

## ***Twelve Lights***

**by Rev. Richard Tennes**

We here at Hawaii Betsuin have much to celebrate, this year, particularly. For one thing, 2011 is the actual 750th Memorial of the death of Shinran Shonin, celebrated as the *Daionki* (Great Memorial Service). Our own Hawaii celebration in 2009 has had the effect – I think – of renewing the interest of many people for thinking about Shinran’s teachings. And as an organization, there is no doubt that we are now truly going through a time of sincere re-examination of who we are, as an institution, and what our job is, not only for our own sake as an organization, but also, in view of our responsibility for being part of the larger human community, and part of the family of all beings living on this fragile and suffering earth.

Jodo Shinshu, as a religion has, in many ways, been a little dormant through the last three or four centuries, kind of keeping to itself, to the isolated culture in which it was first taught. That was a condition brought on by historical circumstances, not due to any limitation of the teaching or its followers. Shinran himself clearly saw Jodo Shinshu as a teaching for everyone, everywhere. But, over the last hundred years or so, radically changing conditions in the world have forced this unique and precious Buddhist vision to slowly reveal itself, not only to be discovered, but to re-*discover* itself, so to speak. I think this is happening – especially – right now, perhaps when and where it is most needed.

One of the ways this is happening in our community of temples here in Hawaii has been in the newly awakened willingness of our members and ministers to seriously question what we are really all about, to struggle to determine our mission. We are now asking ourselves: do we exist only in order to honor the past? Is our mission merely to perform rituals honoring ancestors? Do we join a temple just to participate in the creation of institutional entities, or to attend board and committee meetings, to perform countless administrative and custodial duties? Or, are we here only to enjoy comforting and reassuring social activities together with others similar to us in thinking, culture, and experience? Or, we are asking, are we not – first and foremost – a community of human beings, seeking to understand life and to live it meaningfully, with the teaching of Shinran Shonin as our guide? Are we not here to share a wonderful treasure we have received – the Nembutsu teaching – with all the suffering people in the world? These questions don’t by any means cancel each other out. The community of faith may indeed – certainly does – need all the other things I mentioned; but those other things, without the seeking mind, without the aspiration for the enlightenment of all beings, may be more harmful than helpful to all concerned.

It is difficult for humans to embrace change – especially now when the changes in the world seem to come so terribly fast and are so horrifyingly unsettling (and not by any means *always* for the better). But whatever the quality of current conditions in the world – and I happen to feel that they are mostly of a very low quality indeed – these conditions have at *least* brought about this wonderful re-awakening of sincere interest in Shin Buddhism within our organization, and a growing interest in it among people *all* over the world. So for me, I can say this is the beginning of a *good* year!

One of the things that makes me most happy this year, is the – even for me – surprising and sudden expansion of our Betsuin Adult Buddhist Education program, which we call the “Dharma Light Project.” Dharma Light was the name given to the proposed adult education program that a few people at Hawaii Betsuin dreamed of nurturing, in the wake of the 2009 Leadership Conference – held here – where we got to hear Rev. Marvin Harada speak to us about the education program at his temple, the Orange County Buddhist Church. In his talk, Rev. Harada didn’t mince words but said that Buddhist Education for adults is the most important component of any temple, that it should take priority over *all* other temple goals

and agendas, and that creating one is the *only* way for any Buddhist temple today to even *have* a future. For many of us, his talk was both an inspiration and a great challenge.

Now, adult education is not an easy thing to promote in any church, really. There is a tendency to think that education is for children and we already have, not only a K through 8 school, but now also a High School *and* – specifically as a church – a Dharma School. Adults attends adult services and meetings – that’s thought of as the *adult* thing to do. And, truthfully, most people in our temple are already overcommitted to the many activities it takes to run the temple – as it is now conceived. And anyway, some would say, don’t we have the Buddhist Study Center for those who want to learn?

At the same time, we have all frequently, in fact, wrung our hands in desperation while asking the *perennial* question, “how can we get new people to join the temple?” Over the years many things have been tried, of course, but the fact is, *only* adult education can offer the support needed to help new members understand what our religion is all about; *only* adult education can attract people throughout the community with a *yearning* to learn about Buddhism; and *only* adult education can provide us – that’s you and me – with the understanding, knowledge, and confidence we need to be able to explain to temple visitors, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances what Jodo Shinshu is and why I am – why anyone would want to be – a Shin Buddhist! The Dharma Light Project has come about because of these and other critical needs.

Causes and conditions are a wonderful thing. A handful of people – I don’t want to embarrass them – took it upon themselves to answer this need and have worked very hard to organize and promote, for our benefit, this full-fledged program, which features *seven offerings* this session between February and May. And I think we can have confidence that this is *only* the beginning and that, as the years go by, we will see adult education at Hawaii Betsuin become as central and fundamental a part of our church life as Dharma School or BWA have always been -- perhaps even more so! And so you can all look back at 2011 and remember “that was the year the Dharma Light Project really got going and I was there!”

Now, hopefully, you are all enthused and interested and ready to stampede the business office to register for Dharma Light classes. But you will have to wait until after the service because this is a Dharma talk, after all, and I would like to share with you now a few thoughts about the Buddha Dharma, which is at the root of all this education in the first place. I will be teaching one – only one – of the classes this winter session, which will be offered on Monday evenings. Now I know that many of you don’t like to go out or drive at night. In fact, I am often asked by members why we don’t have classes during the daytime; well, now we do have one daytime class, but not this one. But I want to share something with you that we will learn in this class, this precious teaching of Shinran Shonin that we will be studying.

My class will be an “Intro” to Shin Buddhism class, in six sessions. We will be learning the basics of Jodo Shinshu from Shinran, by encountering the wonderful hymn, written by Shinran Shonin, called *Shōshin Nembutsu Ge* or *Shōshin-ge* for short. What I want to share with you now – from this hymn – is really at the heart of Shinran’s whole view of Buddhism and of life; and perhaps we could even say it expresses his view of Buddhist education. It is encapsulated in the passage I read at the beginning. The passage comes from near the beginning of *Shōshin-ge*, which as you know, is chanted every morning in Jodo Shinshu temples and – used to be – in homes as well. The beginning of the hymn recounts the story of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara – taken from the *Larger Sutra* – in whom arose the great aspiration to become a Buddha and save all beings. Finding a teacher, a Buddha called Lokeśvararaja, he learned all the characteristics of the “realm” or I guess you could call it the “special conditions” which Buddhas, through their Compassionate Aspiration, create around themselves to save suffering beings; these are called “Buddha Lands” or “Pure

Lands." Now, Dharmākara's Aspiration was so Compassionate that he wanted to create the best possible conditions, by which anyone – anywhere – could easily attain true wisdom and enlightenment. Following Lokeśvararaja's guidance, he was able to achieve his goal and, as a result, his great Compassion and Wisdom became a Light that shines everywhere, upon everyone, in the Universe. That Light *is* Amida Buddha; Dharmākara became that Infinite Light. In the *Larger Sutra*, this light is described in twelve ways. Shinran basically quotes from the sutra in the passage from *Shōshin-ge*:

Thus he radiates his Light: immeasurable and boundless;  
Unhindered; beyond compare; a dazzling, glorious blaze;  
Light that purifies the mind; Light of joy and wisdom;  
Light unceasing; beyond thought; far beyond description;  
Brighter than the sun and moon; illuminating countless worlds!  
Every being -- everyone! -- receives this radiant Light! [1]

This Light, Amida's Light, is not merely an attribute of Amida. Amida *really* is this Light, but what is it? The Name "Amida" is short for two two Sanskrit Words, *Amitabha* and *Amitayus*. *Amitabha* means "Infinite" or "Unmeasurable" *Light*; *Amitayus* means "Infinite" or "Unmeasurable" *Life*. That is, *Life* and *Light* beyond measure. In Buddhism, "Light" refers to Wisdom, so Amida is Boundless Wisdom; "Life" refers to Compassion, so Amida is Boundless Compassion. In Amida, Compassion (Life) and Wisdom (Light) are One. So when Shinran talks about Amida's Light, it cannot be separated from Compassion, which is how we receive that Light. So these "Twelve Lights" as they are called, are about Infinite Wisdom and Compassion. Let me give you a quick run-down:

1. Immeasurable Light: there is no limit to Amida's Wisdom/Compassion; it cannot be quantified or compared to anything else. Nor is it limited by time or space.
2. Boundless: It shines everywhere, nothing can limit it.
3. Unhindered: nothing prevents us from receiving this Wisdom, not even our own blindness, greed, or cruelty; eventually it will penetrate our armor and awaken us.
4. Beyond Compare: Being boundless, it cannot be compared with anything else -- through this, we transcend our discriminating minds and learn to appreciate the shining radiance of all things, just as they are.
5. A dazzling, glorious, blaze: *The Larger Sutra* says that this Light is "like the king of fire, because" [it burns] "the firewood of all evil passions." [2]
6. Light that Purifies the Mind: This Wisdom Light makes us aware of what is really going on in our minds, the depth of our selfishness and, through this awareness, our mind is transformed.
7. Light of Joy: With our minds purified of greed and anger, only Joy -- pure awareness of reality -- remains.
8. Light of Wisdom: Amida's Light of Wisdom awakens us to become seekers of Wisdom, to become students, learners of the Dharma.
9. Light Unceasing: It has no beginning and no end and simultaneously includes all things, past, present, and future.
10. Light Beyond Thought: It is beyond judgment, belief, and thought. Rennyo says it "... far transcends the realm of language." The Nembutsu teaching, therefore, both includes and transcends reason, philosophy, doctrine, culture, and religion.
11. Light Far Beyond Description: Even words, which we rely on so much, cannot really describe this wisdom; it transcends ordinary language.
12. Light Brighter than the sun and moon: Nothing we can experience in this world, no matter how powerful, lofty, noble or intelligent, is comparable to the Infinite reality

of this Wisdom and Compassion, which sustains all things and works constantly for the Happiness of all beings.

For Shinran Shonin, this description of Amida as Light expresses his own religious experience. As he worked through the difficult struggles of his life, he experienced himself as the one upon whom this Light of Amida shone. Amida was not an abstract philosophical concept for Shinran, nor was Amida merely a *Hotokesama*, an object of Worship. Amida wasn't a being "out there" trying to help him; Amida was none of these things. For Shinran, Amida was Boundless Light, Boundless Life. Amida was *his own* very life and all the learning and wisdom he had acquired. These had not come *from* Amida but *were* Amida, working Compassionately for his sake. This is the basis of the Buddhist Faith that Shinran lived for and worked so hard to share with others.

I said these "Twelve Lights" also expressed Shinran's view of Buddhist Education. How? True Buddhist Education, True Learning can never merely be learning established doctrines or "facts." It can never simply be something we learn only out of interest or pleasure. The education that Shinran offered to his Dharma friends was based on the dynamic working of Amida's Light. It comes to us, when we are *ready* to hear it and works in us through our experiences, our intellect, our feelings, and our relationships with others. It is *Life* itself.

So, if you want to know more about Buddhism, Shinran, the Nembutsu teachings and many other things, please come, if you can, to one or more Hawaii Betsuin Dharma Light classes. If you cannot, please keep reflecting, reading, and listening to the Dharma. Thank you!

Namo Amida Butsu.

### **References**

1. Hymn of True Entrusting in the Nembutsu", translated by R. Tennes, in *Praising Amida's Virtues: Jodo Shinshu Service Book*, Honolulu: Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, 2010, p. 106.
2. *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation from Chinese*. Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 2000, p. 279.