

# PURE LAND NOTES

Journal of the Shin Buddhist Fellowship UK

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## THOUGHTS ON THE NEMBUTSU (II)

SHAKU KEKAI.

One of the first Shinshu texts that I read was the *Mattosho*. Among the letters compiled in this collection there is one that has always puzzled and spoken to me. It is the one in which Kyoshin expresses his understanding to Shinran. Kyoshin elaborates on a number of subjects but the passage that has always caught my attention is the one in which he speaks of the nembutsu in a more personal way, and not so much in the context of a specific doctrine or narrative. Let me reproduce the passage. After having expressed his joy at reading and listening to the teachings, Kyoshin writes:

Nevertheless, distracted by the business of everyday life I tend to be negligent for hours at a time. Still, whether night or day it never slips from my mind, and there is only the act of rejoicing in Amida's compassion; there is solely the diamond-like shinjin whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying, without any thought of the propriety of time or place; there is only the saying of the Name out of gratitude for the Buddha's profound benevolence and for the joy imparted by the ~~virtue of my master~~ [benevolence of the masters] (Shinran's correction). The nembutsu is not a daily routine for me. I wonder if this is wrong. (CWS 542)

Not unlike Yuienbo when he shares his concerns with Shinran in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of *Tannisho*, in this letter Kyoshin seems unsure about his understanding of the nembutsu. Interestingly enough, the passage begins with the acknowledgment that he is negligent for many hours, which I interpret as meaning that he does not say the nembutsu when he is distracted by the concerns of everyday life. Then he makes a paradoxical statement,

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“whether night or day it never slips from my mind”, followed by different expressions that refer to various dimensions of the nembutsu (e.g. shinjin, expression of gratitude, etc.). Finally he acknowledges again, perhaps with some anxiety, that the nembutsu is not a daily routine, that his practice of saying the name is at times joyful and meaningful and at times non-existent. Although Shinran makes a few minor corrections to Kyoshin’s phrasing, and explains at length the concept of the person of shinjin being close to the Buddha/equal to Maitreya and encourages Kyoshin to say Kimyo Jinjippo Mugeko Nyorai and Namu Fukashigiko Nyorai as well as Namu Amida Butsu, he says nothing about Kyoshin’s irregular nembutsu routine. I believe Shinran’s silence is very significant. There is nothing wrong about Kyoshin’s lack of routine and Shinran does not even feel the need to say so. However, the paradox in Kyoshin’s statement remains: how can he be negligent for hours at a time and yet there be nothing but diamond-like shinjin and the grateful saying of the name? How can the nembutsu be forgotten and not be a routine and yet never slip from our minds? This is the question that has sit with me for a long time.

The great freedom that Jodo Shinshu entertains when it comes to performing its central practice, entails a great relief but also a great responsibility, and with it a big question: how do we say the nembutsu? Most teachers and texts encourage us to just say it, without thinking much about the number of times, how often, how loudly, in which frame of mind, when, where or indeed, why, we do say it. We know that Honen said the nembutsu 60,000 times a day, but the significance of the story and the figure is often lost on us. The reason why we do not consider all these specifics is because they, by and large, do not matter. “Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida”, goes the heart-essence of the second chapter of *Tannisho*. That is enough. That means not only that we might say the nembutsu in different ways and circumstances, but also that there might be times in which we do not say the nembutsu. As much as I admire the practitioners of *fudan nembutsu* or feel touched by stories about Shinshu teachers who recited the nembutsu in their sleep, I have to admit that I do not say the nembutsu very often. I can probably count with the fingers of one hand the times it has come

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to me in my dreams and nobody has ever told me that I was saying it while asleep. Yet, every time the thought of how rarely I say it comes to mind, the nembutsu immediately comes back to my lips and it stays with me for a little. When the nembutsu comes back I feel a bit like Kyoshin, though I would not use his same words. The return of the nembutsu feels natural, feels as if it had never gone away, as if it was always there. I must admit that I make no special efforts at saying the nembutsu and yet I am fortunate enough that not a day passes without the nembutsu returning to my mind and lips. If I observe my thoughts I can see certain patterns: I say it in the morning at some indeterminate point after waking up as I start getting ready for the day, but it does not stay for long; I say it when I am cycling but I often get distracted by the cars and the road; shocking news or unexpected happy events also bring it back briefly; I say it more extensively when sitting on planes or trains or when I experience insomnia; remembering friends and relatives who have died or who are undergoing difficult circumstances also brings it back. And yet for hours on end I do not say the nembutsu, being lost in conversations, thoughts, working routines or mindless chores. I have an awareness that I do not say the nembutsu a lot; I also often wonder whether I should try to say it more regularly, but I also feel that *trying* defeats the purpose of the nembutsu. The nembutsu that we deliberately keep in mind is not the nembutsu that never slips from the mind. The conscious and deliberate nembutsu eventually falls off the mind, as distraction is unavoidable. The nembutsu that we constantly need to keep in mind will at some point fail us, as it will be as unreliable as our conscious will.

However, if it feels good, and I feel often relieved and joyful by its appearance, why should I not apply myself to say it more regularly? Although such thinking is logical the nembutsu does not conform to our ordinary logic: it is unexplainable, ineffable and, therefore, uncontrollable. Its logic lies in its illogicality, as Shinran constantly repeats in his writing. And yet it seems inevitable for the human intellect to try to control, make sense, rationalize or write pieces like this on the meaning of the nembutsu.

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I believe that being aware of this fact is as important as listening and saying the nembutsu, knowing that it is virtually impossible not to fall into the ways of *jiriki* or *hakarai*. That is why I would not state categorically that the nembutsu is always with me or try to elaborate on the nature of Amida or the Pure Land. All I can speak about is my personal and subjective feelings. I believe it is at that personal and emotional level where Kyoshin's paradox is resolved, because when the nembutsu comes to our lips, sometimes taking us by surprise, it feels like it has always been there, it feels like it is constantly embracing and guiding us. Whether we pay attention to it or not the nembutsu carries on. Of course not paying attention, not listening, is not good for us, but it does not make the nembutsu go away. I cannot say that the Primal Vow is ever present in my life, as my mindfulness of it comes and goes, however, I can experience the constancy of the Buddha's embrace through its constant returns.

In an unforgettable seminar in Dusseldorf two years ago Ishida-sensei imprinted on us a number of Japanese Buddhist sayings. One of them was: meeting guarantees separation, separation does not guarantee meeting again. For me, this refrain perfectly instantiates the logic of impermanence that applies to all things in this world. Whoever or whatever you encounter will eventually go away and there is no certainty whether we will meet these people or things again. I feel that the nembutsu goes against this basic logic. If we fully meet the nembutsu, even though we might temporarily part from it, we always return to it, whether dead or alive. This is because the nembutsu is not just a practice that we do but the expression of the Buddha's embrace, the compassionate and lucid quality that pervades our existences. Again, I could refer to this underlying reality using many poetic and technical terms, but the point is to experience it, to feel it. No matter how limited or clouded our consciousness might be, connecting with that gentle and clear foundation, even for a fraction of a second, is enough. If we are touched by this compassion we cannot help but trust it and if we have heard the nembutsu we cannot help but say it.

Of course, our ordinary consciousness departs from this embrace time and time again. And yet our minds are also, deep down, always resting on the Buddha's Vow, the compassionate intent that wishes to deliver all

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beings from suffering. The Vow supports us all and is quietly present in our lives, even though we do not consciously acknowledge it most of the time. The nembutsu then becomes the tip of the iceberg that reveals that large and, for the most part, invisible reality. For a few seconds, when we call the name, we become aware of the deep bond that connects us to our most basic aspiration and the aspirations of all beings, which are all embraced and included in the Buddha's vow. The latent support of the vow suddenly comes to light and reveals its significance to me. For me this is the meaning of Namu Amida Butsu.

Finally, I would like to end by expressing my appreciation to Gary Robinson, to who I owe much, but to who I am especially grateful for having taught me how to chant the Shoshinge, and perform it as a practice that brings together body, speech and mind. I must admit that although I have made chanting Shinran's gatha some form of irregular routine, I am often distracted while chanting and trying to keep the right posture. My mind often wanders away as I go through the many rows of kanjis and musical notations. However, there is one stanza that always brings back my attention to the Dharma and strikes me as the best description of the nembutsu that never slips from the mind. Let me finish by quoting it:

Goku ju aku nin yui sho butsu

The limited and wicked person needs only to say "Buddha"

Ga yaku zai hi ses shu chu

I, too, am in the Buddha's embrace

Bon no sho gen sui fu ken

Though my eyes, clouded by the dust of defilement, do not see

Dai hi mu ken jo sho ga  
shines on me, always.

The great compassion untiringly