

## Practice in Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Temples

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Sometimes we ask a question and it really turns out to be three or more questions that are telescoped in a confusing way. I would like to break the question of “practice in Jodo Shinshu temples” into three different questions. The beginning and end of answering this question can, and I believe should be, “just say the nembutsu.”

### What is the Fundamental Practice in Jodo Shinshu?

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a number of wrong answers were given to this question by philosophers and ministers who were, perhaps, trying to answer some other question. Let me look at some of the misleading answers before we return to the right answer (just say the nembutsu). Names of those giving erroneous answers have been withheld to protect the guilty.

#### *Wrong Answers:*

1. “Jodo Shinshu is the practice of no practice.” – The proper response to this non-answer is to place your hand against your mouth and exhale forcefully producing the sound which is politely referred to as a raspberry.

2. “Compassion” - This is the right answer to another question. It cannot be the right answer to the question above since it is no more or less true for Jodo Shinshu than it is for Zen, Gelugs-pa, Theravada or any other type of Buddhist pathway. We are looking for something specific to the Nembutsu-centered living that draws inspiration from the writings of Shinran. “Compassion” is just too general to be a helpful response.

3. “Self reflection” – This is a classically bad answer. It is motivated by an attempt to escape a possible charge of being self-power centered. But the real mistake to be avoided in Jodo Shinshu is an insincere sort of hakarai - petty, calculative rationalization or contrivance. This is, itself, an evasive and contrived answer.

#### *Some Answers that could be right:*

1. Just say the Nembutsu – So long as we keep in mind the fact that recollection of Buddha by holding to and/or saying his Name can take place in vocalized, silent-reflective, half-conscious and unconscious dimensions of our lives, this is my choice for most valid and nurturing response.

2. Allow Amida’s mind and heart of true reliance and genuine confidence {*shinjin*} to encompass and absorb us.

3. Feeling assurance of liberation in saying the Nembutsu we express our joy and gratitude in our many daily activities.

4. Your interpretation goes here \_\_\_\_\_

One reason answering this question, “What is the fundamental practice in Jodo Shinshu,” generates puzzles and puzzling responses is that it is often telescoped with a couple of related but distinct questions. While answering the central question we are sometimes also wondering, “What other practices might be appropriate at a Jodo Shinshu temple?” Or we are thinking, “What other practices, with non-ultimate objectives, might be useful at Jodo Shinshu temples? What forms of cultivation for important purposes but with no intent to help the settling of *shinjin* or to assure birth in the Pure Land might be valuable?” Let me discuss this a bit below if I may.

### What Other Practices are Appropriate in Jodo Shinshu Temples?

Granting that there are no practices outside the Nembutsu that we would use to assure enlightenment through the auspices of Amida Buddha’s Pure Land nor to facilitate the receipt of *shinjin*, the door to auxiliary activities is quite open.

Valid objectives for practices other than the Nembutsu would include: 1. Wellness. 2. Intellectual and aesthetic stimulation. 3. Providing a background for the better understanding of the Buddha-dharma, etc. (Looking at #3 briefly, the Dai Mu Ryo Ju Kyo presents Sakyamuni as teaching of Amida Buddha, his vows and his land while in a state of samadhi. How could we understand what this means with no experience of meditation practice?)

### What Other Activities Should be Offered at BCA Temples?

My answer to this question is – Only those activities for which the teacher has adequate training. In my own case, I probably logged 8,000 – 10,000 hours of meditation practice between 1968 and 1983. Since encountering Jodo Shinshu in 1983 I have probably spent about 200 hours meditating in the past 22 years. Although I am not an expert, I could teach meditation if it were strongly urged that I do so. How many other BCA ministers have a previous background in the practice of meditation? I think there is some minimum acquaintance with the art of meditation that should be required before someone presumes to teach meditation. I would think that one to two hundred hours of experience at meditation should be a minimum requirement. If ministers are at temples which wish a meditation class and the minister has little or no experience I think that he or she should either bring in someone else who has the experience to teach the class or make the temple wait a year or so while the requisite experience is accrued.

I have been teaching a “tai chi as exercise” class at BCA temples for 11 years or so. I had only one year’s training in tai chi chuan but I have continued the practice for 31 years. I make it clear to participants that if they truly wish to master the art they must find a more qualified teacher. Even so, what I offer is valuable. My students’ and my own health are nurtured by these bi-weekly classes. The likelihood of falling is reduced for senior citizens who participate in the class. Improved coordination and appreciation of being an embodied biological person comes from these classes. Other ministers may have similar non-Buddhist skills to share and I can’t see why they should not.