

Some Basic Concepts in Jodo Shinshu

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A dozen or so ideas, practices and images are central to living as a Jodo Shinshu Buddhist. Without trying to define these exhaustively I will discuss some of them below.

1. Amida Buddha – The Buddha of inconceivably great Wisdom-Light and Endless Life. Amida is seen by many these days as a concept of Buddhahood. Traditionally we have not worried too much about his transcendence of the limits of what is personal. He is nothing like a big guy in the sky but he must be the subject of compassionate action. I do not picture Amida Buddha as some immense mind that is the subject of experience. I do not believe that we can eliminate altogether the notion of subjectivity or personhood from our concept of Amida. Compassion cannot be accidental. Amida is the subject of compassionate, liberating action. The late wajo sensei Rev. Kakuei Miyaji has said that “Amida Buddha is Absolute Subjectivity.” I might say “Amida Buddha is the door to and the fountainhead of Absolute Subjectivity.”

2. Tariki – Usually translated “Other Power.” Recently translated by Mark Blum as “A spiritual power beyond the known self.” In Shinran’s use of the term it is identical to Hongan riki, the power that is at work fulfilling the promise to liberate all who wish the help of Amida Buddha.

3. Jiriki – Self Power. The opposite of Other Power and complimentary to it in the thinking of the concept’s originator, Tan Luan (Donran). The next major theorist in Pure Land Buddhist tradition, Tao-cho (Doshaku) claimed that self-power could be abandoned altogether. According to Tao-cho and most of later tradition Enlightenment can be accomplished by Tariki (a spiritual power beyond the known self) alone. Even at this juncture jiriki was seen as a good but limited thing. By the time of Rennyo Shonin (1414 –1499) jiriki comes to mean what Shinran called hakarai, contrivance, and is seen as an egotistical attachment we should release.

4. Hon Gan – The Fundamental or 18th of Amida’s Vows which ensures access to Amida’s Pure Land to anyone who will recollect Amida Buddha, perhaps by holding in mind or uttering a phrase incorporating his name with a phrase expressing reverence and reliance.

5. Pure Land (jodo) – A. The realm of Amida’s influence. B. Literally Amida’s Pure Land is “The Realm of Unimaginably Great Pleasure and

Happiness" (Sukhavati). C. A land to be born into at death for certain progress toward Enlightenment. Since the dominant interpretation puts this realm beyond space and time Shinran's view that one immediately attains Enlightenment in the same moment as death and birth into the Pure Land is inarguable if not obvious.

6. The Easy Practice (igyo) – Texts attributed to Nagarjuna state that saying the Name of Amida Buddha is the easy practice. His oft-repeated analogy is that it is like riding on a good ship whereas difficult practices are like hiking through the mountains. This still leaves open to question the degree of mental focus and commitment to numerous repetition of phrases such as "Namayam Buddhayam Amitayam"/ "Namo Amida Butsu" and such.

7. Jinen – This term occurs often in Shinran's later writings. It must be understood from two different perspectives. From the perspective of the Buddha jinen is the naturalness of Reality-such-as-it Truly-is. True Suchness works to draw us to the nembutsu and to reliance upon hongan riki. From our side jinen is the naturalness of living without contrivance. Without severing blinding passions we are being transformed and liberated by jinen. That aspect of ourselves which is the Buddha's mind becoming ours flows spontaneously without calculation or design. This is where we take our stand. We don't try to remain in jinen, which would be another sort of contrivance, but we put little store in our opinions and predilections when we are not in that zone of naturalness.

8. Nembutsu - Literally "recollection of Buddha(s)" In our stream of Mahayana, Nembutsu, in forms like "Namo Amida Butsu," is the presence of the Buddha in our lives. Nembutsu is the actual force of our shared commitment to link our Liberation to the freedom and happiness of all living creatures. For further analysis see "Introduction and History of the Nembutsu."

9. Shinjin – The mind of true reliance [upon assistance from Amida]. Three models are necessary to understand this concept. A. Faith, which is trust in and confidence emerging from trust in worthy realities. B. Religious experience, which occurs in the briefest instant and may be registered only unconsciously. C. Trans-formation in identity. It is a fact in the one moment of sincerely saying the Buddha's name that you will be a Buddha in your next life. Besides a transformation in your ultimate identity the person you are now will mellow and mature in the absence of overwhelming causal factors to the contrary. For a more detailed treatment see Shinjin as a Transformation in Identity, Pure Land, Kyoto, December 1997 pages 50 – 63.

10. The Twenty-second Vow – This is the promise amongst Amida's 48 vows that points toward returning to this world to liberate others. Read superficially the vow is a welcome to those who wish to hold off their own Enlightenment until all others are liberated but who still might wish to progress toward that goal through the auspices of Amida's Pure Realm. Shinran, basing his vision on the Vow-mind of Amida, saw that true compassion dictates that we all must return to help others. We will each choose to be at play in the fields of karma liberating others when we truly Awaken. Viewed in another way, we see a consensus in the mature Mahayana that Buddhahood is the platform from which we will liberate others. The notion of the Bodhisattva vows as holding the door until everyone else passes through is too literalistic. The lotus tradition and the Pure Land tradition each lead to the same conclusion, Buddhahood is our destiny and the empowerment of our saving others who drown in oceans of suffering. My reading of Zen tradition, the other major development in mature Mahayana tradition finds a consensus there as well.