



The Answer



Q & A for



Shinshu Buddhists



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This issue will continue with thoughts and excerpts from: *Mysticism, Christian and Buddhist* - by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki. For further reading of this book: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/mcb/index.htm>

What is the Gobunsho?

"THE LETTERS" are those written by Rennyo Shonin (1415-1499) to his followers. He was one of the greatest teachers of the Shin school of Buddhism; in fact it was he who laid the firm foundation for the modern religious institution known as the Jodo-Shin Shu, the True Sect of the Pure Land. His letters numbering about eighty-five are preserved and the title Gobunsho or Ofumi, that is, "honorable letters," is given to them. They are generally read before a sermon and quoted as the most authoritative source-documents on the teaching of the Shin school. Saichi states here that when his mind is illumined by these epistles he realizes what a miserable creature he is; but when he sees the Buddha-mind as revealed through these illuminating documents of the great teacher, he is assured of the overwhelming immensity of Oya-sama's love for him and feels grateful for it without measure. Rennyo's letters serve to bring out both aspects of our religious consciousness: (1) the sense of wickedness and depravity and (2) the feeling of gratitude for being saved from an utterly helpless situation. Here is one of Rennyo's letters:

To be established in [Shin] faith means to understand the Eighteenth Vow. To understand the Eighteenth Vow means to understand the frame of mind the "Namu-amida-butsu" sets up in you. Therefore, when you attain a state of single-mindedness as you utter the "Namu" with absolute trust [in Amida] you perceive

the significance of Amida's Vow which is directed towards awakening a faith-frame in you. For herein we realize what is meant by Amida Nyorai's "turning towards" us ignorant beings.

This is pointed out in the Larger Sutra of Eternal Life where we read: "Amida provides all beings with all the merits." This is what is meant by the statement that Nirvana is attainable without destroying the evil passions (klesa).

This is the teaching exclusively taken up by our school but you are warned not to talk this way to people of other schools. Let me remind you of this.

With reverence . . .

The translation of such documents as Rennyo's letters is full of difficulties as they are so laden with technical terms which defy in many cases replacement by any other languages. The terms require lengthy explanations, which I have to omit. But a word about the "Namu-amida-butsu."

"Namu-amida-butsu" is the Japanese reading of the original Sanskrit phrase "namo amitabhabuddhaya," meaning "Adoration of the Buddha of Infinite Light." But with followers of the Pure Land teaching, the phrase is far more than mere adoration for Amitabhabuddha, or Amida, for by this they express their absolute faith in Amida as one who makes it possible for them to be born in his Land of Purity and Bliss.

With popular minds "Namu-amida-butsu" is rather a confused notion, for as in the case of Saichi the phrase frequently represents Reality itself impersonated as Amida or Oya-sama, and at the same time it is a form of adoration as well as the expres-

sion of absolute dependence. This is not, however, all of "Namu-amida-butsu," for the phrase often serves as a metaphysical formula symbolizing the identity of subject and object, of the devotee and Amida, of the "sin-laden" individual and the all-saving and all-merciful Oya-sama, of all beings (sarvasattva) and Buddha, of ki and ho, of human yearnings and the supreme enlightenment. In this sense, the phrase, "Namu-amida-butsu," stands for a state of consciousness in which Saichi finds it sometimes difficult to distinguish himself from Amida.

*The Oya-sama who never fails me
Has now become myself,
Making me hear his Name—
The "Namu-amida-butsu."*

*I am a fortunate one:
Oya-sama is given me,
The Oya who turns me into a Buddha—
"Namu-amida-butsu!"*

When the phrase is used as a philosophical symbol, it is usually divided first into two parts: "Namu" (ki) and "Amida-butsu" (ho). "Namu" then stands for the devotee filled with all possible sinfulness while "Amida-butsu" is the Buddha of infinite light and eternal life. When the devotee pronounces the phrase, "Namu-amida-butsu," he is the "Namu-amida-butsu" itself. When Saichi repeats "Namu-amida-butsu," "Namu-amida-butsu," the phrase is to be understood in this sense, and no idea of supplication or mere adoration is implied here. Saichi in this case may be said to be like Tennyson calling himself "Alfred," "Alfred" as he tells us in his "Ancient Sage." Saichi here is completely drunk with the identification, completely absorbed in the mystery, through which the miserable Saichi car-

rying all his human passions and cravings finds himself transformed into a Buddha and in the presence of all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and other holy souls. In a state of ecstasy or intoxication, Saichi does not know where to stop when he jots down in his schoolboy's notebook all that goes through his mind while busying himself with making the footgear. Saichi's repetition of "Namu-amida-butsu" is to be interpreted in this way.

Saichi often addresses himself, asking such questions as: "What are you doing now, O Saichi?" "How are you faring, O Saichi?" "Say, Saichi, where are you?" "Why don't you stop writing?" and so on. These questions evidently show that his was a dual personality: the "miserable, despicable, woebegone" Saichi was living together with Amida or Oya-sama when Amida was felt to be near. Sometimes Saichi felt that it was not he who addressed Amida or himself but Amida addressing Amida. Amida's presence in Saichi was not a visionary experience. Amida really directed Saichi's movements while this by no means prevented Saichi from being himself, from being a miserable existence incalculably separated from Amida. But Saichi felt at the same moment that without this miserable existence of his he could not experience all the joy that came from unity.

The psychologists may declare Saichi to be a very good example of schizophrenia. But they forget that Saichi is not a sick person, not a case of psychosis, tormented by the split. He is a perfectly healthy personality, he has never lost the sense of the oneness of his being. In fact his sense of being is so deep and yet so definite that he is living a more real and meaningful life than most of us do. It is we and not he who live in a psychological duality with all its disturbing consequences.

Eckhart once gave a sermon on "the just lives in eternity" in which he says:

The just lives in God and God in him, for God is born in the just and the just in God; at every virtue of the just God is born and is rejoiced, and not only every virtue but every action of the just wrought out of the virtue of the just and in justice; thereat God is glad aye, thrilled with joy, there is nothing in his ground that does not dance for joy. To unenlightened (grob) people this is matter for belief but the illumined know.

It is illuminating to hear Eckhart say that "to the coarse-minded (grob) people this is matter for belief but the enlightened know (wissen)." "The coarse-minded" means those who cannot go beyond the senses and the intellect, for they do not know anything that takes place in the realm of prajña-intuition. The Oya-sama whose all-embracing and all-comprehending love makes Saichi hear his Name, "Namu-amida-butsu," first becomes Saichi himself. This means that the Oya-sama individualizes himself as a Saichi in the same way as Eckhart would have God "be born in the just and the just in God" and then hears his own Name pronounced by his individualized human Saichi. Amida is now transformed into the "Namu-amida-butsu" in the being of Saichi and Saichi in turn becomes Amida by hearing Amida's Name, "Namu-amida-butsu" as pronounced by Saichi himself. In this unity it is difficult to distinguish who is Amida and who is Saichi. When the one is mentioned the other inevitably comes along. Amida's Pure Land cannot now be anything else but Saichi's sahaloka-this shaba world of particular existences.

*Oya is in the Pure Land,
I am in this world,
And Oya has given me,
To become one with me:
The "Namu-amida-butsu"!*

*Let me go to the Pure Land,
Which is like visiting my neighbors
This world is the Pure Land.
"Namu-amida-butsu!"*

*You are not saying the Nembutsu,
It is the Nembutsu that makes you say it,
And you are taken to the Pure Land.
"Namu-amida-butsu!"*

How for Shin Buddhist Approach Death?

This is an excerpt from Rev. Henry A. Tanaka's book, "Shin Buddhism 24/7 Experiences on the Jodo Shinshu Path." He talks of the time just before his mother's passing. It is found on pages 97 & 98.

About two years after the hurricane, Mother's doctor discovered cancer in her lungs, which rapidly spread to her brain. All the family gathered to be with her. The cancer spread within a matter of weeks and rendered her body totally weak. When death was approaching,

my mother was administered morphine to ease her pain. She was very dehydrated. My sister, who was a professional nurse and had served the elderly during her working years, tried to make mother comfortable. A few days before Mother died, I went to her bedside. I did not say much, except, "Mama, you know I am a minister." She was well aware of my role as a minister. I said, "Please place your hands together in gassho." She understood, and as she folded her hands together, I placed my own *ojuzu* on her hands. I said, "I will say nembutsu for you." She complied, and I said Namo Amida Butsu, which means I entrust and rely on the Buddha of Immeasurable and Infinite Life. A few days later Mother passed away at home.

As I reflect on my mother's passing, I realize that she had to let go of everything she had. She had to let go of her home, her business, her wealth, all the things she owned, including her treasured pieces of art. She had to let go of her own children, including myself. In the end, all that remained was her precious life. Even this she let go. When we know we are in the compassionate embracement of the Buddha, letting go becomes easier. I am reminded of Rev. Zuiken Inagaki's poem, which I included at the beginning of this book: "For a lotus blossom, time to fall is time to float." This simple poem reflects my own convictions and beliefs about death and letting go. For it is in the embrace of Amida's compassion that we discover for ourselves the meaning of life. And once life has meaning at an individual and personal level, we can begin to live each day full of gratitude. It is also my firm belief that we can let go, as my mother did years ago, and die peacefully in the nembutsu.

A final Thought:

I hope April brings showers & questions galore. As for me, I found the piece by D.T. Suzuki interesting as he explains his understanding of the Gobunsho. I also included an excerpt from retired Hawaiian minister Rev. Henry Tanaka's book. If you get a chance, please read his book, I think you will find it very approachable and very easy reading. In his book he writes on his own life experiences on the Nembutsu Path. He shares his experiences straying from and returning to Jodo Shinshu. NAMO AMIDA BUTSU