



The Answer

真如法界



Q & A for Shinshu Buddhists

VOLUME 02 No. 03

March • April 2007

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

This is an excerpt from the website: nembutsu.info (Journal of Shin Buddhism). Many have asked the question about meditation and Shin Buddhism, I believe this is a very good answer. This website is a good source of information on Shin Buddhism. I will follow this question with another from the same website, about the Amida Buddha and the Pure Land.

Do Shin Buddhists Practice Meditation?

The traditional Pure Land sutras are replete with contemplative exercises aimed at gaining visions of Amida Buddha and his Pure Land - for example, the Sutra on the Contemplation of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life (one of the canonical scriptures of the Pure Land tradition). Attaining such beatific visions through these often arduous practices was considered a sign of one's assurance of eventual enlightenment. In times closer to that of Shakyamuni, when the faithful transmission of contemplative practices from disciple to student was still intact, it was possible for some to gain a vision of the Buddha in this very life through a form of meditation called the Amitabha-samadhi. As this lineage of transmission now appears to have been broken, there are no longer any authentic teachers who can impart instruction in this form of meditation. Nevertheless, a number of Pure Land devotees today still resort to meditating on Amida with the aid of statues, paintings or mandalas in addition to those practices described in the sutras, as a way of expressing their joyful faith in the Buddha and his Dharma. Chief among such expressions, however, is the nembutsu or the invocation of

the Sacred Name of Amida which, in itself, is a contemplative participation in the Buddha's Infinite Light. The life of shinjin, as described in the previous chapter, is one of constant reflection on life and ourselves. This usually arises in an uncontrived manner as a natural consequence of being embraced by the Buddha's wisdom and compassion. The Shin Buddhist does not sit and practice hours of arduous meditation with a view to gaining enlightenment by one's own efforts. As the Pure Land tradition considers human spiritual capacity to be weak and defiled in this 'Decadent Age of the Dharma' (mappo), full enlightenment is not considered a possibility in this life where conditions for such attainment are viewed as extremely unfavourable. Accordingly, complete trust in Amida through shinjin is all that is required to realize Nirvana in the Pure Land where our enlightenment will be perfected and complete. This fact being assured to those with faith, all that remains to be done in this life is to express one's profound gratitude to the Buddha through the nembutsu and by living the Buddhist life to the best of one's ability.

One cannot, however, reach such a level of awareness without a certain degree of contemplative mindfulness of Amida Buddha as the supreme reality embracing all things. This can be considered as a kind of 'spontaneous' meditation in which one engages without any real effort. Such activity is not practiced with a view to any gain or 'results' but simply as a natural expression of the life of deep faith which is really a manifestation of the working of Amida's mind within us.

Who is Amida? What is Pureland?

Amida (Amitabha in the original Sanskrit) is the Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life. He is a manifestation of the absolute and supreme reality which is known in Mahayana Buddhism as the Dharmakaya. The Dharmakaya completely transcends time and space but is also, at the same time, to be found in all things and within all sentient beings. It constitutes the fundamental essence of all existence and possesses, pre-eminently, the qualities of absolute wisdom, compassion and bliss. It is the principal aim of Mahayana Buddhism to ultimately attain, for oneself and others, blissful and eternal union with this reality - a state more commonly referred to as Nirvana.

In itself, the Dharmakaya remains unknowable and imperceptible to our ordinary human faculties of sense and cognition. One can only be made aware of it through prajna which is an intuitive power capable of seeing things as they are, undistorted by the influence of ignorance and the myriad passions that afflict us constantly. As only very few people have had the capacity and strength to cultivate prajna through meditation and other practices, the Dharmakaya, in its dynamic compassion, has chosen to manifest itself in a form more readily accessible to the multitudes of suffering and ignorant beings - a form that allows all people to share in its inexhaustible blessings, wisdom and power. This form is Amida Buddha.

Amida Buddha and the Dharmakaya are, in fact, identical, differing only in

function. One could say that Amida Buddha is the 'personal' face of the formless Absolute and the only medium through which ordinary beings can ever get to know its treasures. In this sense, the revelation of Amida Buddha to the world can be seen as an act of compassion which serves to illuminate one's path in this turbid world of birth-and-death (samsara).

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Buddha is said to possess three bodies. This is the doctrine of trikaya. The first body is the Dharmakaya of which we have already spoken. The second, the Sambhogakaya, is any manifestation of the supreme reality in the transcendent realm that serves as a tangible object of meditation or worship - Amida Buddha, for example. There are also many other Buddhas that serve this function but Amida remains pre-eminent for reasons that will become apparent later. The third body, the Nirmanakaya is, in turn, a manifestation of the higher bodies and takes the form of Buddhas and sages in the physical world where the greatest number of people might derive benefit from their teaching. The historical Buddha of our era, Shakyamuni (or Gautama) who lived in India, is considered by Shin Buddhists as a manifestation of Amida Buddha revealing the Mahayana sutras to our world - in particular, those concerning Amida Buddha and his Vows.

What is Amida's Story?

The story of Amida Buddha is presented in the sutra literature of the Pure Land School. A powerful king, on hearing the teaching of the Buddha, awakens the aspiration for the highest, perfect Enlightenment. He renounces his kingdom and throne and becomes a monk, taking the name of Dharmakara. In his desire to liberate all sentient beings from suffering and delusion, he makes a number of vows (forty-eight in total) in the presence of the Buddha Lokeshvararaja. These vows are aimed at his becoming a fully awakened Buddha and establishing a transcendent realm, the Pure Land, where ideal conditions are to be found for attaining Enlightenment and Nirvana. Through dint of extraordinary Buddhist practices spanning many aeons (such as deep meditation, cultivation of profound wisdom, exercise of selfless compas-

sion, kindness and charity), Dharmakara eventually fulfills all his vows, becoming the Buddha of Infinite Light (Amitabha) whose realm is Sukhavati (Land of Utmost Bliss). Since that time, Amida has led countless beings to his Pure Land through simply having them entrust their salvation and enlightenment to his care.

The story of Dharmakara should not be seen merely as an allegory with a didactic purpose (didactic: 1. Fitted or intended to teach; conveying instruction; instructive; teaching some moral lesson; as, "didactic essays." 2. Inclined to teach or moralize excessively; moralistic.); but it is not necessary to insist that it details a series of historic events, either. Rather, it is an affirmation of the vast processes involved in the task of human transformation and enlightenment. Furthermore, the law of karma dictates that such processes cannot take place independently of the realm of samsara. In the Mahayana understanding of things, Nirvana and samsara are inseparable.

What is Pure Land?

Although the descriptions of the Pure Land that we find in the sutras (eg. jewelled ponds, celestial music, exquisite flowers raining down from the sky etc.) appear too fantastic and incredible, they are none other than a means (upaya) of conveying the blissful and permanent nature of Nirvana - which is quite inconceivable to ordinary people - in terms and images taken from our every-day world that are more familiar to those who are not aware of any other reality. Presented in such a way, the idea of enlightenment becomes a more intelligible and attractive focus of aspiration to those who would otherwise remain baffled by the highly abstruse and abstract notions sometimes employed by Buddhist philosophers. The Buddha employs all means available to him to bring people to an understanding of his wisdom and compassion. The highest realities that can be conceived are often better explained and assimilated through recourse to rich symbolism rather than through literal description which is largely impossible in such matters anyway.

When the tradition speaks of Amida, the Pure Land, suffering sentient beings

etc., it should not be thought that it is speaking of fundamentally different things. The Buddha and his land of bliss are essentially one and the same reality, these terms merely designating different functions or aspects of the Dharmakaya. Similarly, Amida and we cannot be said to be separated by anything other than an illusion comprising our blind passions such as greed, anger and ignorance, all of which are karmically determined. Amida's presence lies within the heart of nature and all living beings. This omnipresence of the supreme reality is also called Buddhature and it is only in virtue of this very quality that we share with the Buddha that one can speak of the possibility of attaining final union with him at all. For most people, however, burdened, shackled and blinded as we are by our great karmic weight, the realization of this essential identity will not be possible until our complete enlightenment in the Pure Land at the point of death.

The Light of Amida Buddha is infinite because there is nowhere it does not reach and nothing that it does not penetrate, including the darkest depths of our minds and hearts. This light illuminates the nature of the world and helps us recognize the extent of our profound attachment to our own egos and to the real gulf that, in so many ways, separates us from the Buddha. This light also serves to ferry us safely over the stormy waters of our imperfect existence and to purify us of all the defilements that would ordinarily bar our entry into Nirvana.

A Final Note:

This issue is published in an effort to help understand some basic fundamentals of Shin Buddhism. I have added no personal commentary but feel that this basic information is needed to help us understand our religion in an effort to engage with fellow Shin Buddhists and others. I will use many different references to help accomplish this goal of sharing and engaging in our Jodo Shinshu beliefs.

If you have any questions, please ask, only through questions and answers are we able to grow in our understanding. Thank you.

NAMO AMIDA BUTSU