

The Humble Confidence of Being in Touch with the Great Mystery

Rev. Jundo Gregory Gibbs

We don't need to be Enlightened to appreciate saying the Buddha's Name. Whether the most common forms are used, "Namo Amida Butsu", "Namu Amida Butsu", "Namanda" or whether we gravitate toward the less commonly used forms, "Kimyo Jin Jippo Muge Ko Nyorai", "Namo Fukashigi Ko Nyorai" etc., we only need a rough sense of what these utterances mean for them to work in nurturing our lives. In fact, the more we study this Nembutsu/Buddha-recollection approach to Mahayana Buddhist living the less clear we are about meanings pertaining to our actions.

If we don't have any idea what "Namo Amida Butsu" might mean it will not be nurturing to say this phrase aloud or to hold it silently in reflection. Literally translated this most common form of Nembutsu means, "I respect and rely upon Amida Buddha." That understanding itself will be enough to spur some positive transformation in the life of a Nembutsu-based Buddhist. It is worth knowing, additionally, that "Amida Buddha" is actually a contraction of two different names for the same source of caring, - "Amitayus" and "Amitabha". The former term means "immeasurably great expanse of Life". The latter term means "immeasurably great extent of wisdom-light."

Once we start looking into the meaning of the Nembutsu it is natural that questions arise such as, "Is Amida Buddha a person, a process, ... a community of persons?" The answer to that question would be, "yes". In other words, each of those conceptual models reveals an aspect of who and what Amida Buddha is.

The saying of the Buddha's Name along with a phrase meaning to respect and rely upon him/her/them/that will bring Shinjin into our lives. Naturally, the longer we participate in this stream of Buddhist tradition the more likely we are to ask, "Is Shinjin faith? Confidence? Trust? a sort of religious experience? Is it the Buddha's own heart encompassing and including us? The honest answer here is, again, "yes." What we mean by Shinjin is illumined in various ways by all these models of thought.

Receiving Shinjin while saying the Nembutsu guarantees birth into Amida's Pure Land. Is this a place into which we may be born at death, a realm of influence, a state of heart and mind, a platform for Enlightenment, an Enlightened Realm? Again, the answer must be "yes". Each of these ways of thinking clarify some aspect of what "pure land" truly means.

It may be a universal fact about spirituality but is definitely a fact about Buddhist spirituality that we start out not understanding our basic notions terribly well, we study and think about what we've studied and it all starts to have so clarity for us. Even more serious study and reflection then reveals to us that our most treasured concepts elude our complete understanding. The whole process can be very humbling. Ideally we end up with "the humble confidence of being in touch with the great mystery." I borrow that phrase from Robert Aitken but I apply it quite differently. For Aitken Roshi Sakyamuni Buddha himself was someone with such a humble confidence of being in touch with the great mystery. I think this is a bit too little to say of someone we think was fully enlightened. By contrast I don't think it is too much to say of someone who has found the Nembutsu to be worth and trustworthy. Each of us can be such a person if we wish.