

LIVING ON THE BORDERLINE

STEVE LANE

The nembutsu is the centre and heart of our faith, our connection with what we call Infinite Light. It arises out of a sutra some believe was taught by the historical Buddha. Others are not so sure. The sutra, some believe, describes a reality set aside only for Pure Land believers. Some believe all people go there. Others take the Pure Land as a metaphor for Nirvana. Just as many think it is an actual place. There are lots who believe our Buddha Amida is ‘real’ in some sense. Perhaps as many disagree. And how many still hold to the ideas of karma and rebirth despite scientific claims to the contrary?

We cannot establish any of the above beliefs. Whatever our individual positions, we share a common core – an appreciation of our human fallibility and an intuitive awareness of our vital connection with what Shinran in Chapter 10 of *Tannisho* calls the ‘unnameable, inexplicable, inconceivable.’

Note carefully these three words, ‘unnameable, inexplicable, inconceivable.’

When Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree, he abandoned all he had learnt. All the disciplines of an ascetic forgotten. Bereft, yet positive, he sat. He committed himself to an act of absolute faith: “I will sit here until I am enlightened.”

What could he learn sat under a tree with his eyes closed? Only the thoughts in his mind. And they were nothing new. The same questions, the same answers running round and round. Same old, same old.

PURE LAND NOTES

Journal of the Shin Buddhist Fellowship UK

But he sat on, in an act of absolute faith. And ... something happened. Something utterly different. Something he could not have conceived of. Something so inexplicable he decided to keep it to himself, because he had no words to describe it. It was unnameable. Legend says it was the Hindu gods Brahma and Indra who implored the Buddha to try to communicate what he had experienced.

He tried to make the inexplicable...explicable. He used similes, “like blowing out a candle,” parables – the poisoned arrow. Doctrines, visualizations, rules of behaviour. Tried in oh so many ways; sutra after sutra.

And everything he taught was, in a sense, wrong, a failure. Remember we are talking about, or rather, talking around, the ‘unnameable, inexplicable, inconceivable.’ This cannot be tamed by any human contrivance or calculation. We cannot house it in a temple, slip it inside a mantra, stick it in a dictionary.

But he tried. He spoke of extinction, emptiness. Remember, these are not **THE TRUTH**. The truth is beyond the reach of language. It is unnamable. Now, I’m sure there are people, perhaps some who are reading this – clever people - who can work with words like that – extinction, emptiness. When I think of extinction, I think of dinosaurs. When I think of emptiness, I imagine a cardboard box with nothing in it. That’s because I’m a numpty, a bombu. What Americans call a regular Joe.

Hundreds of books have been written about emptiness, Nirvana, enlightenment, satori, and I’ve read a few, but for me, emptiness is still a cardboard box with nothing in it.

I’ve read some sutras including the Pure Land Sutras and I don’t buy into them either. I don’t believe in grass blades made of semi-precious

PURE LAND NOTES

Journal of the Shin Buddhist Fellowship UK

stones. But I get the idea. Something beyond my imagination and incredibly wonderful. And both are true. And neither are true. Because the truth is, ‘unnamable, inexplicable, inconceivable.’

Buddha sat in an act of absolute faith. He waited. And he experienced something life changing. And it was so wonderful he was overwhelmed. And our act of faith is in that same overwhelming wonderfulness. And he named it. He named the unnamable!

Because he knew ordinary folk needed more than silence. He called it Amida. But it is a good word as far as any words are good in this context. It means beyond all measure, all calculation. Something inconceivable and inexplicable. When we say *Namu Amida Butsu* we are saying we have faith in that infinitely wonderful inexplicable, inconceivable reality Buddha experienced.

I think, this is why Shinran says, in Takamori’s inspiring translation of *Tannisho*, the nembutsu “beggars human understanding.” With the nembutsu we are, to use another metaphor, on the borderline of that unnameable, inexplicable, inconceivable reality. And, as Hozen Seki reminds us in *The Great Natural Way*:

There are no borders to Amida’s land; it is *everywhere*.

References:

Seki. *The Great Natural Way*, American Buddhist Academy, 1976.

Takamori. *Unlocking Tannisho*, Ichimannendo Publishing, 2011.

This 742-word piece written by SBFUK member and regular PLN contributor Steve Lane appeared in PLN issue #30, published winter 2016.