmakara became Amida Buddha and established his Buddha land, but as the work of a Buddha who helps us become conscious of our finitude in our inward, forward movement towards the achievement of our true, authentic, infinite selves with total unconditional freedom. In this process of dynamic growth and change we become thoroughly aware of ourselves and our situation. We are awakened to the reality that each of us is both sinner and, surprisingly, at the very same instant, our own savior.

If we approach the Sutra in this light it ceases to be a "dead" classic and becomes a spirited book that reminds us we are able to encounter Amida Buddha only because we are "buddha-beings" ourselves. It is in the inward flight towards our true selves that we discover Amida Buddha. But even then we cannot discover Amida as an object, an 'it.' We become aware of Amida not by some mystical or supernatural experience, but only in the authentic exercise of our freedom. As one with Amida we are truly and wholly what we are.

If those who have been alienated from their true selves want to drive to find their way home, this Sutra can illuminate the way for it states, "Amida Buddha vowed to those who are in need of help and guidance, who are lost and confused ... that they will be enabled to restore their confidence, to awaken to their identity, their one-ness with the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light."

Joseph Campbell, the noted philosopher who restores our confidence in the power and validity of myth, aptly called Buddhism "a religion of identification" in which we move from "the darkness of ignorance to the illumination of boundless wisdom." It is this passage to our true identity the *Juseige* and *Sanbutsugemake* clear to us.

— Rev. Shoji Matsumoto

THREE SHIN SUTRAS

Sanbutsuge: Dharmakara's Song of Praise to His Teacher, Lokesvararaja Buddha

(A translation of the essential meaning of Shinran Shonin's interpretation of this gatha from the Larger Pure Land Sutra)

From the beginningless beginning
Of time itself, Dharma – the true reality of suchness –
Has constantly been evolving
In its infinite way.

Our ancestor, Dharmakara Bodhisattva,
He who is the treasure house of Dharma,
Took this name
Upon realizing his true identity
After having heard from Lokesvararaja Buddha
The teachings that pierce all illusions.

At his first encounter
With the wisdom and reality
That is our fundamental nature
And the nature of all that exists,
Dharmakara Bodhisattva experienced such happiness,
Such joy,
That he abandoned his former way of life and thought.
With his whole body,
His total being,
All energy, complete determination –
He concentrated on the ultimate state
Of becoming a Buddha,
One fully awakened to the truth
Of the reality that is the same
Throughout the universe.

Again seeking out his great teacher
Lokesvararaja Buddha,
The Buddha who is always
Emancipating the world,
Dharmakara first respectfully bowed,
Placed his forehead on the Buddha's feet
And then,
Rising to walk around the Buddha three times
While he gazed in awe from all directions
At this Buddha whom he wished to become,
Feeling the Buddha's inconceivable power,
Dharmakara put his palms together in gassho
And sang in praise.

"You, like whom I wish to become,
Have a countenance radiant with a light
Of utter sincerity, a light of boundless wisdom
Which shines on all beings
Transforming vices into virtues!

Your light is the light of compassion,
The ever-burning light-source
Of peace and happiness,
Penetrating me with its warmth.

When compared to your never-failing light
That of the most precious jewels,
That of the fiercest flames,
That of the sun and brightest stars
Are like the black holes of the universe.

Your shiny countenance,
Your most excellent features,
Your color – which embraces all colors –
Are beyond compare.
Your voice, emerging from the depths
Of your boundless compassion,
Resounds like a lion's roar throughout the universe
Proclaiming that Buddha-ness
Is my true self,
The true self of each and every being everywhere!

That sublime, most rare compassion
Arising from the wisdom-flow
Of your ceaseless activity in perfecting
Mindfulness and awareness:
Your ceaseless activity in perfecting patience,
Strength,
And reflection;
Take you beyond this world of birth-and-death
To the stage of joy and bliss
At having become the dharma.

How inconceivable that this last stage,
The fulfillment of Buddha-hood,
You, a perfected Buddha, made the choice –
Out of Great Compassion –
To return to this world as a bodhisattva
Whose dedication and yearning
Is to awaken and free each and every one of us.

In your samadhi,
So deep, so total and yet so subtle,
Having become one
With the dharma-ocean of all the Buddhas,
You fathomed its fathomless depths,
You measured its inmeasurability,
You perceived its most profound truths.

In you Abhijna, the wisdom of a Buddha
Has for all time replaced the darkness of ignorance.
In you, Mahakaruna, the compassion of a Buddha,
Has for all time replaced the darkness of lust.
In you, through selflessness, Maha-atman, the Great Self of a Buddha
Has for all time replaced the darkness
Of Self-centeredness.

Indeed, you are Bhagavat!
The Tathagata!
The world-honored one whose cosmic virtues,
Whose profound and subtle wisdom radiates
Throughout the immeasurable reaches
Of all the galaxies,
Touching the inconceivable depths of all that exists.

The impact of your enlightenment, like lightning
Striking throughout the universe,
With neither exception nor distinction transforms
All that exists in every world with Bodhi,
The innate nature of Buddha-ness,
The potential to realize what is true and real.

I, Dharmakara, yearn to experience the samadhi
Which you are experiencing.
In it, I shall open the gate of the six perfections,
The gate which includes all dharmas"
Dana-Awareness,
And the resolve to open this awareness to all:

Sila – Restraint practiced with
Ksanti, patience,
Virya, strongest effort,
Dhyana, contemplation that opens the eye of samadhi
To Prajna, the wisdom that frees and emancipates,
The wisdom of things-as-they-are.
Endlessly, without ceasing,
I shall yearn to attain
Anuttara samyak sambodhi –
The unparalleled Great Awakening
That transforms the universe
With immeasurable light and life.

This I shall carry out through my practice.
I will endure whatever must be endured
To attain this for everyone everywhere.

To all who are in need of help and guidance,
For all who are lost and confused,
Hopelessly wandering in these worlds of illusion,
I vow
They will become enabled to restore their confidence,
To awaken to their true identity,
Their great and total Buddha-ness,
Their oneness
With the Dharma that includes all dharmas,
Their oneness with me.

In every land,
Offerings to gods and buddhas are assumed
To insure the highest benefit to a devotee,
But I now establish this superior way
Of becoming a Buddha,

Which I shall follow firmly and forthrightly,
Though it is the most difficult of all difficulties.
It is a way which cannot be rivaled
Even by making offerings to gods and Buddhas
More numerous than the sand grains
In the River Ganges.

Eko

After a traditional chanting of this sutra, the four syllables *Na Man Da Bu* are repeated six times, followed by an Eko.

Eko is the Mahayana (but not the Shin) practice of transferring any merit accruing from this sutra chanting. Since Shinran abandoned this concept of the necessity of acquiring merit, and the virtue of such chanting as a means to the end of attaining Buddhahood, strictly speaking the Mahayana Eko is not compatible with Shin Buddhism.

However, the tradition of chanting Eko has persisted for centuries in Shin temples. For Rennyō Shōnin, under whose guidance Shinshū flourished in medieval Japan, the chanting of the sutra represented one's yearning to be reborn in Amida's Pure Land. The sonorous repetition of *NaManDaBu* represented being so reborn and the eko expressed the Shinshū concept of *genso bodhisattva*, returning to this world to work for the enlightenment and welfare of all.

On the next page is a new century version of Eko, in Shin terms, acknowledging the power of the Vow and its effect on one's life.

A Shin Eko

Having now received the teaching of this sutra
Which contains and conveys the innumerable virtues
Of Amida, the Buddha of Universal Reality,
The Buddha of my reality,
The Buddha whose Pure Land is our timeless home,
I vow to open to all beings everywhere,
Equally,
This joyous assurance of enlightenment,
The life-opening affirmation of wisdom and compassion
Which unconditionally embraces myself and all others,
None to be rejected,
None abandoned,
By the dynamic, transforming power of Amida's Vow.

Juseige: Affirming the Forty-Eight Great Vows

These forty-eight great vows which I,
Dharmakara Bodhisattva,
Established for myself and all beings –
None to be excluded –
Now,
Everywhere,
In the ongoing timelessness of this present moment
Affirm the reality of the infinite
Within this world of birth-and-death.

Through these vows I vow
The Vow that is primal vow of life itself.
Until this shall be fulfilled for each one,
Everywhere,
I will not accept the great supreme enlightenment.
I will not rest as Amitabha,
Amitayus,
Amida,
The Buddha of universal reality,
The Buddha of truth of things-as-they-are.

Throughout all time
In every generation of beings,
If my vow does not become
The source of wisdom and compassion,
The cause of this great awakening
In each and every one everywhere,
I will not accept the great supreme enlightenment.
I will not rest as Amitabha,
Amitayus,
Amida,
The Buddha of universal reality,
The Buddha of the truth of things-as-they are.

Upon my becoming a Buddha,
My name shall resound
Throughout the farthest reaches of the universe.
If there is even one place
Where my name is not being heard,
I will not accept the great supreme enlightenment.
I will not rest as Amitabha,
Amitayus,
Amida,
The Buddha of universal reality.
The Buddha of the truth of things-as-they-are.

To attain the great supreme enlightenment
To become the dharma teacher of gods and men,
I shall, without ceasing,
Practice the great practice: Brahma-carya,
The all inclusive
Most difficult
And final practice
Without the hindrance of desire,
In the dhyana-samadhi of contemplation
From which the purest wisdom,
The immeasurably pure compassion
Of the workings of my vow shall flow.

This Great Vow shall be all-penetrating,
Universal,
A shining light of wisdom and compassion,
An inconceivable light
Illuminating our inner darkness,
Enabling us to see our ignorance,
Our hatred,

Our unquenchable desires,
Our own deep, awesome true reality.

But the Vow's incomparable enlightenment rescues us,
Just as we are!
From the heavens of self-pride,
The hellish torments of the worlds of illusion
Which we constantly create.

The Vow's unfailing light replaces our blindness
With the eye of wisdom.
It dispels the illusions of these empty worlds
To which we cling.
It transforms the realms in which we suffer
And opens to us the real world of things-as-they-are,
The Pure Land,
The realm of this extraordinary light.
Amitabha, Amitayus, Infinite Light and Life
Awakens us to a joy that never diminishes –
The true happiness of working for the welfare
Of all beings everywhere,
The true happiness of Buddha-hood,
The universe endowment of the Vow.

For the sake of all beings,
To all, at all times, everywhere,
With the light of wisdom itself
I preach the Dharma.
My vow assures this treasure of all treasures,
The virtue among virtues,
The inexhaustible storehouse of Dharma
Which my Name shall convey.

I offer the flowers of enlightenment
To all Buddhas-to-be.
I show my reverence to each of them.
I praise each one's virtuous roots.

As my vows become fulfilled
I will be the champion of naturalness,
Freed from the proud thought of
"I am such."

A Tathagata's eye of wisdom
Penetrates even man's self-centeredness,
Penetrates conditioned and unconditioned equally,
Piercing the depths of inner darkness.

I vow that the power of my wisdom will be such
That I will become a true Buddha.
This having become so,
The cosmos will resound with the dharma.
Flowers of enlightenment
Like a rain of light
Will adorn all beings.

About *Shoshinge*

What strikes us immediately as we read Shinran's writings now is how far away and yet how close he is to us today. He wrote *Shoshinge* more than 750 years ago. Its words are not our current modern ones. They speak of a very different historical and human ambiance. Yet, he belongs as fully to our time as he did to his own. He speaks to us now, I believe, even more forcefully than at any time since his death in 1262.

Shinran begins *Shoshinge* with the exclamation: "How inconceivable! Throughout the universe the ceaseless, boundless, immeasurable activity of Namu Amida Butsu awakens me to what is real and true!" Here speaks an authentic human, and his voice is pervasive. He encountered Amida Buddha at the very center of himself, was rescued from a dead, senseless, purposeless universe and lives, even now, in the Land of Bliss.

Though Shinran died just over 700 years ago, through his writings he is still talking, thinking, practicing Shinshu, and leading us to practice it also. He wrote *Shoshinge* in the hope that we would be able to share his feelings, thoughts, and experiences, his encounters with Sakyamuni, Amida, and the seven masters of India, China, and Japan who helped him shape his nembutsu path. In *Shoshinge* he compresses all his experiences and insights into one long poem, or hymn, through which we learn to realize how we got principles by which unconsciously, we are already living our lives.

Shinran wanted us to know that our lives are more than just a simple journey from the cradle to the grave. *Shoshinge* emphasizes that we are part of that long, unbroken thread of Life which extends deep into the past. He reminds us we are responsible for helping to extend that chain into the future.

The *Shoshinge* is just a small part of Shinran's *Kyo-Gyo-Shin-Sho*, therefore it may not show us the full range of Shinran's thinking, but we can see the essential Buddhist poet in him. That poet successfully dealt with a religious experience which, almost by definition, cannot be conveyed by mere language. Shinran's images, therefore, activate us to attempt our own halting, ineffectual effort to restate the unstable. Not only does the *Shoshinge* live with us in this appealing way, but also it compels us, no matter how often we read it, to relive the enlightenment and the oneness with Amida which Shinran felt so deeply.

We all (including this writer) think we know Shinran when what we probably know is merely what we have been told to think about him. To call him "Saint" Shinran, as was the custom in the west in much of this century misleads and detracts. Shinran was a radical in the same sense that Sakyamuni was. No thinker in the thirteenth century has had as direct, deliberate, and powerful an influence upon mankind as Shinran. Refusing to learn about his reality and the reality of his Shinshu means that we will know less about ourselves and will remain forever partially blind. Who are we? *Shoshinge* will help us to find answers.

As our most lucid, trustworthy, and enlightened Buddhist poet, Shinran leads us down into those frightful, but fruitful depths where our task of relocating and rewording the reality of Amida Buddha is to be done. He tells us that the meaning of Shinjin is our relationship to Amida Buddha. We live this relationship, live within it. We are constantly renewing and recreating it and, in turn, being recreated by this relationship every day.

Trying to step out of that life to look at the relationship from a greater distance would destroy it. Unlike 'belief,' Shinjin is never a static condition to be 'had' or 'owned.' Rather, Shinjin is the result of our own decision to move toward the Amida within.

Shinran holds that nembutsu gives us Amida Buddha in the present -- not a feeling of some endlessly progressive future, onward and upward, but a sense of inner eternity in this very moment. As long as we find ourselves in nembutsu practice, our lives are meaningful.

As from the union of two opposite germ cells begin, a new life, so from the contact of we human beings and Amida Buddha springs Namuamidabutsu – a living, true reality. When we therefore hear Namuamidabutsu in the Shoshinge and take it into ourselves, we and we alone can make the Shoshinge a sutra and we and we alone can keep the teaching of Shinran alive.

— *Rev. Shoji Matsumoto*

Shoshinge: Shinran's Song of the Nembutsu

How inconceivable!
Throughout the universe
The ceaseless, boundless activity of
Namu Amida Butsu
Awakens me to what is real and true.
This is my reliance,
My refuge,
My wholehearted trust.

Namu Amida Butsu is the call of the Vow
Made by Amida,
The Buddha of Immeasurable Light and Life,
When he was Dharmakara, a Bodhisattva,
Who, coming into the presence of the great teacher
Lokesvararaja Buddha,
Was enabled to see that which is invisible
And yet visible to the mind's eye –
The Pure Lands of all the Buddhas
And how they became so.

To establish such a realm for all beings,
Whether good or evil,
A realm without discrimination or condition,
Was Dharmakara's deep yearning, his Great Vow.
He spent five kalpas –
A time and effort beyond comprehension –
Fulfilling this most excellent and rare Vow,
This dynamic Vow,
The primal Vow,
The original Vow,
By which his name conveys enlightenment to all.

Throughout the universe this Name resounds,
This Vow continues, like light
Unbounded by space or time,
Without hindrance,
Needless of cause or condition,
Illuminating our greed,
Our anger,
Our blind and calculating foolishness.

Inconceivably,
Just as I am,
This all-embracing Vow enables me to become a buddha!
Its light, in all its many facets,

Stronger than the light of the moon,
Stronger by far than the light of the sun,
Illuminates even the least particle of dust
In the countless worlds of the Universe,
Shining equally on all.

The Nembutsu of Amida's Great Vow
Is the dynamic cause for my birth
Into the realm of enlightened beings,
Jodo, The Pure Land.
Because of the Vow
My mind of true entrusting, my shinjin,
Is assured
As is my ultimate enlightenment,
Identical with that of Amida's,
Resulting in the great, complete Nirvana.

Sakyamuni Buddha was born into this world
With the sole mission of teaching
The treasure-ocean of Amida's Vow
To rescue we who constantly pollute
Our streams of birth and death.
Please listen to the truth of Sakyamuni's message!

The mind of true entrusting, shinjin,
Arises from my awakening to the reality
Of Amida's Great Vow.
No need to sever evil passions to reach Nirvana!
Ordinary people,
Holy monks,
Unbelievers,
We who break the five precepts –
All of us, equally, just as we are,
Though like various polluted rivers
Become of one taste on entering the ocean of the Vow.

To receive and be taken in
By Amida's Great Compassion
Is to be perpetually transformed,
Embraced,
Protected by its light.
Yet, while my inner darkness is thus broken,
My cloudy mists of anger, hatred, and desire
Continue to obscure shinjin's bright sky
Though shinjin, in the same way as sunlight filtered
Through mists and clouds,
Continues to cast light into the darkness below.

To receive this shinjin is to know great joy.
Simultaneously, I am emancipated
From the limbo of a world without dharma.
Of all of us,
Good and evil together,
Who hear and awaken to Amida's Great Vow,
The Buddha says: we are persons of shinjin.

Those who comprehend this completely
Are like a white lotus blooming.

Yet, having received this mind of true entrusting,
This shinjin,
To neither doubt nor question it,
To retain it,
To not forget that the Nembutsu of Amida's Great Vow
Is directed to all sentient beings –
Including arrogant persons and those of wrong views –
Is the most difficult of all difficulties.

The great dharma teachers
Of ancient India, China and Japan
Make clear Sakyamuni's emphasis that
When compared with Amida Buddha's pure activity
All we sentient beings are calculating
And defiled.
Sakyamuni's teachings disclose to us
Our inconceivable endowment –
Universal enlightenment,
Made possible through Amida's Great Vow

In a sermon on Mt. Lanka,
Sakyamuni talked about Nagarjuna,
A bodhisattva of southern India
Who later appeared in this world
To destroy misleading views
Of 'being' and 'non-being.'
Nagarjuna proclaimed the great dharma
Of Mahayana,
And identified for us the joyous stage
Of birth in the Pure Land.
He described this Pure Land Way
As like the ease of an ocean voyage,
Whereas the way of difficult practices
Is like traveling a rough and dangerous path
On foot.
Once we entrust to the vessel of Amida's Vow,
At that instant, says Nagarjuna,
Our birth in the Pure Land is assured!
To fully express our gratitude for this,
Let us utter Amida Buddha's Name always.

Jodo Ron,
Compiled by the bodhisattva Vasubandhu in India,
Urges us to rely on
The Tathagata of Unhindered Light – Amida –
Through the Larger Pure Land Sutra
Which makes clear
The truth of Amida's eighteenth vow,
The vow which gives to each and every one of us
The mind of true entrusting, shinjin,
And the certain eventuality of our joining
The great company of bodhisattvas
In the treasure-ocean of Namu Amida Butsu.

At the very moment of our entrusting,
Says Vasubandhu,
We are able to see the truth
Of things-as-they-are,
Of suchness,
And instantaneously we become an avenue
For the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha.
This being so,
Though we can now burst free
From the thicket of our passions,
Having become this avenue of wisdom and compassion,
In this transformed state,
We freely plunge back
Into the garden of birth-and-death.

The cause resulting in all this
Is shinjin alone.
Such is the teaching of T'an Luan,
A bodhisattva in China,
Before whom the benevolent Buddhist Emperor Wu-'Ti
Always bent his head.
Ta'n Luan had received Chinese translations
Of the Pure Land sutras and Vasubandhu's writings
From the sage Bodhiruci.
Turning to these teachings,
Ta'n Luan burned his Taoist texts.
His own writings say that
When we ordinary foolish beings realize
The mind of true entrusting,
The mind of shinjin,
Though we still wander in samsara –
The world of birth-and-death,
At the same time we are shown Nirvana –
The world of the Buddha,
The world of things-as-they-are,
Of that which is real and true.

In this true and real wisdom of Amida's realm,
All we sentient beings,
Everything that exists,
Totally and equally,
Become as one.
The great teacher Tao Ch'o showed us the difficulty
Of the path of self-power practices.
He clarified that for we ordinary men and women
The way to Buddhahood
Is the Pure Land path of entrusting to
The wise and compassionate power of the Vow.
Even millions of self-power practices are useless!

Tao Ch'o urges the single practice of
Saying the Name, Namu Amida Butsu,
From which arises the uncalculated directness,
The single focus,
And the constancy
Of the mind of true entrusting,

The mind of shinjin.
Tao Ch'o explains that this is the pure mind
Which is in total contrast to our mind of doubt.

At any time, in any age,
We who happen to encounter the drawing power
Of the Great Compassion of the Vow,
Though throughout our lives
We create nothing but evil,
Will reach the Pure Land
And the final state, enlightenment.
It is Shan Tao alone who teaches us
The Buddha's true meaning in disclosing that
For we who break the five precepts,
We who constantly pollute
Our streams of birth-and-death
As we come to hear the Vow,
Amida's light and Name manifest cause and condition
For our entry into its great wisdom-ocean.

This we nembutsu followers receive
Shinjin's diamond-like mind.
In the joy of this single moment,
When we encounter the wisdom of the Buddha
Exactly as did Queen Vaidehi,
We simultaneously receive shinjin's three benefits:
A joyful mind that totally entrusts in the Vow,
An awareness of the nature of the dharma,
And the assurance of Nirvana.

Genshin, on Mt. Hiei in Japan,
Widely explored the whole of Sakyamuni's teachings
And coming to those of the Pure Land,
Genshin recommended this path to all.
However, he makes clear to us a distinction
Between the shallowness of self-power nembutsu,
Which leads only to the borders of the Pure Land,
Leaving one at a way station,
With the depth of the true nembutsu
That assures us entry into the heart of Amida's realm.
True nembutsu can be uttered
By the lowest of the low.
Amida is always pursuing them, drawing them in.
Such a one am I! Genshin confesses.
Even though I am blinded
By the anguish of my passions,
Great Compassion is always,
Without interruption,
Tirelessly,
Illuminating me.

The great Buddhist teacher Honen
Out of compassion for all beings
Established the true way of nembutsu teaching
In Japan.
He opened to ordinary persons everywhere

The gate of Amida's eighteenth Vow.
Our turbulent endless cycle of birth-and-death,
Going and returning,
Is due to our mind of doubt, says Honen.
But in the nembutsu,
When we receive the decisiveness
Of the mind of shinjin,
The mind of true entrusting,
Immediately –
Without fail –
We are assured of entering Nirvana's peaceful world.

Thus these bodhisattvas and great masters
Of India, China, and Japan
Have shown us the meaning of
The Larger Pure Land Sutra,
The meaning of the Name and the Vow
Which liberates innumerable beings:
Those of us who are the most defiled
And calculating,
Those of us who are hopeless.

Their teachings speak to us directly
So that now,
At this present moment,
And always, throughout our lives,
We who are priests,
We who are lay,
Being of one same mind together
In abandoning all superstitions,
Abandoning self power and petitionary practices,
Need believe only in this true nembutsu way.

— *Rev. T. Nagatani and Ruth Tabrah, 1983*

A New Century Homage

I sing in praise of Sakyamuni Buddha, who gave us the teaching of the Nembutsu. Through this teaching I place my trust in the assurance of Amida's primal vow Which enables me to live life with courage, strength, and serenity. I treasure the light of the Buddha which shows me my true reality, my one-ness with all that exists. I listen to the teaching of the Dharma which unfolds to me the naturalness, the suchness, the buddhaness with which we are all unflinchingly endowed. I cherish the Sangha, which is my true family, nurturing, supporting, sustaining me in this precious, unrepeatable Vow-powered Now. Namu Amida Butsu!

— *Ruth Tabrah, 1989*