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Significance of the Nembutsu

by

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I

In the history of Mahayana Buddhism we find a trend called Pure Land thought. That trend of thought gave rise to a number of prominent expounders such as Nāgārjuna (2c. A.D.), Vasubandhu (4c. A.D.) of India; T'an-luan (476-542 A.D.), Tao-cho (561-644 A.D.), Shan-tao (613-681 A.D.) of China; Genshin (942-1017) A.D., Honen (1133-1212 A.D.) and Shinran (1173-1262 A.D.) of Japan. In a hymn called *Shoshin Nembutsu Ge*, which is contained in his main work, the *Kyo-gyo-shin-sho* (Teaching, Practice, Faith and Attainment), Shinran epitomized the contributions made by the above-mentioned patriarchs of the Pure Land thought in verses. The very mentioning of them reveals Shinran's view of history and his attitude towards what he had learned from history.

Not only in the Pure Land teaching itself, but also in the Buddhist thought in general, the so-called "Latter Day Thought" has been widely held. With the exception of such people as Dogen (1200-1253 A.D., founder of the Soto Zen School), this was a common tenet in the Kamakura Period (1192-1333 A.D.) during which the Buddhist revival movements took place in Japan. On the one hand, it was Dogen's well-known contention that any age is the Age of Right Dharma, since everybody can attain Enlightenment if he strives hard to establish a right faith in his mind. On the other hand Honen, Shinran, Nichiren (1222-1282 A.D.) and others perceived in the Latter Day Thought a historical truth as well as man's existential predicament. Among these teachers, Shinran in particular did not simply side with Dogen's a-historical viewpoint, in which the sense of historical process was left out of account. Neither did he run to the other extreme of viewing concrete historical events solely as "cyclic symptoms" of the Latter Days. Shinran viewed history, or the history of Buddhism, as a process of incessant unfoldment of man's essential aspiration or *bodhicitta*, or in other words as the process of man's continual adaptation parallel with his consciousness of *bodhicitta*, this being commonly portrayed as generated by man's self-effort. In reality, however, it will be more correct to say that the *bodhicitta* arises in man, being transcendent to his personal doing or non-doing, from the very fact that it belongs to the *dharma-dhātu*, realm of the Buddhas free from all human preconceptions. Shinran's acceptance of the Latter Day Thought never meant that he swallowed the view of history as process, but rather that the unfailing insight of the Pure Land Masters made Shinran conscious of the abysmal decadence of man, not excepting his own self.

According to Shinran's perspective, it is not the age nor the nature of man as such that degenerates with the passage of time, but the consciousness of man's abysmal decadence that has been both successively revealed and deepened thanks to the teachers of the Pure Land doctrine. The fact that Shinran's thought was based not only upon his own inward faith but also upon his view of history (more especially the history of the appearance on the scene of teachers qualified to adapt and clarify the traditional Pure Land thought in response to the needs of each successive age) is clearly shown in a passage of the *Shoshin Nembutsu Ge* to be found at the end of the chapter on Practice of his *Kyo-gyo-shin-sho*; in this passage he concisely depicts the original insights of the above-mentioned Masters with a profound sense of praise and devotion, thus showing his own appreciation of their invaluable contribution in the sense of clarifying the significance of Nembutsu practice, the core of Pure Land Wisdom-cum-Method.

The fact that the history of the Pure Land teaching has incessantly produced countless commentaries and sub-commentaries on its basic *sūtras*, firstly in India and later in China and Japan even down to the present day, testifies to the fact that this teaching embodies something immortal and universal in itself and that its history is none other than the steady process of Nembutsu practice by countless people who were edified thereby and delivered from *samsāra* (the vicious circle of birth and death) by virtue of the truth embodied in it. As in China, so in Japan, nobody knows how many people have found the profound joy of faith and deliverance in the teaching of Nembutsu in the course of their lives and as a result of its uninterrupted transmission.

II

In view of the fact that the Nembutsu is considered today as having the dual significance of "thinking of, or remembering the Buddha" and "pronouncing the Name of the Buddha, especially of Amida Buddha or the Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life (Skt. *Amita* = immeasurable + *ābha* = light or *āyus* = life), it seems quite probable that the Nembutsu is the consummation of the *mantra* tradition in the most genuine sense of the term. Mantra was the device born out of the Vajrayana tradition by which man was enabled to enter into *samādhi* (concentration of mind) as quickly as possible, for *samādhi* is the only state in which *prajnā* (Transcendental Wisdom) can co-exist. As is well known, this fact was especially emphasized by Hui-neng (638-713 A.D., 8th patriarch of Zen Buddhism). Although *mantra* or *dhārani* is often associated by the ignorant with superstitious practices, its nature was originally by no means dubious; rather was it a means solely intended to further the universal salvation of men, as distinct from the more circumscribed monastic and scholastic ideal prevailing in the early centuries of Buddhism, with its predominant appeal to a select minority. The rise of the *mantra* teachings provided an avenue accessible without distinction to all men who aspire to final deliverance or Nirvana.

At present the label "Nembutsu" is given to the practice of pronouncing the *mantra* "Namu Amida Butsu" in Japan. It was Shinran who clarified the nature of Nembutsu under its various aspects in the light of the traditional teachings of the Pure Land School as expounded by prominent Indian, Chinese and Japanese masters. Shinran's main work, the *Kyo-gyo-shin-sho* is made up of the following six parts:

Teaching, Practice, Faith, Attainment, True Buddha with His Land, and Illusory Buddha with His Land. The six parts are nothing other than the six aspects of the Nembutsu. The teaching of the Buddha calls upon man, and man responds to it. Man's response to the teaching is expressed in history as innumerable commentaries and sub-commentaries on sutras. The concrete expression of man's incessant response to the teaching is the practice of the Nembutsu. How the Buddha's (Awakened One's) compassion toward sentient beings in *samsāra* came to be crystallized in the Nembutsu is described in mythological terms in the *Sutra of Eternal Life*. Shinran followed in the wake of Honen who, after selecting the Triple Sutra of the Pure Land Buddhism from among the numerous Mahayana sutras (the *Larger Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra* or *Larger Sutra of Eternal Life*, the *Meditation Sutra*, and the *Smaller Sukhāvati-vyūha Sūtra*), designated the first as the sutra that revealed the Buddha's sincerest compassion toward sentient beings. According to him, Amida Buddha's compassion is expressed in the form of the vows taken by the Bodhisattva Dharmākara which was the name of Amida in his disciplinary stage.

The Nembutsu as a practice is clarified in the second chapter on Practice. The content of this chapter is based on the seventeenth vow which declares that innumerable Buddhas in the ten directions shall upon Dharmakara's attainment of Buddhahood, pronounce and praise the Name of Amida (by saying the Nembutsu). In the chapter on Practice, Shinran declares that the Nembutsu dispells all forms of man's ignorance and fulfills all the wishes of sentient beings. Shinran concludes this chapter with the *Shoshin Nembutsu Ge* (Hymns of the Right Faith as Nembutsu). The salient feature of this *gathā* (hymn) is that Shinran enumerates by way of praise the names of the seven masters of the Pure Land tradition and epitomizes therein their respective original insights. This shows what he himself had learned from these eminent teachers.

Another significance of this chapter is that Shinran viewed the Nembutsu under two aspects; Nembutsu as Faith and as Practice. Traditionally the teaching of the Buddha had hitherto been viewed under three aspects: Teaching, Practice and Attainment. Shinran, however, viewed Nembutsu as the crystallization of Buddhism in general, while noting a special significance in the Practice of the Nembutsu; that is to say, he viewed it as a unity of Faith and Practice, hence his special establishment of the chapter on Faith after Practice. The famous passage in the Faith chapter of the *Kyo-gyo-shin-sho* demonstrates Shinran's insight into this point. He says: "The true faith is always accompanied by the utterance of the Nembutsu, but the mere utterance of the Nembutsu does not necessarily show the presence of Faith as the expression of Amida's Vow-power." This passage shows Shinran's critical attitude toward the practice of Nembutsu as the expression of faith in spite of his conviction that there is no Nembutsu practice apart from Faith in the Original Vow of Amida. The Original Vow of Amida is man's basic aspiration whereof man himself is unaware on the superficial level of his ordinary consciousness. It is the *bodhi-citta* which fulfills man's innermost wish to be what he is originally and in principle (this is metaphorically expressed as "Birth in the Pure Land"), by attaining his original nature (Buddhahood) free from the egoistic drive or influence of *klesa* (disturbing and unwholesome mental tendencies). *Bodhicitta* directs ordinary man towards what he essentially is (the Buddha). Shinran showed explicitly that the Nembutsu practice, as expression of Right Faith, is no other than this *bodhi-citta*.

Honen had selected the practice of Nembutsu from among the various practices which were supposed to lead man to the final deliverance. He showed the grounds for that selection by way of theoretical arguments and the benign and persuasive power of his own personality. The former is to be seen in his main work, the *Senchaku Hongan Nembutsu-shu* (A Collection of Important Passages Supporting the choice of the Practice of Nembutsu Based upon the Original Vow, published in 1198). It was Shinran's mission to show the world what Honen had truly intended to reveal. In order to execute his mission, Shinran resorted to the critical method of sharply distinguishing the element of absolute truth (*paramārtha-satya*) from conditional truth (*vyavahāra-satya*) within the practice of Nembutsu. Shinran thus refused to admit too readily that the mere recitation of the Nembutsu was an expression of true faith and he extended his critical attitude (called the spirit of "Shinke Bunpan" in Japanese, which means a sharp discrimination between the true and the conditional) toward the source from which the Nembutsu derived. This critical attitude was a step forward from Honen's standpoint.

We are reminded of the age when among Honen's disciples absurd competitions were in vogue concerning the number of times daily the Nembutsu was recited. Such a thing could happen only among those Nembutsu devotees for whom the quantity rather than the quality of the Nembutsu counted. Therefore, Shinran's main work, the *Kyo-gyo-shin-sho*, could be called a landmark in the history of the Nembutsu faith, especially the chapter devoted to Faith, which is divided into two sections. The first section of the chapter on Faith is based on the spirit of the 18th Vow, which declares that all sentient beings in the ten quarters who recite the Nembutsu in deep faith shall be delivered, whereas the second section is based on the fulfilment of that same Vow. Through the correlation of these two parts Shinran showed that the Nembutsu is not man's prayer seeking for some benefits (*jiriki*), but the Buddha's self-declaration and summons (*tariki*) calling upon human beings in *samsāra* (the sea of birth and death). Not only is it a calling on the part of Amida, but likewise it is the response of man who is thus called upon. At the same time, the act of saying the Nembutsu is itself the fulfilment of Amida's Vow in man, therefore the reciting act itself is the proof of man's having been delivered. This insight of Shinran's resulted in his denying that man's final deliverance could only be expected at the time of his physical death. Thus it may be said that Shinran shifted the significance of "Ojo" (Birth in the Pure Land) from the time of physical death to the moment of man's existential death here and now in the act of the Nembutsu. In Shinran's teaching, the so-called "in the future" means, in reality, "in the infinite depth of one's consciousness."

Even the act of saying the Nembutsu (manifest form) could mean, with Shinran, not merely the vocal pronouncement, but also the will or urge for the act (latent form) in the minds of the devotees. This point is clearly expressed at the beginning of the *Tannisho* (A Tract Deploring Heresies), which is a record of Shinran's teachings made by Yuien, one of his foremost disciples. It runs as follows:

At the very moment the desire to call the Nembutsu is awakened in us in the firm faith that we can attain birth in the Pure Land through the saving grace of the Inconceivable Grand Vow, the all-embracing, none-forsaking virtue (of Amida) is conferred on us. (Chapter I)

With Shinran, this pre-vocal urge for the Nembutsu was as important as the reciting act itself. Incidentally, it was one of the gravest concerns to the followers of the Pure Land teaching prior to Shinran how one could maintain a peaceful mind at the time of physical death. That is to say, "Ojo" meant for them a physical death and nothing more. It might be said that Shinran identified the significance of physical death with the existential death at the moment of the arising of faith in the minds of the devotees.

This does not necessarily mean that he totally neglected the significance of the *act* of saying the Nembutsu, but rather he viewed the reciting act as the natural outcome of faith. This is the reason why, with Shinran, right faith should necessarily be identified with right practice, but not *vice versa*. This is also the reason why it is generally (though not necessarily rightly) said that Honen emphasized practice while Shinran emphasized faith. Especially noteworthy is the fact that the difference of faith and practice here is not the qualitative one but that of the point of emphasis. As seen in the above, in the Nembutsu as an organic unity of faith and practice, there can be no faith apart from practice and no practice apart from faith; both are dependent upon each other (in the relationship of *pratītiyasamutpāda*). Shinran says in one of his epistles to his pupil, Yū Amidabutsu, "Faith not accompanied by the reciting of Amida's Name would be in vain; constant reciting of Amida's Name in lukewarm faith makes difficult the practicing devotee's birth in the Pure Land".

Accordingly, it could be said that in the chapter on Practice Shinran showed the traditional aspect of his faith in the Nembutsu or what he had learned from his predecessors; and in the chapter on Faith he revealed his original insight into the faith in the Nembutsu teaching.

III

From another point of view, both chapters on Practice and Faith (these being the two aspects of the Nembutsu practice) may be seen as the former revealing the teaching (Dharma) and as the latter revealing man (as recipient of Dharma). The two are in reality only the two aspects of one organic reality. The former, therefore, cannot but be expressed as man's praise of the teaching and of Amida's virtues, while the latter is expressed as man's repentance of his sinfulness and his debased nature which have been necessarily exposed by the illuminating light (Wisdom) of Amida. Therefore Shinran's Nembutsu faith may be characterized at once as the praise of Amida's virtues and as repentance for the debased character of himself. This double nature of the Nembutsu faith had already been pointed out by Shan-tao in his *Commentaries on the Meditation Sutra* as the "Two Aspects of Deep Mind (Faith)". This is clearly reflected in Shinran's faith as expressed in his writings.

In the fourth chapter on Attainment, Shinran primarily bases himself upon Tan-luan for his expositions on what the final goal of the Nembutsu faith is, what the character of the state called Nirvana is, and how the Enlightened man (Buddhas and Bodhisattvas) carries out the activity of salvation of sentient beings who are immersed in the sea of birth and death. In this chapter, it is clarified that Nirvana can never be described in relative terms, it is beyond human conception, and that "Ojo" is in actuality the Birth of Non-birth, and that the Bodhisattva's birth in the Pure Land itself is his activity of delivering sentient beings in *samsāra*.

T'an-luan's insight into the nature of Bodhisattva's saving activities reveals the fact that it is when the Bodhisattva is "freely playing in the garden" (that is, when he is free from the consciousness that "I am saving somebody") that he is truly delivering people from their *klesa*-bondage. This shows the truth that only he who has been freed from ego-attachment (love and hate being its expressions) can save others. If there is a modicum of consciousness of "I" and "mine" in the mind of the one who saves, there is no salvation taking place. This teaching reminds us of Shinran's famous declaration that "I, Shinran, have no disciple of my own. How can I claim myself to be a teacher of anybody? I have no other task but to listen in faith to the Tathāgata's teaching and share its joy with other people. We are all brothers and sisters before the Tathāgata, therefore we are fellow disciples". Herewith Shinran turned upside down the common belief that man should first of all become a believer, after which he could teach people; he identified the two processes with one another as being in a simultaneous relationship. Therefore for Shinran, there was only himself to be taught and not other people. His way was the Way of Discipleship through and through. Herein lies the eternal secret of his teaching.

IV

The Nembutsu is usually expressed vocally as "Namu Amida Butsu". Fully translated, it means, "I take refuge in the Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life." "Light" here signifies *prajna* (Transcendent Wisdom) and "Life" *karuna* (All-embracing Compassion). The reason why the Nembutsu is the core of the Pure Land teaching can be seen in the dynamic and dialectical structure of the Nembutsu itself. It would seem at first sight that "Namu" (Skt. *namah:* "*I* worship") corresponds to the subject of faith, and "Amida Butsu" to the object of faith, therefore "Namu Amida Butsu" is the unity of subject and object. But in reality this is not a static relationship but a dynamic reality. There is no "I" apart from "Amida", and there is no "Amida" apart from "I", but both are, essentially speaking, not self-existent or something real in a substantial sense; the arising of both I and Amida is simultaneous. In other words, "I" in the act of "namu" is real in the true sense of the term, and without the attitude of "namu" on my part, there is no "Amida" anywhere. Then what or who is Amida? "Amida" means "immeasurable", "infinite" or "eternal". It is well known that Nāgārjuna (2c. A.D.) taught that the Absolute cannot be expressed in positive terms but only in negative terms. "Amida", being a negative expression, may be one such example. In this connection, Shinran says: "Amida's Original Vow was meant for us to become the Supreme Buddha. The Supreme Buddha has no form. Because it has no form, it is called "Suchness." If it were shown as having forms, it could not be called the "Supreme Nirvana" either. I learned from my master that Amida Buddha is so called only so as to make known to us its formlessness. The Name of "Amida Buddha" is only a skilful means to make Suchness known to us."

Consequently, the name of "Amida" itself shows that it is already a limited, relative Buddha, for naming something inevitably qualifies it. Therefore, when we express in words the Infinite Buddha as "Amida", it is only the Buddha objectified on the level of the secondary truth. Therefore Shinran called Amida "*Dharmakaya* as *Upāya*". That which is pointed at with the name of "Amida" is, needless to say, unnamable, inexpressible, for it is Suchness itself. What mattered to Shinran was no longer "Amida

Buddha" as the object of worship, but "Namu Amida Butsu". "Amida Buddha" as *upàya* can be objectified, but not "Namu Amida Butsu", for it is the actual inter-relationship between subject and object: it is not a static "thing" but a dynamic "event". Therefore Rennyo (1415-99 A.D.), the eighth Patriarch of the Jodo Shin School and one of the lineal descendants of Shinran, remarked: "In the Jodo Shin School, as the object of worship, the picture scroll of Amida Buddha should be preferred to the wooden statue of Amida; but more than that, the "myogo" (the six characters of *Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu*) should be preferred to the picture of Amida."

A question may be asked, "Why Nembutsu?" Looking back on the history of Buddhism, we note the Name-calling of "Namu Amida Butsu" has been transmitted from time immemorial from India, through China and Japan up to us moderns, living in the 20th Century.

The teaching of *anitya* (impermanence), however, remains the core of the Buddhist teachings. According to the teaching of *anitya*, all things created must sooner or later perish. And yet we see the century-old transmission of the Nembutsu in the history of Mahayana Buddhism. If the Nembutsu were created by somebody, then it must have perished long ago. And yet the Nembutsu has not only survived the history of many centuries, but I find it now reverberating in my mind! What on earth is it in the Nembutsu that made it possible to persist in history over such a long space of time? Something uncreated or eternal must be there in the nature of the Nembutsu, which alone must have caused the Nembutsu to survive century after century.

In the light of past history, it is quite evident that Nembutsu embodies something that belongs to the transcendental realm. On the other hand, it has another aspect: that is, it can be grasped and recited by anybody living in history, on this mundane level. From the above, it is clear that the Nembutsu belongs at once to the supra-mundane realm and to the mundane realm. This means that Nembutsu can be "owned" by anybody, but at the same time it is beyond any individual's monopoly. Shinran's notion of the character of Nembutsu as being Buddha-given derives from the realization of this fact. Besides, from his own religious experience Shinran came to learn of this fact from the mythical description of the Nembutsu having been chosen by Dharmākara Bodhisattva (primordial man) as the result of his deep contemplation lasting five *kalpas* and of the hard discipline he underwent during innumerable *kalpas*. It was only natural for Shinran, after realizing this fact, to have developed his well known conception of faith as something given by Amida. What must not be overlooked here is the fact that even where he emphasized the givenness of the faith in Nembutsu in terms of the famous "Other Power", he never lost sight of the reciprocity of the arising of faith.

Shinran describes the nature of the True Buddha and His Land versus the Illusory Buddha and His Land in terms of Tan-luan's expositions, in the fifth and sixth chapters of the *Kyo-gyo-shin-sho*. The True Buddha and His Land are beyond man's description, in-conceivable and unthinkable (*acintya*), whereas the Illusory Buddha and His Land are those grasped by man's limited, relative and discriminative reason. The Illusory Buddha is the Buddha seen through the distorting spectacles of man's thinking mind, and the Illusory Buddha Land is the limited world as seen through this same distorting medium. Those who are self-complacent with their own preconceptions about the Buddha are living in the Illusory Buddha Land. They are not aware of the fact that they are qualifying the unlimited Enlightenment or Nirvana by their

own limited sense of differentiation. They even give forms to the formless Buddha and His World. Shinran applied these conceptions to those who were trying to effect their own salvation by their own self-effort using the Buddha-given Nembutsu as a means to Enlightenment.

The fact that True Buddha and His Land (Nirvana) is *acintya* (unthinkable) does not mean that they are shrouded in mystery. Rather they are, to enlightened eyes, most self-evident. *Acintya* means that reality is so self-evident that it is not graspable or expressible through limiting human concepts, or else it means that it is not possible to express reality in finite terms.

Shinran's critical attitude caused him to discriminate the significance of the 18th, 19th and 20th Vows among all the Vows specified by Dharmàkara, numbering 48. He designated the 18th Vow as most essential, and the 19th and 20th Vows as relative and secondary in significance. He did not, however, once and for all reject the people who adhered temporarily to the 19th and 20th Vows, but declared that they too would be led, by virtue of the Buddha's vow-power, to the ultimate state of salvation indicated by the 18th Vow.

In one of his hymns Shinran says about such people: "Even those who utter the Nembutsu with self-effort and with a dispersed mind will finally be embraced by the Buddha's Vow assuring universal salvation, and will naturally be led into the gate of Suchness without being taught." In this hymn, Shinran's firm faith in Amida's Vow-Power (the Power of Naturalness) is explicitly revealed.

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

You must have heard about the tremendous power of faith. It is said in the Purana that Rama, who was God Himself—the embodiment of Absolute Brahman—had to build a bridge to cross the sea to Ceylon. But Hanuman, trusting in Rama's name, cleared the sea in one jump and reached the other side. He had no need of a bridge.

Once a man was about to cross the sea. Bibhishana wrote Rama's name on a leaf, tied it in a corner of the man's wearing cloth, and said to him: "Don't be afraid. Have faith and walk on the water. But look here—the moment you lose faith you will be drowned." The man was walking easily on the water. Suddenly he had heard an intense desire to see what was tied in his cloth. He opened it and found only a leaf with the name of Rama written on it. "What is this?" he thought, "Just the name of Rama!" As soon as doubt entered his mind he sank under the water.

Sri Ramakrishna.

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