



The Answer

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Q & A for Shinshu Buddhists

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FOR QUESTIONS, COMMENTS OR CONTRIBUTIONS, PLEASE CONTACT: fukumotodsgn@earthlink.net or sensei@vhbt.org

Volume 3 will cover the issues some might ask about chanting. The book I will be using as a reference guide is "THE BOOK OF JODO SHINSHU CHANTING." It is an undated publication by the BCA Ministerial Association Gonshiki Liturgy Committee. The contributors are as follows: Rev. Seikan Fukuma, Rev. Zuiken Taniguchi, Rev. Ikuo Nishimura, Rev. Haruyoshi Kusada, IBS and Mr. Thomas Okamoto.

Why do we need to chant in the Jodo Shinshu tradition? Part 1

The present liturgy or chanting has developed through over eight hundred years of Shin Tradition as a living expression of the Shin spiritual experience. The style and content of the chanting has changed over those many centuries. Modifications are occurring even as I write this answer to the question. The Jodo Shinshu position is that modifications ought to arise out of spiritual experience and not for esthetic reasons. Furthermore, the liturgy serves to integrate all the followers of Shin into a truly religious family; the word *shu* (sect or teaching) in Jodo Shinshu, our sect's name, means *ancestor*, so that it implies clearly the concept of *family* as derived from a common ancestor. Accordingly, a true sense of belonging to a family should arise when one goes into a congregation, be it in Los Angeles, Venice, Fresno, Switzerland, Brazil, Japan or any-

where Shin Buddhism has taken root. When one hears the liturgy in its familiar words and intonations, a true sense of belonging to a family arises no matter where one may be. The ability to change the chanting is part of the process, because change is one of the three fundamental teachings of Buddhism. However, modifications of the liturgy must take into serious consideration both its spiritual and psychological reasons.

Why do we need to chant in the Jodo Shinshu tradition? Part 2

Shin chanting is different than the chanting of other sects in one big respect; other sects of Buddhism regard chanting the liturgy as a spiritual act, a specific spiritual practice which can lead ultimately to complete Enlightenment. In Shin, the exact opposite is true. Chanting is not a religious act producing religious merit, but rather chanting the liturgy becomes an expression of gratitude for the teachings of the Buddha. This is in fact a special characteristic of Shin Buddhism. This also exemplifies a vital spiritual truth and difference from other traditions.

Why do we need to chant in Japanese, why not in English?

It is true that the Buddha said his followers should use the language of the people, and throughout the history of Buddhism this has been tradition. In India, native languages

were chanted in the Buddhist temples, and when Buddhism took root in China, a Chinese liturgy was developed. This has been transmitted down to the present day as a living experience in China, Korea and Japan. In Korea and Japan, the Chinese language has been, until recent days, a living part of the culture even as the Japanese migrated toward their native language. However, one thing must be noted, that portions of the previous influences remain (Sanskrit in China, Chinese in Japan). Just as in the case of the United States, we will most likely retain portions of the Chinese and Japanese liturgy even as we might migrate towards an English liturgy.

In Shin Buddhism, there are no reasons why the chantings cannot be revised. Traditional chanting, both in melody and content are derived from the Tendai Sect. In the 15th century, Rennyo Shonin created a liturgy based upon the Shoshinge, and used more Japanese intonations. In the 16th century, the Patriarch Jakunyo reintroduced aspects of Tendai music and influences of Shingon chanting were brought into the Hongwanji tradition. In the 18th century, Patriarch Honyo reorganized and systematized Shin chanting as an independent tradition. Further musical theory in 1910 and 1933 have brought the tradition to what it is today. So there is no fundamental reason why, in the future,

or present, more modifications could not be made. Just remember, the Jodo Shinshu position is that modifications ought to arise out of spiritual experience and not for esthetic reasons, novelty or convenience.

As to my personal thoughts on this issue, as intriguing as this sounds, it just sounds funny and is distracting when done in English.

"NEMBUTSU: THE WAY OF SPIRITUAL FULFILMENT

Why is reciting the Nembutsu considered an act of Purity?

My voice which calls Amida's Name is mine ~ but in truth, it is Amida calling me.

It is not we, ourselves, who recite the Nembutsu, but Amida himself who, giving us his own Name, obliges us to repeat it.

This is why we say that whereas all our acts (other than Nembutsu) are, more or less tainted with impurities. The reciting of NAMO AMIDA BUTSU is truly an act exempted from all impurity. It is not we that utter his Name, but it is Amida who speaks to himself. It is his own utterance breathed in this breath.

Therefore, lay it well to heart that uttering the Buddha's Name, or paying him homage or thinking of him, is not an act originating in ourselves, but it is the doing of Amida Buddha himself.

How can we get Faith?

Although Amida is constantly trying to awaken us to faith, from where I come from, I find it hard to get, find or have. Faith does not come suddenly or at any certain time, in fact there is no pattern of where or when. Anything that has to do with a change in our personality or core beliefs do not come suddenly. Compassion, faith, love are all parts of us that are nurtured over time and environment, it is a growing process. The realization of Amida's infinite wisdom and compassion is

a continuing process that develops with growth and experience.

FAITH IN AMIDA HAS TO BE CULTIVATED

To become conscious of growing in Amida's Wisdom and Compassion, self-reflection is recommended. We must first understand ourselves and understand the nature of Amida's Great Wisdom.

As human beings, we have the ability to reflect upon what we know, believe and have done. We should take advantage of this ability to reflect and spend some time looking within.

By looking within, we find out more about ourselves and become aware of the necessity of accepting faith in Amida's Compassion and Wisdom.

Personally, I feel that the workings of the Amida will embrace us as we are, I believe that what Sensei is trying to express is that because we have a need to know and define, that is why it is a continuing process. We are working against ourselves and preventing our own realization of Amida's gift.

How can Amida enter our hearts?

We must first receive Faith from Amida. Faith is received when we feel an inward need for Amida. Amida never enters the hearts of those who remain smug and self-satisfied. Faith is always preceded by humility ~ a sense of unworthiness and helplessness. Through humility, we realize our nature and our limitations. As Shinran Shonin said, "Realization should come from within."

For example, when a child does something wrong, it does no good to tell him or yell at him that he is wrong, it only makes the child feel angry or mad. If the child is made to realize the wrong from within, then the child will be able to see the wrong and why it was not right. This exemplifies Shinran Shonin's attitude of realization.

To ask us, to throw away our reliance on what we know about ourselves is asking a great deal of us. We have these talents and abilities that we rely upon, how can we just throw away our self~power (Jiriki). This is not an easy task, our inclination is to rely upon what we know of our abilities. It is very difficult for us to be convinced of our inadequacies. So if we can not abandon our reliance on self~power, by saying, I shall "abandon self~power" from today, and sit and wait for the awakening of faith.

I struggled after reading this, according to Wajo Miyaji, you must fear for your life to truly entrust in the Amida. Because only then are you truly open to the Salvation offered. I also feel that Amida saves us all, including those who remain smug and self-satisfied. We, who are like this, need the Grace of Amida the most. We who are so delusional and limited that we are not able to see the truth of the Amida, that we feel empowered with own goodness (power). I believe that the Amida will enter our hearts even though our hearts may be closed, we are simply not aware of it. This Compassion is realized when we have no choice but to reach out to the only one who can save us, the Amida Buddha. Many believe that Jodo Shinshu targets the EVIL PERSON, but that is another question.

Future columns may include Letters from the Gobunsho and other writings.

The most recognized letter in the Gobunsho is, I believe, the "Letter on White Ashes." I will from time to time include full translations of these letters from Rennyō Shonin.

I am also requesting your feelings and thoughts on what is written here or to share your understanding or questions on Jodo Shinshu, or anything really. This is your forum, this is your chance to ask questions and share what you have learned.

Comments from Rev. John Iwohara:

Why do we need to chant?

“the word shu (sect or teaching) in Jodo Shinshu, our sect’s name, means ancestor” Although the character shu (宗) does have the meaning of ancestor as one of its meanings, other meanings include, “source, origination; that which forms the core; primary person; that which a person holds as auspicious; school, sect; destination, leaning.” It is the character used in shukyo (宗教), or the Japanese term for “religion.” In this combination of characters, shukyo literally means “core (or primary) teaching.” These other definitions were included because if you were to translate Jodo Shinshu with just the meaning of ancestor, Jodo Shinshu (浄土真宗) would mean “true ancestor of the Pure Land.” Instead, the term Jodo Shinshu is probably more correctly interpreted as “True Source of the Pure Land.” Although Shinran Shonin did not have this usage in mind, the more common usage of Jodo Shinshu would be “True School of the Pure Land.”

The inclusion of the entire family has always been one of Jodo Shinshu’s strengths. Whereas it is true that chanting together does help to create a sense of community and family, if chanting is going to maintain that unifying characteristic, the common element that we all share as a family, then any changes to the chanting will have to be gradual and natural.

Why do we need to chant in Japanese?

Although it is true that chanting does not have to be limited to any particular language, if the idea of “family through chanting” is going to be maintained a “common language” will be necessary. Chanting in Japanese has the added benefit of helping us to see the timeless nature of the Vow: this is what people more than five centuries ago chanted as Jodo Shinshu Buddhists. This is what I chant

today. On the other hand, however, that is not to say that Jodo Shinshu Buddhists in countries other than Japan cannot make a contribution to the liturgical tradition we share. The songs, or sanbutsuka (literally, “song in praise of the Buddha”), can be seen as the unique contribution or influence we of the West have made to the liturgical tradition of Jodo Shinshu.

Nembutsu is a pure act because it was fulfilled without an iota of impurity. Whereas it is true that Amida Buddha motivates us to repeat the name, why would Amida feel a need or want to speak to himself? Within the name is the fulfillment of the Vow. Because of this when we hear the Name we need to hear the arising, reason, beginning and fulfillment of the Buddha’s Vow.

“The word hear in the passage from the Sutra means that sentient beings, having heard the Buddha’s Vow arose-its origin and fulfillment-are altogether free of doubt. This is to hear.” (cws, p. 112). This is what motivates us to repeat the Name. That’s why saying the Name was interpreted by Kakunyo and later by Rennyō to have the meaning of gratitude. It is an act not motivated by the self.

How can Amida enter our hearts?

This was a difficult section for me to understand. The reason for this is because I was forced to ask myself the following question:

1. Is faith preceded by humility or is humility an outcome of faith?
2. If a smug and self-satisfied person cannot be saved then how can the Vow be for all sentient beings?

On the evil person: From the General Preface (cws, p. 3)

The universal Vow is difficult to fathom and is indeed a great vessel bearing us across the ocean difficult to cross. The unhindered light is the sun of wisdom dispersing the darkness of our ignorance. Thus it is that, when condi-

tions for the teaching of birth in the Pure Land had matured, Devadatta provoked Ajatasatru to commit grave crimes. And when the opportunity arose for explaining the pure act by which birth is settled, Sakyamuni led Vaidehi to select the land of peace.

Tannisho Chapter 3 (cws p. 663) Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.

My final thoughts

I have just broke a goal that I had of trying to keep the Answer short and simple. Rev. John presented me with these sets of comments, and rather than try and edit them to fit, I am presenting them in its entirety. I have done this because I feel that it will help generate questions and comments. In the future I will continue to try and keep it simple, but sometime you can not, so for this issue we have 3 pages. The Answer and a page of comments

As for me, I have one short comment regarding the quote “Amida speaks to himself,” because Rev. John made a comment regarding it, and since I agree with him that it just sounds weird, let me just write this: When I read that initially, I felt compelled to add it as written because I did not know how to respond to this uncertain feeling I had about what was written. After reading Rev. John’s comments, I now know why I felt the way I did. I believe that the recitation of the Name is our vehicle for salvation, that is, to receive Shinjin and to be re-born into the Pure Land. The Amida has no need for this because he is already Enlightened and created the Pure Land for beings like us. The Name benefits those of us who are still trapped in the world of delusion.

CWS is THE COLLECTED WORKS OF SHINRAN published by Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-Ha.

If you have any questions regarding this issue, please, just ask.