

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NEMBUTSU

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I

In the history of Mahayana Buddhism we find a trend called Pure Land thought that gave rise to a number of prominent expounders such as Nāgārjuna (2nd c. A. D.) and Vasubandhu (4th c. A. D.) of India; T'an-luan (476-542), Tao-ch'ō (562-645), Shan-tao (613-681) of China; Genshin (942-1017), Hōnen (1133-1212) and Shinran (1173-1262) of Japan. In a hymn called *Shōshin Nembutsu Ge*, which is contained in his main work, the *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō* (Teaching, Practice, Faith and Attainment), Shinran epitomized the contributions made by the above-mentioned patriarchs of the Pure Land thought in verses, which reveal Shinran's view of history and what he had learned from history.

Not only in the Pure Land teaching itself, but in Buddhist thought in general, the so-called Latter Day Thought has been widely held. With the exception of such people as Dōgen (1200-1253), founder of the Sōtō Zen School, it was a common faith in the Kamakura period (1192-1333) in which the Buddhist revival movements took place in Japan. It was Dōgen's well-known contention that any age is the Age of the Right Dharma: therefore anyone can attain Enlightenment if he strives hard to establish a right faith in his mind. Hōnen, Shinran, Nichiren (1222-1282) and others, on the other hand,

perceived in the Latter Day Thought a historical truth as well as man's existential predicament. Of all these people, Shinran did not simply side with Dōgen's a-historical viewpoint in which the sense of the progress of history did not count. Neither did he run to the other extreme of naively viewing concrete historical events as a symptom of the Latter Days. Shinran viewed history, or the history of Buddhism, as a process of the incessant unfolding of man's basic aspiration or *bodhi-citta*. In other words, he saw it as a process of man's ever-deepening, as well as ever-progressing consciousness of *bodhi-citta*, which is usually portrayed as being generated by man's self-effort; but in reality it would be more correct to say that the *bodhi-citta* arises in man, for it is transcendent to him as it belongs to the *dharmadhātu*, the realm of the Buddhas free from man's preconception. Shinran's acceptance of the Latter Day Thought never meant that he rejected the progressive view of history, but rather that the ever-deepening insight of the teachers of the Pure Land thought made Shinran conscious of the bottomless decadence of man, especially of himself. In Shinran's view, it is neither the age nor the nature of man that degenerates with the passage of time, but the consciousness of man's bottomless decadence that has been ever-deepened and increasingly revealed by the successive teachers of the Pure Land doctrine. The fact that Shinran's thought was based not only upon his inner faith, but also upon his view of history, especially the history of the appearance of teachers who ever-renewed and deepened the interpretations of the traditional teachings of the Pure Land thought, is clearly shown in the passage of the *Shōshin Nem-*

butsu Ge, which is found at the end of the chapter on Practice in his *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō*, where he concisely depicts with a profound sense of praise and devotion their original insights, which he undoubtedly regarded as invaluable contributions toward clarifying the significance of the practice of the *Nembutsu*, the core of the Pure Land teaching.

That the Pure Land teaching up to the present day has steadily produced throughout India, China and Japan innumerable commentaries and subcommentaries on its basic sutras testifies to the fact that its teaching in itself embodies something immortal and universal and its history is none other than the story of the steady progress of the *Nembutsu* teaching for countless people who have been edified thereby and delivered from *samsāra* (the vicious circle of birth and death) by virtue of the truth embodied in it. As in China, so in Japan, nobody knows how many people, in the course of the continued transmission of the teaching, have found the profound joy of faith and deliverance in the teaching of the *Nembutsu* throughout their lives.

II

In view of the fact that the *Nembutsu* is considered today as having the dual significance of “thinking of or remembering the Buddha” and “pronouncing the Name of the Buddha,” especially of Amida Buddha, or the Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life (Skt. *Amita* [immeasurable] *ābha* [light] or *āyus* [life]), it seems quite probable that the *Nembutsu* is the consummation of the history of the *mantra* tradition in the most genuine sense of the term. *Mantra* was a device born

of the *Vajrayāna* tradition in which man was enabled to enter into *samādhi* (concentration of mind) as quickly as possible, for *samādhi* is the only state in which *prajñā* (transcendental wisdom) can coexist. It is well known that this fact was especially emphasized by Hui-neng (638-713), the 8th patriarch of Zen Buddhism. Although *mantra* or *dhāraṇī* is apt to be associated with something superstitious nowadays, its nature was originally by no means dubious or superstitious. Rather it was meant solely for universal salvation, over against the strict monasticism or scholasticism prevalent in the early stages the history of Buddhism, which was meant only for a selected minority. The rise of the teachings of the *mantras* was a revolt against the privileged classes that monopolized the path to final deliverance or Nirvana.

At present the *Nembutsu* is known in Japan as the practice of pronouncing, "*Namu Amida Butsu.*" It was Shinran who clarified the nature of the *Nembutsu* in all of its aspects in the light of the traditional teachings of the Pure Land School as expounded by prominent teachers throughout India, China and Japan. Shinran's main work, the *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō*, is made up of the following six parts: Teaching, Practice, Faith, Attainment, True Buddha and His Land, and Illusory Buddha and His Land. The six parts are nothing other than the six aspects of the *Nembutsu*. The teaching of the Buddha calls upon man, and man responds to it. Man's response to the teaching is expressed in history in innumerable commentaries and subcommentaries on sutras. The concrete expression of man's incessant response to the teaching is the practice of the *Nembutsu*. How the Buddha's (Awakened One's) compassion

toward sentient beings in *saṃsāra* came to be embodied in the *Nembutsu* is described in mythological terms in the *Sutra of Eternal Life*. Shinran followed in the path of Hōnen who selected the Triple Sutra of Pure Land Buddhism from among the numerous Mahayana sutras: the *Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra* (or the Larger Sutra of Eternal Life), the *Meditation Sutra*, and the *Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha Sutra*, and designated the first as the sutra that revealed the Buddha's sincerest compassion toward sentient beings. According to him Amida Buddha's compassion is expressed in the form of the vows taken by the Bodhisattva Dharmākara, the name of Amida in his disciplinary stage.

The *Nembutsu* as a practice is explained in the second chapter on Practice, which is based on the seventeenth vow. This declares that upon Dharmākara's attainment of Buddhahood innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions shall pronounce the name of Amida (to say the *Nembutsu*) in praise. Shinran declares in this chapter that the *Nembutsu* dispells all forms of man's ignorance and fulfills all the wishes of sentient beings. Shinran then concludes with the *Shōshin Nembutsu Ge* (Hymn of the Right Faith as *Nembutsu*). The salient feature of this *gāthā* (hymn) is that Shinran enumerates by way of praise the names of the seven masters of the Pure Land tradition and epitomizes therein their respective original insights. This shows what he had learned from these eminent teachers.

Another significance of this second chapter is that Shinran viewed the *Nembutsu* from two aspects: *Nembutsu* as Faith and *Nembutsu* as Practice. Traditionally the teaching of the Buddha had been viewed from three aspects: Teaching, Prac-

tice and Attainment. However, Shinran viewed the *Nembutsu* as the crystallization of all Buddhist teachings. But he noted a special significance in the practice of the *Nembutsu*, that is to say, he viewed it as a unity of faith and practice. Hence his special insertion of the chapter on Faith after that on Practice. The famous passage in the Faith chapter of the *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō* demonstrates Shinran's insight in this point. He says, "The true faith is always accompanied by the utterance of the *Nembutsu*, but the mere utterance of the *Nembutsu* does not necessarily show the presence of faith as an expression of Amida's vow-power." This passage shows Shinran's critical attitude toward the practice of *Nembutsu* as an expression of faith in spite of his conviction that there is no *Nembutsu* practice apart from faith in the Original Vow of Amida. The Original Vow of Amida is man's basic aspiration, of which man is ordinarily unaware on the superficial level of his ordinary consciousness. It is the *bodhi-citta* which fulfills man's innermost wish to be what he originally is (this is metaphorically expressed as "Birth in the Pure Land"), to attain his original nature (Buddhahood) free from the egoistic drive or influence of *kleśa* (disturbing and unwholesome mental tendencies). *Bodhi-citta* directs ordinary man toward what he essentially is (the Buddha). Shinran showed explicitly that the *Nembutsu* practice as the expression of Right Faith is no other than this *bodhi-citta*.

Hōnen had selected the practice of *Nembutsu* from among the various practices which were supposed to lead man to the final deliverance. He showed the grounds for that selection by way of theoretical arguments and the benign and yet per-

suasive power of his personality. The former is to be seen in his main work, the *Senchaku Hongan Nembutsu Shū* (A Collection of Important Passages Supporting the Selection of the Practice of *Nembutsu* Based upon the Original Vow) published in 1198. It was Shinran's mission to show the world what Hōnen had truly intended to reveal. In order to execute his mission, Shinran resorted to the critical method of sharply distinguishing the element of absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*) from conditional truth (*vyavahāra-satya*) within the practice of the *Nembutsu*. Shinran thus refused readily to admit the mere recitation of the *Nembutsu* to be an expression of true faith, and he administered his critical attitude (this is called the spirit of *shinke-umpan* in Japanese, which means a sharp discrimination between the true and the conditional) toward the source from which the *Nembutsu* is derived. This critical attitude was a step forward from Hōnen's standpoint.

We are reminded of the age when among Hōnen's disciples absurd competitions were current as to the number of times the *Nembutsu* was to be recited a day. Such a thing can happen only among the devotees of the *Nembutsu* for whom the quantity rather than the quality of the *Nembutsu* counts. Therefore, Shinran's main work, the *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō*, could be called a landmark in the history of the *Nembutsu* faith, especially for the chapter devoted to Faith which is divided into two sections. The first section of the chapter on Faith is based on the spirit of the 18th Vow, which declares that all sentient beings in the ten directions who recite the *Nembutsu* in deep faith shall be delivered, whereas the second section is based on the ful-

fillment of the same vow. Through the correlation of these two parts, Shinran showed that the *Nembutsu* is not man's prayer seeking for some benefits (*jiriki*), but the Buddha's self-declaration and summons (*tarikī*) calling upon human beings in *samsāra* (the sea of birth and death). Not only is it a calling on the part of Amida, but is at once the response of man who is thus called upon. At the same time, the act of saying the *Nembutsu* is itself the fulfillment of Amida's vow in man; therefore the reciting act itself is proof of man's having been delivered. This insight of Shinran's resulted in his denial of anticipating man's final deliverance only at the time of his physical death. Thus it may be said that Shinran shifted the significance of *ōjō* (Birth in the Pure Land) from the time of physical death to the moment of man's existential death here and now in the act of the *Nembutsu*. In Shinran's teaching, the so-called "in the future" means, in reality, "in the infinite depth of one's consciousness."

Even the act of saying the *Nembutsu* (manifest form) could mean, with Shinran, not necessarily the vocal pronouncement but also the will or urge for the act (latent form) in the minds of the devotees. This point is clearly expressed at the beginning of the *Tannishō* (A Tract Deploring Heresies), which is a record of Shinran's teachings allegedly made by Yuien, one of his foremost disciples. It runs as follows:

"At the very moment the desire to recite the *Nembutsu* is awakened in us in the firm faith that we can attain the birth in the Pure Land through the saving grace of the Inconceivable Grand Vow, the all-embracing, none-forsaking virtue (of Amida) is conferred on us." (Chapter I.)

With Shinran, this pre-vocal urge for the *Nembutsu* was as important as the reciting act itself. Incidentally, prior to Shinran, how one could maintain a peaceful mind at the time of physical death, was one of the gravest concerns to the followers of the Pure Land teaching. That is to say, the *ōjō* meant for them a physical death and nothing more. It might be said that Shinran identified the significance of the physical death with the existential death at the moment of the arising of faith in the minds of the devotees.

This does not necessarily mean that he totally neglected the significance of the act of saying the *Nembutsu*, but rather he viewed the reciting act to be the natural outcome of faith. This is the reason why with Shinran right faith should necessarily be identified with right practice, but not *vice versa*. This is also the reason why it is generally (though not necessarily rightly) said that Hōnen emphasized practice while Shinran faith. Especially to be noted in this context is the fact that the difference of faith and practice here is not a qualitative one but a matter of emphasis. As shown above, in the *Nembutsu* as an organic unity of faith and practice there can be no faith apart from practice and no practice apart from faith: both are dependent upon each other (in the relationship of *paratityasamutpāda*). Shinran says in one of his epistles to his pupil, Yū Amidabutsu, "Faith unaccompanied by the recitation of Amida's name would be in vain; constant recitation of Amida's name in lukewarm faith makes difficult the practising devotee's birth in the Pure Land."

Accordingly, it can be said that in the chapter on Practice Shinran showed the traditional aspect of his faith in the *Nem-*

butsu or what he had learned from his predecessors ; and in the chapter on Faith he revealed his original insight into the *Nembutsu* teaching.

III

From another point of view, both chapters on Practice and Faith (these being the two aspects of the *Nembutsu* practice) may be seen as the former revealing the teaching (*dharma*) and as the latter man (the recipient of *dharma*). The two are in reality only the two aspects of the one organic reality. The former, therefore, cannot but be expressed as man's praise of the teaching and Amida's virtues, while the latter as man's repentance of his sinfulness and his debased nature exposed necessarily by the illuminating light (wisdom) of Amida. Therefore Shinran's *Nembutsu* faith may be characterized at once as the praise of Amida's virtues and as repentance for his own debased character. This twofold nature of the *Nembutsu* faith had already been pointed out by Shan-tao in the *Commentaries on the Meditation Sutra* as the "Two Aspects of Deep Mind (Faith)." This is clearly reflected in Shinran's faith as expressed in his writings.

In the fourth chapter on Attainment, Shinran is primarily dependent upon T'an-luan for his expositions on what the final goal of the *Nembutsu* faith is, what the character of the state called Nirvana is, and how the enlightened men (Buddhas and Bodhisattvas) carry out the activity of salvation of sentient beings who are immersed in the sea of birth and death. In this chapter it is clarified that Nirvana can never be described in relative terms ; it is beyond human conception, that

the *ōjō* is in actuality the birth of non-birth, and that the Bodhisattva's birth in the Pure Land itself is his activity of delivering sentient beings in *samsāra*.

T'an-luan's insight into the nature of the Bodhisattva's saving activities reveals the fact that it is when the Bodhisattva is "freely playing in the garden" (that is, when he is free from the consciousness that "I am saving somebody"), that he is truly delivering people from their *kleśa*-bondage. This shows the truth that only he who has been freed from ego-attachment (love and hate being its expressions) can save others. If there is a modicum of consciousness of "I" and "mine" in the mind of the one who saves, there is no salvation taking place. This teaching reminds us of Shinran's famous declaration that "I, Shinran, have no disciple of my own. How can I claim myself to be a teacher to anybody? I have no other task but to listen in faith to the Tathāgata's teaching and to share the joy with other people. We are all brothers and sisters before the Tathāgata, therefore we are fellow disciples." Herewith Shinran turned upside down the common belief that man should first of all become a believer and then he could teach people, and identified the two processes with each other to be in a simultaneous relationship. Therefore, for Shinran, there was only himself to be taught and not others. His way was the Way of Discipleship through and through. Herein lies the eternal secret of his teaching.

IV

The *Nembutsu* is usually expressed vocally as "*Namu Amida Butsu*." Literally translated, it means, "I take refuge

in the Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life." "Light" here signifies *prajñā* (Transcendent Wisdom) and "Life" *karuṇā* (All-embracing Compassion). The reason why the *Nembutsu* is the core of the Pure Land teaching can be seen in the dynamic and dialectical structure of the *Nembutsu* itself. It would seem at first sight that *namu* (Skt. *namah*; "I worship") corresponds to the subject of faith, and *Amida Butsu* to the object of faith; therefore, *Namu Amida Butsu* is the unity of subject and object. But in reality it is not a static relationship but a dynamic reality. There is no "I" apart from "Amida," and there is no "Amida" apart from "I"; neither is, essentially speaking, self-existent or real in a substantial sense, but the arising of both I and Amida is simultaneous. In other words, "I" in the act of *namu* is real in the true sense of the term, and without the attitude of *namu* on my part, there is no Amida anywhere. Then what or who is Amida? "Amida" means "immeasurable," "infinite" or "eternal." It is well known that Nāgārjuna taught that the Absolute can be expressed only in negative, not positive, terms. "Amida," being a negative expression, may be one of such cases. In this connection Shinran says: "Amida's Original Vow was meant for us in order that we might become the Supreme Buddha. The Supreme Buddha has no form; and because it has no form, it is called 'Suchness.' If it were shown to have form, it could not then be called the 'Supreme Nirvana.' I learned from my master that Amida Buddha is so called, only to make known to us its formlessness. The name of 'Amida Buddha' is only a skillful means of making 'Suchness' known to us."

Consequently, the name, Amida, itself shows that it is already a limited, relative Buddha, for naming something inevitably qualifies it. Therefore, when we express in words the Infinite Buddha as Amida, it is only the Buddha objectified on the level of secondary truth. Therefore, Shinran called Amida "*Dharmakāya* as *Upāya*." That which is pointed at with the name of Amida is, needless to say, unnamable, inexpressible, for it is Suchness itself. What mattered to Shinran was no longer Amida Buddha, as the object of worship, but *Namu Amida Butsu*. Amida Buddha as *upāya* can be objectified, but not *Namu Amida Butsu*, for it is the actual interrelationship between subject and object; it is not a static "thing," but a dynamic "event." Therefore Rennyo (1415-1499), the eighth patriarch of the Jōdo Shin School and one of the descendants of Shinran, remarked: "In the Jōdo Shin School, as the object of worship, the picture scroll of Amida should be preferred to the wooden statue of Amida; but more than that the *myōgō* (the six characters of *Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu*) should be preferred to the picture scroll of Amida."

A question may be asked, "Why *Nembutsu*?" Looking back on the history of Buddhism, we note that the recitation of *Namu Amida Butsu* was transmitted in ancient times from India, through China and Japan, to us of the 20th century. The teaching of *anitya* (impermanence), however, is the core of the Buddhist teachings. According to the teaching of *anitya*, all things created must sooner or later perish. And yet we see the century-old transmission of the *Nembutsu* in the history of Mahayana Buddhism. If the *Nembutsu* were created by somebody, then it must have perished long ago. And yet the

Nembutsu has not only survived the history of many centuries, but I find it now reverberating in my mind. What on earth is it in the *Nembutsu* that made it possible to persist in history over such a long space of time? Something uncreated or eternal must be there in the nature of the *Nembutsu*, which alone must have caused the *Nembutsu* to survive centuries after centuries. In the light of the past history, it is quite evident that the *Nembutsu* embodies something that belongs to the transcendental realm. On the other hand, it has another aspect: it can be held and recited by anybody living in history, on this mundane level. From this, it is clear that the *Nembutsu* belongs at once to the supra-mundane realm and to the mundane realm. This means that *Nembutsu* can be "owned" by anybody, but at the same time it is beyond any individual's monopoly. Shinran's notion of the character of *Nembutsu* as being Buddha-given derives from the realization of this fact. Besides, from his own religious experience, Shinran came to learn of this fact from the mythical description of the *Nembutsu* having been chosen by Dharmākara Bodhisattva (primordial man) as the result of his deep contemplation lasting for five *kalpas* and the hard discipline he underwent for innumerable *kalpas*. It was only natural for Shinran, who came to realize this fact, that he should have developed his well known conception of faith, as something given by Amida. What must not be overlooked here is the fact that even where he emphasized the givenness of the faith in *Nembutsu* in terms of the famous "Other Power," he never lost sight of the reciprocity of the arising of faith.

Shinran describes the True Buddha and His Land, versus

the Illusory Buddha and His Land, in terms of T'an-luan's expositions in the fifth and sixth chapters of the *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō*. The True Buddha and His Land are beyond man's description, inconceivable and unthinkable (*acintya*), whereas the Illusory Buddha and His Land are those grasped by man's limited, relative and discriminative reason. The Illusory Buddha is the Buddha seen through the distorting spectacles of man's intellect, and the Illusory Buddha Land is the limited world as seen through this same distorting medium. Those who are self-complacent with their own preconceptions about the Buddha are living in the Illusory Buddha Land. They are not aware of the fact that they are qualifying the unlimited enlightenment or Nirvana by their limited sense of differentiation. They even give forms to the formless Buddha and His World. Shinran applied these conceptions to those who were trying to effect their own salvation by their own self-effort with the Buddha-given *Nembutsu* as a means to enlightenment.

The fact that the True Buddha and His Land (Nirvana) is *acintya* (unthinkable) does not mean that they are shrouded in mystery. Rather they are, in the enlightened eyes, most self-evident. *Acintya* means that reality is so self-evident that it is not graspable or expressible through limiting human concepts. Or it means that it is not possible to express reality in finite terms.

Shinran's critical attitude enabled him to discern the particular significance of the 18th, 19th and 20th Vows, among the 48 Vows specified by Dharmākara. He designated the 18th Vow as the most genuine, while the 19th and 20th Vows were regarded as relative and of secondary significance. He

did not, however, reject once and for all the people who belonged temporarily to the 19th and 20th Vows, but declared that they too would be led, by virtue of the Buddha's vow-power, to the ultimate state of salvation of the 18th Vow.

In one of his hymns Shinran says in regard to such people :
“Even those who say the *Nembutsu* with self-effort and with a dispersed mind, will finally be embraced by the Buddha's Vow assuring universal salvation, and will naturally be led into the gate of Suchness without being taught.” In this hymn, Shinran's firm faith in Amida's vow-power (the power of naturalness) is explicitly revealed.