



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

In this issue, I will be using edited excerpts from the following book, "The Teaching and Practice Jodo Shinshu" written by Rev. Haruo Yamaoka, published by BCA in 1974. For me, I have found that many past booklets and pamphlets have seemingly a clearer explanation of what Shin Buddhism is.

Is the Jodo Shinshu Tradition really Buddhism?

It is indisputably Buddhism, but to reach this understanding, certain points need to be clarified and defined within the historical context of the Shakyamuni Buddha's life experience.

In introducing the Jodo Shinshu, it is often times questioned whether the teaching of Amida Buddha's working to enlighten sentient beings is really Buddhism or not. It seems to be felt by many that the whole concept is more Christian oriented than a feature of Buddhism. Regardless of the Sutras and the commentaries of the Masters, upon which Jodo Shinshu is based. There can also be doubt in the minds of many. This doubt is further increased by the concept of Other-Power, Amida's Power, or simply the idea of Enlightenment moving towards the sentient beings in delusion.

How do we clarify the above misunderstanding?

We need clarify the misunderstanding of how we tend to define Buddhism and how we tend to define Jodo Shinshu. Generally we tend to define Buddhism as the path of an individual striving to attain Enlightenment, while we tend to define Jodo Shinshu as the path followed by the individuals who cannot strive towards Enlightenment on their own and

only through the help of Amida Buddha can this attainment be achieved.

In terms of understanding, the two concepts seem poles apart. In general, Buddhism is considered, fortified and defined around the life experience of Siddhartha Gautama, who gave up the material life to struggle to attain the Truth. This whole process leading to his Enlightenment is generally believed to be the one and only Buddhist way. Most of the English texts that we read touch upon this orientation, therefore, when we speak about Buddhism, we generally do so from this perspective. From this perspective, if one was a member of the Jodo Shinshu tradition, they would probably become totally confused. Shin Buddhists are told that with our own power we cannot attain Enlightenment, but on the other hand, Buddhism says to strive to attain Truth. We need to put the entire problem into proper perspective.

The view of Buddhism, where by one strives to attain Truth is only part of the whole picture. This point should be evident without further discussion (8 Fold Path, 6 Paramitas, etc.). Another perspective of Buddhism is the beginning point of Jodo Shinshu, from a historical perspective.

Shakyamuni Buddha, upon attaining Enlightenment, faced a very perplexing problem. He had to decide whether to keep the experience of Enlightenment to himself or to share it with others who sought the path to Truth and who sought peace of mind. Moved by the Great Heart of Compassion of Buddhahood historically He moves towards those in ignorance and delusion. The concept of the Other-Power or Buddha Power is

found here.

From the standpoint of the former disciples, the Buddha's Compassion moved towards them and embraced them in the Truth. It was the work of the Buddha's Power of Enlightenment which moved to embrace them and awaken them. This is the work of Buddha Power.

Only upon the attainment of Enlightenment was Shakyamuni Buddha able to perceive the true capabilities of mankind. Some men were able to leave home and family to seek the Truth as he did. Yet, he also noted that there were those, indeed the vast majority, who were tightly bound to home, family and their relations which make them householders. They could not cut away from their obligations as human beings. In their cases, the possibility for attaining Enlightenment was virtually impossible. In His Wisdom, the Buddha Compassionately moved towards such beings, taking into account their human frailties and bonds. To the householders, He offered the way of Enlightenment by means of the Buddha's Power of Compassion. He revealed to mankind the way of the absolute Compassion, which is the very essence of Enlightenment, Amida Buddha.

What is the relationship between the Shakyamuni and Amida Buddhas?

The subject of Shakyamuni and Amida Buddha has always been a point of confusion with regards to explaining the two in relation to humanity. Often time, Shakyamuni is termed the historical Buddha and Amida the Spiritual Buddha. Unfortunately, the description usually ends at this point. The problem remains as to how we can logically understand

this most complex relationship.

The Amida Buddha is described with such terms as infinite, inconceivable and immeasurable. Amida is called the Buddha of Infinite Life, Inconceivable Light or Immeasurable Life only to give a few examples. This clearly indicates the Amida Buddha is actually beyond any historical reference of time and space

We also see that the word Amida is an abstraction of the two Sanskrit words Amitabha and Amitayus. Wisdom is usually symbolized as Light whereas Compassion is symbolized as Life. Amida, in short stands for Wisdom and Compassion. With the use of such words as Infinite, Inconceivable and Immeasurable to describe the Amida as being Wisdom and Compassion or Life and Light, we find ourselves really talking about the Essence of Enlightenment itself. The problem is how can we come to any conceptual understanding of the Essence of Enlightenment, which is the Amida. There is no way that delusional and ignorant beings (like us) can come to any awakening of this great Truth on their (our) own, because they (we) are so bound to delusion that they (we) are not capable of seeing the Truth.

In actuality, we need a teacher who has attained Enlightenment. We need a teacher in the physical and historical life in whom we can see ourselves. A teacher who has attained Enlightenment and can see the bonds of delusion which must be cut. This teacher is the Shakyamuni Buddha. Here we can see the basic difference between Shakyamuni Buddha and the Amida Buddha.

What is Practice in Jodo Shinshu?

The term "Practice" has been a perplexing problem for most followers of the Jodo Shinshu tradition. How are we to interpret the word "Practice?" Is there a practice for the followers of Shinran Shonin? In order to answer, it is important to clarify the meaning of practice both as it is traditionally interpreted in the rest of Buddhism, and how it is interpreted in the Jodo Shinshu tradition.

In Buddhism, "Practice" means "to act and advance to a goal." In fact, any "Practice" in Buddhism can be so called because it is an action which leads to Enlightenment. The historical and traditional reference for the word "Practice"

can be found in the practice of Shakyamuni Buddha as he searched for Enlightenment. Therefore, in Buddhism, there is a practice that a person does in order to go from ignorance to Enlightenment. There are such practices as meditation, the six paramitas, the eight-fold path, renunciation, and so forth. These are done in order to attain Truth.

In Pure Land Buddhism, there are many kinds of practice, but the emphasis is placed on the practice of the Nembutsu. For example, Zendo regarded the utterances of the Nembutsu as the Act of Right Assurance for Birth in the Pure Land. Honen succeeded Zendo's teaching and called the 18th Vow, the Vow of Attaining Birth (The 18th vow is called the "Causal Vow" because it is the cause for us sentient beings to be born in the Pure Land. It is also called the "Primal or Original Vow" because it is the most important of the 48 vows and contains everything in all the others) through the Nembutsu. However, in regards to the practice of the Nembutsu, many different kinds of understanding existed. The two mainstream of practices can be expressed in terms of the practice of self-power and the practice of Other-Power. To clarify the above misunderstanding, Shinran Shonin clarified the true significance of the Nembutsu by bringing forth the concept of Great Practice.

So, What is Great Practice?

In Jodo Shinshu, Great Practice refers to the dynamic motion of Amida Buddha, or in the causal sense the practice of the Dharmakara Bodhisattva (Hozo Bosatsu, or the name of Amida Buddha before the Amida became a Buddha). The Dharmakara Bodhisattva made the 17th Vow and fulfilled it. Shinran implies that the 17th Vow is the Vow which reveals the Name of Namu Amida Butsu as the Great Practice. This Vow stresses two major Points:

1. The Name of Namu Amida Butsu has within it the ultimate meaning of Wisdom and Compassion, or of Enlightenment itself. It is the key to the whole process of Enlightenment for those who cannot comprehend the meaning of Enlightenment.
2. Because the Name has the ultimate meaning of Wisdom and Compassion, the Countless Buddhas of the ten

quarters praise and laud the name of Amida Buddha. The Name of Amida Buddha can thus be heard everywhere, or more concretely, the potentiality of Enlightenment is everywhere. It can be heard by anyone. Because the Name is the ultimate expression of Enlightenment itself, and because it is praised by all the Buddhas, then through this process it moves towards sentient beings. Shinran Shonin identifies this as the working of the Great Practice based on the Fulfillment of the 17th Vow as found in the Larger Sutra (Daimuryojukyo). The Sutra says: "The Buddhas of the ten quarters, as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges, all praise the inconceivable, sublime merits of the Buddha of Infinite Life." Shakyamuni Buddha, by making his statement about the Compassion of Amida Buddha, gives testimony to the Great Practice which will lead all beings to Enlightenment. By relying on the virtuous practice of Amida Buddha, Shakyamuni Buddha praised the merits and virtues of the Buddha of Infinite Life. In essence, it is because of the Bodhisattva who made and fulfilled the Vows in the Name of Amida Buddha, that this movement is called Great Practice. This is why Enlightenment moves dynamically towards us. Great Practice does not refer to our movement towards Amida Buddha, but rather that Amida embraces us just as we are.

What is Practice in Relation to Us?

In Jodo Shinshu, the word "Practice" is not stressed from the standpoint of the followers. This is because the follower is not a person who does the traditional monastic practice to reach Enlightenment. Rather, the follower is a householder. Because we are householders, the question of practice poses a serious problem. Shinran Shonin recognized the futile and limited nature of human endeavor. The emphasis of Jodo Shinshu is, therefore, placed on the Great Practice of Amida Buddha who awakens the Faith in those persons who cannot do the practice in the likeness of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Parting Note:

Please send questions, I am still waiting for the first one. Check out the attachments, first read Truth then Noun. As always, in gassho.

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