

Personal Stories ... Responses to Shin Buddhism

D.C., Missouri

I have lived my entire life in the St. Louis area. My education includes a B.A. from Southern Illinois University in Government, History & Sociology and an M.A. from Webster University in Business Administration. I have worked since 1967 as an accountant, currently serving as Treasurer of a small manufacturing company in St. Louis. Our companies claim to fame is that our co-founder was T.S. Eliot's father. Although I have earned my living for thirty plus years as an accountant, my interest has always been in the area of comparative religion/sociology of religion. At age 40 I met and married a research nurse who is currently working with the department of Geriatrics for St Louis University Medical School. In 1986 after two years of marriage we became foster parents with the hope of eventually adopting. Finally in 1990, we were able to adopt three brothers-the three youngest of a sibling group of seven. The boys are now 12, 10 and 8.

I was raised in a Southern Baptist church which I rejected in my early teens and have been searching since then for a satisfactory outlet for my religious impulses. I was always uncomfortable with the ideas of eternal punishment for people who did not belong to the right religion, with the idea that Jesus was God (in a unique way), with the idea of the inerrancy of the King James version of the bible, and the idea that all religions other than evangelical Protestant Christianity were totally wrong.

Over forty years ago, I gave up belief in a transcendent God outside of the natural order of things and have been more comfortable with the idea of God as the power or force that is the ground or source of being. One of my problems with many religions has been that I have always felt that all ideas of the exact nature of that force is merely speculation and beyond the ability of people to know.

Some of the things that attracted me to Buddhism are; the basic spirit of openness and tolerance, the idea of our interdependence since we are all one at the core seems to me much more reasonable and a view that is sorely needed in our overly competitive and individualistic society, and the strong emphasis on the importance of wisdom and compassion.

Following are some of the reasons I find Shin the most attractive school of Buddhism. The fact that it is a lay rather than a monastic path. I have always felt strongly that the religious person is not the one who flees life, but rather the one who is deeply involved in life. I like the fact that there is a non-celibate priesthood since this means that the spiritual leaders are not separated from the experiences of the lay members of the congregation.

Although I have read that some people who grew up in the Christian faith condition and become Buddhist seek an experience as far removed from Christian forms of practice as possible, I find some of the Shin practices I have read about to offer a reassuringly familiar sound. Although I long ago rejected the theological structure of Christianity, the services continued to be attractive to me as long as I could mentally distance myself from the theological expressions. The idea of Amida Buddha seems to me a better expression for my spiritual yearnings than the idea of a transcendent God.

E.C., North Carolina

My husband and I have a 117-acre farm here. We don't do any commercial growing, we very much enjoy the open fields and woodlands surrounding us. We also have a small pond with fish in it. I am a 53-year-old grandmother of seven, four boys and three girls. I am also a registered nurse and work part-time in a nursing home. I have been an on again, off again practicing Tibetan Buddhist for 15-20 years. While I was in Japan last spring, I found the book, "The Teaching of the Buddha" in a drawer in the hotel where we were staying. In fact, many of the hotels in Japan and Taiwan have this book in the drawers of the rooms. I started to read it and what I read struck deep familiar chords within me. I asked the hotel if I could have the book which they gave to me free of charge.

To make a long story short, after a deep tragedy occurred in the lives of our family, I felt the need for the teachings about Amida in my life as presented in this book. I searched the net and came upon sites for Shin Buddhism, in particular Al Bloom's Shin Dharma Net site and also The Shinshu Forum, presented by Claude Huss. I have been to visit the Ekoji Temple in Springfield, Va. I have been also been communicating with Al Bloom via e-mail. I have come to realize that as a whole, the communities of Shin Buddhists are warm and caring people. I have also have come to realize that trusting in the Great Vow and the Name are like a cushion which support me when I fall and rejoice in when I'm happy."

F.L., Hong Kong

Born and educated in England, I specialised in the study of the history of the Christian Church, and I taught in the UK, Spain and Australia before moving to Hong Kong in 1990. My interests had widened to include the history of other religions, especially in Asia, and I did further research in Australia. As my knowledge of Buddhism grew I became involved in Christian-Buddhist dialogue in Asia and Europe, and that remains an abiding interest.

My own religious allegiance moved slowly away from my 'cradle' Catholicism towards Buddhism. Possibly because of long exposure to certain elements of Catholic thought and practice – namely the idea of the Church as a church of sinners more than of saints – I may have been disposed to find uncongenial forms of Buddhism which put practice beyond the reach of ordinary people, either through a strong preference for monasticism (Theravada and Tibetan) or because of a culture of elitism (Zen).

So, Jodo Shinshu seemed to be the form of Buddhism which left the door open to all. I then began to read Shinshu texts and commentaries, and found additional reasons for admiring Shinran, Rennyo, and the forms of spirituality which had developed within the Shinshu tradition. In this way I came increasingly to think of myself as a Shinshu Buddhist. I suppose one could say that I read my way there, in solitude, so to speak, and so I very much feel the need to have some sort of experience of Shinshu community.

H.S., Kansas

I am 65 years old and retired three years back after injuries disabled me. I grew up in the Pecos River Country of West Texas. My family entered that area in the last century, raising cattle and farming. I had a splendid childhood, with my own pony and two redbone hounds, free as the wind. My family was poor by modern standards but owed no-one, worked hard, fed anyone who came to our door and lived in the light of the Presbyterian Church to which

they were devoted. My strongest memory is of the love we had for each other. My family was my treasure.

I joined the army when I was seventeen, became a paratrooper and fought in the Korean War. I was wounded and discharged on my nineteenth birthday. I apprenticed as a stonemason and bricklayer and plied that trade for ten years. I became a merchant seaman, then a shrimp fisherman and entered the Pacific tuna fishery. Restless, not inclined to put down roots, I had a growing sense of the emptiness of life. I now know that I was dimly aware of the impermanence of my existence.

My search began for an understanding of who I was and what I had to do to gain a measure of wisdom. While I stumbled through my life I found and married a wonderful woman. We have two children. My daughter is now a lawyer for the National Park Service in Washington. My son is a college student interested in biochemistry. They are my jewels beyond price. My wife is a long time student of Roshi Aitken, despite the distance that separates them. She is a sincere and devoted Buddhist and Roshi Aitken a true teacher in her practice. Despite her MS, which has crippled her, she lives in her practice as The Buddha teaches us.

I practiced Zen for many years. I was a total failure. My evil self was too powerful to overcome, too cunning to subdue. I came to know that – despite my best intentions – I had not a single sincere and selfless thought in my body. I truly lived in misery. When I found the teaching of Shinran it saved my life. I see in the life of Shinran my own life, my own story. I was in the hell of my own ignorance and The Great Vow drove my personal darkness away. Namu Amida Butsu! A few weeks ago I moved from my home in New Mexico to Austin, Texas. I am rebuilding an old school bus, making a "mobile home" out of it. When finished this bus will allow me to take my wife to visit relatives she has never seen and places she has never been. My life has become a service for my family and any other person I can touch. I was poor and now I am rich. Namu Amida Butsu!

G.R., Texas

I am a 47-year-old male of European-American ancestry. I have a Bachelors degree in chemistry and biology and am employed in the field of reproductive medicine. My upbringing was Roman Catholic. At 26, because of increasing philosophical conflicts between the religion of my youth and my scientific training, and searching for more effective forms of mental discipline, I began examining eastern forms of meditation and their attendant religions and philosophies. It was within this search that I found the writings of Dr. D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts. I was very attracted to Zen Buddhism, particularly, as my studies progressed, the Soto tradition. Buddhism offered both freedom of inquiry and a religious and philosophical view of the universe which was in keeping with the latest scientific truth.

Unfortunately, because I live in the Bible belt and because in this time period Buddhist teachers and priests were few and far between, I was compelled to largely carry on without direct contact with teachers except for books and the publication of Zen Notes from the First Zen Institute in New York. I am therefore self-initiated as a Buddhist convert, having personally taken refuge in the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha, and having taken the 16 vows and the Bodhisattva vows without any formal ceremony.

In the last few years, as I have continued my training in Zazen, I have felt that there was something missing in my practice. Recently, I remembered that most Chan monks in China practiced both Zazen and recitation of the Nembutsu. This has led me to Pure Land Buddhism and to the teachings of Honen and Shinran. And this in turn led me to you, Dr.

Bloom. I would also like to thank you for your help and good wishes. I am sure I will have many questions as my studies continue and I will undoubtedly find books that I will need to purchase. Thank you too for letting me know I have company in the Houston area.

Dr. K.M., United Kingdom

I am a lecturer in medical sociology and also publish papers on the relationship between religion and health, in particular drug and alcohol misuse. In terms of my religious background I was baptised and brought up in the Church of Scotland. In common with a lot of others of my generation I drifted away in my adolescence and became attracted to meditation as taught in Eastern religions. I only became serious (in other words joined a group) when I felt myself to be threatened with a potentially serious illness. I started learning Buddhist meditation with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order and then I went for Refuge in the Karma Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism. I felt the need for tradition and encounter 'the real thing'. I am currently completing a Mahamudra Course in this tradition.

So why should I wish to join the Sangha in another tradition? It could either be a severe case of inability to settle, a bad case of religious post-modernism, or if I wished to be pretentious, an ongoing spiritual journey. Ever since starting to meditate I have been deeply attracted to the devotional and mantric aspects of Buddhism and in particular to the Buddha Amitabha and have been instructed in practices within the Tibetan Tradition. Ever since joining the Tibetan Tradition I have also been involved in inter-faith dialogue. Unlike a lot of British Buddhists I have never felt the need to reject my Christian background, in fact I believe this is impossible and the more I have become involved in Buddhism the more I have rediscovered aspects of my Christian roots which closely correspond to Buddhist ideas.

As the years have passed and I continued to sit down on my cushion, I think in some ways I became more confused by a lot of issues. I was aware I was trying to do everything on my own forcefully (self-power). Again, although I believe in the purity of the teachings of the Tibetan Schools I began to become irked by the micro-politics of the small groups surrounding the teachers. This was particularly the case after I stopped being a member of these small groups. I am also a lay person with two lovely children and have no intention of going into a monastery.

Although I believed in the monastic structure as a way of preserving the purity of the teachings, and that this system produces spiritual masters I had always implicitly rejected the notion of first and second class citizens in the spiritual world. So where did this leave me. I was looking for a simple devotional faith and I was amazed when I discovered in a library an old slim volume entitled The Jodo Shinshu Creed. It had one old photograph of a small boy running out of the main gate at Shinran's mausoleum. I tried to find out more but there did not seem to be much. I looked through the UK Buddhists Directory and telephoned the number of the Reverend Jack Austin. He had died a couple of years previously, but his widow kindly put me in touch with Jim Pym of the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship. Jim Pym continues to be a great help in my developing understanding of Other Power Buddhism, the practice of the Nembutsu and in the teachings of Shinran.

Being an academic occasionally writing in the sociology of religion has enabled me to further my personal search for information on Shin Buddhism and this in turn led me to Al Bloom.

G.K., Iowa

I'm 29 years old. I am Caucasian, of Irish background. I was born in Whittier CA. but now live in eastern Iowa. I live near Iowa City, but most of my upbringing was in the LA area. An incident of some significance to me happened when I was 2 years old, living in CA. I was involved in a pool accident, and when my mother found me, I was under water, and not breathing. This is another reason to believe that I may have a purpose in this life.

However, when I was 15, I sort of lost faith in what I was being taught in the Christian church. I was against ALL religion and considered myself an atheist. Since I didn't believe in anything or anyone, (including myself) I descended into a limbo of doubt. I abused my body with drugs and alcohol and really wanted to die.

When I was 23, I nearly got my wish. I survived a suicide attempt, (and to this day believe that it wasn't my 'time' to die just then). From there I had to literally rebuild my life. I had hit rock bottom and had nowhere to go but up. It was then that I started going to the local library and read everything I could on the religions of the world. Some were simply meaningless, others held partial truth, but when I came upon the teachings of Buddhism, I knew I had found my way to the REAL truth.

I wasn't looking to end my emotional turmoil, but how to just live. Since I didn't die when I tried to, living THIS life became my priority.

Since I had had to start at the beginning, I read on Theravada Buddhism. I was getting close, but it wasn't a 'right fit' to what would be most meaningful to me.

I glossed over the Tibetan school, but the wrathful and 'helping' demons seemed too sundry in its teachings. I came to the Ch'an school of Sheng-yen by way of his book 'Dharma Drum'. Since there wasn't much available on Buddhism in this part of the U.S., I had to rely on *Tricycle* Quarterly. There I ordered books as often as I could afford it.

Soto Zen became my second to last search for the ultimate Truth. When I realized that I couldn't leave home and become a monk, or spend thousands of dollars on Retreats. I hit a brick wall. Meditation was very hard, and knew no matter how hard I tried to 'just sit'; I could never become perfect.

I was overcome with guilt about my past, I could never erase my misdeeds, and I was failing fast in my pursuit of why I didn't die when I tried. (If I was a failure, why should I be allowed to live?!) In desperation I read Shambala's Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen trying to find that one last glimmer of hope....

I read about Amida Buddha, Nembutsu, The White Lotus Society of ancient China, and all the entries that spoke of Amida. Through *Tricycle* Quarterly I located the Buddhist Bookstore, and ordered their catalogue. I started with as many introductions to Jodo Shinshu Buddhism books as I could, and ordered the "Jodo Shinshu Handbook for Laymen." I knew that only through the compassion of Amida could I have any hope.

When I had the time, I used my parents' computer to locate Shinshu websites. I memorized the Shinshu Creed, which I say whenever I light incense before my home altar. This, by the way, is made up of a scroll of Amida Buddha from the Buddhist Bookstore, an electric 8-inch temple lantern from a Zen catalogue, A koro from the local Asian market, and a brass vase from Goodwill! It sits on a table about waist high.

In the last month, I have had a bit of rough luck. I had to move home with my parents. That sounds rather sad and pathetic, but it has enabled me full use of the internet to communicate with others on the Nembutsu path for the first time in three years of study and practice. My parents also appreciate me being home so that I can help out more as they get older. So what at first seems like a sad situation really has served a useful purpose not only to me, but my family. It has also helped me to reach beyond my limited self and seek help from wonder people who share the same aspirations as myself.

I am employed in a small screen printing company in Iowa City. Since the staff totals only 10, I have had to learn many aspects of the business. I never went to college, (which explains my bad attempt at an autobiography!) I could have and should have gone on to further my education, but for so many years lacked the self-confidence to even believe that I could do it.

I probably gave all of you who read this too much bad information and not enough of why I chose Jodo Shinshu and the teachings of Shinran as my own. Some of you may think I do not deserve to hear the true teachings of Shinran. You may be Right. I can only say in my defense as taught by the Shonin in one English version of Shoshin Ge. "Like various polluted rivers, all become one taste upon entering the ocean of the Vow."

Through everything I've put myself through and put others through, I am glad to be alive! I am very grateful to have been born in this life, which enabled me to come to know Amida Buddha's compassion. The 18th Vow was intended for such a being as myself! Shinran taught the Ultimate Truth. Regardless of whether I go to the Pure Land or am condemned to Avichi Hell, I shall never regret saying the Nembutsu with all my heart.

When Shinran spoke of the Pure Land way as the 'easy path,' I find it is not at all easy. I do not know if I have been given Shinjin or if it is through my own calculations. It is really not my business. All I can do is say the Nembutsu, and be the best person I can.

I still get angry, sad and doubt myself, but I will never doubt the Primal Vow. All I can do is be honest, as caring as I can, and live my life as best as Amida guides me. He led me to finally speak up (so to speak), so all of you could know I am here. Thank you for reading this. May all beings attain peace.

Namu Amida Butsu. .

A.B., Colorado (Sept. 30, 1919 - July 2, 2000)

My parents were immigrants from the Philippines who arrived in San Francisco some time during WWI. Because my father had been in the U.S. Navy since 1908, he was able to be naturalized in 1917 along with my mother and older brother and sister who were born in Hawaii. I was born in San Francisco in 1919.

Neither of my parents were very religious, although my mother was quite superstitious, a lot of which rubbed onto me. We moved to a small predominantly Catholic community just outside of San Francisco when I was a year old. One day shortly after I started school, two Catholic nuns came to our house to tell my mother that she had two sons that were not attending Catechism. They told her that if we didn't start soon, they would notify Jack Doyle, the Chief of Police and brother of the Pastor of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church. So, whether we liked it or not, we became Catholics.

I entered high school at a Catholic convent and became quite a devout Catholic, having received all of the necessary sacraments required of my age. But going out into the world soon changed my mind. Racial prejudice was quite rampant in those days and I became quite distraught with my life as a Catholic American. When England and Canada went to war, I decided to hitchhike to Canada to join the Royal Canadian Air Force. I had been previously denied entry into the U.S. military service (other than as a mess attendant) because of my ethnic background. Shortly after I arrived in Portland, Oregon I came in contact with a bible group. Ironically, while I was in High School, I close friend of the family gave me a King James Version of the Bible which I had studied somewhat and which inspired me to purchase a Douay (Catholic) Version. I saw little difference between the two where it came to believing in God and Jesus Christ as our savior. So I became quite a Bible scholar.

When U.S. started the draft, I saw an opportunity to get into the military service through the California National Guard, which I had been a member of. We were placed into federal service in March 1941, but I failed the physical for some insignificant cause. I was placed on Draft Class 4-F – ineligible for military service. That is not the whole story, but the rest is not important at this time. In 1943, a good friend of the family, who was an army major West Point graduate and attached to the newly formed Filipino Regiment, visited our home one day and asked me why I was not in military service. When I explained in detail all that happened leading to my being placed in Draft Class 4-F, he suggested that I write to the U.S. Army Adjutant General and explain those circumstances. Upon receipt of approval to re-enlist, I would be sent to Monterey.

After completion of testing, I should ask for infantry assignment and assignment to the 1st Filipino Regiment in Marysville, California. That is exactly what happened, except that after being tested and interviewed by several non-commissioned and commissioned officers, and after lots of argument requesting infantry assignment. I ended up in the Army Air Corps, was sent to Air Crew College and Aviation Cadet training. I was in school for two and one-half years and the war ended and I was discharged.

During the Berlin Airlift, I was employed at Moffett Field Naval Air Station, when one of the flight crew members who had just returned from Germany called to talk to me and said that I should re-enlist for the Airlift. Things were not going to well for me at home, so I ended up in Germany. I met my wife to be, there after I had learned to speak German quite fluently and my wife spoke no English. I was commissioned as 2nd Lieutenant and was able to bring my wife home in concurrent travel on a military transport ship.

My wife and I were interested in raising a family, and I felt that we owed someone some thanks for the way life had been so kind to us. I tried becoming a Catholic, but that didn't work. We were baptized Mormons, but that didn't work. Somehow we ended up at Dixon, California and I was employed at the University of California at Davis.

One day my sister called me from Arizona and suggested that I get in contact with Nichiren Shoshu of America in Sacramento. She sent a package of NSA literature that I briefly browsed through. I did call the NSA Office in Sacramento and told whoever answered that I would be interested in learning more about their activities. A few weeks later, a young lady showed up at my UC office and introduced herself as a member of NSA. She was also a UC employee. She became our sponsor. I then decided to read, more intensely, some of the of the literature that my sister had sent to me, and I was quite surprised at how closely Buddhist philosophy matched mine. So my wife and I attended our first NSA Regional meeting in Sacramento, and we received our Gohonzon. I built a rather impressive Butsudan, and we practiced quite fervently for the next few years.

After I retired from UC Davis in 1986, I worked at NASA Ames Research Laboratory as a Tech Writer. I was having some stress problems which doctors attributed to possible stomach ulcers or hiatal hernia. So after two years at NASA, my daughter had an offer to transfer to Colorado Springs where she could get into the Air Force Reserve flight engineer program and continue with her job with the Aerospace industry. But she didn't want to go alone, and so, with the thought that my job was causing my stomach problems, I retired again and moved to Colorado Springs.

And again, ironically, I got an appointment with a doctor for some medication for my stomach problem, and after being examined he informed me that I had something more serious than stomach trouble. So he ordered an immediate CT Scan that morning. That same afternoon I received a call from a cardiovascular surgeon who informed that I had to be hospitalized immediately; that I had an enlarged Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm. I was operated on and was thankful that I had moved to Colorado Springs.

It took me six months to recover, but after I was able to get around, I came in contact with NSA of Colorado Springs. I was not too impressed with the people organization, which I think has always been a problem in religious movements. At that time there was some conflict between SGI and NSA. So I dropped out. Afterwards, when and wherever I could find a book or literature on Buddhism, including Zen, I would buy it. Among some of the authors which I have been reading were John Snelling, Stephen Bachelor, His Holiness Dalai Lama, and Charles S. Prebish's Luminous Passage, which led me to the Gateway to Buddhism WEB site and Pure Land Jodo Shinshu. I was almost convinced that Zen or Ch'an was the way to go, but it wouldn't work too well for my wife. Also, I was eventually led to Taitetsu Unno's "River of Fire, River of Water."

Even before reading your most appreciative e-mail, I was quite convinced that Shin Buddhism was the way to go for my wife and myself. I've been jumping back and forth between your home study course and some of the books that I have, especially Taitetsu Unno's "River of Fire, River of Water." I have found so much to read from Shin Dharma Net that I probably have not spent enough time concentrating on Nembutsu.

Before closing, there are two things that I thought I should mention.

1) While on the train on the way to Monterey, California's Army Reception Center, I thought to myself, 'What would I do if I came face to face with a German or Japanese soldier, shoot or be shot?' I have never known any German or Japanese person that I disliked. So I said a prayer, to whom I don't know. I have since been to Japan and Germany, learned their language and was treated most kindly in both countries.

2) A few years ago I attended a home town get together with former neighbors and school mates. One of my first or second grade school mates showed me a class picture where I stood out like a sore thumb, being the only non-Caucasian in the class, or in the school, for that matter. But what stood out even more was my hands and fingers together in front of my face in Gassho. I was about six years old, then. Does our Karma begin at birth?

Ms. V.B.'s memory of her father, A.B.

I've been thinking a lot about what to write about my father for your website and I don't know what to say now that he's gone. Maybe because my father was to me what words cannot say. I'm not sure who he really was inside, I only know how he made me feel.

I know that I was very proud of him and while he was still here I talked about him all the time. Specifically, I recall a conversation I was having with a co-worker, telling him about my father and how he sometime made me laugh.

My father loved my strawberry cakes and when he came over to my house I would make him a good cup of coffee, fix it just the way he liked it and served him before anyone else – as if he was a king. Then I would bake him a cake (if I didn't have one already prepared). One time he was sitting at the table in the kitchen and I asked him to cut two round pieces of wax paper for the bottom of the cake pans. (I normally put the pan on top of the wax paper and cut a circle around it.) Dad took a piece of wax paper, folded it several times, measured the pan, made some calculations and a drawing on a piece of notebook paper, cut an arc on the side of the folded wax paper, unfolded it and placed it in the pan with an absolutely perfect fit. My laughter was with amazement of how common and normal his use of knowledge was to him.

Anyway, while I was telling my co-worker about this cake story, I had to hold back my tears. Not because I was overjoyed or overly sad, but because of the way I felt about him and how intense my feeling were.

This was only one of many times I felt this way when I talked about him to friends and acquaintances. I told everyone about my father and talked about him frequently and proudly.

My brother and I would talk to him as often as possible, sometimes for hours at a time. It was always hard to hang up the phone or walk out the door. Sometimes I would call him three and four times a day. Everything he had to say seemed so important and so valuable to us.

I don't know how he did it, but he brought us love, happiness, wisdom and the ability to know that we can be and do anything in this world.

If a king is defined as a ruler of a kingdom, one who is supreme, highly successful and respected by all – then he truly was our king. My father thought he was a lot of trouble when he was ill, and I didn't have the opportunity to tell him that it was an honor to have cared for him to the very end.

I don't know that this is appropriate for your web site, but I felt the need to tell you how I feel. You have a special place in our family and in our heart. We are so grateful that my father had the opportunity to know you and be a part of your Songhai.

I am so very sad and I miss him so much right now, but when everything settles down, I would like to learn more about Shin Buddhism. My brother and I both have copies of "River of Fire, River of Water" that we are reading. If you have literature you can send us, please do. Rev. Okamoto gave my father a little scroll, I'm not sure what it means, but I would like to know how I can get a larger one. You will hear from us again in the near future.

M.V., Montana

I am 44 and have recently "retired" from Art Museum work. I share a house in the country with 4 cats, and my partner of 16 years. Our property is adjacent to hundreds of acres of protected land, so we enjoy seeing a significant amount of wildlife. Raised in wheat country, I seemed destined (like my father) to farm the homestead of my grandparents and work in

the local copper mill. Fate brought me into contact with more "worldly" people, including a maverick teacher in high school who gave me a copy of Herman Hess's "Siddhartha." My little world started to crumble.

I left for California soon after graduation, and there began a long, frustrating search for something I could trust, something beyond the constricting influence of my childhood Christianity. Over the years I've involved myself in a variety of approaches to meditation, Zen in particular has occupied my mind and bookshelves. More recently I have practiced a Tibetan form of Buddhism with a local (and only) Buddhist group. After two years it began to dawn on me that a deep, meditational path outside of monastic protection, here in modern America was a hopeless task with the real risk of it becoming a source of pride.

The odds of a Lay practitioner achieving enlightenment in this hyper, corrupt, violent, anxiety ridden world seem bleak at best. I also noticed how freely the term Enlightenment was tossed around by people (including authors) as though they were talking about car repair; oh sure it would be painful, but you'd be on the Autobahn to Nirvana in no time. Sure! I am new to the path of Nimbus, but it feels like Amide has been waiting for me my entire life. I can't even say how it all fell into place, but it did and has continued to do so.

The Internet discovery of writings on Shin Buddhism confirmed my suspicions that I had truly found something great, and that Amide was at work within those devoted paragraphs. D.T. Suzuki's "Buddha of Infinite Light" is a wonderful gem from someone whose thoughts on Zen had meant so much to me over the years. The photo on the cover was a Buddha statue in a pose I'd never seen before; the head turned to one side. The dust jacket explained that this was "Amida Looking Back."

Not looking forward into the unimaginable bliss of the Pure Land, but back at us, at me, and my little life here on this spinning ball of dust. What a beautiful image to remind us of Amida's Vow of infinite compassion. I recently sent Al Bloom a description of images that came to me after reading his paper: "The Metaphysical Structure of Shinshu." (As an artist it seems my brain is wired to work through complex ideas visually.) Al suggested I share it with the rest of the Sangha, so here it is.

It was the image of a rushing mountain stream. The rocks in the water were symbolic of the Self, and the rushing water was Tariki-Other power. The wonderful sound that the stream made was the Nembutsu. It was the sound of Nature-as-Compassion, of Other power flowing around us.

I then realized that there is only Stream; the rocks and water are not separate, but are one and the same as a stream. I then imagined the circular cycle of this motion, this beginningless Primordial Vow, from stream to river to ocean to cloud to rain to stream in endless repetition, and that this circle was not a collection of separate things, but one vast, flowing, nurturing, Nature. The Nature of Amida.

G.S., Tennessee

About 20 years ago, I rejected Christianity. I could no longer accept a judging God and identify with the hard-hearted, narrow-minded people who worshipped him. At about the same time, at nearly 30 years old, I began college. Without intending to do so, I ended up majoring in philosophy, and going on to graduate school in philosophy, with a minor in eastern religions. During that time, I was also trying to sort out my spiritual thinking and path.

As a child, I always drew more strength from the earth quite literally, through physical contact than from any other source. In my early adulthood, in startling disjunction with my then-Christian belief, I had an experience of oneness with the earth that remains formative. While in college, I had another spontaneous experience, this time of rays of light radiating out from my center, with "nothing" at the center. (Words kind of fall short here.) From that I knew the truth of "form is emptiness, emptiness is form."

So I've been an animist at heart, and a Buddhist philosophically (influenced mainly by Nagarjuna, Dogen, Thich Nhat Hanh, and some of the Mahayana sutras, as well as the Taoist Chuang Tzu). I have held back from formally identifying myself as a Buddhist, being unable to be involved in hierarchical institutions (Zen masters, monks and nuns, Vajrayana guru yoga, etc.). I kept trying to start and persist in a practice (meditation, rituals) or to keep the precepts. Never did I succeed at any of that for more than just a little while. And during all those years, I never once read Shinran who, when he too failed in self-power practices, found the true depth of the power of the name-that-calls, of Amida's vow. (Many religious studies programs have a lot to answer for, fostering as they do the misperception that Jodo Shinshu is just a popular salvation religion, with no hint of philosophical depth.)

Last year, wanting to broaden the scope of my teaching, I ordered a selection of new texts to consider for class (Eastern Religions). One of them was T. Unno's "River of Fire, River of Water." What an eye-opener! Immediately, I ordered Tabrah and Matsumoto's "The Natural Way of Shin Buddhism," a selection of Shinran's writings, and "Tannisho."

Deeper and deeper, through thinking (hearing the name-that-calls), into the heart and out: Namu Amida Butsu. This is it: shinjin. "Grasped, never to be abandoned," unifying the past, dynamically settling the future. The Immeasurable calls and draws us through the beauty of the earth, the plants, the animals (nonverbal dharma), through the written teachings (verbal dharma), and in our most hidden thoughts and feelings. How can I not respond? Already, moment by moment, day by day, I find this shinjin changing my thinking, my feelings, my choices, and my actions, without calculation.

I am grateful for the nonhierarchical, non-dogmatic character of Shin Buddhism, for the Sangha, and for Al Bloom's work in reaching out to us. Gassho.

D.M., Texas

I have been friendly disposed towards Jodo Shinshu ever since 1960 (40 years ago!), when I read a book called, "Buddhism and Jodo Shinshu." Prior to that, I had seen only anthologies by the likes of Christmas Humphreys and Edward Conze or Zen books by Suzuki and others. When I was in college in the late '40s, I took the correspondence course from the British Buddhist Society, which leaned mostly towards Theravada. All of these authors convinced me that Buddhism was wonderful, but I, the happily married father of a young family, could not possibly be a Buddhist myself. I had no desire whatsoever to become a monk.

"Buddhism and Jodo Shinshu," however, showed that there exists a Buddhism which is for anyone, even for the likes of me. I read the book over and over, underlining passages and wearing out the pages. I immediately loved the "Tannisho," which was included in the book, and have marveled at it ever since. I also subscribed to the magazine, "The American Buddhist," and received it for many years. However, my way through the door of Shinshu was stopped dead by a remark by Rennyo: "There must not be even a dewdrop of doubt" (V.21). How is such a thing possible? How can there not be a dewdrop of doubt? I have always had rivers of doubt – oceans. How could I just will them to dry up and disappear?

After graduating from college in Mexico, I went to theological seminary, first at Princeton and then at Philadelphia Lutheran, on your old stomping ground of Germantown Avenue in Mount Airy. Existentialism was in vogue in those days, and I, too, was taken up by it. Existentialism, not the Bible, was the key to faith. The Bible was analyzed like any other piece of ancient literature, and thus it became a problem, not a solution. The Christian had to make an existential leap of faith. Once we had arrived on the other side of the chasm, we were told, everything would look different. But I teetered on the brink, unwilling to jump into space.

Finally I chose the Eastern Orthodox Church precisely to avoid the existential leap. The Eastern Church was a historical entity, something which could be seen and experienced. It was there as an actual fact and had been there for centuries, perhaps even back to the time of Christ. If Christ were true, his handiwork must be true, too. We could see and experience this handiwork (so ran the argument) in this ancient Church, which was His very Body. I was ordained a priest in 1953 and began parish work the next year.

For the next five years I served in parishes of the Syrian Archdiocese, which at that time was the only Orthodox jurisdiction encouraging the use of English. However, instead of an existential leap I now had to make a cultural leap, from Philadelphia to Lebanon. The one was as difficult as the other.

By 1960, I had gone from full-time pastor to part-time pastor and full-time educator. (It was then I began reading on Jodo Shinshu.) In 1962, we moved to Wayne, Pennsylvania, where I joined the faculty of Valley Forge Military Academy. There I remained for 15 years, eventually retiring as a colonel and chairman of the Foreign Language Department.

One day an old friend of mine, who had become an Orthodox bishop, paid me a visit and begged me to take an Albanian parish in Connecticut. I asked him, "What are Albanians like?" "They are the nicest people in the world," he replied, "and the best cooks." It turned out he was right on both counts. I served the Connecticut parish for thirteen fruitful years, retiring in 1987 as an Archpriest. It was while I was teaching in Pennsylvania in the 1960s that I first came upon the Nichiren Buddhists, or rather, they came upon me. Some Sokagakkai missionaries approached me on the streets of Philadelphia, and soon I was attending meetings and trying to figure out what they meant by "Gohonzon" and "benefits." Neither seemed very Buddhistic to me, but I was able to gather a lot of material for my future book, "Fire in the Lotus."

By the early 1970s, Reiyukai had entered the mission field, too. They advertised a guided tour to "find Buddha in beautiful Japan" at a very reasonable price, so one of my daughters and I took them up on their offer. We had a grand time although we learned more about fellowship and veneration of ancestors than we did about Buddhism. President Kubo, though, struck me as a good man and a serious scholar. Reiyukai recruited me to speak at their centers in Japan and write articles and even a book in English on Buddhism.

During one of my trips to Japan, I met Murano Sensei, who was then teaching at Rissho University. He took me to the Head Temple of Nichiren Shu to meet the Lord Abbot. Later on Nichiren Shu had me do some English books for them. Murano and I liked each other from the start, and as the years passed we became good friends. He stayed at our place in Connecticut and I at his in Hawaii on a number of occasions. I helped him with his revision of the Lotus Sutra in English, and he helped me gather material for my book on Nichiren Buddhism. One of his sons visited us in Texas, and our son went to see him in Japan. After my retirement from the ministry, I began to write a lot of material on Nichiren Buddhism and considered myself a disciple of Murano Sensei even though I still could not accept all the tenets of Nichirenism.

We exchanged so many letters than he even published some of them in a small book, which he published in 1998. While I was in the Church, I always firmly believed that I must be loyal to the ecclesiastical authorities who had appointed me and the people who depended on me. I was careful not to mix my Buddhist avocation with my Christian vocation (although once a newspaper writer after interviewing me did just that, labeling me a "Buddhist Christian"). Likewise, in my Buddhist studies I felt I must remain loyal to my good teacher, Murano, and wait until he died before striking out on my own. But he seems to have no intention of dying, bless his heart!

Meanwhile I continued studying Shinshu. I read "Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace" 20 years ago, and took Al Bloom's correspondence course 10 years ago, learning much from both. I also read everything available in English by Shinran and even struggled with some of his Japanese writings. Frankly, I have always found Shinran far more convincing than Nichiren. The latter is pedantic and academic, while the former is philosophical and personal. However, that dewdrop of doubt would not vanish away.

What finally began to crack things open was my trip to Korea in May. There I found Pure Land expounded as an integral part of Mahayana as a whole, capable of illuminating Zen, esotericism, or Tendai. At the same time, the deficiencies of Chinese Pure Land practice became glaringly apparent, too, and it was Shinran who had revealed and resolved these deficiencies. Chinese Pure Land stresses continuous and mindful chanting of the Name. Everything comes to a head at the moment of death.

The whole fate of the devotee hinges on that last second of life. If he gets distracted for one instant, all his years of practice will have been in vain. If he can keep his mind fixed on Amida, he is destined for the Pure Land. But if his attention wanders to anything else – his wife or his children, for instance – he is doomed. One of the books I brought back from Korea contains a whole chapter devoted to the special care friends and family must give to the patient during his last moments to make certain that nothing distracts him from steady concentration on Amida Buddha. Instead of assurance, the practitioner faces the most dreadful test of his life.

Here the Shinshu Creed speaks with special force: "We believe that the assurance of our rebirth through his Salvation comes at the very moment we put our Faith in him," that is, when we see with clarity, not when we struggle with the pangs of death. As for my dewdrops of doubt, they are part of my makeup. I cannot change them. Amida accepts me as I am, dewdrops and all.

N.J., California

I was reared Southern Baptist, learning to fear a punishing God. My early years were spent cultivating guilt, shame, and the knowledge that I would never be a good person, but always a sinner. As so many, during my teens I rebelled, refusing to step foot in the church. I spent the following decades searching, but I couldn't tell you what I was searching for. Finding myself abandoned at age 38, with an 8-month-old baby and no job, I returned to the religion of my youth. There was comfort in familiarity. But that year reaffirmed the reasoning I left twenty years earlier. I left, more mentally defeated than before.

Having been unable to find employment, and knowing my son had only me to take care of him, I counted my losses, moved from San Diego to Bakersfield in order to return to college. Living in Bakersfield is much easier (read "cheaper") to live in when going to college, working part time, and raising a child on your own. I am in my senior year, majoring in history.

During this time, I ventured into a new age group. Their main concern was meditating, through self-hypnotism, in order to acquire material things. This supposedly was all that was needed to make a person happy. This materialistic view always bothered me. I have, over the years, learned to live simply, and this type of lifestyle was just not for me. But I felt that perhaps the teachings of this group, along with hypnotherapy and life regression, could help me control this great anger that permeated in and around me. It didn't. But through this experience I did gain a steadfast belief in reincarnation, and knowing there was a place that all people go, after death, a way station of sorts, to re-group before being re-born.

Therefore, when I had to take a required course on religion, I chose Religions of India. This class, surprisingly, was almost too easy for me. It seemed everything being taught was already a part of me. But when we came to Buddhism in the latter part of the course, I was blown away!

"Living Buddha, Living Christ," by Thich Nhat Hanh was the required text for this particular portion of the course. Here were answers to questions I've had for so very long. Needless to say, the following lectures on Buddhism, and the explanation of what the "Pure Land" was had me enraptured. But it wasn't until the professor, after hearing my explanation to his question on what we perceived as "One-Self" looked directly at me in class and said, "Nancy, you're a Buddhist, but you just don't know it yet." I left class that day in a sort of haze. I thought about his statement, and my enthusiasm for the material, and the whole of everything that led me to this point in my life. My professor is right, I am a Buddhist but now I know it.

It was only this past March (2000) that all of this happened. Not a very long time ago, but I feel I've come home. My anger has slowly dissipated with the knowledge gained with Buddhism. Then began my search for the basics. The Internet is a great source of information. But at times the amount of information becomes overwhelming. I found some fantastic web sites; many that help converts to Jodo Shinshu who find accessibility to a temple either hard or non-existent.

I flirted with Zen, of course, hasn't everyone? But found too much emphasis on finding a teacher and a Sangha both are unavailable in my area of the world, frustrating. Continuing my search, I found, on the Internet, a meditation group located in Long Beach, and was accepted, via telephone, to consider them my Sangha. They specialized in Theravadan Buddhism, which I found to be intellectually stimulating, but also very solitary. It was suggested I buy "A Gradual Awakening" written by Stephen Levine, in order to help me learn to meditate. All of the self-hypnotism really messed me up when it comes to meditating. The book made me realize not only how weak my mind is (millions of jumping monkeys!), but also how little time I actually had to meditate.

Being a full time Mom to a very healthy three-year-old, a full time student, and working part time made the jumping monkeys in my mind the least of my distractions! Also, I found the monasticism involved was definitely not my cup of tea. I am a people person, and I love to talk and touch! (And write J!) So, I turned to Thich Nhat Hahn and began reading "The Teachings of Buddha." I felt I needed to know the succinct background of Buddhism before all else.

It was during this time I discovered the Shin Forum and joined. I didn't know what Shin was, but did know this forum dealt with Buddhism, and perhaps I could pick up some pointers. At first, all I received from the letters being sent to the forum was mass confusion. Just what were these people talking about? So, being the good historic researcher I am, I began looking up anything and everything on the net that had a Shin, Jodo Shin, or Jodo Shinshu in it. And I read and read. The more I found, the more interested I became.

Now my greatest challenge came to the forefront. I live in a city of 237,222 people. There are seven full pages in the Yellow Pages listing various churches, including one Islamic Mosque and one Sikh Temple. There are no Buddhist Temples listed. One was built in June of this past year, a Thai Temple. Since the opening, they have kept very low key. Simply stated, Buddhism, and specifically Jodo Shinshu is relatively unheard of here.

I did find a Betsuin in a town 200 miles north of here, in Fresno, and visited it some months back. I enjoyed being there very much but find the drive, 200 miles up and back in one day, rather daunting.

So, I keep myself busy reading books sent to me from my friends, and reading the Forum. But still, I feel so isolated. This too, will pass. I have been "doing" things to help propagate Jodo Shinshu in my area. My hope is that someday I will be able to start a Ko here in this town.

One of the first things I did, is order a "Buddha fish." This fish goes on your car, like the Christian fish, but it is rather fat, with the word "Buddha" in it. Yes, it gets noticed. And yes, many comment on it. I've not had any bad remarks, just questions.

I've also had many interesting conversations with my friends. When I get stumped, which is often, I turn to my mentors I've been fortunate to meet on the internet, for answers. This allows me to feel not so isolated.

Also, I believe that we can all help one another, via e-mail, telephone, and in person, just by being available, and being open-minded. We are all from different backgrounds but have one goal, to be reborn in the Pure Land.

P.S., Kentucky

The Name-that-calls has been seeking me for lifetimes, it seems; whispers of its voice finding me in the depths and crevasses of my involuted and willful human career. At several crucial junctures I have stopped to listen, and each time I breathlessly echoed my thank you, but my monkey mind would grow impatient and bored and I would be off to my next shiny moment.

I began life as a New York Jew and find myself 50 years later as a Kentucky Buddhist. In between were many jobs, lovers, identities – in short, many lives. Looking back at it all I have to wonder how I got to what I where I am – whose wisdom and compassion have been behind, beneath, and always in front of me?

In the 1928 Prayer Book of the Episcopal Church is the sentence "I am a worm and no man." It was regarded as excessively groveling and was removed in the 1978 revision. I, however, find it to the point and strangely buoying. I have certainly not risen to the fullness of my being – both – and am crippled by choices and influences of my past. Nevertheless, I am at the point in my life where I find I cannot dodge the Name; its call clings to me like fabric. And the good news it brings is that I am beloved of the universe just as I am – blind, foolish, and pitiable.

Namu Amida Butsu.

V.C. , Vancouver, Canada

I am an accountant who was born in Hong Kong. My family has no formal religious affiliation but my parents respected all major religions. I had no interest in religion during my youth until one day in the early '80s I encountered a book about Buddhism in a book store. The book said that the Buddha was not a god. I was surprised that Buddhism did not worship god and was also shocked by my own ignorance about Buddhism.

Since then I bought many books about Buddhism and subsequently joined an organization called The Dharmasthiti Buddhist Institute where I took many courses on Buddhism including courses like Chinese Buddhism, Indian Buddhism, Buddhist Logic, and courses on different schools like Tendai, Hua-yen, Mind Only, Zen, etc. There were times when I went to the institute several evenings a week in addition to joining the Sunday Sutra gatherings despite the fact that I had a full time job. At that time I did not pay too much attention on Pure Land as I did not quite agree to its teachings.

When I migrated to Canada in 1988, I encountered many obstacles in adjusting to the new environment and fitting into the new society. I took refuge in the three jewels after a dharma talk in a hotel with Master Sheng-Yen of Dharma Drum Mountain. I joined the Dharma Drum Mountain's community in Vancouver in practicing meditation for a while but stopped mainly because of language barriers. Most people there spoke which I did not understand nor speak too well. I then joined the Tung Lin Kok Yuen Canada Society, a Buddhist society originated from Hong Kong. I am still taking their various courses on Buddhism but I seldom take part in the religious rituals or ceremonies except in big days like the Chinese New Year or the birthday of the Buddha.

In the process of adjusting myself to the new country, I discovered that my self power was unable to solve all the problems. This was the time when I started to look into Pure Land Buddhism. I got books on Pure Land Buddhism but encountered a great difficulty.

Most of the books said that we should trust the primal vow and the Pure Land Sutras because they were told by the Buddha. However, this was against today's common perception that Mahayana Sutras were developed several hundred years after the nirvana of the Buddha. I asked how anyone could base his faith on something which was untrue. Instead of calming myself I found myself more confused.

After thinking about the problem for a while, I knew that I loved many Mahayana sutras. The important thing was the message they sent and the things they taught instead of their authority. I had to shift from historical facts to the dharma itself. I listened to a dharma talk about the Pure Land by a teacher who liked to use logic to present the teachings. He concluded that the Pure Land was logical but I was still not convinced.

As I had exhausted all means to understand the Pure Land, I put the problem aside for a while until one day I visited the book store belonging to the Buddha Light Mountain. I encountered a Chinese translation of a book about the nembutsu by a Japanese writer. In that book, several references were made to the "Tannisho." When I read the words of the "Tannisho," I was deeply moved. I realized that the true Pure Land way was in the "Tannisho."

I bought some books on Shin Buddhism from that book store. However, books on Shin Buddhism in Chinese are rare. At the same time, one cannot buy books on Shin Buddhism in English in regular book stores easily neither. Fortunately, I was able to buy the book "Ocean: An Introduction to Jodo-Shinshu Buddhism in America" by Kenneth Tanaka. From that book I knew of the address of the Buddhist Book Store where I obtained several books on Shin Buddhism.

Due to bad karma, I did not have the privilege to read Al Bloom's "Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace," but I did read "The Life of Shinran Shonin: The Journey of Self Acceptance," "Strategies for Modern Living: A Commentary with Text of the Tannisho," and "Shoshinge: The Heart of Shin Buddhism." Other books I like very much include Dr. Taitetsu Unno's "River of Fire, River of Water," and more recently his "Shin Buddhism: Bits of Rubble Turn into Gold."

Recently, I am able to get access to the internet where I found a lot of information on Shin Buddhism and I discovered the Shin Dharma Net.

Namu Amida Butsu

N.M., Florida

Hello Friends!

I took Rev. Bloom's course. He has already e-mailed me twice, which I find very comforting and for which I am grateful. He invited me to post my thoughts, so here they are.

In my tradition, I would say that I was guided here. I have been lurking around for a few months in Buddhist chat rooms, so I know that's not how Buddhists express themselves, but I don't know what else to say.

About a year ago I added this affirmation to my list of goals in my prayers: "I hasten and contribute to the liberation of all sentient beings throughout time and space." I don't know where that came from. I have read a lot in different religions, but I thought that was just mine. I didn't understand it and was a little uncomfortable that it sounded grandiose, but I also felt strongly about keeping it.

I had done some reading on Buddhism but had decided it was not for me, that I was just not tough enough. Then I picked up a tape set that had been lying around the house for years. It was from a series my husband had on the various world religions. Actually, it was supposed to be a two tape set on Buddhism, but he had put another tape in by mistake, so I took just the one tape on Buddhism out to my car. The lecture contained a recitation of the Bodhisattva vow. I was shocked. That's my prayer!

So I began researching it. I started reading Buddhist postings on Beliefnet. They seemed so self absorbed, and I thought, "Where is the concern for the suffering of the world? Where is the Bodhisattva spirit?" Finally, I ran into a Shin Buddhist posting, which led me to Rev. Bloom's course.

There is a big part of me that does not want to launch into a new belief. I was happy where I was. Sometimes, I want to go back. Then I remember the vow. I seem to have some kind of built-in imperative. Now that I have found it, I cannot walk away from this goal: All must be saved. All will be saved. All have been saved! Now I want to learn how to hurry things along.

Shin is a religion based on thanksgiving. Imagine that!

Namu Amida Butsu!

G.F., Colorado

As a theologian, ordained Anglican priest and religious studies professor, it was inevitable Buddhism would cross my path. When it happened was some eight years ago, while attending a University. I was doing research for the first time in depth on Eastern religions. One of my professor's assignments for me, was to visit either a Buddhist temple or a Hindu service and write about it. That day I went to the college library and picked up a book on Buddhism. Since then I have always had a book in my hand on the subject of Buddhism.

After a few months of reading on my own, I joined a local Sangha in the Denver area. I remained a member for several months then went on my own. Although there was nothing wrong with their teaching and practice it did not seem very clear to me what the real purpose of Buddhism was from their point of view. I know now it was nothing to do with the Sangha. It was me. Finally, about a year ago I started looking at various branches of Buddhist thought and teaching. I had read a little about Pure Land and had visited a Local Denver Buddhist Temple which is Pure Land. It was there I was introduced to the teachings of Shinran. The more I read about Shinran and his thoughts on Buddhism, the more sense all of it started to make. For some reason, there was clarity, a path well laid out for one to follow. Now I feel planted and grounded in a belief system that has merit and viability.

I also teach a class on Death and Dying, and I firmly believe the teachings of Buddhism establishes an Art for Sacred dying, something that in Western civilizations is lacking. I was and still am a certified funeral director in the state of Colorado. I also volunteer at a local Hospice where I have seen firsthand the problems faced by the dying without hope or direction. Now, I am living the practice daily and moment by moment. Pure Land has given me something each day to live by and for.

Namu Amida Butsu!

B.E., California

I can still vividly recall the despair and emptiness I felt when, as a 14 year-old, I lost my Christian faith. Walking home one summer afternoon, my thoughts filled with theological questions and doubts that had already haunted me for some time, I came to the realization that I could not force myself to believe in something – however familiar or existentially comforting. It occurred to me that I either sincerely believed in my family's Congregationalist faith or I did not. I needed to be honest with myself. I left the city park that afternoon a believer and returned home an agnostic. The loss of my childhood religious convictions greatly disturbed me, and I went back to my room demoralized and filled with angst. Now so much about the world and my place in it seemed uncertain and life seemed undermined by meaninglessness. My family members, although generally sympathetic to my questions and anxieties, were reticent to provide their own answers and encouraged me to continue investigating. Looking back, I believe that this poignant experience initiated for me a philosophical search for truth, which ultimately led me to the Name-that-calls and the Shin Buddhist faith.

In college, I attempted to meet this need by majoring in philosophy. Unconsciously, I must have believed that I could tackle the problem cognitively. I hoped at the time that philosophy could help me discover authentic answers and fill (or at least neutralize) the sense of lack I felt chronically. I read the major philosophers of the Western tradition ravenously – Plato, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Wittgenstein, Whitehead, the existentialists. I found many of their ideas interesting and arguments persuasive in regard to certain problems and issues. However, even after obtaining a Masters degree in philosophy, I was

painfully aware that the deep spiritual hunger which had originally motivated my philosophical search remained unfulfilled; if anything, my philosophical training merely clarified how apparently bottomless and insatiable that hunger really was! As I review that period in my life now, it seems to me that philosophy does indeed offer some excellent resources for elucidating concepts and evaluating arguments, but it does not (at least for me) adequately serve as a spiritual practice by itself. Philosophy can be a helpful addendum to religious faith but by no means a substitute for it.

For several years following, I put my religious questions and yearnings aside, resigned myself to a quiet agnosticism and secularism, and focused my attention and energy on more practical career pursuits. I enrolled in a clinical psychology program of which I am now in my final stint, working on my dissertation. When I turned 30, I began to experience a greater sense of professional direction, stability, and confidence; many things in my life felt considerably more settled. During this period of relative calm, the religious concerns of my earlier years began to resurface and to reassert themselves, albeit in a different form. Rather than asking abstract questions about philosophical theology and the nature of ultimate reality, as I had done previously, I now felt more inclined to consider matters of faith in a more personal or relational light. I began inquiring into my own relationships to the world and to others. How did I relate to the world around me? What had I contributed to it? What had I contributed to others? What sorts of things did I really value and appreciate? In these uncertain and turbulent times, what makes for a worthwhile life?

With these questions in mind, I ventured into the Buddhist section of a local bookstore one evening. There I chanced upon Taitetsu Unno's "River of Fire, River of Water" – an introduction to the Shin Buddhist Pure Land tradition. The title and commentary on the back cover intrigued me, and so I bought it, though I had never heard of Shin Buddhism or the Pure Land tradition before. This turned out to be a very worthwhile purchase. I found myself interested, even inspired by much of what Professor Unno had to say about his faith. I sought out other Jodo Shinshu literature, such as the "Tannisho" as well as the Sukhavativyuha sutras and read them with delight. The "Tannisho" and Pure Land sutras struck a deep chord inside me. I was moved by their undeviating emphasis on Amida's indiscriminating, genuinely limitless grace and liberating power, reflecting a compassion so profound and encompassing that it would not willingly relinquish any creature, not even the most depraved, to suffer in the hells of its passions and delusions. The Soto Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki speaks of the experience of receiving "letters from emptiness" – figurative messages from the heart of being that open our eyes to its luminous grandeur and compassion – and the aforementioned writings served as precisely that for me. One afternoon shortly thereafter, while riding on a subway train, I uttered the Nembetsu spontaneously and without thinking. It felt as though it came out of me on its own, and it transfigured my perception of the entire scene around me. I felt deeply grateful and peaceful. I experienced in that moment a living relationship to the Other Power and discerned the folly of my prior, wholly self-directed attempts to obtain spiritual fulfillment.

As someone quite new to Shin Buddhism, I recognize that I have much to learn about our faith, and I look forward to connecting and corresponding with others who also want to deepen their understanding and appreciation of the Primal Vow and Amida's grace.

Namu Amida Butsu!

K.L.P., Florida

Your words dance through my mind with strong and gentle steps. "Accidents of history should not obscure the meaning of a teaching or the mission of a movement."

Well written – and how true. That sentence applies to Mahayana Buddhism in general, as it takes firm root in Western thought and culture, and Shin Buddhism in particular. Shin IS nothing more or less than a 'World Religion.'

First, I met Kuan Yin ... or, was 'embraced by her.' In 1989, she invaded my Roman Catholic life, when a 'Buddha' was just an object to be made fun of in a Chinese restaurant. She appeared in a dream. I continued to go to Mass, and tried to forget the dream. When I could not forget, I began to question and research the 'being' who 'appeared' in that dream. Within six months I had obtained several Buddhist books. There was no one around to tell me what to buy, read, believe, or reject. Kuan Yin 'led' me to Amida Buddha. Amida led me to Shinran Shonin.

By 1990, I owned a dozen books on Mahayana Buddhism, and was both impressed and confused by the many conflicting viewpoints that were presented.

Two of the dozen texts demanded a re-read: "Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'" and D.T. Suzuki's book, "Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist." Most of the others remained on their shelves or in boxes for the better part of a decade because I wasn't ready to understand The Dharma, but, I had been caught and 'embraced never to be abandoned,' by NamuAmidaButsu.

The world has been my home. I have been fortunate to live in many places and in a wide range of different circumstances. New York City was my birth place, but I grew up traveling with my family between Cuba, NYC, Florida, and Virginia in the 1950s. As an adult I have lived in California, Maryland, New Mexico, Austria, New Zealand, and Hawaii, and had the privilege of visiting many other wonderful places. I have two fabulous children and three 'perfect' grandchildren.

Reality beyond appearances ('Religion'), has been extremely important to me since I began to *think*. Now I recognize it as a profound concern with the suffering of birth and death. When I read the REALLY GOOD NEWS of Amitabha Buddha, and His Primal Vow, I knew I had found my 'Oya Sama' ... my home in this world and the next.

Amitabha, for me, is the 'father'-in-Heaven, whom Yeshua (Jesus) loved, and to whom He 'prayed.' Now, and only now, that I have heard of the Original (Buddha) Nature, do I understand the words, "I and the Father are ONE."

After years of independent and well-guided study, the Buddhist books on the shelves are dog-eared and worn. This has been a long and rewarding journey, which is very much still in progress.

On 11/10/03 I was ordained a Priest and Sensei by Hongaku Jodo of America (Original Nature-Pure Land). May the faith my teachers have in me be well-founded. I have been so blessed by their wise teachings and deep patience.

..."The Course on Shin Buddhism" was a catalyst for my Faith in Amida Buddha before I began my studies with NMIBS, and remains a source of joy and reference for me. I thank Dr. Bloom for sharing wisdom and bright Faith with all of us.

May All beings attain perfect peace in the Pure Land of Buddha Amitabha.

NamuAmidaButsu.

W.C., New York

I was born (1949) and raised in Virginia with a Christian (Methodist) upbringing. Perhaps certain karmic imprints enabled me to question the various spiritual contexts and mysteries that were available to me. I received sustenance from the teachings of Jesus, but I often struggled with the dogmatic underpinnings of the Church doctrine. I "dropped out" of the Sunday morning church rituals when I left home for college...where I soon became enticed by Western philosophy. Discovering that I was alone in a harsh world – condemned to make choices – I eventually yearned to seek transcendence. Eastern religions appeared to be what the doctor ordered as I yearned for a more expansive awareness of the metaphysical world.

In the early 1980s, Buddhism was clearly becoming my spiritual path. I studied Theravadan texts and in 1983, I sat my first of many 10-day vipassana (insight) meditation courses as taught by Burmese Master, S.N. Goenka. This wonderful meditation became my practice for twenty years. I received many benefits. For example, I became a more calm and peaceful person in all facets of my life.

I honestly don't know exactly why I (seemingly out of the blue) drifted into the Mahayana world. Perhaps it was a belated natural progression. I was particularly impressed by the theoretical emphasis on bodhicitta and on the bodhisattva mind. I read some Pure Land texts but decided to take a Mahamudra (Tibetan) Lam Rim study course. After several months of study, I wasn't sure that I wanted to invest my time in this methodology. I decided to re-visit Pure Land where I was awakened to the writings of Shinran.

In a short time frame, Jodo Shinshu has seemed to fit like an old comfortable shoe. I embraced the Nembutsu as a daily practice about three months ago. Presently I often find myself reflecting on Amida's Light while driving in my car and walking in the woods. I don't naturally visualize Amida as depicted in the Sutras; it's more like I feeling a warm glow that frequently brings joyful and/or pensive tears. I also think about Amida throughout my work day. I am a program supervisor of a human services intensive home-based treatment program. I acknowledge gratitude for my staff's hard work and to our connection with the many troubled families that we work with.

Shinran reminds that we all struggle to make sense of the foibles and the follies of our existence - it's simply a matter of degree. He also reminds me that Other Power is accessible at times of both joy and sadness. What more could I ask for? I feel blessed for all of these recent experiences. Of course I'm a novice to Jodo Shinshu; I hope that I will be able to deepen my understanding of the philosophical aspects of this great religion.

NAMUAMIDABUTSU.

D.M.

In response to the question what brought me to Shin Buddhism, you may recall I've dabbled in Buddhism in high school, then quite a few other religions including Islam and Catholicism. Finally after taking a trip to Japan with my wife (who's Japanese), I re-awoke to Buddhism, and ultimately Shin Buddhism.

As to how that all happened, I will try to explain. When I was in Japan, I was still interested in Catholicism and Islam. Buddhism was kind of dry at times and hard to understand. I was continuously frustrated by the "New Age" feel of Buddhism in the West. When I was in Japan, I saw many times examples of Buddhism that were totally different than what I knew

in the US. I remember when my wife and I went to pay respects to her grandma who had passed away a few years back, I saw a cluster of gravestones in one part of the cemetery that were set apart. My wife explained that those people had no family to care for their graves, so anyone could pour water over them, or clean them.

In another example, I remember visiting a famous Shinto/Buddhist shrine near my father-in-law's house and there I had a good talk with the curator there. What struck me again was this sense of deep compassion beyond annoying dogma. I always liked Islam for its strong faith, but I found it too legalistic, to the point that people would easily get caught up in the word of the law, not the spirit. Catholicism had a strong streak of compassion like Buddhism, but it also had a strong guilt streak that made me uncomfortable. In Japan I saw examples of true compassion in Buddhism there, without the legalism or guilt, and realized that Buddhism was for me.

The problem was when I got back to the US, I had no idea how to practice Buddhism. Being a tech-savvy guy, I hung out on Internet forums, but I found most Buddhists to be arrogant or weird in a New-Agey kind of way. The only Buddhist temples in my area were all Tibetan ones, and I just don't like Tibetan Buddhism and its authoritarian nature (and all the New Age types that hang out there). It was more of the same that made me lose interest in Buddhism before. However,

I ran into one Buddhist forum for Pure Land Buddhists, and people here were different. They were more humble, and didn't take themselves too seriously. Later, I found the Jodo Shu official website, and was immediately hooked. They have a cool animation on how the nembutsu sounds, and I was inspired to start reciting the nembutsu. That's about it.

I think what drew me to Shin Buddhism is that I wanted to incorporate religion into my life, not incorporate my life into religion. In the case of Islam, I would have to give up pork and alcohol, memorize Arabic verses of the Q'uran and pray five times a day. I failed on all counts. In the case of Catholicism, I just didn't believe in Creation, in the Pope, and in the whole idea of Sin as grounds for eternal damnation. For Zen Buddhism, I would have to meditate a lot, even though I have no patience for it. For Tibetan Buddhism, I would have to revere and respect the religious authority of some lama for no other reason than some vague lineage I don't understand.

With other religions and Buddhist schools, I had to live up to a certain standard, and just couldn't be myself. With Shin, I just stopped striving to be something else, and just learned to be myself and just recite the nembutsu. That was a big relief. I hope that makes sense.

D. F. Maui, Hawaii *(a talk)*

Sensei has asked me to share with you today, about peace. My son and I were searching for a church to attend and one Sunday, a few months ago, we arrived here. On that Sunday, it was just my son and I. My husband decided to stay home. Before we left, I had told him that we were looking for a church to attend. He thought this was a great idea, but added, "Now you know, I will never attend a church. I find God in the ocean." My husband is an underwater photographer and a man of the sea. He is also a man of great integrity and is naturally very much at peace. (I will tell you a little secret – don't tell Sensei – I have to work a little harder at this peace thing. But my husband finds God in the ocean.) "Okay, we'll see you later," I said as we went out the door, and son and I were on our way to church.

On our first day here, a member spoke. She read a story from a Shin Buddhist book about a man who was struggling in the ocean to stay afloat. As she told the story, I felt waves of emotion come over me. The story in the book was a dream I had when I was 19 years old. I had this dream after a very bad accident, a near death experience. Her story was exactly the same as my dream. Except in my dream, I was the one drowning and a person came to me. That person was my spiritual teacher, Amba, a Buddhist teacher who was 73 at the time. In my dream, I was going under the water struggling, drowning, and I looked up and there was Amba laughing and happily floating on the waves. She said to me, "Let go. Let go of your striving. You're fine just as you are! The ocean will hold you up. Ride the waves, it's fun!" So I let go. And I began to float. I even began to enjoy riding the waves. I no longer struggled or tried to control my situation. Nothing had changed in the ocean, only *I* had changed. What had once seemed so dangerous and frightening, was now fun!

As that church member finished her reading, I sat in my seat filled with emotion. For whatever reason, I felt like I had come home. I *was* home. I felt a great peace, a great joy, and deep hope. When service was over and my son and I walked to the back of the church, the woman met us and embraced us. She was holding the book she had read. She handed it to me and asked if I would like to take it home. As she handed it to me, I saw the title, "Ocean." When I brought the book home to show my husband, he was surprised to see the title. He took the book and read a few pages. He then said to me, "Now *this* I can get into. This is good for us, and Sean."

Again, I felt peace. I was feeling "Namu Amida Butsu." I think I was beginning to feel Shinran's teaching of shinjin. I felt a deep hope and peace within. *Peace.*

So, this week when Sensei asked me to talk about peace, I pondered, how do I achieve peace with in my family? How do I achieve peace with my friends and my community? What about the world? I kept coming back to inner peace. But now I wondered, how do I achieve inner peace? Perhaps if I can become more aware of who I am today, with all my fears, all my judgments, misgivings, and flaws... if I can find the awareness and acceptance of myself today, then perhaps, I have touched on the unconditional love of Amida Butsu. "Let go. Let go of your striving. You're fine just as you are!" my dream had told me. This is my first step to inner peace. How then do I achieve this inner peace? The answer is simple: through attainment of faith in Amida Buddha.

This week, I did a lot of research on Shin Buddhism. I read a paper by Rev. Kemyo Sato from Ontario. I would like to share a little of what he said with you because it reminds me of my dream. Rev. Sato wrote:

"And what exactly is the Shin Buddhist faith? The essence of Shin Buddhist faith lies in awakening or realisation. Whenever I have attempted to interpret the Shin Buddhist notion of faith to Westerners, I have explained it as having *four* main aspects: 1) awakening, 2) entrusting oneself, 3) instantaneous attainment, and 4) purification. First of all, in the true Shin Buddhist faith there are *two* kinds of awakening: an awakening to one's own true self, to one's existence as it really is, full of blind passions and conflicts; and an awakening to Amida Buddha, to his unconditional love that knows no discrimination. These are two aspects of the one reality, faith as awakening. Secondly, when awakened in this way, one will be led to entrust oneself quite naturally and with one's whole being to Amida Buddha. Thirdly, the faith to entrust ourselves to the Buddha comes over us all at once. What enables us to attain pure faith so instantaneously is not self-power but Other-Power, the great working of the Buddha's Original Prayer (or Vow). Fourthly, this faith is consequently pure faith, as indicated by the original Sanskrit word *prasada*, found in 'The Larger Sutra of Eternal Life,' for it is accompanied by the purification of the mind through Other Power. Through attainment of faith, we find ourselves in the

embrace of Amida Buddha's unconditional love, which is beyond the distinction between self and others. Awakened to the reality of our existence, heavily burdened with blind passions and hence full of conflicts, we entrust our whole selves just as we are to Amida Buddha, who made a vow to embrace all beings without any trace of discrimination. Thus we find a resplendent, peaceful world, purified of all war and conflict. We achieve inner peace by surrendering ourselves to Amida Buddha. As mentioned above, the Shin Buddhist faith-experience embraces two kinds of awakening: 1) deep awakening to oneself and 2) deep awakening to Amida Buddha. In true faith these two conditions are experienced simultaneously. Once true faith, consisting of these two kinds of awakening, is attained deep down at the very core of our existence, we also acquire a new and peaceful awareness, illumined by Amida's unconditional love. Secure in the embrace of Amida's light, we are conscious of ourselves as burdened with blind passions still, yet this awareness is pure and serene, reflecting everything as it is, our own blind passions as well as Amida's great compassion."

Thank you, Rev. Sato in Ontario.

I would like to end with two affirmations. Every day I try to have a daily affirmation that I write down and carry with me. Sometimes I am so busy I only have time for one word. Some days it is as simple as "breath." This week was "peace," which evolved into "pause for peace." Here are two others I came up with yesterday. "For today, I will not dwell on trying to figure out the meaning of my life. Instead, I will find ways to be meaningful to others." ... "For today I will not dwell on finding peace for myself. Instead, I will find ways to bring peace to others."

Namu Amida Butsu. Namu Amida Butsu.