



# The Answer

真言宗  
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法親王



## Q & A for Shinshu Buddhists

VOLUME 03 No. 12

December 2008

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This issue will cover a variety of items including personal essays, Letters of Ren-nyo as part of the Shin Buddhism Translation Series and other reference materials.

*What does being "grasped" never to be abandoned mean?*

Letter number 23, "Singleness of Heart, Great Benefit, 5-6" reads as follows:

To the practitioners who entrust themselves to Amida with singleness of heart, Amida bestows the virtues for attaining the unsurpassed, great benefit. Concerning this, Shinran Shonin says in a hymn:

When sentient beings of this evil world of the five defilements

Entrust themselves to the selected Primal Vow,  
Virtues indescribable, inexplicable, and inconceivable

Fill those practitioners.

The meaning of this hymn is as follows: "sentient beings of this evil world of the five defilements" refers to all evil beings like us, both men and women.

Even though we are such helpless, foolish beings, committing evil all our lives, Amida Tathagata never fails to save us if we entrust ourselves single-mindedly and unwaveringly to Amida for our emancipation in the afterlife. There should not be any doubt about this.

To those who thus rely on Amida, the indescribable, inexplicable, and inconceivable great virtues are bestowed. "Virtues indescribable, inexplicable, and inconceivable" means infinite, great virtues.

Since such great virtues are directed to us who entrust ourselves to Amida with singleness of heart, all our karmic hindrances and evils committed in the three periods - past, future, and present - will

be eliminated at once, and thus we dwell in the stage of the truly settled, or the stage equal to perfect enlightenment.

This is also described in a hymn as:

Entrust yourself to Amida's Primal Vow;  
Through the benefit of being grasped, never to be abandoned,  
All who entrust themselves to the Primal Vow  
Attain the supreme enlightenment.

"Being grasped, never to be abandoned" means that the sentient beings who entrust themselves to Amida with singleness of thought are embraced in Amida's light and, since their entrusting heart does not change, they will not be abandoned.

Although there are other aspects of the teachings in Jodo Shinshu, there should never be any doubt that those who entrust themselves to Amida with singleness of thought will all attain birth in the fulfilled land.

Humbly and respectfully.

I will be following up with an excerpt from "Letters of the Nun Eshinni" by James C. Dobbins. Here is a defining moment of Faith as described by Eshinni, the wife of Shinran Shonin, in letter No. 5.

*Was Shinran Shonin ever sick?*

On the fourteenth day of the fourth month in the third year of Kangi (1231), from around noon, (Shinran) felt the slight sensations of the flu, and beginning in the evening he went to bed rather ill. He lay there without making a sound, not allowing his back or legs to be massaged and silently refusing visitors. Whenever I felt his body, it was as hot as fire. (Furthermore,) the pounding in his head was extraordinary. At dawn on the fourth day of his illness (I heard) him say amid his pain, "(From) now (on) that's the

way it will be." I asked, "What is it? Are you talking gibberish?" He responded, "It is not gibberish. From the second day of my illness I have been chanting the Larger (Pure Land) Sutra without a break. Whenever I happened to close my eyes, the letters of the sutra would appear brilliantly and in detail, without a single character missing. This (chanting) indeed is senseless, I thought, for outside of faith (which comes) from the *nembutsu*, what is it that should command my attention so? As I carefully reflected on this, (I recall) a time seventeen or eighteen years ago when I set out to chant the three sutras (Pure Land) sutras faithfully a thousand times for the benefit of all sentient beings. The wondering what this was for, (I brought to mind the verse) 'To have faith oneself and to cause others to have faith is by far the most difficult among (all) difficult things.' To have faith oneself and to cause others to have faith is truly the way to respond to one's indebtedness to the Buddha. With faith in this, what outside of the *nembutsu* could possibly be lacking that would make one feel the need to chant the sutras? Having reflected on this, I did not (continue) chanting them. Because of that (experience), would there still remain even a bit of that (compunction to chant the sutra now)? One should ponder well the attachments of human beings and the faith they have in their own power (*jiiriki*). Once I thought that, I stopped chanting the sutra. Hence, at dawn on the fourth day of my illness said, '(From) now (on) that's the way it will be.'" Soon after telling me this he was dripping with sweat (as his fever broke), and (before long) he became well (again).

(The incident in which) he began to chant the three (Pure Land) sutras faithful a thousand times occurred at a place called Sanuki in either Musashi province or

Kozuke province when Shinrenbo was four years old. About four or five days after (he began chanting them) he had this reflection, and he did not (continue) chanting thereafter. We were on the way to Hitachi (province at the time).

Shinrenbo was born at noon on the third day of the third month of the year of the sheep (1211), so this year he is fifty-three, I believe.

3rd year of Kocho (1263)  
2nd month, 10th day

Even one as dedicated and faithful as Shinran Shonin can have lapses in faith when sick. "With faith in this (one's indebtedness to the Buddha), what outside of the *nembutsu* could possibly be lacking that would make one feel the need to chant the sutras?" To realize this even as he is struggling with his sickness, is truly remarkable. So for those that need it, I hope you got your flu shot for this season.

I wrote the next piece as a class assignment for the Jodo Shinshu Correspondence Course (<http://jscc.cbe-bca.org/home>) to the following question:

*The Buddha* in this text claims a sort of omnipresence, "Just as there is no place where there is no sky, the Buddha abides everywhere universally." Can you accept this teaching? What would it mean for the Buddha to be everywhere? Who or what would *the Buddha* be in such a case?

Gotama Buddha taught, "...this is the great nirvana. Also, it is so called because of the great self, for the great self means the truth that nirvana has no self and is absolute freedom. Since nirvana has nothing to grasp at, it can contain every and all dharmas as they are. Since it is everywhere like the sky, though it cannot be seen directly, it can be shown to people at will." He further taught, "The Buddha is not an ordinary man. His body, his mind, and his insight permeate universally all the countries of the world, transcending boundaries and obstacles eternally and without change." According to his teachings Buddha is everywhere because he is nowhere. The Buddha is clear in his intent, "Even though this physical body perishes, the body of the Dharma that I taught remains forever." "Through the eyes of insight, compassion, and reverence, you will see the Body of the Dharma that is far superior to mine. Only those who rightly perceive the Body of the Dharma will become aware that I shall remain in this world as before and never leave their sides." "The Dharma that I have

taught you through the years is the teacher that you must follow." This is the essence of what the Buddha expressed as his omnipresence and I believe this is true and real. When Gotama Buddha became the "great self" he also became the Tathagata. His teachings transcend his presence, and just before he died he said, "From now on, if you disciples discuss this among yourselves and practice accordingly, it will mean the continuous and imperishable existence of the Dharmakaya of the Buddha."

I can accept his universal presence, but not the efficacy of his teachings unless he was alive today. Remember, shortly after his death Massa-Kassapa observed the irreverent behavior of Subhadda towards the Buddha, "Only seven days have passed since the World Honored One's demise, and this man speaks such words. The flower of the true Dharma will soon be scattered by this kind of man, like unstrung flowers that are easily blown away by the wind." Like the flowers blown away, today's causes and conditions make the path impossible for ordinary people like me to follow.

Further, Buddha can be everywhere because within each sentient form resides Buddha Nature. Buddha nature cannot be destroyed, decayed nor seen, yet we ordinary people possess it. The Buddha said, "...Buddha nature is called the mind of great faith, for by means of such faith one can complete the path of the bodhisattva. Since all people will realize this without fail, I say that they all possess Buddha nature. Buddha nature is the Buddha." Accordingly the "mind of great faith" will lead us to Nirvana. I further believe that the great "mind of faith" is the Nembutsu and is the one vehicle in which all can ride equally.

Finally, the only Buddha that saves is described by the Gotama Buddha thusly, "...if you maintain the mind of faith...and offer the Buddha even one stalk of a flower, you will be able to reach nirvana on account of that merit...even if someone only once thinks of the Buddha in his mind, and even if he only once pays reverence to him, he is destined to realize nirvana...if someone hears the name of the Buddha, he will be able to enter nirvana on account of that merit...I shall become a refuge for all those who have no refuge..." I believe that this describes the Amida Buddha the Gotama Buddha spoke of at Vulture Peak, the Buddha who saves all just as we are.

(Reviewer's comments) I particularly appreciate your first paragraph, because I think that

it really captures the essence of the Buddha's meaning as to his "omnipresence". If there is no "I", then there is no "him", either, yet it is universally true that he is everywhere and nowhere. And you have really captured the meaning of "Dharmakaya", the "Dharma Body" very well, too.

Professor Takeda Ryusei of Ryu-dai, and one of the "Kangaku", would take exception to your comment about all of us having "Buddha nature", as in one lecture that he gave when I was attending the Kaikyoshi seminar, he stated that ministers (and by extension, everyone) in the United States, did not understand the teaching of Buddha nature in the Hongwanji tradition. As he explained it, our own Buddha nature is "shriveled up", and we are unable to access it. We must depend upon our Oneness with Amida Buddha and accessing his Buddha nature, as our own is inaccessible. So, while we technically have Buddha nature, we cannot use it—we must depend upon using Amida Buddha's "Buddha nature". Unless he has changed the teaching, this is the "official orthodoxy" of the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. Well-written response. (Reviewer)

Thank you very much for your thoughtful comments. I understand every point you have made. In the broader brush of things, I believe as you do, the Amida has existed beyond our abilities to calculate. With limited abilities and experiences we have attempted to describe that which is indescribable. For me, the only event that has made me aware of the Amida is my chance of birth. The Amida is that Infinite Truth and Reality that we can never perceive, so in this day and age, I believe that all we have left is to trust that reality with deep faith.

The issue of Buddha Nature is as the text described and I believe this Buddha Nature is, as the Gotama Buddha taught, in each and every sentient being. It may be "shriveled up," but it still is within us, albeit in that state. I also believe that this inherent nature is totally inaccessible by ordinary persons through the Path of Sages or any efforts of self-power. The Power of Grace (Nembutsu) through the Amida is the only Path Accessible to final Awakening for ordinary folks like me.

The Power of Grace, although it sounds as if it is an external force, is the Tathagata in a form I am unable to fully describe. Yet, it is the Tathagata that is at once with us and saves us. Thank you for your feedback.

The answer and feedback are based on assigned readings. What do you think? Happy Holidays! NAMO AMIDA BUTSU