

# PURE LAND NOTES

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## THOUGHTS ON THE NEMBUTSU (I)

SHAKU KEKAI.

The nembutsu is the central practice of Jodo Shinshu, the single most important activity of the Buddhist life according to Shinran and yet we are told that “this is not our practice” or that myokonin like Saichi only said nembutsu “once and then”. What does this mean? Of course we can come up with doctrinal and philosophical answers that might satisfy us, but that does not necessarily solve the question in our lives. How do we practice nembutsu? What does it mean? And how is it relevant to us? Professor Mark Blum confessed to his audience once that he could explain to his students all kinds of complicated Buddhist doctrines but when it came to discuss the nembutsu he always struggled. The fact that someone of his knowledge and experience in Buddhist thought finds the nembutsu difficult to explain really highlights the complexity and subtlety of this seemingly “easy practice”. If it is so difficult to even discuss it in academic terms, how much more difficult would it be to actually live the nembutsu and find personal significance in doing so? The only way to come up with any possible answer is to go back to our own experience, to engage with the nembutsu and see what it does to us. I will not try to answer any questions but I will retrace my steps on the nembutsu path, which were always haunted by these questions.

The saying of the nembutsu is something that is always preceded by listening. In Jodo Shinshu it is not so much the beginning of our journey as it is its climax and its resting point. The nembutsu is not something that we are asked to say without understanding or as a formula that will bring us magical power. The nembutsu is a response to hearing the Dharma, and

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being touched by its message, and so it is not ritual that we do to achieve a goal, but something that we say to express a certain feeling: that of awakening to the Buddha's teaching, in whichever small or limited way. Yet everybody's journey to and in the nembutsu is different and I am sure others might speak about these matters differently. All I have is my experience so I will refer you back to it. I never wanted to become Jodo Shinshu, but at a moment of personal impasse I found myself developing an interest in Shinran, so I started reading about his life and ideas. Though I never thought his Buddhism would appeal to me, after engaging with the teachings for a week I found myself being more and more emotionally involved and moved by them. They ceased being an intellectual interest and they started talking to me personally; that's when listening began. And after being reading about the nembutsu for a while, I also started saying it. And then it started to say itself.

The first time I said the nembutsu it was an expression of relief and joy. Nevertheless, that moment was followed by a sense of awkwardness at not really understanding what the nembutsu did mean or what it did to me. My first attempts at saying the nembutsu involved trying to do it for a given period of time. It implied having to check the clock and ending up thinking about time more than about the nembutsu. By doing this, though, I discovered something.

When the time came to stop saying of the nembutsu I would feel two conflicting desires: a part of me just wanted to carry on, disregarding the time constraints, and the other wanted to adjust to the time schedule, fearing that saying the nembutsu too much or for too long was a form of self-power calculation (*jiriki hakarai*).

In one respect all of this was *jiriki hakarai*, of course, however, I realized that the desire to control the *nembutsu* in any form whatsoever was

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a form of *jiriki*, and the impulse to just carry on, disregarding time, place or circumstance, was a form of *tariki*. My sense here was that the nembutsu just carries on, whether I recite it or not, whether I am awake or asleep, listening or not. A bit like my heartbeat or the natural coming and going of breathing.