

## Chapter 17

### *The Nembutsu*

What is an existential religion? I suggest one definition be that it is a profound religion embracing and permeating every facet of everyday life. The history of such a religion, and its theology, reveals the gradual penetration of insight into every area. The on going problems and questions of men and women at any time (including our own), demand that one contemplate the relation of faith to the activities of everyday life, not in a superficial, quieting, ritualistic way, but in the most deeply honest, often painful, process of awareness of self.

Applying such a definition to Buddhism, and particularly to the Mahayana Pure Land development of Shin Buddhism and the history of Nembutsu, we can discern a significant line of evolution culminating in the thought of Shinran. It is an intriguingly open question as to whether there might not yet be a further step to which modern Shinshu will address itself.

The term Nembutsu derives from the Sanskrit term buddhanusmrti, which has the meaning of “meditating on the Buddha” or “recollecting the Buddha” or visualization practices. It is this concept which lies behind the system of meditations in the Meditation Sutra, and this practice which was in line with the discipline of meditation that was the continuing legacy of earliest Buddhism. Buddhanusmrti, “meditating on the Buddha,” was the practice at the basis of Hui-yuan’s White Lotus Society in China, an attempt to achieve a visualization of the Buddha. Until the Kamakura period in Japan, such Buddhist practices were elitist, requiring the devotee to excel in virtue and ascetic commitment. Buddhaghosa of the Pali tradition states:

“It should be developed by one who has taken his stand on virtue that has been purified by means of the special qualities of fewness of wishes, etc., and perfected by observance of the ascetic practices.” [1]

Among the meditation subjects which prepare the individual for enlightenment, there are ten recollections of which the first three relate to Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In the case of the Buddha recollection, the meditator focuses on special qualities of the Buddha. One result of this recollection is:

“He comes to feel as if he were living in the Master’s presence. And his body, when the recollection of the Buddha’s special qualities dwells in it, becomes as worthy of veneration as a shrine room. His mind tends toward the plane of the Buddhas. When he encounters an

opportunity for transgression, he has awareness of conscience and shame as vivid as though he were face to face with the Master. And if he penetrates no higher, he is at least headed for a happy destiny.” [2]

Though this does not specifically indicate that a visualization of the Buddha takes place from contemplation of his special qualities, it is inferred in the system of 16 meditations of the Pure Land “Meditation Sutra” and may be only a small step to the formation of a total vision of the Buddha:

“But through the power of the Tathagata’s vows fulfilled in a previous life, those who keep the Buddha in mind will, without fail, be able [to perceive his body]. Just by perceiving the figure of the Buddha, one gains immeasurable merits; how much more so if one perceives all the physical features of that Buddha.” [3]

The text commends such meditation on the qualities of Amitayus Buddha, the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light:

“The Buddha of Immeasurable life has eighty-four thousand prominent features; each feature has eighty-four thousand secondary attributes; each secondary attribute sends forth eighty-four thousand rays of light; each ray of light shines out over the worlds of the ten quarters; and those sentient beings who are mindful of the buddha are embraced [by that light], never to be abandoned.

“No words can fully describe the lights, the prominent features, the secondary attributes, and the miraculously created buddhas, but by concentrating your thoughts [on these things], you can see them with the mind’s eye. For to see these things is to see all the buddhas of the ten quarters. because you see these buddhas, it is called the mindfulness-of-the-buddha-samadhi.” [4]

Such meditation is recommended to people like Queen Vaidehi who, after Buddha’s passing, required some assurance of a better life. The text of the Meditation Sutra describes a system of grades of beings and relates the practice of which each grade may be capable. To the lowest being, it offers the recitation of the name of the Buddha — especially to those who cannot, because they are in death throes, think on the Buddha. In recommending this system, the Sutra states:

“Those who perform this samadhi will be able, in this present life, to see the Buddha of Immeasurable Life and the two great bodhisattvas. If a good man or a good woman but hears

the name of the Buddha and the names of the two bodhisattvas, the evil karma binding that person to birth-and-death for immeasurable kalpas is eliminated. How much more so if that person is mindful of the Buddha.” [5]

Meditation was favored over recitation and regarded as a higher practice for superior beings such as monks and nuns. T’an-luan’s (Donran) achievement in China was to establish that the mode of recitation of the name of Buddha as prescribed for the lowest grade of beings in the Meditation Sutra, fulfilled the principle of “easy practice” that had been proposed by Nagarjuna and that the recitation of the name had effectiveness because of the power in names to evoke the reality they represented. Tao-cho (Doshaku) took up this theme and transmitted it to Shan-tao (Zendo) who gave a most comprehensive theoretical basis to the practice of recitation of the name, and who restated the 18th Vow to read:

“As it is said in the Muryojukyo: ‘If, when I become Buddha, all beings are not reborn, as they recite my name even down to ten voicings, may I not gain true enlightenment.’” [6]

Once the practice of recitation was established as a possible alternative to the practice of meditation, rather than a low grade practice available only to those unable to meditate or incapable of doing so, it evolved to being regarded as the true practice for defiled beings of the last or Mappo age, which the last approximately fifteen hundred years have been presumed to be. Though the believer might assist his process of salvation with other practices, recitation of the name, or Nembutsu, was thought to be the most powerful for the ordinary human being. In Japan, this utter reliance on the power of the Nembutsu was developed by Honen, who taught that the Nembutsu is the root of salvation and should not be diluted by auxiliary practices. Honen, whom Shinran revered throughout his lifetime as his teacher, developed the principle of senju Nembutsu — the sole practice of Nembutsu.

Up to this point, the Nembutsu had had a horizontal universality in comparison with the vertical universality of the elitist Buddhist practices such as meditation. With Shinran, that universality became neither horizontal nor vertical, but a practice of universality itself with his assertion that Nembutsu was not merely an external practice of a magical character, but the expression of an inner state of being, a practice and an expression to which there were no barriers, no discrimination, and no exclusivity. The power of Nembutsu turned, with Shinran, from an outward to an inner focus, and indeed, from a practice to what is described in chapter X of “Tannisho” by Yuienbo: “The master Shinran said, in the Nembutsu no selfworking is true working — it is beyond description, explanation, and understanding.” And in “Tannisho,” chapter VIII:

“The saying of Nembutsu is neither a religious practice nor a good act. Since it is practiced without my calculation, it is non-practice. Since it is also not a good created by my calculation, it is ‘non-good.’ Since it is nothing but Other Power, completely detached from Self power, it is neither a religious practice nor a good act on the part of the practitioner.” [7]

Shinran interpreted the term Nen, “to think,” in the Nembutsu, to mean Faith:

“Nen (means) to believe the Vow of Tathagata single-mindedly (literally, without two minds.)” [8]

In a very significant passage in the “Kyogyoshinsho,” Shinran reveals this change in interpretation in a succinct statement:

“The Adamantine True Mind is called the True Faith. The True Faith is necessarily accompanied by (the utterance of) the Name. (The utterance of) The Name is not always accompanied by the Faith endowed by the Vow-Power.” [9]

Shinran thus made the Nembutsu an existential condition, no longer a practice of recitation but an exclamation of gratitude for the awareness deep in a believer’s being of the Buddha’s embrace which never rejects. No longer is the Nembutsu one among many practices. No longer is it merely for weak people. With Shinran, it becomes a sign of faith, when it spontaneously arises at the very thought-moment the absolute trust-worthiness of Amida’s Vow is realized. The Nembutsu becomes an expression of being, and otherwise has no meaning except as the yearning repetition of the response to the totality of Other Power in one who glimpses but has not yet yielded himself to it and who still clings to attempts to use self power and calculation, to suppose that life can go as one determines it must for oneself.

The existential nature of the Nembutsu as a spontaneous and natural expression of gratitude arising in one’s heart and mind is the essence of Shinshu. Shinran exalted the Nembutsu as fundamentally the Great Practice in fulfillment of the 17th Vow. Nembutsu has become not the vehicle for salvation, but the spontaneous signal that one has realized through Amida’s Vow that he is already saved. The calling of the name in that simple moment is a response of joy and gratitude. The lifelong recitation of Nembutsu, as practiced by Shin Buddhists, is no longer a practice for acquiring merit, or transferring merit, but is instead an expression of thanksgiving, of appreciation for all that the Vow means in each person’s life.

There is a transformation in meaning from a “recitation of the name” to a response to the “name that calls us,” that calls each human being to awaken to the recognition of his true and

real self and to the web of interdependence that is life for all beings. It might be said of Shin Buddhism, in modern terms, that its foundation of living the Nembutsu can also be described as existentialism without despair.

So, to return to the original question asked early in this chapter — whether there might yet be a further step which modern Shinshu will take. I believe that to be an exciting possibility. In our time, we may continue to build on the perspectives established by the Pure Land teachers, by regarding the Nembutsu more comprehensively in relation to our lives. It is universal in character. It is inward in root. It must be comprehensive in expression. In Buddhism there has traditionally been the trilogy of Body-Mouth-Mind which is used in reference to Buddhist practices. In Shinshu, the compassion that manifests itself in the Nembutsu must become the motivating force for all of life, body-mind-mouth: what is done, what is thought, what is said — with the emphasis not on “saying Nembutsu” but on “being Nembutsu.” Or, perhaps, the emphasis should be on “living the Nembutsu,” as in a former slogan of Honpa Hongwanji (Shin Buddhist) Mission of Hawaii.

Now and then, I hear individuals state that the recitation of Nembutsu doesn't make any sense. It seems like mere words, but they believe it is a prescribed practice that all believers in Pure Land teaching should perform. However, Shinran has clearly shown that there is no meaning in “just” saying Nembutsu, unless it has a deeper root in one's being. I have also heard that some are concerned that Shinshu does not have disciplines as, for example, does Zen. In Shin Buddhism, one does not appear to have to do anything. But again, what is at stake is not whether we do something or not, not whether we have or do not have a discipline, but how deeply and comprehensively we understand the power of the Vow, the total affirmation to which Nembutsu is the response.

If our actions manifest the great compassion in all the affairs of our lives, there is implied a great discipline. When studying the Bodhisattva path, we see that as the perception of compassion deepens, the Bodhisattva works harder in the learnings and character he is developing. The point is, Bodhisattvas are not egoistically oriented. Their labors are for others. Such a transformation of ordinary life from egocentricity to becoming a part of the Vow by living the Nembutsu is the option for modern Shinshu. Relating Nembutsu to the activities of life prevents Shinran's teaching from merely becoming a spiritual tranquilizer, or sentimental-emotional religious pietism. It avoids the segmentation of religious existence as something quite apart from ordinary everyday life, as something only done in a temple or on Sundays and at funeral and memorial services.

The transformation and “practice” that Shinshu points to are graphically illustrated in the lives of many Nembutsu followers and particularly those designated as myokonin. We will now turn to a study of these outstanding persons of faith.

## **Bibliography**

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Bloom, Alfred: “Shinran’s Gospel of Pure Grace,” pp. 7-25

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## **Notes**

[1] Buddhaghosa, “Visuddhimagga,” p. 84

[2] Ibid., p. 230

[3] Ryukoku University Translation, “The Sutra of Contemplation on the Buddha of Immeasurable Life,” p. 75

[4] Ibid., pp. 59-61

[5] Ibid., p. 113

[6] Alfred Bloom, “Shinran’s Gospel of Pure Grace,” p. 15

[7] Taitetsu Unno translation, Buddhist Study Center Publication Series Number One

[8] “Shinshu Shogyozensho I,” p. 617

[9] Ryukoku Translation Series, “Kyogyoshinsho,” p. 112