



The Answer

真如浄土



Q & A for Shinshu Buddhists

VOLUME 03 No. 01

January 2008

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

Happy New Year! As indicated in the last issue of Vol. 2, I will again use excerpts from "Well, Almost Everything You Always Wanted to know About Jodo-Shinshu." Written by the ministers from the LA Betsuin (Nishi), Rimban Mohri, the Revs. Umezu, Hamada, Oda and Rev. Masao Kodani from Senshin, the book was sponsored by the S.D.D.S.T.L., under special projects.

What does it mean to be "Evil"?

A kendo, Japanese sword fighting, master was once asked, "If I study kendo for 2 hours every day, how long will it take me to become an expert?" "It will take 5 years," the master replied. "If I study for 4 hours every day," the questioner continued, "then how long will it take?" The master's reply was, "It will take ten years." But if I practiced as hard as I could for eight hours every day," the questioner persisted, "then how long will it take?" "In that case," the master said, "it will take a lifetime."

This story seems contrary to reason, for the more you practice, the sooner you should become expert. But in this story lies the essence of the Jodo Shinshu teachings.

During his lifetime, Shinran Shonin was looked upon by his disciples as being a saint. His disciple Ren'i said Shinran Shonin was the incarnation of a Bodhisattva. That is how Shinran Shonin was evaluated by others.

But how did Shinran Shonin evaluate himself?

In a poem written when he was over 80 years of age. Shinran Shonin wrote:

*Though I rely on the Teachings of the Pure Land.
The True Mind is difficult to acquire.
I have an ignorant and insincere body.
And am absolutely without a Pure Mind.*

Can there be a greater difference in how the same person was evaluated? His disciple considered him to be a saint; he considered himself to be a hypocrite.

It is impossible to reconcile these two attitudes unless we understand the standards set for himself. The kendo master knew that a person who was willing to spend only 2 hours a day in practice would not have very high standards, and could easily convince himself that he was an expert in 5 years. If the student was interested enough to practice 4 hours a day, however, his standards would undoubtedly be much higher, and at least ten years would be required before he would be satisfied. But if the student was earnest enough to practice 8 hours a day, he would never be content with his fencing ability, even if he won all the tournaments he entered.

Similarly, because Shinran Shonin's conduct exceeded Ren'i's standards, Shinran Shonin was a saint to Ren'i. But Shinran Shonin's conduct was far below the standards he set for himself. And the more Shinran Shonin approached his already high standards, the higher he saw that they could be set.

Although people looking at Shinran Shonin could see him growing morally and spiritually, he himself felt that in comparison with his constantly rising standards (which always rose faster than his attainments), he was falling behind and thus his sense of "evil" (his consciousness

of imperfection) increased.

The reason we do not sense our "evil" nature as strongly as Shinran Shonin did, is that we are not as severe with ourselves as he was. And the more severe we are with ourselves, the greater will be our sense of imperfection, or "evil."

This sense of "evil" in Jodo Shinshu is quite different from "sin" in Christianity. According to Christian dogma, "Man is born in sin." In Jodo Shinshu, however, this sense of imperfection or "evil" develops only as we strive to improve ourselves.

What is meant by Religious Practice or "Shugyo"?

What do you do if you wish to become a good baseball player? You practice baseball. And if you wish to be a good basketball or football player, you must practice those games.

In order to do anything well, you must practice. But what do you practice in order to become enlightened?

In Buddha-dharma, the word shugyo is used to refer to religious practice that results in enlightenment.

As most of you know, the shugyo of the Zen school of Buddha-dharma is meditation (zazen). The Shingon school emphasizes "finger movements" (mudras) as the way to follow in attaining enlightenment. The shugyo for the Nichiren school is reciting the "sacred title" (Daimoku) which is Namu Myoho Rengekyo. In that school it is felt that the more often and earnestly you chant the Daimoku, the more material benefits you will receive.

What is the position of Jodo Shinshu regarding shugyo?

Jodo Shinshu is unique among Buddhist schools that there is no shugyo to perform because doctrinally, all shugyo is contained in the name Namo Amida Butsu. Not only all shugyo, but also all good and all benefits are contained within it. The number of times we recite Namo Amida Butsu has no bearing on our birth in the Pure Land.

Jodo Shinshu is a teaching for lay people, it is not as all other Buddhist schools are, a teaching for monks.

In Japanese, to become a monk is referred to as shukke, in other words, in order to become a monk, you must give up all your possessions, leave home, and spend your entire time and effort in the cultivation of enlightenment.

Is this possible for everyone? And even if it were possible for everyone to leave home, would all have the will power to complete the rigorous religious practice that is required?

Shinran Shonin became a Tendai Buddhist monk in the year 1181. No one is absolutely sure what he did as a monk, but there is very little doubt about the kind of shugyo Shinran Shonin performed because the Tendai monks of today are very proud of the fact that the religious practice they engage in is exactly the same as that first performed by Dengyo Daishi, the founder of the Tendai school in Japan.

Shocho Hagami, a modern day Tendai Monk has completed a rigorous training called Kaihogyo. It literally means "around-peak-practice" and consist of making 1000 circuits around the peak of

Mt. Hiei and required 7 years of dedication to complete. He is given a short knife to commit "seppuku" if he feels he is not able to complete the circuit. He was not able to take time off to see sick parents or if he suffered broken bones. After 700 circuits he had to endure 9 days of deprivation. No food, water or lying down. There are other even more severe events he experienced and at age 52, he finished. He said, "I did it because my master ordered me to, and because it is the practice handed down to me from Master Dengyo. Now that I have completed the Shugyo, however, I can state that I benefited greatly from it."

What is Jodo Shinshu Practice or "Shugyo"?

Would you be able to undergo a shugyo like monk Hagami did, as described in the previous section?

Until Shinran Shonin's time, all monks had to perform a shugyo similar to what monk Hagami did. With Shinran Shonin's awakening to the true nature of the Primal Vow, however, came the understanding that all shugyo is contained in it. Because Amida Buddha performed all the ascetic practices required when he was Hozo Bosatsu, there is no need for us to perform them.

Monk Hagami is very impressed with Shinran Shonin and the teachings of Jodo Shinshu. He frequently speaks before Jodo Shinshu groups, always remarking that he could never have completed the Kaihogyo austerities through his own efforts, and that looking back he realizes that it was tariki (Buddha centered power) that saw him through.

As already mentioned, there is no shugyo in Jodo Shinshu because ac-

cording to doctrine, all shugyo that we have is contained in the Nembutsu. But that only means there is no special shugyo that we have to leave home to perform. The other side of this doctrinal formulation is that we do not have to do anything special because everything we do is shugyo. The way we wake up in the morning (can't we get out of bed less grumpy?), the way we greet our parents and children (can we be more cheerful about it?), the way we eat breakfast (do we have to rush so?), the way we drive to work, the way we work...there is nothing that is not shugyo for a follower of Jodo Shinshu.

And as we practice living a better life, we realize that we can become even better.

If it were possible to measure "goodness," if we become better by a value of one, our ideal of goodness will increase to 2. If we act "better" by 2, our goal will become 4, etc. Although someone looking at us from outside may feel that we are becoming a better person, in relation to the constantly increasing ideal in our mind (which always increases much faster than we become better), we realize that we are falling behind or getting worse.

This is the Jodo Shinshu sense of "evil that we always face.

I had to shorten the section on Monk Hagami and slightly modified the text to help fit the question and answer.

A final Thought?

As we embark into a new year, please remember that "No Pain, No Gain!" Please READ, and have a great new year. NAMO AMIDA BUTSU

