

## ***Gose Monogatari Kikigaki (On the Life Hereafter)***

**Author unknown [Ryukan, 1148-1227], Copied by Shinran in 1254, age 82**

*(Provisional Translation by Mr. Wayne Yokoyama. A rough draft not to be cited verbatim.)*

*The compiler is unknown; perhaps it was Shinran or someone Shinran knew. The "Master" is probably Ryukan, hence this is post-Honen, second generation Pure Land community. Still we can see the impact that Honen had on his disciples. They are still talking in terms of Zendo's commentary that Honen loved, and have not gotten down to Donran and the Larger Sutra that Shinran picks up on. There is still a very final goal oriented, last nembutsu emphasis in this text. There is no trace of the Anjinketsujosho (third generation community), with its emphasis on beginnings (not final goals), especially the arising of the Vow. At the same time the idea of actually saying the nembutsu, doing morning service, and deathbed ritual are important features of Pure Land culture we need to know more of.*

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The other day when I called on the celebrated Master of the Pure Land teaching at his secluded hermitage in the eastern hills of Kyoto, I discovered there were already fourteen or fifteen people lined up waiting. These were nembutsu followers from the capital's nine sectors and those seeking the life hereafter from the five states' seven highways. All of them were properly attired in somber dress and with hearts steeped in somber thoughts. They seemed to be made up of those who had renounced the world, and had come here hoping to find out how they could win Birth in Pure Land in this round of life. You could hear them speaking amongst themselves how, yes, they too wanted to find out and that's why they made the journey, and what a lucky thing they did, to at last be able to set aside those nagging doubts [as to the Pure Land] they carried with them day after day. As I surveyed the eager faces who made up the crowd, I could see they were largely from the countryside, the unlearned. Then little by little a hush fell upon the crowd and the following exchange took place.

(1)

Someone asked: As you can see I'm just a poor unlearned fellow, but I was told that even someone like me would be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss if I called the Buddha Name. Ever since then I've been saying the nembutsu. I really want to believe that what I was told was true, but how can I know for sure that is indeed the case?

The Master said: Birth in Pure Land through saying the Buddha Name is [what the Buddha taught] for the sake of those who cannot uphold precepts and have no wisdom. If you were a person of vast wisdom who could uphold the precepts, you could have chosen any Dharma teaching you wished to practice and with it made your exit from this world of living death, for you'd be sure to get bodhi. But if it's our lot to be born who we are, then we have no choice but to seek in the present life for Birth in Pure Land through doing the nembutsu.

(2)

Next, a person asked: I heard someone say that there are all kinds of [Buddhist] teachings for the high and mighty, whereas the nembutsu is recommended for the lowly and

wretched; that there are many wonderful teachings of the Paths to Spiritual Perfection, while there is only one dismal teaching pointing to the Portal of the Pure Land.

The Master said: Let me illustrate the point. You're saying this is deep and that's shallow, that others are high and mighty and you're lowly and wretched. But what would you say if I were to tell you that it's precisely due to your present [lowly and wretched] condition that you will be able to slip away from the sufferings churning away in transmigration and gain such status as to never slip back again? Spewing arguments over how deep or shallow [the teachings are] tell us nothing at all. How could that be? If the high and mighty attain Buddhahood through wonderful Dharma teachings and the wretched who do nembutsu are Born in Pure Land, for the time being they seem to be applying themselves to different ends, but once the dust settles [ultimately] they find they are in the very same place. As Zendo says, "There are 84,000 gates [to the Dharma], with no two gates the same, but neither are any two gates different. Switch the different gates, and they are identical" (Hojisan, latter half).

What I want to say is that all these teachings derive from one and the same Shakyamuni Buddha, and so we should not be going around saying some are superior and some are inferior. It's erroneous but some people say the teachings of the Lotus Sutra are superior because in it [the Buddha] predicts even the evildoer Devadatta and the eight year old daughter of the Naga dragon will become buddhas. But the nembutsu is also something very much like this. [Through the nembutsu] the evildoer and the women who are shunned by the various teachings and cast aside [as beyond salvation] by the various buddhas, are able to overturn their delusions and swiftly attain Birth in the Pure Land where they open up satori, So if it were up to me, I'd say this [nembutsu] is truly superior to the various teachings.

But one thing you should know is that even the spiritually advanced people like Donran and Doshaku of China who were blessed with wisdom, abandoned the revealed teachings [Tendai] and esoteric doctrines [Shingon] to pray for [Birth in] the Pure Land. Further, Eshin (Genshin) and Eikan (Yokan) of Japan, seeing that there were those who were dull and [spiritually] inept, abandoned the practices to create the right karma to attain the Ultimate, and took refuge in the Vow power of nembutsu. These were superior men of profound wisdom who had superb ability to maintain precepts; they could have entered any Dharma gate with good chance of resolving the problem of this living death. And so if you would let your encounter [with the nembutsu] take the lead, and not let yourself be led astray by what people tell you is good or bad, just simply pour yourself into this practice perfectly suited to who you are.

(3)

Then, another person asked: I heard someone say that when doing nembutsu, if the Threefold Heart is absent, you will not attain Birth in Pure Land. What does this mean?

The Master said: It's true the nembutsu is something like that. But as our late Master Honen used to tell us, "That's like saying, if you know what the Threefold Heart is, you don't have to do the nembutsu. So think of it this way: If you recite the nembutsu without knowing what the Threefold Heart is, even so your nembutsu will be supplemented with the Threefold Heart and you'll surely be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss." This is truly how we should understand this matter, and even now whenever I express my understanding, I always remember these words. But now you should feel free to express your questions on matters that still do not sit well with you, without regard to whether or not you are right in your understanding of the Threefold Heart.

(4)

Someone said: I do the nembutsu, but then these stray thoughts start to come in. However noble I may look from the outside, inside there is a lot of bad stuff going on. So whenever I remember it's empty nembutsus I'm saying, not the real thing, I grow despondent and lose all desire to say it anymore. And so I beseech you, good sir! Tell me what I can do to polish this heart of mine that troubles me so much I can hardly recite.

The Master said: Your situation comes about because you count on your self-power and know nothing of Other Power, which breaks off a big piece of your Sincere Mind. What you just said, that while your mouth starts to recite the nembutsu, your heart gets enmired in delusions and you feel like you're just mouthing empty nembutsus. You're saying, Oh, if only I could clear out those delusions and get on with my life of recitation! And so you sound like a practitioner of empty nembutsu who has a big piece missing from his Sincere Heart. When your heart gets stuck in delusions, you should recite the Name by mouth such that your inner and outer aspects come into harmony and you find yourself moving away from the empty nembutsu to the reciting of the nembutsu of the Sincere Heart; this is for the person who is a stranger to this Sincere Heart.

Those ordinary persons who do the nembutsu realizing the truth about themselves [as ordinary] are acting with a heart that violates Amida's Original Vow, for they earnestly count on their self-power to get things done. If you have already decided there must be some way to purify this heart of yours, that's the way of thinking of the Path of Self-perfection, not the heart that seeks the Portal of the Pure Land; it is the heart that seeks the Path of Difficult Practice, not the Path of Easy Practice. Once you come to understand this, and realize how hard it is for a person who is only an ordinary mortal to sever those afflictions, you realize how much harder it is [to rescue the heart] enmired in delusions. But Amida Buddha has already taken this into consideration, and making allowance for the limitations of living beings, established the Vow of Other Power, vowing to remove the evil karma of living beings through the mystery of the Name, Thus it is referred to as Other Power.

Once you understand this Truth, our hearts will no longer have a hankering to keep the company of the delusions and illusions that crave our attention. With hearts unsinkable and on strong footing, they no longer have a taste for the spurious and distracted heart that enmires itself [in delusion]. Without throwing oneself into the difficult concentration practices of Buddha contemplation and Dharma contemplation, all one needs to do is to let one's thoughts dwell on the Name and the Vow of the Buddha. As long as the Original Vow prevails, even though our bodies are but bags filled with the afflictions of greed, anger, and stupidity, since we know for a fact we shall be born in the Pure Land, we can go through life with our hearts at ease.

Thus it is called the Path of Easy Practice. If you feel you have been given some strong advice, you should cultivate your heart to be ready, such that whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, regardless of time, place or circumstance, you can proceed [with your practice]. Further, if you feel yourself in readiness, clear your heart of all thoughts as you perform the service, and you will surely, without even asking the Buddha's help, make your exit from this world of living death.

(5)

Another person asked: We're told that when we do the nembutsu, with each and every voicing we extinguish the evil karma of countless rounds of life and death, we're shone upon by the [Buddha's] Light, and [our bodies] are made soft and pliant. But I've been doing nembutsu for a long, long time and I haven't extinguished even the teensiest bit of my

three poisons or mental afflictions, my heart has become worse and worse, and there are few days if any when I go about with a good heart. When it's time for me to go, though I don't doubt the Buddha's Original Vow, because of the wickedness rooted in this heart of mine it seems to me no easy thing to [for the Buddha] to consummate with ease the great matter of my Birth in Pure Land.

The Master said: This is the one matter that causes us no end of worry and truly causes our hearts to become deluded. But this should never become a path by which we fail to be born in the Pure Land. In that one nembutsu at life's very end, all of our evil karma is eradicated as we leave behind our mortal frame to be Born in that Land. That is why it is called the teaching of the Pure Land. If we were to open up satori, [this teaching of the Pure Land] would be a Path severing the afflictions and demonstrating the Real, the so-called Path of Self-perfection of the Shingon, Buddha-mind [Zen], Tendai, Kegon, and so on. If we understand Zendo's commentary, there are two interpretations of the Heart informed [by the Vow of Birth].

First, it says, "We should know that we are ordinary beings existing in the evil karma of the living death. Full of afflictions and with little by way of good roots, we have been churning away in transmigration through the three spheres of time, unable to find a way to leave this cycle from endless kalpas past." Then it says, "Out of the depths of the Pledge made by Amida, know that all living beings will be delivered -- of this one should have not even a single doubt." If we understand this passage correctly, it means that even with our bad points, thanks to Amida's great compassion, even in our grief it is possible for us to raise our faces in joy as we turn to [the Buddha]. If we were strong enough from the outset, we would have been prey to the dark side of our heart that made us give rise to doubts [as to the Vow]. If we earnestly believed that the power of the Buddha would come to our rescue, without doubt -- that is the Deep Heart.

(6)

Again, a person asked: From long kalpas down to the present day, because I've been generating the bad karma of the ten evils, five wrongs, four serious misdeeds, and have spoken ill of the Dharma, and so on, I've returned over and over to this roost of mine in living death as I churn away in transmigration through the three periods of time, past, present, and future. If in this transient form I now take I say the nembutsu a few times, the churned up waves of my lust and passion defile that good heart, the flames of my anger and greed incinerate what merits I had. Once in a blue moon I might utter the nembutsu with a good heart, but the rest of the time it's all empty nembutsu. Even if I wanted to put a stop to this, it never occurs to me that the nembutsu is the answer ought to do the trick. When others whose hearts are even more mixed up than ever say it, they wonder if this is really what they're looking for. As we're confused, please advise us as to what we should be doing here?

The Master said: Here too you have yet to understand the Heart informed [by the Vow]. For this reason, in order for your troubled mind to follow your heart's wishes, it has to be tethered to the Heart issuing the Vow [to be Born in Pure Land] that has turned over merit to that end. In Zendo's understanding, "According to Shakyamuni's teaching, if we turn to Amida's Vow-power, even though we have long kept the company of Lust and Desire, Anger and Greed, once we part from them we will never see them again" (Sanzengi, I). Truly the White Path of the Original Vow will never be defiled by those waves of Lust and Desire. Nor shall the merit of Other Power ever be reduced to ashes by the flames of Anger and Greed.

Although one may give rise to Lust or to Anger, that are difficult to make subside and hard to bear up to, if we simply call to the Buddha to help us, Amida's great compassion will surely come to our rescue and we will be swept up and definitely settled by the power of the

Original Vow. Since we are swept up and definitely settled, we should realize that our Birth in the Pure Land has been definitely settled, and though there may be those whom we meet who will try to tell us otherwise, we remain unchanged in our understanding of our diamond-like heart. Thus this is regarded as our having already been swept up into the arms of the Nyorai. This is called the Heart issuing the Vow [to be Born in Pure Land] that has turned over merit to that end. This you should be careful to understand.

(7)

Next, someone asked: What I essentially want to know is the basic point of the Threefold Heart?

The Master answered: Indeed, that is a matter you must understand. When you cross over to the Single Heart singly directed [to the Pure Land], that's the whole point of the so-called Sincere Heart. When we realize there's nothing in our outward circumstances we can count to help us [with this ultimate problem of our life in the hereafter], when we leave off our self-power ways and latch on solely and sincerely to Other Power, then we grow into harmony with the so-called True Heart of Reality. That's why the heart that does not turn to Other Power is said to be a false and deceiving heart.

Next, when you feel yourself filled with the urge to call on the Other Power, that's basically what's meant by the Heart informed [by the Vow] without a single shred of doubt. That is, when we realize that Amida's Original Vow was in its entirety made from the very first for the sake of the ordinary person laden with evil karma, that it was not made for the sake of the holy or the clever, but for our person just as it is with all its bad points, then we come to receive that so-called Heart issuing the Vow [to be Born in Pure Land] that has turned over merit to that end.

Finally, when you feel yourself being absorbed into the Reality of the Original Vow's Other Power, this is the granting of your wish for that Heart that knows for certain your Birth in the Pure Land has been settled once and for all.

(8)

Again, someone asked: When I say the nembutsu, I was told that, even without my knowing it, I'm being supplemented with the Threefold Heart, but how can that be?

The Master answered: Abandoning all other practices to do nembutsu and to focus the heart on turning to Amida Buddha alone---this is the Sincere Heart. To recite the Name and to raise the heart seeking for Birth in the Pure Land---this is the Heart issuing the Vow [to be Born in Pure Land] that has turned over merit to that end. If you come to this understanding, you realize that whoever does the nembutsu will be Born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss, that even an unlearned person who sets their mind to doing the nembutsu will come to be equipped with the Three Hearts for Birth in the Pure Land. When it comes to discussing these matters, the ordinary person with the full complement of mental afflictions should not be started out with a lot of advice as to what's good or bad for the heart. Let them turn to Amida with singleness of purpose free of doubt, let them do the nembutsu as if the settlement of their Birth in the Pure Land depended on it; this, then, is to be the practitioner equipped with the Three Hearts. The Shonin (Genku, Honen) would tell us, "Recite the Name as if you had nothing to lose, and in time you will naturally come into what's yours." There's much truth in that statement.

(9)

Another person asked: When we recite the Name, do we always have to be conscious of this Threefold Heart element every time we say the Buddha Name?

The Master answered: That element is not something that always needs to be present. Once you make up your mind [to call the Name], do nothing other than give yourself over to reciting "Namu Amidabutsu." The Threefold Heart is nothing other than your voice chanting the Name, and after you've done that, there should be no residue of that Threefold Heart element at the bottom of your heart.