

REV. JOSHO ADRIAN CÎRLEA

THE PATH OF  
ACCEPTANCE

- Commentary on Tannisho -

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Rev. Josho Adrian Cîrlea is the representative of Jodo Shinshu Buddhist Community from Romania, founder of Tariki Dojo Craiova and Tariki Dojo Bucharest.

Cîrlea Adrian  
O.P. 6, C.P. 615  
Craiova, Dolj,  
România

phone: 0725854326  
e-mail: [josho\\_adrian@yahoo.com](mailto:josho_adrian@yahoo.com)  
yahoo id: josho\_an  
skype id: josho\_adrian  
blog of the author:  
[www.amida-ji-retreat-temple-romania.blogspot.com](http://www.amida-ji-retreat-temple-romania.blogspot.com)

*I dedicate this book to my parents and  
grandparents from this life (Gheorghe, Tamara,  
Constantin, Ioana, Gheorghe, Cristina) and  
other lives.  
May they always have peace, love and happiness  
in their hearts, receive faith in Amida Buddha  
and be born in his Pure Land.*



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## Foreword

This book is an adaptation of my Dharma talks on “*Tannisho – Notes on Lamenting Divergences*”, given at Tariki Dojo Craiova during the usual days of practice.

Yuien-bo, the author of *Tannisho*, warns that this text can be wrongly understood by those who are not ready yet to receive the message of the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha:

*“It should not be shown about indiscriminately.”*

In the same spirit, Master Rennyō added the following words in the colophon of *Tannisho*:

*“This sacred writing is an important scripture in our tradition. It should not be indiscriminately shown to any who lack past karmic good.”*

But today *Tannisho* has already been translated and printed in many languages, being accessible both to those opened or to those closed to its wonderful teaching. This is why I decided that a commentary is needed, because it matters to me how various parts of it are to be understood by beginners or the general public.

Faith (shinjin) can be awakened in us by Amida Buddha if we listen to his Dharma. By listening to and understanding the content of the teaching with the head, our hearts can become opened and receive faith. Thus, reading, listening, and discussing the sacred texts are extremely important.

The title of this book, “The Path of Acceptance”, comes from the main feeling which arises in me while reading the *Tannisho*. I feel myself loved and accepted as I am, filled with illusions and blind passions, attachments and limitations. There are no special conditions asked by Amida Buddha so that I can follow this Path. There are no

obstacles to prevent me from becoming a Buddha in his Pure Land, once this life is over.

Jodo Shinshu Buddhism<sup>1</sup> is the path of acceptance, the gate through which all spiritual losers can enter. When you are 100% convinced that you cannot attain Buddhahood in this life, then you are ready for the Jodo Shinshu path. As long as you still harbor in your mind the smallest thought of personal merit or “maybe I can” kind of thinking, you cannot see and enter the Dharma gate of birth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land.

In writing the commentary I have used the English edition of *Tannisho* printed by Hongwanji International Center in 2008, whose translation work I appreciate very much. Due to copyright reasons I didn’t quote each chapter before commenting it. So, I advise my readers to look for the printed edition or the free online edition of Shinran’s works at [www.shinranworks.com](http://www.shinranworks.com).

I am grateful for the help of my Dharma friend Richard St. Clair (Shaku Egen), who proofread the manuscript and gave me valuable suggestions.

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<sup>1</sup> Jodo Shinshu means „the true teaching of the Pure Land school”.



## Commentary on the Preface of *Tannisho* – the duty of the teacher

The intention of *Tannisho* is to prevent Shinran's disciples (that means us) from twisting the teaching with their own views (i.e. understanding based on personal views). In fact, the title, *Tannisho*, means "lamenting the divergences."

Yuien-bo, the author of *Tannisho*, emphasized this by saying: "*Let there be not the slightest distortion of the teaching....*" So, even the slightest distortion of the teaching is dangerous. In his intention of preventing us from distorting the teaching, he uses only the words spoken by Shinran Shonin, and not somebody else's words. He looks to Shinran Shonin as the ultimate teacher in matters related to our birth in the Pure Land:

*"For how is entrance into the single gate of easy practice possible unless we happily come to rely on a true teacher whom conditions bring us to encounter?"*

Yuien-bo has no other teacher than Shinran Shonin. If he had another teacher other than Shinran, then he would have quoted his words as well, but as we see in *Tannisho*, he quotes only the words and understanding of Shinran Shonin.

Yuien-bo sees himself as a transmitter, not a producer, of the teaching. He uses his capacities only to transmit the teaching ("*I set down the words spoken by the late Shinran Shonin*"), choosing the words of the Master that are suitable to specific misunderstandings.

He never invents new teachings: he never comes with his own opinions. This is, I think, how a Jodo Shinshu teacher should be. This is what many priests, teachers and scholars of our day don't have. All members of our school, whether they are lay or priests, must always look for and accept only the words of our Master Shinran Shonin. And

we must always be careful, as Yuien-bo says in another chapter of *Tannisho*:

*“One should cautiously fear that one may be going against the late Master’s intent.”*

So, this is what we are trying to do now, when discussing *Tannisho* and other

classical texts from our tradition: we are trying to understand and follow the exact teaching of our true teacher, Shinran Shonin, so that we may receive the same shinjin like him and attain Buddhahood in the Pure Land.

Zuiken Sensei<sup>2</sup> said:

*“Shinjin can be obtained through a good teacher’s words; How could you obtain shinjin without accepting the words of the Founding Master<sup>3</sup>?”*

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<sup>2</sup> Zuiken Inagaki Sensei (1885-1981).

<sup>3</sup> Founding Master: Shinran Shonin (1173-1262), the Founder of the Jodo Shinshu school of Buddhism

## **Comments on the first chapter of Tannisho – salvation of Amida<sup>4</sup> is beyond understanding and has no connection with our merits**

The first sentence of this chapter, “*saved by the inconceivable working of Amida’s Vow<sup>5</sup>, I shall realize birth in the Pure Land<sup>6</sup>*”, shows very clearly that the saving (birth in the Pure Land) comes from Amida’s Vow. This is the essence of the teaching we receive from Shinran Shonin. This working, this saving, is “*inconceivable*”, which means it cannot be fully understood by our limited minds. We can hear the promise contained in the Primal Vow and entrust in it, but we cannot understand rationally its work and action, for example, in the way we understand any other human action. In connection with this, I remember the words of Shinran Shonin addressed to Kyomyo-bo in letter 9 from *Lamp for the latter Ages (Mattosho)*”:

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<sup>4</sup> Amida is the Buddha of Infinite Life and Infinite Light. Among all Buddhas, he is the only one who promised that he will save (lead to Buddhahood) all beings no matter their spiritual capacities, especially those whose karma is so heavy that they deserve to be born in hell. All these beings need to do is to entrust themselves in him, say his Name in faith and aspire to be born in his Pure Land.

<sup>5</sup> The Primal Vow of Amida Buddha promises birth in his Pure Land to all those who entrust themselves in him, say his Name and aspire to be born there:

*If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten quarters who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves to me, desire to be born in my land, and call my Name, even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment.*

Birth in the Pure Land of those who entrust themselves in Amida without doubt, will coincide with their attainment of perfect Enlightenment or Buddhahood. The 48 Vows of Amida Buddha, among which, the Eighteenth is called the Primal Vow, are recorded in the Larger Sutra on Amida Buddha. This was taught by Shakyamuni Buddha on Vulture Peak, in the northern part of India.

<sup>6</sup> The Pure Land (*sukhavati* in Sanskrit) is the manifestation of Amida’s Enlightenment, a transcendent place where those who have faith (*shinjin*) in him are born after death and become Buddhas themselves. See the chapter “About Amida Buddha and his Pure Land” from this book.

*“It seems to me that with all your attempts to understand by reasoning and by learning you have fallen into confusion. It is completely in error. Once you have simply come to realize that Vow and Name surpass conceptual understanding, you should not calculate in this way or that. There must be nothing of your calculation in the act that leads to birth. You just need to entrust in the Tathagata<sup>7</sup>.”*

So, as we see, it is not by accident that Shinran Shonin speaks about the working of the Vow as being inconceivable. He repeats this in many parts of his writings and I think it is because he doesn't want us to become distracted by our own ideas and personal opinions, and fall into the error of having a false and intellectual shinjin. Human minds always have the tendency to calculate and try to understand everything by its limited methods, thinking there is nothing that cannot be understood by them. But the working of the Vow is beyond human calculations and beyond thinking. Related to the Vow we can only hear it and accept it in faith, nothing else. It is like travelling by boat or plane. We do not have extensive knowledge of sea navigation, ship construction or flying, and we do not know how exactly the captain or the pilot drives the boat or plane, but we can entrust in them and climb on board. The boat or plane will take us to destination without the need from us to have all the knowledge about them.

*“The moment you entrust yourself thus to the Vow, so that the mind set upon saying the nembutsu<sup>8</sup> arises within you...”* – I think these words show that the moment of entrusting and the moment of nembutsu are one and the same, that shinjin (entrusting heart) and saying of Amida's Name are not separate. *“The moment you entrust, so that the mind set upon saying nembutsu...”* – shows very clearly that one who entrusts immediately feels the need to recite nembutsu.

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<sup>7</sup> Tathagata is another term for „Buddha”.

<sup>8</sup> Nembutsu is the saying of the Name of Amida Buddha, „Namo Amida Butsu”. „Namo” means „I take refuge in” but also „homage/praise to”. „Butsu” means „Buddha”. So, Namo Amida Butsu is „I take refuge/homage in Amida Buddha”.

I always like to quote Saichi on this matter:

*“When someone is catching a cold he cannot abstain not to cough. I caught the cold of Buddha’s Dharma and I cannot stop coughing the nembutsu.”*

What is in fact, Namo Amida Butsu? “Namo” means “to take refuge”, but it also means “homage to”. “Butsu” is Buddha. So, Namo Amida Butsu means “I take refuge in/homage to Amida Buddha.” To recite Namo Amida Butsu is to express entrusting and also to express gratitude to Amida for saving us.

So, Shinran says that in the moment you entrust yourself to the Vow (and because of this you say the nembutsu) *“you are immediately brought to share in the benefit of being grasped by Amida, never to be abandoned.”* This means that you enter into the stage of those assured of Nirvana or the stage of non-retrogression.

What is the stage of non-retrogression? It means the root of your karma<sup>9</sup> is cut: that is, although you continue to experience the results of your own past karma and to act as a being full of illusions and blind passions until the moment of your death, your karma cannot plant further seeds into another life.

Because of the merit transference from Amida, you are now assured of Nirvana<sup>10</sup>, which you will attain in the moment of your death, when you are born in the Pure Land. You are established in this stage of non-retrogression, not by yourself, but by Amida (*“being grasped by Amida”*) who will never abandon you (*“never to be abandoned”*) –

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<sup>9</sup> Karma means any action by thought, deed and word which one day (in this life or future lives) will produce an effect.

<sup>10</sup> Nirvana comes from the term „nirv” – „to extinguish”, and is wrongly understood by many as becoming nothingness. But „nirvana” means to extinguish the flame of blind passions and illusions and to awake to the true reality or Buddha-nature which all beings possess. In the Jodo Shinshu school, the state of Nirvana or Buddhahood is to be attained in the moment of birth in the Pure Land of Amida, after death.

this is what is meant by non-retrogression, or being assured of Nirvana.

To be “*brought to share in the benefit of being grasped by Amida, never to be abandoned,*” or to enter the stage of those assured of Nirvana, is called “salvation in the present” and is of primal importance in Jodo Shinshu. According to Shinran Shonin, salvation by Amida Buddha takes place in the present life, when we receive shinjin (faith), and because of this, in the moment of death we are born in the Pure Land where we immediately attain the supreme Buddhahood.

Other Pure Land schools<sup>11</sup> think that being born in the Pure Land does not mean you immediately attain Buddhahood, but you just enter in the stage of non-retrogression and you will become a Buddha after further practice in the auspicious environment of the Pure Land. This is very different to the understanding of our Master Shinran Shonin.

These schools place their emphasis on the moment of death, which they think is the moment of salvation when, if you recite nembutsu with mindfulness, this action can make your birth in the Pure Land more certain by the arrival of Amida Buddha to welcome you. Shinran Shonin contradicts this view in his Letter 1 of *Mattoshō*:

*“The idea of Amida’s coming at the moment of death is for those who seek to gain birth in the Pure Land by doing various practices, for they are practitioners of self-power. The moment of death is of central concern to such people, for they have not yet attained true shinjin. ... The practitioner of true shinjin, however, abides in the stage of the truly settled, for he or she has already been grasped, never to be abandoned [assured of birth in the Pure Land here and now]. There is no need to wait in anticipation for the moment of death, no need to rely on Amida’s coming. At the time shinjin becomes settled, birth too*

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<sup>11</sup> The Pure Land Buddhist tradition consists of many schools, among which the most representative in Japan is Jodo Shinshu. Devotional aspects toward Amida Buddha can be seen in many Mahayana schools from Tibet, China, Mongolia, Vietnam, etc.

*becomes settled; there is no need for the deathbed rites that prepare one for Amida's coming."*

*"Know that the Primal Vow of Amida makes no distinction between people young and old, good and evil; only shinjin is essential".*

If we read the Primal Vow we see that Amida promised that those beings who entrust in him, wish to be born in his land, and say his Name will be born there. These three minds – the mind who entrusts in Amida, the mind who wishes to be born in Amida's Land and the mind who says the nembutsu are in fact one mind, the manifestations of the entrusting mind. So, we do not find any requirement other than shinjin in order to be born in the Pure Land. The fact that Amida makes no distinction between young and old shows that the time of practice is not important. Some rely on Amida Buddha now, in their youth, and use their time to listen the teaching again and again in order to deepen their understanding, while others meet with the Shinshu Dharma and rely on Amida in their old age or even on their death bed. The length of practice is longer or shorter, but this is of no importance.

*"For it is the Vow to save the person whose karmic evil is deep and grave and whose blind passions abound."*

This shows exactly what kind of people the Primal Vow saves and why it was created. It shows "the origin/cause of the Vow". While other practices lead to Enlightenment only people who do this or that, or have this or that kind of virtue, the Primal Vow saves those incapable of any practice, because one who has deep and grave karmic evil and is full of blind passions cannot do any meritorious practice.

*"Thus, for those who entrust themselves to the Primal Vow, no good acts are required, because no good surpasses the nembutsu. Nor need they despair of the evil they commit, for no evil can obstruct the working of Amida's Primal Vow."*

This passage strengthens the previous affirmation and gives more assurance to the practitioners who listen to this wonderful Dharma, that they are really saved exactly as they are. Many people when listening to the Jodo Shinshu teaching say this is somehow exaggerated, that although the Compassion of Amida Buddha makes no discrimination, however, some little virtue must still be acquired by the practitioner in order to be sure of his birth in the Pure Land.

I think that in order to prevent this kind of thinking and show all the more the nature of Amida's Primal Vow, Shinran Shonin strengthened his previous affirmation by saying that "*no good surpasses the nembutsu*". And to people who might still be afraid of the evil they see in themselves and do not have the courage to enjoy what they hear, Shinran says: "*nor need they despair of the evil they commit, for no evil can obstruct the working of Amida's Primal Vow.*"



## Commentary on the second chapter – the simple faith of Shinran Shonin

*“Each of you has come to see me, crossing the borders of more than ten provinces at the risk of your life, solely with the intent of asking about the path to birth in the land of bliss. But if you imagine in me some special knowledge of a path to birth other than the nembutsu or of scriptural writings that teach it, you are greatly mistaken. If that is the case, since there are many eminent scholars in the southern capital of Nara or on Mount Hiei to the north, you would do better to meet with them and inquire fully about the essentials for birth.”*

I think these first sentences show the intention we must have when coming to the dojo or temple and listen to the teaching of Shinran Shonin, or when reading and studying alone the sacred texts. Here the Founding Master speaks to a group of nembutsu followers who came a long distance to meet him and ask his advice.

He especially begins with these sentences, because he intends to make them aware of the reason for their visit, which cannot be something else than finding the *“path to birth in the land of bliss”*. And this path is only the nembutsu of faith in the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha, nothing else.

Shinran Shonin warns his visitors that he knows no other path to birth in the Pure Land, and if they still look for some other methods, then he is not the right teacher for them. In the same way, people who come to the dojo and look to learn something else than the nembutsu of faith, they should leave home or search for another Buddhist group.

Jodo Shinshu is simple and easy to understand and it must be kept this way. The intention of the Founder Shinran was to explain the teaching about the Primal Vow of Amida in easy terms so that everyone, no matter their high or low mental capacities, can understand and accept it. We have to be careful not to lose ourselves in

the complicated and sophisticated traps of our minds, but simply accept what Shinran Shonin himself accepts to be true:

*“As for me, I simply accept and entrust myself to what my revered teacher told me, ‘Just say the nembutsu and be saved by Amida’; nothing else is involved.”*

This is the only teaching we need to receive and preach to others. When we engage in study, alone or with a teacher at the dojo, we must be concentrated on the essentials of the nembutsu teaching, and not lose ourselves in our own opinions. Shinran Shonin mentions that he himself is not the one who invented the Jodo Shinshu teaching, but received it from his Master. In the same way, we receive Jodo Shinshu from Shinran Shonin and share it with others, without distorting it.

If some teachers or followers want to be like the *“eminent scholars in the southern capital of Nara or on Mount Hiei to the north”*, then it’s their decision, but I myself choose to keep my mind simple and try my best to receive the same teaching that Shinran Shonin and his Master, Honen Shonin, received. I do not wish to have a different faith and understanding than theirs. So I say: *“As for me, Josho, I simply accept and entrust to what my revered teacher, Shinran Shonin, told me....”*

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*“I have no idea whether the nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Honen and, saying the nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets. The reason is, if I could attain Buddhahood by endeavoring in other practices, but said the nembutsu and so fell into hell, then I would feel regret at having been deceived. But I am incapable of any other practice, so hell is decidedly my abode whatever I do.”*

In this passage, Shinran Shonin explains his faith in a way that might seem very strange at first sight. It can even be interpreted that he somehow doubts the teaching he received. He says that he would have no regret if he was deceived by his Master, Honen.

But his statement is beyond ordinary ideas of right or wrong, and it is not something like: “If things go well, then I follow my Master, and if not, then I leave him”. Rather, he says: “anywhere my revered teacher goes, I will follow him, even if he goes to hell”. The words of Shinran does not express doubt, on the contrary, they are the expression of his diamond-like faith who is no longer obstructed by the words “but what if I am wrong?”

This passage is closely related with *“if you imagine in me some special knowledge of a path to birth other than the nembutsu or of scriptural writings that teach it, you are greatly mistaken”*.

By saying *“I have no idea”*, he admits his ignorance and by *“I am incapable of any other practice”*, he acknowledges his incapacity to attain birth in the Pure Land and Nirvana by self-power practices. His faith has two aspects: profound awareness of his limitations and his evil karma which can take him only to hell, and his total reliance on the saving power of Amida Buddha.

Of course, he doesn’t believe that the teaching about the saving activity of Amida is false, and he explains this in the passage:

*“If Amida’s Primal Vow is true, Shakyamuni’s teaching cannot be false. If the Buddha’s teaching is true, Shan-tao’s commentaries cannot be false. If Shan-tao’s commentaries are true can Honen’s words be lies? If Honen’s words are true, then surely what I say cannot be empty.”*

He starts his argument by stating that Amida’s Primal Vow is true. This is the beginning of a genuine spiritual life in Jodo Shinshu and cannot be negated. It is the basis of his faith and life. Without the

Primal Vow being true, there is no Dharma. Anyone who is in accord with the intention of the Primal Vow is a true teacher and the mission of a true teacher is to expound the Primal Vow. This is the lineage of the True Pure Land path with Amida's Primal Vow as the origin.

Shakyamuni Buddha is the teacher who appeared on earth to expound the saving activity of the Primal Vow of Amida; the commentaries of Shan-tao and the words of Shinran's Master Honen further spread and explained this to other beings. Shinran's mission was also the same as theirs and his faith is in accord with their faith. They all said in one voice only one thing: "Amida's Primal Vow is true", and he, Shinran, will never deviate from this:

*"Such, in the end, is how this foolish person entrusts himself [to the Vow]."*

Looking to his audience but also to us, his disciples of future times, he says:

*"Beyond this, whether you take up the nembutsu or whether you abandon it, is for each of you to determine."*

You decide for yourself whether to simply entrust to Amida, or entrust to your own power or any other practice. I sense something like a sad tone in Shinran's voice. Maybe his listeners failed to meet his expectations and were still wandering on the roads of self power mind, maybe he knew that few of us, his future disciples will be able to have a simple and undistracted faith in the Primal Vow.

I think he was very much aware of the difficulty of accepting the teaching of Amida's Power in a world so full of complicated egos, of "smart" people and "virtuous" practitioners who never imagine their karma being so heavy so as to lead them to hell.

## **Commentary on the third chapter – attainment of Buddhahood by the evil person**

*“Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.”*

This statement is to help us break our limited view of Buddhist practice based on the so called power of the ego and escape its dangerous traps. Many people who hear the message of the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha and the wonderful Jodo Shinshu teaching about it, are struck by the simplicity and easiness of the attainment of birth in the Pure Land. Although they seem to understand what it is all about, in fact they cannot accept this teaching as it is.

Even if they hear that Amida especially saves (leads to birth in the Pure Land and to Buddhahood) all people no matter their good or evil karma, their merits or lack of any merit, they still cannot believe what they hear and think that somehow, those with some merits and virtues are especially saved, or they are even more saved than the others with no merits.

When these people hear that Amida made his Primal Vow with the intent of the *“evil person’s attainment of Buddhahood”* they do not take this statement for what it is, i.e. to immediately entrust in it and become happy about it, but they think the contrary, that especially because *“an evil person attains birth [in the Pure Land], it goes without saying that a good person will.”* This line of thinking goes something along the lines “if evil people are saved, then we who are not so bad as they, deserve all the more to be born in the Pure Land.” Thus, instead of relying on Amida’s power, they still cling to their own power and merits. So Master Shinran continues as follows:

*“This is because people who rely on doing good through their self-power fail to entrust themselves wholeheartedly to Other Power and therefore are not in accord with Amida’s Primal Vow”*

No matter how often they hear the Jodo Shinshu teaching, the only thing such people can hear and accept is their own ego's calculations. They are blinded by their ego and their so-called merits and virtues. For these people the power of the Primal Vow avails them nothing, and they cannot use this wonderful and simple method in order to attain supreme Buddhahood in the Pure Land. In other words, they do not have the twofold profound convictions (nishu jinshin) of shinjin:

*I am an evil being who has wandered in the world of delusion from timeless past and have no possibility of reaching Enlightenment*

and

*Amida Buddha established his Primal Vow to cause such an evil person to be born in the Pure Land.*

This is what is meant by “*when they overturn the mind of self-power and entrust themselves to Other Power, they will attain birth in the true and fulfilled land.*”

If one thinks that he is good enough to be born in the Pure Land, believing that somehow he has an advantage because of such and such merit or good deeds that he has done, then he is caught in the trap of his ego, and is thus very far from attaining Buddhahood in the Pure Land.

Shinran Shonin said that as long as one has not yet become a Buddha, he lives in delusion and darkness, and for this kind of person every good he does is always mixed with the poison of ego. Only a Buddha can do a truly good deed. So what kind of good or merit do we think we have as long as we are not a Buddha? How can unenlightened people like us have a merit even as little as a piece of dust? And what can this so-called “merit” do for us in order for us to be born in the Pure Land? What practice can we successfully do by relying on our own power?

Shinran said, *“it is impossible for us, who are possessed of blind passions, to free ourselves from birth-and-death through any practice whatever.”*

Into my opinion, the evil person saved by Amida is in fact the one who realizes he is indeed an evil person, who is aware of the evil he has deep in his heart, even if on the outside he looks like a good person. And, how many of us do not look like good people? It is so easy to keep the appearance of a good person!

Many people think of me as a good man, but only I myself know how evil I am and how often I am capable of committing any act if the conditions are met. When I look to a murderer or a thief or any other criminal now in jail, I realize that they are me, but me without having the occasion of being in the same situations they were in when they committed their evil actions. I am now writing these words, and maybe I have a calm mind, but who knows what I will do tomorrow out of jealousy if my girl friend leaves me, or I lose everything I have. I might steal, kill and do any evil actions that other people did who are now in prison.

When Shinran spoke about evil I do not think he had in mind what is commonly considered social or moral evil – that which society says is wrong but might have been acceptable in the past. By evil, he rather means that no matter what good we might think we did or merit we believe we have acquired, we still cannot be sure that we attained a level from which we cannot fall back and retrogress, thus not being able to finally attain Nirvana. Many sages of today from various religious paths widely admired by people still say about themselves that they are just simple persons with a lot of work to do on themselves. Not even they think that they attained a level from which there is no retrogression.

Thus it is no coincidence that the third chapter of *Tannisho* begins and ends with the sentence: *“Even a good person attains birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will.”*

Those people who look like good persons on the outside but realize they are in fact evil persons, and all people who are aware of the evil inside them, will be born in the Pure Land if they rely on Amida Buddha's Primal Vow and not on their own so called "merits". This is shinjin of the twofold profound convictions.



## **Commentary on the fourth and fifth chapter – salvation of those with whom we have close karmic relations and of all beings**

These chapters clearly show that Jodo Shinshu is part of Mahayana<sup>12</sup> Buddhism and that birth in the Pure Land is not the attainment of a personal and selfish Nirvana where we remain for eternity, but a permanent return, in various forms, to lead all beings to Buddhahood.

There are four Bodhisattva<sup>13</sup> vows that a Mahayana practitioner is expected to take and put into practice:

- 1. No matter how perfect a Buddha is, I vow to become like him.*
- 2. No matter how profound the Dharma is, I vow to fully understand it all.*
- 3. No matter how numerous the passions are, I vow to conquer them all.*
- 4. No matter how numerous the beings are, I vow to save them all.*

This aspiration - to attain Buddhahood in order to save all beings, is called the awakening of the Bodhi Mind.

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<sup>12</sup> Mahayana or Buddhism of the Great Vehicle has the goal of leading all beings to attain Buddhahood. On this path, the follower makes the vow of practicing the Dharma not only for himself, but for the liberation of all sentient beings. Mahayana represents a great number of schools which relies on the Sanskrit canon. The Pure Land tradition, which also contains many schools, is one of the main streams of Mahayana Buddhism.

<sup>13</sup> The term „bodhisattva” is used to describe the practitioner who aspires to become a Buddha for himself and all beings (bodhisattva in aspiration) and makes the vows of the Bodhisattva, and the one who although he has attained supreme Enlightenment or Buddhahood does not remain closed in it but continues to manifest himself in various forms in the world of suffering to help all beings (Bodhisattvas who are already Buddhas).

In Jodo Shinshu, although we don't take any vows, we have the same aspiration, but we understand that we cannot fulfill it through our own efforts. This realization of our own spiritual incapacity is not just a relaxed awareness, but it often comes after an intense religious struggle and a painful meeting with our own limitations. If we read about Shinran's life we see how desperate he was when he realized that after twenty years of being a monk he found himself not a step toward his final goal. He expressed this awareness by saying many times in his works that without the teaching about the Primal Vow he was surely destined to hell. So, how can one save others when he cannot save himself?

*“However much love and pity we may feel in our present lives, it is hard to save others as we wish; hence, such compassion remains unfulfilled. “*

But through the nembutsu of faith this aspiration of saving others can be fulfilled, and we are made capable by the power of Amida to attain perfect Buddhahood in his Pure Land, and then come back to this world as Buddhas. This is how *“Compassion in the Pure Land path”* or the Bodhi Mind of the Pure Land path is fulfilled, even by ordinary people full of blind passions like ourselves.

Shinran said that all beings have been our parents in many states of existence –which is another crucial statement of Mahayana and the basis of the four Bodhisattva vows and the Bodhi Mind. Because of this, not only our mother and father of this present life can be called parents, but all beings, no matter where they are born, or whatever form they take due to their karma.

The four modes of birth, mentioned by Shinran in the fifth chapter are: (1) birth from womb, like human beings, some animals and devas (gods) inhabiting the earth, (2) birth from the egg, like birds and fishes, (3) from moisture, like some insects and worms, and (4) spontaneous birth, such as gods, pretas (hungry spirits) and hell-dwellers.

Although all beings can be called our parents, Shinran specifically insists that after we attain Enlightenment in the Pure Land we save *“first those with whom we have close karmic relations”*. These beings with whom we have close karmic relations are those to that we have strong attachments to in this life. Karmic relations mean, in fact, strong attachments.

How many of us didn't think at least once about how beautiful it would be if we were able to meet again with our good friends, parents, children or wife after we die? But if we meet again with them in another life and still we are not Buddhas, then this meeting might be of no real benefit to them or to us. It can even become a meeting of pain and sorrow, in which we will surely don't recognize them. Because of our deluded minds, we might harm them or make them run from us.

We and our loved ones have different karma and after this life we will take different forms, but because of attachments to one another we can still be close in space and time. For example, one of us might be born in the next life as a human being, while the other (wife, husband, parent, friend) can be born as an animal. Due to attachment he can live around our house, but because we cannot see our previous lives, we are not able to recognize him. We can think of him as just a close dog or cow, but we cannot really benefit him much.

It can even be worse than this. In time our feelings for him/her or his feelings towards us may change and because of various circumstances love can turn into hate. People who are now in a love relation can hate each others after a few lives, or even in this life. So, until we become Buddhas, not only can we not benefit our closed ones, but we can actually make them sink even more in the ocean of suffering.

Thus, if we truly care about them, we should make a commitment not to lose this life in vain, but to listen to the teaching again and again and receive shinjin (faith in the Primal Vow of Amida). There is no other way of receiving shinjin but through listening to the teaching.

Only in this way, our aspiration to save all beings, especially those with whom we have karmic connections, will be fulfilled.

Whether I use the word shinjin, nembutsu, or the nembutsu of faith I refer to the same thing, because the true nembutsu is only the *Namo Amida Butsu* as the expression of faith in Amida Buddha and of gratitude that we are saved as we are. When Shinran says that we can attain Buddhahood “*through saying the nembutsu*” he is in fact saying that we become Buddhas through the nembutsu said on the basis of faith given by Amida Buddha<sup>14</sup>. Only in this way does the nembutsu become effective as a mean of salvation for us and for other beings.

If we think that nembutsu is like a machine we can use to gain merits, then we are terribly wrong. This attitude shows that we are in fact relying on our own power and not on the power of Amida. We are still clinging on our ego and not on the Primal Vow.

This is what Shinran meant when he said in the fifth chapter of *Tannisho* that nembutsu is not a good act through which he strives through his own powers. He does not use nembutsu as a tool to gain personal merit that he transfers to others. This kind of nembutsu practiced by people who rely on their own power is nembutsu without faith, nembutsu like a machine or instrument, and is not in accord with the teaching of our school. Shinran warns us that if we wish to save people we love and other sentient beings, we must practice the nembutsu of faith, not the false nembutsu.

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<sup>14</sup> „Nembutsu said on the basis of faith given by Amida Buddha” - in Jodo Shinshu it is said that faith and nembutsu come from Amida. To better understand this aspect, please read the chapter “Faith and nembutsu are not our creations”.

## Commentary on the sixth chapter – again on the role of the Jodo Shinshu teacher

According to Master Rennyo<sup>15</sup>, there are five conditions that someone must meet in order to be born in the Pure Land:

- stored good from the past
- a good spiritual teacher
- Amida's light
- the entrusting heart (shinjin)
- the saying of the Name (nembutsu)

The “stored good from the past” represents our good karma from past lives and this life which manifests itself as an opening or receptive state of mind towards the message of the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha.

In Jodo Shinshu, the main practice is called *monto* – “to listen” to the teaching. A lot of people hear the teaching about the Primal Vow but few are opened to it. This openness is very important in our tradition and is the manifestation of the good stored from the past. Also, if you listen again and again to the teaching in this life, thus becoming immersed with all your being in the Dharma, this listening will become a “stored good” which will make you open to the call of the Primal Vow.

The good spiritual teacher is the one who guides us to the Path of reliance on the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha, “*he is the messenger who urges us to take refuge in Amida*” and his apparition is also a manifestation of the good stored from the past. His message can be received only in the opened state of mind I explained before. In Jodo Shinshu the teacher is called *Zenjishiki* (*kalyanamitra* in Sanskrit)

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<sup>15</sup> Rennyo Shonin (1415-1499) was the eighth descendant of Shinran Shonin and Patriarch (Monshu) of Hongwanji, the mother temple in the Hongwanji-ha branch of Jodo Shinshu.

which is translated as a “good friend on the path”. It is not to be mistaken for the role of the Master or Guru in other Buddhist traditions. Whenever the term “Master” appears in Jodo Shinshu texts with reference to Shinran Shonin or in our days with reference to a wonderful modern teacher, it is only to express gratitude.

Amida’s light represents the working and the wish of Amida Buddha to save (lead to Buddhahood) all sentient beings drowned in delusion. The manifestation of this work and wish is his Primal Vow.

In this way, because of the good stored from the past, we meet with a good spiritual teacher and we are open to his message – the Primal Vow (Amida’s light). At this very moment the so-called “Awakening of Faith” or the apparition of the entrusting heart (shinjin), takes place.

The entrusting heart (shinjin) means that the follower relies on Amida and his Primal Vow for the attainment of Buddhahood in the Pure Land. The saying of the Name (“Namo Amida Butsu”) appears spontaneous in the same time with the Awakening of Faith, as an expression of it and of gratitude towards Amida Buddha who saves us exactly as we are. This is the only nembutsu accepted in our tradition – the Nembutsu of faith and gratitude.

The “stored good from the past” and the “spiritual teacher” are only conditions which create a beneficial environment for Amida’s Light to manifest, but they are not the direct causes of our birth in the Pure Land. The “entrusting heart” and “saying of the Name” are the manifestations of Amida’s Light in the heart of the practitioner, and cannot exist independently of Amida’s Light. Only because of Amida’s working and his wish to save us are we able to entrust in Amida and say the nembutsu. To summarize, neither the “stored good from the past” nor the “spiritual teacher” are direct causes for our birth in the Pure Land.

Master Rennyo explains this in one of his letters:

*“Prompted by the working of this light [Amida’s light], those endowed with past karmic good have come to attain the entrusting heart of Other Power. Thus, it has now become clear that the entrusting heart is bestowed by Amida Tathagata. Accordingly, we now clearly know that this is not the mind created by the followers but the great entrusting heart of Other Power given to us by Amida Tathagata.”*

This passage together with the above explanations clearly show the truth of Master Shinran’s words in chapter six of *Tannisho*:

*“For myself, I do not have even a single disciple. For if I brought people to say the nembutsu through my own efforts, then they might be my disciples. But it is indeed preposterous to call persons “my disciples” when they say the nembutsu having received the working of Amida.”*

Nembutsu is the same with shinjin (entrusting heart), and both of them come only from Amida.

Thus, a Jodo Shinshu priest or teacher cannot say *“these are my disciples”* or *“those are someone else’s disciples”*, as if he were the one who gave them shinjin and nembutsu. On the contrary, he is only a messenger, one who urges people to entrust in Amida. He does this work of a messenger by relating himself to the words and explanations of Shakyamuni, Shinran, Rennyō and the seven Masters, not to his own personal interpretations.

Of course, the true teacher can use his skills and knowledge to make people understand and entrust in the teaching of the Primal Vow, but he must never deviate from what Master Shinran or Rennyō said. This is very important and all teachers have to always ask themselves if they are truly in accord with the words of these two Masters and with the

canonical texts<sup>16</sup>, which are the only source of the true shinjin. Anything else which is not mentioned in the canonical texts, or is not in accordance with them, must be considered to be outside of the Jodo Shinshu school.

Thus, if a follower realizes that his teacher does not preach in accordance with the letter and spirit of the canonical texts and the words of Shinran and Rennyo, he may leave that teacher and never listen anymore to his explanations. But also, even if his teacher is speaking in accordance with the canonical texts and the words of Shinran and Rennyo, he may still change this teacher for another one whom he considers more skillful in his explanations.

No priest or teacher should be upset because of this. A follower has the freedom to search for the teacher in which he can trust and with whom he feels a deep connection. Of course, this does not mean to change teachers because of daily dispositions, but even if someone acts in this way, without being serious in his search, the teacher must not be upset and consider someone as his or her personal property.

I think that a teacher must educate his mind to be like a mirror. A mirror entirely reflects the person who stands in front of it, being filled with that person and not somebody else, but when that man goes away, the mirror does not reflect him anymore. In the same way, a Jodo Shinshu teacher must be fully concentrated on the people who ask him to guide them in their understanding of the teaching, according to the urge of Shinran Shonin, “*help others receive shinjin*”, always using his skills to make them become open to the working of Amida. This is his mission.

But if all the members of his dojo or temple decide to leave and go to another teacher, he must let them go and not feel any attachment to them. Acting in this way he proves that he truly understands the law of

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<sup>16</sup> The canonical texts comprise writings like the Three Pure Land sutras taught by Shakyamuni Buddha, Letters of Shinran (*Mattosho*), Letters of Rennyo (*Gobunsho*), Hymns of Shinran Shonin (*wasans*), etc.



karma, according to which “*we come together when conditions bring us to meet and part when conditions separate us*”, and also that he understands the truth that he is only a messenger and a guide, not the giver and the creator of shinjin. Also if they return to him, he should receive them like they have never gone away, thinking of nothing else but only how to be useful to them.

And, if he truly acts and preaches “*in accord with the spontaneous working of the Vow*”, his listeners will see this - if they have eyes to see - and will respect him as a good teacher and feel gratitude to him. This is what I understand by “*will awaken to the benevolence of the Buddha and of one’s teachers.*”

## Commentary on the seventh chapter – nembutsu is the single path free of hindrances

*“The nembutsu is the single path free of hindrances. Why is this? To practitioners who have realized shinjin, the gods of the heavens and earth bow in homage, and maras<sup>17</sup> and nonbuddhists present no obstruction. No evil act can bring about karmic results, nor can any good act equal the nembutsu.*

Hindrances in Buddhist practice have the origin in our own illusions and attachments. Buddhism talks about internal demons who represent our ignorance, attachments, desires and blind passions, but also about external demons. The external demons, or maras, can harm us only if the door of our heart is opened to them and if our mind is in chaos. Internal demons call the external demons to come. If you are drowned in illusions, anything and everything may happen to you.

On the other hand, if you are well trained and a master of the six senses, you cannot be attacked by external demons or maras. But what if you are not? What if you have a lot of attachments and illusions, problems and difficulties? Then, for such a person, only the nembutsu of faith is the path free of hindrances.

While Buddhas, Bodhisattvas or advanced practitioners are free of any hindrances due to their own wisdom and power, an ordinary person full of blind passions and ignorance becomes free of hindrances and protected only if he takes refuge in Amida. For him, the nembutsu of faith is the only path available. Because of this nembutsu of faith he cannot be attacked by external demons or maras and the internal demons (his own blind passions and ignorance) present no obstructions for his Enlightenment (birth in the Pure Land).

Shinran said in one of his letters:

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<sup>17</sup> Mara in sanskrit means „the evil”, „the adversary”. Maras are a class of celestial demons.

*“Since persons of true shinjin are guarded in this world, the Smaller Sutra of Immeasurable Life speaks of ‘the protection of the countless Buddhas in the ten quarters.’ This does not mean that they guard such persons after birth into the Pure Land of peace, but rather that they watch over them with protecting thoughts while such persons are still in this Saha world.”*

Not only that we are safe, but also, *“the gods of the heavens and earth bow in homage”*.

And why is this? Because the nembutsu practitioner who relies on Amida’s Primal Vow is already assured of Nirvana even in this present life; he is a non-returner, a man who entered the stream that leads only to Nirvana. Such a state can be obtained only after many eons of hard practices by self power, but by relying on Amida’s Power, one can attain this stage of non-retrogression in the very moment he entrusts in Amida.

In Letter 18 from *Lamp of the Latter Ages*, Shinran Shonin said:

*“...all Buddhas feel great joy when such a person rejoices in the realization of true shinjin, and they proclaim, ‘This person is our equal.’ Sakyamuni’s words of rejoicing are found in the Larger Sutra: ‘The one who sees, reveres, and attains [the dharma] and greatly rejoices - that person is my excellent, close companion’”*.

He also said in another letter:

*“The Tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, praise the minds and hearts of persons of true shinjin.”*

Thus, if the Buddhas praise the person of shinjin, how much more he will be praised and respected by the gods of heaven and earth who are inferior to Buddhas! If a person is worthy of the respect of the Buddhas, it means that he deserves the respect and praise of all beings.

“*Nonbuddhists present no obstruction*” means that a person of shinjin cannot be influenced by people of other religious views. Shinjin cannot be lost once it has been installed in the practitioner’s heart.

On one occasion, Master Rennyō said to Doshu<sup>18</sup>:

*“You can lose written materials but if you have acquired shinjin in your mind, you will never lose it.”*

Shinjin is often called diamond-like shinjin – because it is given by Amida<sup>19</sup>. This, I think, is the very reason why shinjin cannot be destroyed once acquired, because it is not our creation, but what we receive from Amida. If shinjin was created by us, then it would have the power of human mind – which is changeable and can easily be destroyed – but because it is the “*shinjin of merit transference based on Buddha-centered power (tariki eko no shinjin)*”, it has the power of the Buddha’s mind, which cannot be destroyed.

*“No evil act can bring about karmic results, nor can any good act equal the nembutsu”.*

As long as a nembutsu practitioner is alive he is influenced by his own karma and will bear its consequences, but this karma is a “rootless karma”, because if you received shinjin, your karma will not manifest in another life. Thus, I call it a karma without roots, or which has its roots cut by Amida’s Power. A plant with its root cut of will continue to live only for a very short time (a metaphor for this present life of a nembutsu practitioner), but it will wither away and cannot give rise to any fruits (other lives spent in delusion).

This is what is meant by “*no evil act can bring about karmic results*”. It does not say that you will experience no more sufferings while you are still alive, but that you will not continue to be born in

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<sup>18</sup> Doshu o Akao (?-1516) was one of the closest disciple of Rennyō Shonin and was famous for his devotion.

<sup>19</sup> Read the article „Faith and nembutsu are not our creations” at the end of this book.

another life as a being drowned in delusion. Your karma, be it evil or good, has no more power to keep you as a prisoner in Samsara. Also, your so-called “good” karma or “good” actions cannot add something to the nembutsu of faith. Only by faith in Amida are you born in the Pure Land and escape Samsara, not by your own merits or good karma.

## **Commentary on the eighth chapter – the saying of the Name is not our practice or virtue**

*“The nembutsu, for its practitioners, is not a practice or a good act. Since it is not performed out of one’s own designs, it is not a practice. Since it is not good done through one’s own calculation, it is not a good act. Because it arises wholly from Other Power and is free of self-power, for the practitioner, it is not a practice or a good act.”*

“...it is not performed out of one’s own designs” means that we didn’t create or invented the nembutsu. It is not something that works because of us, as if we had a good recitation or a bad recitation, if we have virtues or have no virtues at all, etc. Also it is not a practice that we can use for our own personal goals, namely to use nembutsu to purify us, to live longer, be healthy or gaining material wealth, etc. The nembutsu does not depend on us, hence it cannot be improved by us.

“*It is not a good act*”, because it has nothing to do with our virtues. People always calculate and think that if we are good persons and recite nembutsu, if we are wise and read a lot or if we recite it while we meditate or contemplate this or that, then this will add something to the nembutsu, thus making us more capable of attaining birth in the Pure Land.

People also might think that if we recite nembutsu many times we have more chances to be born in the Pure Land than if we recite nembutsu few times, thus making the nembutsu their own practice – a practice that relies on their own power and merit. If you think that nembutsu becomes more effective or less effective because of your capacity to recite it often or seldom, then this means that you mistakenly believe the nembutsu works only because of you and your own power, like a car that works with fuel provided by you.

Shinran advises us to let go of these calculations and discriminations because nembutsu of faith and gratitude arises only from Other Power,

that is, by the Power of Amida, and does not depend on our own power at all. Because of Amida we entrust in Amida and we recite nembutsu.

Master Rennyō also said on this matter:

*“The self-power nembutsu is practiced with an expectation that the Buddha will save you because of the merit of reciting the nembutsu many times. The Other-Power teaching is that at the moment a single thought of entrusting arises in your mind, you are immediately saved. The nembutsu you say after that is simply to repeat, “Namo Amida Butsu, Namo Amida Butsu, ...” joyfully with a thought of gratitude that you have been saved.”*

So, let us just rely on Amida and recite nembutsu, abandoning any thought of “me”, “mine”, “my practice”, “my merit”, etc. We will become Buddhas in the Pure Land only because of Amida.

## **Commentary on the ninth chapter - no need of special feelings to be born in the Pure Land**

*“Although I say the nembutsu, the feeling of dancing with joy is faint with me, and I have no thought of wanting to go to the Pure Land quickly. How should it be [for a person of the nembutsu]?”*

How many of us didn't ask ourselves even once the same question like this question of Yuien-bo! How many of us didn't think that maybe something is wrong with us because we do not feel every day that extreme joy described in the sutras and do not wish to go to the Pure Land immediately? How many of us were not scared that maybe we cannot go to the Pure Land because we do not feel happy about it every time, being so much attached to this life?

Yuien-bo was very courageous to ask Shinran Shonin this question, which he was asking not only for himself but also on our behalf. He is indeed the representative of our greatest fears and attachments to life. I imagine him fearfully waiting for his Master's answer which will indicate if he is walking the right path or not, if his birth in the Pure Land was assured or not.

His question was not just an ordinary question, but one which probably came from a great inner turmoil. I am sure that question burdened his heart many days and nights, something like: “How can I attain birth in the Pure Land, if I don't feel joy all the time and I am never ready to die and go there? Is it something wrong with me? Am I walking the right nembutsu path or not?”

*“I, too, have had this question, and the same thought occurs to you, Yuien-bo!...”*, this first sentence of Shinran's answer was maybe shocking but it gave immediately a sense of relief to Yuien-bo. His Master didn't scold him, on the contrary, he even begun his explanations by saying that he had the same feelings and asked himself the same question!



Then he continues by saying other shocking words of relief:

*“...the very fact that I do not rejoice at what should fill me with such joy that I dance in the air and dance on the earth, I realize all the more that my birth is completely settled.”*

This is extremely profound. The absence of daily joy and the presence of fear of death with the subsequent lack of wish to go to the Pure Land immediately are not an obstacle to birth in the Pure Land, but on the contrary, they are the assurance that our birth is completely settled! It is because Amida saves exactly such beings as this. Such beings with such feelings are the reason why Amida made his Primal Vow.

Also our attainment of birth in the Pure Land and our feelings are two separate things, which cannot influence one another. Our feelings and fears depend on our personal karma and blind passions, while our birth in the Pure Land depends only on Amida's Power. This is why our own feelings and attachments cannot influence birth in the Pure Land. The power of our illusions and fears cannot be compared with the Power of Amida's Compassion manifested in his Primal Vow. Nothing can equal Amida's Power to which we totally entrust ourselves and which causes us be born in the Pure Land.

What a relief, Yuien-bo felt and we, in whose names he asked this question, feel the same relief. The salvation of Amida doesn't expect anything from us, not even to feel joy because we are saved! We may also keep our attachments to this life and be afraid of death – everything its okay! It doesn't matter that we do not want to go to the Pure Land immediately, it doesn't matter we are afraid to die even at the slightest sign of sickness or danger.

Amida understands this and he accepts us as we are. He knows that we cannot overcome the fear of death and that the joy of being assured

of birth in the Pure Land might be many times put into shadow by our daily sufferings, which come from ignorance and attachments.

Amida has not the smallest requirement from us. All we need doing is just to entrust in him and he will do everything needed to cause us to be born in the Pure Land when our lives come to the end. We are allowed to be afraid and even to be attached to this house of pain we call life.

Amida Buddha didn't create his Primal Vow for Buddhas or Bodhisattvas who are already Enlightened and free of blind passions, but for evil beings full of attachments and illusions, afraid of death and of even the smallest sign of illness, who are not capable of attaining Buddhahood through their own powers.

At the end of his answer to Yui-en-bo's question, Shinran has a big and healthy laugh, saying to him and to us, with a great sense of humor:

*“If we had the feeling of dancing with joy and wishing to go to the Pure Land quickly, we might wonder if we weren't free of blind passions.”*

So, let us all calm down and smile with this last sentence. We are saved as we are. Nothing is required from us. Really nothing.

## Commentary on the tenth chapter – no working is true working

*“Concerning the nembutsu, no working is true working.*

*For it is beyond description, explanation, and conceptual understanding”.*

The following comments can be read in connection with the commentary on the eighth chapter.

“No working” refers to the facts that *not* through ourselves are we born in the Pure Land and become Buddhas. Nothing which we think that belong to us can add something to the salvation of Amida. The saying of the Name (nembutsu) is a genuine practice due only to Amida and not to our own recitation. This “practice” has nothing in common with some special state of calm or concentration that we think we have or develop during recitation.

Without the infinite store of merit of Amida embodied in his Name, Namo Amida Butsu (nembutsu) would be empty and ineffective. Also, if the saying of the Name is not done on the basis of faith (shinjin), it has no effect. Faith is the acceptance of the Infinite Power of Amida – the only power capable of causing us become Buddhas.

When you have faith (shinjin) you are connected to this Power and to the merits of Amida, and the Name you recite is the expression of this connection. Name and faith are one, and both come from Amida; they are the manifestation in you of the salvation Power of Amida. Only Amida Buddha is the one who truly works in your salvation through the nembutsu of faith and not you. This is why it is said that “*no working is true working*” – that is, *not* through yourself are you saved.

When you recite Namo Amida Butsu with faith, you say: “I take refuge in Amida /Homage to Amida Buddha”, and not “I take refuge in

myself/homage to myself". This means we don't think of nembutsu as being our own working.

Also, our minds are limited, so the understanding of an unenlightened person is restricted to its mental categories, incapable of realizing in detail the action of a Buddha. By listening to the words of Shakyamuni Buddha we hear about Amida Buddha and his Primal Vow: we accept it in faith or not, but until we ourselves become Buddhas we cannot understand everything about the salvific working of Amida.

We hear that Amida Buddha saves us if we entrust in him and recite his Name, but we cannot know in detail the mechanism of this salvation. Any description remains just a description; any conceptual understanding is just a conceptual understanding.

The salvation of Amida Buddha, manifested in the promise of his Primal Vow and placed in our hearts through faith and nembutsu, is inconceivable and beyond the understanding of our limited minds, but it is assuredly completely effective and real.

## **Commentary on the eleventh chapter – Primal Vow and the Name are one and beyond our limited understanding**

*“On the matter of confusing practicers of the nembutsu who are ignorant of even a single letter by challenging them, ‘To which do you entrust yourself in saying the nembutsu - the inconceivable working of the Vow or that of the Name?’ without clarifying fully these two kinds of inconceivable working.”*

We see that in the eleventh chapter of *Tannisho* the word “inconceivable” appears in connection with both the Name and the Primal Vow. This is because some “smart” persons might try to confuse simple practitioners and even themselves by trying to apply judgments of their limited minds to the working beyond understanding of the Primal Vow and the Name.

The working of the Primal Vow is truly inconceivable. This Vow promises that those who entrust in Amida, wish to be born in his Pure Land and say his Name will be born there and become a true Buddha. We can accept this or not, but we cannot understand in detail how this Primal Vow works. Our minds are too limited so as to know everything about the mystic power of the Primal Vow.

We cannot explain in the limited terms of our limited minds the working of the Primal Vow. We just know that if we entrust ourselves in Amida and wish to be born in his Pure Land, then we’ll go there. That’s it. To say the Name of Amida (NA MO A MI DA BU) is to express faith. If you entrust yourself to Amida and say his Name it also implies that you wish to be born in his Pure Land and become a Buddha.

Simple people can understand this, and we all have to become simple in order to understand this. To complicate our minds and ask ourselves questions such as “to which do we entrust ourselves when saying the nembutsu – *the inconceivable working of the Vow or that of*

*the Name?*” is really stupid, for doing so means that we are complicating, and thus confusing, our minds.

It is clear that Amida designed the Name, thus creating an easy path available to all. He said that those who say the Name, which means entrusting themselves to Amida and wishing to be born in his Pure Land, will escape samsara and be born there.

But where do we hear about the Name of Amida if not in his Primal Vow? So, *“when we entrust ourselves to the inconceivable working of the Vow, taking it as essential, the inconceivable working of the Name is also included; the inconceivable working of the Vow and that of the Name are one, with no distinction whatever.”*

This clearly shows that if we simply entrust ourselves in the Primal Vow when we hear it, because in the Primal Vow the path of simple entrusting and recitation of the Name is presented, we normally start saying the Name with faith. So, the saying of the Name and the Primal Vow are one and the same. They are not distinct and separate. We do not understand with our limited minds everything about the Vow and the Name, so we accept their inconceivability, but we entrust ourselves in them.

To accept the inconceivability of the Vow means that we accept both the inconceivability of the method presented in it and the method itself, which is to say the Name as an expression of faith. To accept the inconceivability of the Vow and the Name, of this method created for us by Amida, means also that we decide to rely only on this Vow and method, and not at all on any other personal idea of merit or lack of merit.

As Shinran said, people who *“discriminate good and evil acts and consider them aids or hindrances to birth, interposing their own calculation, do not entrust themselves to the inconceivable working of the Vow and, striving to do acts that result in birth with their own designs, they make the nembutsu they say their own practice.”*

When one hears the salvation method of Amida Buddha, presented in his Primal Vow, and entrusts himself in it, without thinking of anything else, he is in accord with the inconceivable working of the Primal Vow and the Name. But when one hears this method and considers that this is not enough to cause himself be born in the Pure Land and that somehow he has to add a special ability or merit created by him, then he doesn't follow anymore the path presented in the Primal Vow. This is because Amida never said in this Vow that one has to do such and such good acts or accumulate such and such merits in order that this birth be effective.

Amida just said, “entrust in me, say my Name and wish to be born in my land”. Nothing else. Otherwise it is as if we make the nembutsu our own practice.

What does it mean to make nembutsu our own practice? In short, it means to think that nembutsu works only if we have good karma or some special abilities or merits that can make us deserving of being born in the Pure Land. It would mean that our merits are the means that make the Name, and the saving of Amida, to be effective. It is like our merits create or influence the Nembutsu we recite. Thus, nembutsu or the saying of the Name falsely appears dependent on us and we come to think that it is our own practice, created by us.

Shinran said that *“People with such an attitude do not entrust themselves to the inconceivable working of the Name either.”*

They will not take advantage of the Primal Vow and will not be born directly into the true Pure Land, but will have to wait for a period *“in the borderland, the land of sloth, the castle of doubt, or the womb palace”*<sup>20</sup> which are all names for the same place, until they escape their doubts and misunderstandings and, in the end *“they attain birth in the fulfilled land by virtue of the ‘Vow that beings ultimately attain birth’.”*

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<sup>20</sup> Read the commentary on the 17th chapter which is about birth in the borderland.

People like these don't understand that the Primal Vow and the Name (nembutsu of faith) were created by Amida and work and are effective only because of Amida's power and merits. This is why this method presented in the Primal Vow is supreme and can be followed by everyone no matter how heavy their karma is, because it was created by Amida and works only because of Amida.

This is why Shinran said: “... *it is through Amida's design that we come to say the nembutsu with the belief that, saved by the inconceivable working of the Tathagata's great Vow of great Compassion, we will part from birth-and-death. This being realized, our calculation is not in the least involved, and so, in accord with the Primal Vow, we will be born in the true fulfilled land.*”

We are in accord with the Primal Vow only when we entrust ourselves entirely to it and do not involve at all our calculations and ideas of merit or lack of merit, which are in fact created by our unenlightened minds and not by the mind of the Buddha.

We just have to entrust ourselves and think of nothing else, because we cannot understand with our limited minds more than what we hear in the Primal Vow – that is, those who entrust in Amida, say his Name and aspire to be born in his Pure Land will definitely be born there by the power of Amida.



## **Commentary on the twelfth chapter – the reason for studying the sacred texts**

*“On the assertion that for practitioners who do not read the sutras and commentaries and engage in study, birth is not settled.*

*This statement must be declared hardly worth mentioning. All the sacred writings that clarify the significance of the truth and reality of Other Power state that one who entrusts oneself to the Primal Vow and says the nembutsu attains Buddhahood. Apart from this, what learning is essential for birth?”*

All the sacred texts that clarify the Jodo Shinshu path mention only one condition to be born in the Pure Land, namely to entrust oneself in the Promise of Amida Buddha presented in his Primal Vow. And this Primal Vow is very easy to understand for everybody. It clearly states that those who entrust themselves in Amida and say his Name, which is the expression of faith, will definitely be born in his Pure Land.

So, if nothing else than simple entrusting is required to be born in the Pure Land, why do some people complicate their minds and the minds of others? It is because they engage in study not with the intention to learn the method of escaping the sickness of samsara, but because they simply like to read and study. For them, to study is just an intellectual pleasure which feeds their ego and satisfies their sense of self appreciation.

Also, the study of the Dharma gives to such people a sense of great power and superiority, especially when they win in debates. Thus, because they feel powerful and superior, a sense of deserving to be born in the Pure Land is instilled slowly and implacably in their hearts, and in time they come to forget that in fact, their birth in the Pure Land is due solely to Amida’s Power, and not to a special condition or quality that can be found in themselves.

Only Amida's inconceivable Power, and nothing else, makes the Primal Vow and saying of nembutsu with faith to be effective in attaining birth in the Pure Land. No matter how much they study, they fail to understand that nothing can be added to this Power. The mechanism of Amida's salvation works only because of Amida. It is exactly why this method (of saying the Name in faith) is simple, because it doesn't depend on us.

Everybody is able to understand this, even if they don't know to read or write, because anyone can say: "I take refuge in Amida" which is what Namo Amida Butsu is. Apart from saying this and accepting that we are indeed relying on Amida Buddha for our birth in the Pure Land, nothing else is required.

To rely on the power of a limited being with limited capacities is futile, but to rely on someone who has Infinite Power to save, and is himself free of birth and death, is the only true and real thing we can do. The understanding of this is the only knowledge we need to have. It is the wisdom of knowing who we really are, namely incapable beings forever drowned in birth and death and with no chance to free ourselves by our own power. And it is the wisdom of realizing that the Power of Amida is Infinite in comparison to us and the only power capable of making us attain Nirvana through birth in the Pure Land.

Other than to understand the "*Amida's fundamental intent*" and explain to others that the infinite Compassion of his Primal Vow does not discriminate between the capacities of beings, if they are pure or defiled, have great knowledge or not, etc, there is no reason in being a scholar and studying the sacred texts. Any study that doesn't have the goal of "*receiving shinjin for himself and help others receive it*" is just an ego centered action.

And more than this, if one is confusing others and intimidating those who simply follow the nembutsu of faith in accordance with the Primal Vow, saying that they will not be born in the Pure Land because they have no learning, then this action is as grave as that of a demon

obstructing the Dharma. It is going against the intent of Amida's Primal Vow and that of Shinran Shonin who dedicated his life to clearly expound the method of attaining birth in the Pure Land through nembutsu only.

And rather than engaging in never ending disputes with representatives of the Path of Sages, we, people of nembutsu, should simply explain to them, but also to ourselves, the simplicity of our practice and the lack of any merits and superior capacities in us, this being the very reason why we follow a path like the Nembutsu of faith.

If we are called "*worthless people*", we should recognize that we are indeed worthless people or "*foolish beings of inferior capacity*". By reminding those who feel superior to us and tend to denigrate our Dharma practice, that "*the fundamental intent of the Buddhas is nothing but freedom from birth-and-death for all, ourselves and others included*", we thereby explain, without entering into further disputes, that we adhere to this simple method because for us it is the only way, given our inferior capacities.

Perhaps others of superior capacities are capable of following difficult practices, so for them this method might seem "*utterly base*", but for us, to simply entrust ourselves to Amida's Primal Vow is all we have. So for us, this is the supreme Dharma. It doesn't matter if other teachings are excellent, "*since they are beyond our capacity they are difficult for us to put into practice.*"

This is all we can explain about our practice without entering into disputes about whose Dharma method is superior or inferior. As long as samsara<sup>21</sup> exists, there will always be plenty of smart and "superior" people who will abuse or distort this simple yet effective teaching of nembutsu.

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<sup>21</sup> Samsara is the repeated cycle of birth and death.

## Commentary on the thirteenth chapter – influence of past karma

*“[...] The Master once asked, “Yuien-bo, do you accept all that I say?”*

*“Yes I do,” I answered.*

*“Then will you not deviate from whatever I tell you?” he repeated. I humbly affirmed this. Thereupon he said, “Now, I want you to kill a thousand people. If you do, you will definitely attain birth.” I responded, “Though you instruct me thus, I’m afraid it is not in my power to kill even one person.”*

*“Then why did you say that you would follow whatever I told you?”*

*He continued, “By this you should realize that if we could always act as we wished, then when I told you to kill a thousand people in order to attain birth, you should have immediately done so. But since you lack the karmic cause inducing you to kill even a single person, you do not kill. It is not that you do not kill because your heart is good. In the same way, a person may not wish to harm anyone and yet end up killing a hundred or a thousand people.”*

The doctrine of karma is extremely important in Buddhism. Not only that it explains how things work in the world, why we are what we are, why we have this form (body), but it also assures us of our free will. We are what we think (karma of thinking), what we say (karma of speech) and what we do (karma of action or body) and we can always change this karma and thus create a more peaceful and pleasant way of life.

Apparently, by saying that sentient beings cannot free themselves from birth and death by their own power, it seems that Jodo Shinshu misinterprets or does not totally accept the doctrine of karma. However, Jodo Shinshu accepts fully the teaching of karma, just that it sheds light on a very important aspect that many Buddhists usually tend to forget.

Yes, generally speaking, we can change our karma and thus decide to act in such and such a way, influencing our own destiny, but do we really always act as we wish? Suppose a person who drinks a lot since childhood and has now 40 years of alcoholism, can he give up alcohol just like that, by a simple act of will? Or someone who smokes since early childhood, can he really give up smoking over night?

We see from experience that many smokers, alcoholics or drug abusers cannot give up their bad habits so easily, some of them even ending their lives without being able to stop their harmful behavior. How much more is the influence of the past habitual karma!

This habitual past karma is not what we did in a habitual manner in a single lifetime, but what we did and were concentrated on in many lifetimes. If it is hard to put an end to the habitual karma of smoking which lasts only for twenty or thirty years, how much harder or even impossible would be to stop the various bad karmic tendencies of many lifetimes!

So, Jodo Shinshu doesn't deny free will in changing karma, but it insists on the truth that this will is so much weakened by the habitual karma of past lives that it becomes almost incapable of really changing something.

When we have become accustomed for many eons and long kalpas with living in ignorance, hate, greed, jealousy, attachments, how could we not be influenced by this habitual evil karma also in this life and how could we end all these perpetual miseries just by force of will? We all know that a long time of drug abuse leads to dependency, a state in which the personal will of change is extremely limited and one needs immediate help from a specialist. But we took the drugs of delusion for many lifetimes since the beginningless past!

Jodo Shinshu teaching and method doesn't start by staring at the ideal: we all have Buddha-nature and we can all become Buddhas, or

at least do pure deeds and gain merits, but from the state of mind in which we dwell in the present moment.

Entering the Jodo Shinshu path is like saying: “Hello, I am Josho Adrian and I am an alcoholic”. The Jodo Shinshu Buddhist doesn’t say: “Hello, I am Josho and I have Buddha-nature”, but “Hello, my name is Josho and I am ignorant and full of blind passions, incapable to heal myself (attain Nirvana)”.

So, first in Jodo Shinshu we recognize our own incapacities and then we accept the medicine, which is the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. We recognize that we are so sick that we can no longer rely on ourselves. We agree to apply the only treatment that works in dependency cases like ourselves.

Someone who says, “I can become a Buddha in this lifetime because my true nature is Buddhahood itself” is someone *who “fails to understand the influence of good and evil karma of past lives” and “that every evil act done - even as slight as a particle on the tip of a strand of rabbit’s fur or sheep’s wool - has its cause in past karma.”*, as Shinran said in the thirteenth chapter of *Tannisho*.

In the same way as someone who abused drugs for many years thinks that he can give up immediately his dependency, and after a few tries he ends up taking a super dose, also *“a person may not wish to harm anyone and yet end up killing a hundred or a thousand people”*. This is the heavy influence of karma from past lives. And this is exactly why we need Amida’s salvation.

This salvation, as promised in his Primal Vow, doesn’t depend on our own will, which is influenced by our good or bad karma from past lives, but it depends solely on Amida’s Power of curing our illnesses and transforming us into Buddhas: *“it is by the inconceivable working of the Vow that we are saved”*.

Because we are so sick with the illness of ignorance and blind passions cultivated for eons, we cannot have a clear mind and right judgment. Being under the influence of our past karma we continue to act and live in delusion until the end of our lives, no matter whether we are assured of birth in the Pure Land due to entrusting ourselves to Amida's Power.

We were in delusion before we received faith and we are in delusion after it, too. This is the normal state of mind of unenlightened beings.

It is not that we are like this **purposely**. One person during Shinran's life wrongly asserted that *"since the Vow was made to serve the person who had committed evil, one should **purposely** do evil as an act for attaining birth."*

The word **"purposely"** is very important here. We are what we are due to the influence of our past karma, our weak minds and will, and because we are unenlightened beings. We are not some free guys who can be everything they want to be, but they decide to do evil **purposely** in order to attain birth in the Pure Land.

To think that someone "presumes" upon the Vow means that he or she should be free to choose between good or evil, but decides to do evil in order to attain birth. Unenlightened beings simply cannot be something else than beings full of blind passions. They can't choose between being good or evil, and yet decide to be evil.

Shinran said that we should not **purposely** take poison (do bad deeds) because we have the antidote (Primal Vow of Amida). He said this in order to stop the wrong understanding that people should do evil in order to attain birth in the Pure Land. But, to repeat, people do evil acts because they are unenlightened beings under the influence of their past karma, and not because this is their decision out of free will, without any influence of past karma. Thus it is stated in *Tannisho*: *"how could we commit evil acts without any karmic cause in ourselves?"*

*“Even the evil we commit while “presuming” upon the Vow occurs through the prompting of past karma” – at first sight it appears that people who rely on Amida’s Primal Vow presume upon the Vow, but in fact they are not capable of abstaining from doing various wrong deeds even after they receive shinjin, and this is only because they remain all their lives under the influence of past karma.*

*The Primal Vow is especially made for people like these, while “to rid yourself of blind passions is to become a Buddha, and for one who is already a Buddha, [Amida’s] Vow that arose from the five kalpas of profound thought would be to no purpose.”*

If we should entrust to Amida only after we completely rid ourselves of karmic evil and influence of the past karma, then it means we are already Buddhas and no one can ever accuse us that we presume upon the Vow. But to say that an unenlightened being is presuming upon the Vow while he is still living in this world of samsara and under the influence of the blind tendencies of his past karma, when the Vow was especially made for such beings like him, it is like saying that a person sick with a terminal disease should stop being sick, otherwise he doesn’t deserve treatment.



## **Commentary on the fourteenth chapter – one or many sayings of the Name and elimination of the negative karma**

This chapter of *Tannisho* deals with the same problem we discussed earlier: who is the force behind the Name that makes its recitation effective? Is it our own power or the Power of Amida Buddha?

If the saying of Amida's Name depended on our own power, then it means that it is effective only because of us. It would mean that it is our creation. But the Name of Amida was created by Amida, and it works only because it contains the merits and virtues of Amida, his enlightened supreme force and energy.

If you concentrate on yourself when you recite nembutsu, then the nembutsu loses its efficacy because it becomes a tool of your own power. And because your own power is limited, in the same way, the nembutsu recited in self power becomes so much limited that it can have some results only if you recite it continuously and in the correct state of mind during your entire life, in every second and minute. That is because in every second and minute you may die and if you don't recite it in that very second, you cannot be born in the true Pure Land.

But how can an unenlightened and ordinary being be so careful about nembutsu recitation? As Shinran said,

*“Since our karmic recompense restricts us, we may, meeting with various unforeseen accidents or being tormented by the pain of sickness, reach the end of our lives without dwelling in right mindedness; in such circumstances, saying the Name is difficult. How then is the karmic evil committed in that final interval to be eradicated? If it is not eliminated, is not birth unattainable?”*

On the contrary, when you say the Name in accordance with its real nature, that is with faith in the Power of Amida Buddha, which is the real power that makes the Name effective, then you are embraced by

this Power just as you are, without the necessity that you dwell in the right mindedness in every second of your life. Your personal peace of mind doesn't matter, your so-called "virtues" or "purity" don't count, you just need to entrust yourself to Amida Buddha, letting yourself be carried to the Pure Land by his saving Power.

To recite the Name in this way doesn't mean that you recite it while relying on yourself to purify your negative karma or accumulate positive karma. To think that you can use the nembutsu in order to purify yourself – i.e. the better you recite it, the more you become pure and cleaned of negative karma - is to use the nembutsu as it would be your own creation and would depend on you.

But saying the Name means entrusting oneself in Amida. The nembutsu is nothing else but expressing faith in Amida's Compassion, in his Primal Vow, and not in our own self and unenlightened capacities: *"If it were not for this compassionate Vow, how could such wretched evildoers as ourselves gain emancipation from birth-and-death?"*

To recite the Name means precisely *not* to trust in your own power, but rather to entrust yourself in the power of Amida. One has to understand fully that nembutsu means to rely absolutely on Amida and that only in this way, because the Name works due to Amida (*"virtuous working of the Tathagata's great compassion"*), the recitation of this Name is effective in leading you to the Pure Land.

Expression of faith and gratitude are always linked with nembutsu. Why is that? If you really feel that you need to escape the suffering of birth and death, if to attain Buddhahood becomes extremely important for you, and if you deeply realize how incapable you are in doing this, then the wonderful news that Amida Buddha especially leads to Nirvana beings like you will surely give rise to joy and gratitude in your heart.

If someone helps you from drowning or death by fire, you will surely feel the natural joy of escaping, so how much more when you are assured of escaping birth and death forever! Faith (shinjin) is the cause of birth in the Pure Land, but gratitude naturally accompanies faith, especially in that moment when you entrust yourself to Amida Buddha for the first time. In romantic love one always feels joy at the first kiss, so in the same way, one always feels natural gratitude at the first awakening of faith in Amida.

And now to come back to the main goal of this chapter: To think that you can somehow improve the nembutsu by reciting it in every second or minute of your life or in right mindedness, thus purifying your karma, means that you do not truly entrust yourself to Amida, but rather you rely on your own capacities. It also means that you are preoccupied with your karma, and do not leave it to Amida's care.

As Master Rennyo said:

*“You should ask yourself over and over again whether you have attained shinjin or not, instead of questioning whether you still have karmic evils or not. It is up to Amida to save you after he has destroyed your karmic evils or to save you while leaving them as they stand. You should not inquire into this problem. Remember that shinjin is of paramount importance.”*

In this chapter of *Tannisho* a very important reference is made to the Contemplation Sutra:

*It is asserted [based on the Contemplation Sutra] that there are persons of the ten transgressions and five grave offences who, although they have passed their lives without saying the nembutsu, at the time of death, urged by the instruction of a good teacher, come to say it for the first time. In one utterance eight billion kalpas of karmic evil are eradicated, or in ten utterances, ten times eight billion kalpas of grave karmic evil are eradicated, and thus they attain birth. It appears that one utterance and ten utterances are taught in order to*

*make us know the gravity of the ten transgressions and five grave offences.*

When the Contemplation Sutra mentions those persons who did the ten transgressions and the five grave offences, it is only to make us realize the gravity of these actions whose effects hinder us from ever attaining freedom by ourselves and to show us that only the nembutsu of faith in Amida Buddha can destroy them.

But it doesn't mean at all that those transgressions and offences are annihilated because of our own power and skills in nembutsu recitation. That nembutsu mentioned in the Contemplation Sutra which can destroy the karmic evil of eight billion kalpas or ten times eight billion kalpas is the nembutsu of faith in Amida, which works only because of the Power of Amida, and is not the nembutsu of self power which relies on ourselves.

The Contemplation Sutra mentions one utterance and ten utterances in order to show us how easy it is for the nembutsu which relies on the power of Amida to destroy such billion kalpas of evil karma. It is like saying: "you don't need to do any hard practices, the nembutsu of Amida's Power is effective even if you recite it one time or ten times".

And such expressions like "*billion kalpas*" are usually used in the sutras to stand for infinite, so it is in fact referring to all the evil karma you made from the infinite past. One utterance and ten utterances are in fact, one or ten, and every number from one to ten. In reality, it shows that the number of recitations are not important, as long as you say the nembutsu while relying on Amida's Power.

## **Commentary on the fifteenth chapter – attainment of Buddhahood in this life is impossible**

*“On the assertion that one attains Enlightenment even while maintaining this bodily existence full of blind passions. This statement is completely absurd.”*

This chapter of *Tannisho* presents two very important features of Jodo Shinshu teaching, which differentiates it from other Buddhist practices based on self power:

Perfect Enlightenment and Buddhahood cannot be attained in this very life, but only in the moment of birth in the Pure land.

Birth in the Pure Land and Buddhahood is attained only in the moment of death. Shinjin or entrusting in Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow, which is received in this life and makes us enter in the stage of those assured of birth in the Pure Land, must not be confused with the actual attainment of birth in the Pure Land.

The fifteenth chapter begins with a powerful and clear statement, that is, to attain Enlightenment while still living in this very body is absurd. Shinran said this possibility is not just hard to obtain but is truly impossible. More than this, it is “completely absurd”!

This is indeed a great difference between our Jodo Shinshu school and other Buddhist schools, especially the esoteric Buddhism, like Shingon, the Tibetan schools, or the Tendai, which relies on the Lotus Sutra and teaches the same possibility of attaining Buddhahood in this life, with this very body:

*“The attainment of Buddhahood with this very body is the essence of the Shingon esoteric teaching; it is the realization achieved through the three kinds of mystic acts. The purification of the six sense organs is the One Vehicle teaching of the Lotus Sutra; it is the virtue acquired through the four practices of repose. These are both ways of difficult*

*practice to be followed by those of superior capacity; they lead to the Enlightenment realized through fulfilling contemplative practice.”*

The three kinds of mystic acts (sanmitsu) means to achieve the gestures of Buddha with the hands (mûdra) to recite the words of Buddha by formulating the prayers, (shingon - or mantra in Sanskrit): to carry out the heart of Buddha while returning calms the spirit and by purifying it of its thoughts in the concentration (Samadhi).

The purification of the six sense organs implies the purification of the consciousnesses which are generated when our senses encounter their objects. These consciousnesses are: 1) consciousness of sight, 2) consciousness of hearing, 3) consciousness of smell, 4) consciousness of taste, 5) consciousness of touch and 6) consciousness of mind. The consciousness of mind integrates the perceptions of the five senses in concrete images and takes decisions concerning the exterior world.

But in Mahayana Buddhism another two Consciousnesses which influences our present life are described. These are: 7) impure (mind) consciousness and 8) the alaya (storage) consciousness.

The impure (mind) consciousness is the source of clinging and so the origin of the sense of ego as well as of the other illusions which are born from the fact that man takes as real something which is merely apparent.

The alaya consciousness is the place where all the actions and experiences in this life and the previous lives, generated by the seven consciousnesses, are stored as karma, being the only consciousness which comes along with every birth.

This consciousness - which contains what I usually call the habitual karma of a person who has been like a drug addict for eons (the bad seeds of our evil karmic tendencies and dependencies of incalculable lives spent in ignorance, greed, hate and other blind passions) -

influences at the same time the workings of the other seven consciousnesses.

It is extremely hard to destroy or to purify this alaya storage from which the seeds of our evil karma can always manifest in the form of various obstacles and hindrances in our practice. Shinran Shonin, being profoundly aware of the overwhelming influence of our illusions, blind passions and habitual evil karma of the past, states that it is “completely absurd” for an ordinary person like us, living in this last age of the Dharma, to think that he can somehow attain Buddhahood through his own power while living in this present body.

While in other Buddhist schools, especially those mentioned by Shinran, the first step is to recognize the possibility of every sentient being to attain Buddhahood in this life, **our Jodo Shinshu teaching begins with the sense of failure**. When you are 100% convinced that you cannot attain Buddhahood in this life, then you are ready for the Jodo Shinshu path.

But as long as you still harbor in your mind the smallest thought of personal merit or “maybe I can” kind of things, you cannot see and enter the Dharma gate of birth in Amida Buddha’s Pure Land.

Amida Buddha’s Pure Land is like a country where everybody can emigrate without the least requirement: no visas, no special capacities, no anything. As Shinran said:

*“This is the way of easy practice to be followed by those of inferior capacity; it is the teaching that makes no distinction between the good and the evil.”*

On the Jodo Shinshu path we don’t take into consideration the four practices of repose, the purification of the six senses or of the negative thoughts, and while we try “*not to take poison because we have the antidote*” (to intentionally do evil deeds in order to be born in the Pure Land), we don’t consider precepts to be the cause for any personal

attainment, because we do not recognize any genuine personal attainment in ourselves. As Shinran said, the so-called good acts of an unenlightened person *are “always mixed with the poison of ego”*, so these cannot be called true pure acts.

To show us and others how silly our endless talking can be about the possibility of attaining Buddhahood in this very life, Shinran addresses to the so-called “good Buddhists” the following words:

*“Do those who speak of realizing Enlightenment while in this bodily existence manifest various accommodated bodies<sup>22</sup>, possess the Buddha’s thirty-two features<sup>23</sup> and eighty marks<sup>24</sup>, and preach the Dharma to benefit beings like Shakyamuni? It is this that is meant by realizing Enlightenment in this life.”*

Can you, the reader of these lines, say that you are like a Buddha from this description? And if you are not a Buddha in this very moment, what certainty do you have that you will live enough to become one? Now and not tomorrow it is the right moment to ask yourself this question, to see yourself as you truly are and to see what capacities you actually have. As life in samsara is always fragile and insecure, you never know in what state of mind death will find you or if you will have another chance of being born as a human being.

Even practitioners who are supposed to have more merits than us, like *“the virtuous monks who practice the Shingon and Tendai”*, but also many other Masters in Tibetan Buddhism, for example, *“pray for Enlightenment in the next life”*. Practices related with Amida Buddha

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<sup>22</sup> Nirmanakaya in Sanskrit. One of the three bodies of the Buddha. A Buddha manifests himself in various forms in accordance with the conditions and the capacities of those he wishes to save. See the article „About Amida Buddha and his Pure Land” at the end of this book where the doctrine of trikaya or three Buddha bodies is explained.

<sup>23</sup> „Thirty-two features” refers to the thirty-two physical signs of perfection attributed to a Buddha and to a Cakravartin (ideal king).

<sup>24</sup> „Eighty marks” are the minor physical features of a Buddha in addition to the thirty-two main ones.



(or Amitabha), are present in many schools of Mahayana Buddhism, even if they are not 100% an expression of complete faith and total negation of self power, as in Jodo Shinshu. This shows that many sincere practitioners realize partially or totally their limited capacities.

But after all, the most important thing in this chapter and in all the Jodo Shinshu teaching is that, in comparison with the perfect Enlightenment of a Buddha, our so-called advancement on the path is too fragile, always subject to retrogression, and isn't worth anything because no one among us can say that "*while in this bodily existence*" he can "*manifest various accommodated bodies, possess the Buddha's thirty-two features and eighty marks, and preach the dharma to benefit beings like Shakyamuni*".

If there has been a religious figure in this last age of the Dharma about which can be said he is Enlightened or very much close to Enlightenment, then he or she was not and is not an ignorant person like you and me who attained something in this life, but a Bodhisattva or Buddha who manifested the appearance of ignorance, effort and then the attainment of various levels of spirituality in order to encourage others to follow the path and not give up, because not all people were or are ready to fully entrust themselves in Amida's Primal Vow.

But in reality, there hasn't been a single unenlightened being in this Dharma ending age<sup>25</sup> who made efforts and attained Buddhahood by his own powers in this very life.

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<sup>25</sup> The last of Three Dharma Ages. Generally speaking, the doctrine of the Three Dharma Ages refers to the gradual decline of the capacities of beings to practice the Dharma and attain realization through it. The first period of 500 years after the physical death of the Buddha (parinirvana) is called the right Dharma age. It is an age characterized by correct understanding and practice of the Dharma in all its aspects (meditation, wisdom and precepts) with often attainment of emancipation. The second Dharma age is called the semblance Dharma age, which lasted 1000 years after the previous one. It is characterized by gradual decadence in the determination by which practitioners, both monks and lay, practice the Way. Self indulgence slowly takes place and fills the minds and hearts of the followers. The

The previous quote applies not only to those who think they can attain Buddhahood in this life, but also to those followers of the Pure Land teaching who, under the influences of ideas borrowed from other Buddhist teachings, or trying to adapt the simple and faith oriented Jodo Shinshu path to the Zen teaching or other Buddhist teachings on emptiness, misunderstand the receiving of shinjin or faith in Amida Buddha with the actual attainment of birth in the Pure Land. These are the “Pure Land is here and now” or “Pure Land is Pure Mind”, kind of theories.

These kinds of misunderstandings are easily corrected by the following explanations:

*“At the moment shinjin becomes settled, we are grasped, never to be abandoned, and therefore we will not transmigrate further in the six courses. Only then do we part forever from birth-and-death.”*

Then, Shinran asks,

*“Should such awareness be confusedly termed “attaining Enlightenment”? It is regrettable that such misunderstanding should arise.”*

So we see that to interpret the settlement of shinjin (faith in Amida Buddha) to mean attainment of Enlightenment is a misunderstanding. On the contrary, the moment of shinjin is the moment when we let ourselves to be embraced or grasped, never to be abandoned, by Amida Buddha. In the moment we entrust ourselves in Amida to cause our birth in the Pure Land - and because of this entrusting - Amida

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breaking of precepts becomes more and more common among monks and nuns and *“only a few attain the fruit of Enlightenment”*. The third and last Dharma age lasts for 10.000 years after the second age. In it *“only the verbal teaching remains”*, while nobody is capable of observing the precepts and of truly practicing meditation or other Buddhist methods based on self power. Shinran said we are now living in this last Dharma age in which only the Pure Land teaching remains the only path to liberation.

destroys the roots of our karma, making it incapable to plant its seeds in other lives of delusion.

In this sense “*we part forever from birth and death*’. But our karma and blind passions still continue to have effects in the present life and we see that we can’t escape suffering and wrong behavior as long as we live in this world.

It is like a child being carried by his mother safely to the other shore of the river, but the child remains just an ignorant child, although he entrusts in his mother and lets himself be carried by her. To receive shinjin and be assured of birth in the Pure Land doesn’t mean that we become Buddhas in this very life, or that our mind becomes “a pure mind”. Nobody can say that after shinjin we become pure or don’t have bad thoughts anymore. As Shinran said in another chapter of *Tannisho*:

*“To rid yourself of blind passions is to become a Buddha, and for one who is already a Buddha, the Vow that arose from the five kalpas of profound thought would be to no purpose.”*

Attainment of birth in the true Pure Land means to become immediately a Buddha, but no one can say he really feels or acts in this life as if he would be in the Pure Land. So, shinjin or entrusting in Amida Buddha which results in being grasped, never to be abandoned, doesn’t mean to “realize the Pure Land is here and now” or “the Pure Land is Pure Mind”, etc.

Only when we “*attain the shore of the Pure Land, the dark clouds of blind passions will swiftly clear*”, hence only then will we have a truly Pure Mind - “*and the moon of Enlightenment, true reality, will immediately appear. Becoming one with the unhindered light filling the ten quarters, we will benefit all sentient beings*” – i.e. come back in this world as Buddhas to save all beings. “*It is at that moment that we attain Enlightenment*” – namely the moment of our birth in the Pure Land.

Shinran's statements are very clear:

*“Attaining Enlightenment in the coming life is the essence of the Pure Land teaching of Other Power; it is the principle actualized through the settlement of shinjin [in this life].”*

*“According to the true essence of the Pure Land way, one entrusts oneself to the Primal Vow in this life and realizes Enlightenment in the Pure Land; this is the teaching I received.”*

## Commentary on the sixteenth chapter – changing of the heart

*“On the assertion that whenever practitioners of shinjin happen to become angry, or commit some misdeed, or dispute with fellow practitioners, they must without fail go through a change of heart.”*

What is the “change of heart” in Jodo Shinshu? If somebody who is not accustomed to the teaching of Other Power hears about this expression, he will probably think it means the definitive decision not to do any wrong act in the three ways of action, mentally, verbally and physically. For example, “from this day on, I take the decision to always have pure thoughts, speak only good and useful words and do only virtuous actions with my body.”

This is not at all what Shinran had in mind when he used the expression “change of heart” and it was not because he encouraged his fellow travelers on the path to intentionally do evil deeds, but because of a simple and easy to understand reason – we cannot change our impure heart and evil tendencies and become good.

As I said in my commentary on the previous chapter of *Tannisho*, the Jodo Shinshu path starts with a profound sense of failure, with accepting the impossibility to become pure in mind, in words and in one’s deeds, and the absurdity of our attaining Buddhahood in this life as Shakyamuni did.

So, what is the “changing of heart” in Jodo Shinshu? It is said in this chapter:

*“People who have in ordinary life been ignorant of the true essence of the Primal Vow, which is Other Power, come to realize, through receiving Amida’s wisdom, that they cannot attain birth with the thoughts and feelings they have harbored up to then, so they abandon their former heart and mind and entrust themselves to the Primal Vow. This is what is meant by “change of heart.”*

There is a time before this “changing of heart” and a time after. The time before is the time when we thought we could attain Buddhahood in this life by our own efforts or that we could be born in the various Buddha lands or in the Pure Land of Amida by becoming ourselves worthy of being born there. It is the time when we thought **we can**, no matter what we understood by these words in our spiritual life.

On the contrary, the moment we experience the changing of heart is the moment when we profoundly realize that we **cannot**. It is the moment when we become aware (it is a moment of awakening) that we have failed forever and we have no chance of attaining something in our spiritual life, especially the true Liberation from suffering of birth and death or the state of Buddhahood.

It is both a moment of complete realization of failure and total entrusting in the Primal Vow of Amida. From this moment on we rely exclusively on Amida Buddha to cause our birth in the Pure Land and our attainment of Buddhahood. No further thoughts of self power or personal merits are held in our minds. This is what changing of the heart is in Jodo Shinshu.

Does it seem complicated? No, it is not – just give up the trust in your powerless ego and entrust yourself in the true and real Amida Buddha to become a Buddha yourself. Nothing else.

In exactly the moment when you have this change of heart, you are assured of birth in the Pure Land and this birth is definitely settled for you. It is because you no longer rely on the limited capacities of yourself as an unenlightened being, but on the infinite salvation power of a Buddha, and not just any Buddha but the Buddha, Amida, who especially vowed that he will save (lead to Buddhahood) all beings, no matter their spiritual capacities.

So, as you see, Amida Buddha is the one who made special connections, through his Primal Vow, with the beings incapable of any

practice and even those who did the ten transgressions and the five grave gravest offences. This is extremely important to realize, because no other Buddha is known to have created such methods of saving incapable beings only by faith in him and with no additional requirement of earning special merit or virtue on the side of those to be saved.

The statement that the change of heart or the complete entrusting in Amida Buddha while acknowledging our spiritual incapacity, occurs only once, means in that very moment when we have this change of heart we become assured of birth in the Pure Land. In that very moment of entrusting our birth there is completely settled. We no longer need to worry about our karmic destiny because this destiny is changed forever and we will go directly to the Pure Land in the moment of our death, no matter that we still have delusions and blind passions in this life.

Those who speak about the need to have many changes of heart are confusing the terms and are not speaking about the same change of heart that Shinran spoke about.

In fact, they think this change of heart is some kind of a moral change of heart or a change in the three types of karma, related with thoughts, words and deeds, like a purification of these three. But the change of heart in Jodo Shinshu is solely a changing of reliance from one's own limited power to the infinite power of Amida.

They are people who although *“claim with their lips that they entrust themselves to the power of the Vow”*, yet they *“harbor in their hearts the thought that, even though the Vow to save the evil is said to be beyond conceptual understanding, after all it saves the good person in particular”*;

So, they are in fact *“doubting the power of the Vow, they lack the mind of entrusting themselves to Other Power, and are destined for birth in the borderland.”*

Only because they have this misunderstanding do they speak about the need to have a change of heart every time a person who entrusts in Amida does or thinks something wrong. Their reliance on Amida's infinite power is not complete or it doesn't exist at all, and their so-called "change of heart" is only a change at the level of their personality, like a personal purification.

As we know, any change in the ignorant personality of unenlightened beings is subject to impermanence. Every state of mind and even the so-called good states of mind or virtuous states of mind one is trying to have, can change and perish, because nothing which relies on the personal power of an unenlightened person can last for long.

That is why Shinran said in this chapter:

*"Suppose that attainment of birth were possible only by going through changes of heart day and night with every incident that occurred. In that case - human life being such that it ends even before breath exhaled can be drawn in again - if we were to die without going through a change of heart and without abiding in a state of gentleness and forbearance, would not Amida's Vow that grasps and never abandons us be rendered meaningless?"*

But to switch the reliance from oneself to Amida Buddha means to enter forever into the powerful karmic stream of this Buddha with no possibility of failure in attaining Buddhahood in his Pure Land, because we rely no more on ourselves. So what kind of further changes of heart do we need to have when we already have switched the reliance from ourselves to reliance on Amida Buddha, which is exactly what changing the heart means.

Birth in Amida Buddha's Pure Land is "*brought about by Amida's design*", so we don't need to worry or have the impression that we should act or think in a certain way so as to add something from our unenlightened personality to the salvation of Amida because to do so



would mean involving personal calculations on the path of Other Power.

One is calculating if he thinks that he can somehow influence or add something better or essential from himself and his practice to the working of Amida. But this is foolish: what can an unenlightened person add to the enlightened activity of Amida Buddha?

*“Our not calculating is called jinen. It is itself Other Power.”*

In relation with using the term *jinen* in this chapter, I selected some other easy to understand explanations of Shinran of the same term:

*“Ji means “of itself” - not through the practitioner’s calculation. It signifies being made so.*

*Nen means “to be made so” - it is not through the practitioner’s calculation; it is through the working of the Tathagata’s Vow.*

.....  
*Jinen signifies being made so from the very beginning. Amida’s Vow is, from the very beginning, designed to bring each of us to entrust ourselves to it - saying “Namo-amida-butsu” - and to receive us into the Pure Land; none of this is through our calculation. Thus, there is no room for the practitioner to be concerned about being good or bad. This is the meaning of jinen as I have been taught.”*

(Shinran- “Hymns of the Dharma Ages – on Jinen Honi”)

Jinen is the natural and spontaneous working of the Vow and of the salvation of Amida, and it means it has nothing to do with us. There is nothing good or essential we can add to Amida’s working.

Everything comes naturally and spontaneously from Amida – our entrusting to him and the saying of nembutsu. Even if some gentle heartedness and forbearance appear in our evil hearts, this is also due to the spontaneous working of Amida Buddha in us.

Nothing good or virtuous can come from an unenlightened mind, especially our birth in the Pure Land. So, everything is done by Amida for us. This is what we deeply understand when we experience the changing of the heart.

## **Commentary on the seventeenth chapter - birth in the borderland of the Pure Land**

*“On the assertion that a person born in the borderland will in the end fall into hell.*

*In what authoritative passage do we find such a statement? It is deplorable that this is being maintained by people who pretend to be scholars. How are they reading the sutras, treatises, and other sacred writings? I was taught that practitioners who lack shinjin are born in the borderland because of their doubt concerning the Primal Vow, and that, after the evil of doubt has been expiated, they realize Enlightenment in the fulfilled land.*

*Since practitioners of shinjin are few, many are guided to the transformed land. To declare, despite this that birth there will ultimately end in vain would be to accuse Shakyamuni of lying.”*

Everything related with the Pure Land is the creation of Amida Buddha. It comes from his enlightened activity and is the manifestation of it. All the manifestations of Amida Buddha, especially his true Pure Land and the borderland of his Pure Land, are real and effective in helping sentient beings to achieve supreme Buddhahood.

Amida Buddha realized that it is easier for unenlightened sentient beings to attain Enlightenment or Buddhahood in the favorable environment of his Pure Land. This is why he created it and made it in such a way so that both people who completely entrust in him and also those who cannot completely entrust, be born there and escape once and for all from samsara.

But there is a difference between these two categories of people. Those who completely entrust in Amida Buddha and let go of all clinging to any form of reliance on their personal power become themselves Buddhas in the very moment when they are born in the Pure Land, while those who entrust in Amida but still cling to some

kind of personal power do not become immediately Buddhas when they are born in the Pure Land.

People in this second category are in fact born in the so called borderland of the Pure Land. They do not attain the state of Buddhahood, but are free once and for all from the suffering of birth and death in samsara. They are safe, but still they are not liberated. At the same time, being in the special environment of this borderland of the Pure Land they have the opportunity to overcome their doubts and entrust completely in Amida Buddha.

Master Shan-tao said: *“those born in the fulfilled Pure Land are extremely few; those born in the transformed Pure Land are many.”*

This is because there are very few who completely renounce the reliance on their personal power and calculations and entrust 100% to Amida’s Power. It is also taught in this chapter: *“Since practitioners of shinjin are few, many are guided to the transformed land.”*

Transformed land and borderland are the same. Also there are many other names for the borderland, like “the realm of indolence and pride”, a term used by Shinran in his wasans: *“...People devote themselves to saying the nembutsu in self-power;*

*Hence they remain in the **borderland or the realm of indolence and pride**...”* or “the city of doubt”, “the womb-palace”, etc.

This borderland of the Pure Land is also described as a luxurious prison “made of seven precious materials” where people who doubt the Power of Amida Buddha and recite nembutsu while relying on self power or are aspiring to be born in Amida’s Pure Land by depending on their personal merits and virtues are like princes who, because they committed offenses against the king, are imprisoned in a golden palace where they enjoy all pleasures but they are not able to see the king.

This comparison appears in the Larger Sutra:

*“The Buddha said to Maitreya, “Consider the case of the noble cakravartin-king who possesses a prison embellished with the seven precious substances. It is adorned in manifold ways, furnished with a canopied bed, and hung with many silken banners. If young princes commit offenses against the king, they are imprisoned there.....”*

*The Buddha said to Maitreya, “These sentient beings are precisely like that. Because they doubt the Buddha’s wisdom, they are born in a womb-palace... If these sentient beings become aware of their past offenses and deeply repent, they desire to leave that place...”*

To doubt the Buddha’s wisdom means to doubt that Amida created the perfect method for saving you and to believe that there is still something you need to do or add to his enlightened activity in order to be born in his Pure Land. To doubt also means to doubt the Primal Vow of Amida in which is described the method and cause of direct birth into the fulfilled Pure Land – the total entrusting in Amida.

Amida Buddha has 48 Vows, among which the Eighteenth is called the Primal Vow. This Vow contains the direct cause of attaining complete Buddhahood in the moment of our birth in the Pure Land. Becoming a true Buddha, capable of benefiting sentient beings in the exact moment of attaining birth in the Pure Land is the consequence of receiving shinjin or complete faith in Amida Buddha during this present life, while to rely on Amida while entertaining doubts means to be born in the borderland of the Pure Land.

To *deeply repent*, means to realize how foolish the idea of adding something to the working of Amida is. Unfortunately, people who doubt Amida Buddha’s Power in the present life will have to expiate their doubts by realizing their stupidity in the borderland or this womb like palace. So they will have the change of heart we talked about when commenting the last chapter, and receive shinjin, in the place called “borderland of the Pure Land”.

Then, in this chapter of *Tannisho* it is said, “*after the evil of doubt has been expiated, they realize Enlightenment in the fulfilled land.*”

As we clearly saw in this chapter and in the quote I chose from the many passages one can find in the sutras about birth in the borderland, this place is not one from which one can fall back into the lower realms or the hells, but a place within the Pure Land where people who relied on Amida Buddha during their present life but were still clinging to their self power will stay until they overcome their doubts and completely entrust themselves to Amida Buddha.

It is like an emigrant who was received in the country of Amida but he is still kept at the border region, not being allowed to enter the main continent and meet the king. In fact, his own doubts obstruct him from entering the main continent: the Power of Amida is that which caused him to be born in the border region.

Only the Enlightened Power of Amida Buddha is that which makes possible even birth in the borderland of the Pure Land, not to mention birth in the true Pure Land itself. Amida Buddha has such an Infinite Compassion and good methods of saving sentient beings that he succeeds in offering salvation from samsara even to people who doubt and don't rely completely on his Power.

Amida brings sentient beings safely out of samsara, both those who entrust completely and those who still have an incomplete trust, while the latter will stay for a while in the borderland until they overcome their doubts. It is not the fault of Amida or a punishment that some are born in the borderland, just they are kept in that region by their own doubts. They are the ones who are keeping themselves out of the main continent of the Pure Land, while Amida carried them out of samsara once and for all.

It is very important to understand that the Pure Land in both its aspects, the borderland and the true Pure Land, is not a realm within samsara, but a manifestation of the enlightened activity of Amida which is situated beyond the reach of birth and death. There is no retrogression or falling back from the borderland of the Pure Land into

hell or any other samsaric realms because this place has nothing to do with samsara.

One who entered the borderland of the Pure Land is already in the safe embrace of Amida Buddha, except he doesn't completely entrust himself in Amida. His journey in samsara is definitely over, and there is not a single word in the sutras and the sacred texts saying otherwise.

## **Commentary on the eighteenth chapter – donations can't influence birth in the Pure Land**

*“--On the assertion that the size we become as Buddhas depends on the amount of our donations to the sangha<sup>26</sup>.—”*

When I first read the eighteenth chapter I smiled. How could someone possibly think that the more money he gives to the sangha, the greater his size will be when he becomes a Buddha in the Pure Land?

I didn't imagine that such a wrong understanding could possibly be born in the heads of some people during Yuien-bo's times. But, if I consider this matter more carefully, I realize that even in our days there have been many false teachers and gurus taking advantage of their followers, lying and cheating them with many promises in order to get their money or abusing them physically and mentally in many ways. The human mind is not so strong and smart as it seems, and nobody knows when in a moment of weakness someone else might profit off him.

My opinion is that we can easily be safe from these kinds of false statements and false teachers who just want our money or who seek various mundane advantages from us. This can be accomplished by seeing the funny and strange aspects of these false statements and, of course, by knowing the teaching ourselves. We should personally study the sacred texts and always compare what we read there with the words of such and such teacher or priest.

First of all, it is a matter of common sense that the state of Buddhahood is not the result of money. How can money determine something about our future birth in the Pure Land where we become Buddhas? Just imagine how funny it would be to see there Buddhas of various sizes in accordance with the Bank account they opened in the

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<sup>26</sup> Sangha is the community of Buddha's disciples, priests and lay.



Pure Land when they were still living in the world of suffering! It is indeed absurd because of many arguments based on common sense, but also because of the teaching about what a Buddha is and what birth in the Pure Land means.

Amida is described in many ways in the sutras, and sometimes he is indeed portrayed as having huge bodily manifestations. These ways of describing him refers to his Sambhogakaya form or the *“fulfilled body of compassionate means”*. This form or any forms that are taken by Amida Buddha are the effects in terms of cause and effect of his Vows and they are the manifestations of his Enlightenment in order to help and guide sentient beings. Also Amida Buddha has, as does every Buddha, an ultimate nature or “Dharma nature”, which *“has no form, long or short, square or round, and no color, blue, white, or black”*.

When we are born in the Pure Land and become Buddhas, we will also be able to manifest various transcendent and accommodated bodies of many sizes in order to help all beings, while in the same time we’ll dwell in the true “Dharma nature” which is beyond description and beyond form.

But this attainment of ultimate Buddhahood in the Pure Land and the various manifestations we will be able to produce in order to save sentient beings are the effect of the merit transference from Amida to us in the form of shinjin and nembutsu. Nothing which belongs to us can add something to the merit transference of Amida.

Also, a nembutsu practitioner may have some visions of Amida Buddha during his present life or he may not have any visions. These visions may be different from person to person, depending on many circumstances, but having visions is not at all a requirement for birth in the Pure Land.

Some recite nembutsu many times or use a form of meditative nembutsu, some use contemplative techniques described in the sutras together with nembutsu recitation, etc. Visions of the Pure Land,

Amida and of Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta<sup>27</sup> might appear before the eyes of the Pure Land practitioner, but even these visions are possible only because of the Power of Amida, and not of the practitioner. This is very important to know.

Maybe some people, hearing that one may have various visions, somehow relate this to giving donations, so they might think that by giving large amounts of money, they deserve to see a large Buddha or to become a large Buddha themselves in the Pure Land. It is funny how an unenlightened mind with no shinjin and who doesn't understand that every true attainment comes from Amida, can make such strange connections and misinterpret the teaching.

Also, making offerings is indeed useful in order to help teachers and Shinshu centers to propagate the Dharma, but this is only to express gratitude. We can't use offerings in order to add something to the working of Amida and to become Buddhas in the Pure Land.

Donations and attaining Buddhahood in the Pure Land are two different things. Practicing charity towards others and the Three Treasures might bring a benefit in this life to the donor, because of the law of cause and effect, but in order to attain Buddhahood, only a pure cause is effective, and that cause is shinjin or faith in Amida Buddha.

Donation is a worldly cause, while shinjin is the ultimate outer worldly cause – it is the cause planted in us by Amida Buddha's transference of merit. The first can influence only this life, but has no effect in terms of ultimate freedom. Giving or not giving money to the Buddha's image, teachers or Shinshu centers has no importance<sup>28</sup>. Only shinjin is the true cause for our complete freedom. Those who say otherwise are only "*using the Buddha's teaching as a pretext*" and are "*moved by mundane desires*".

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<sup>27</sup> Avalokitesvara (Kannon in Japanese) and Mahasthamaprapta (Seishi in Japanese) are the two Bodhisattvas attending Amida Buddha.

<sup>28</sup> In the Jodo Shinshu centers from Romania there have never been and will never be any fees for membership and access to the teaching.



## Commentary on the Postscript of *Tannisho* (part 1) – the reason for writing *Tannisho*

Yuien-bo begins and ends the postscript by restating the reasons for writing the *Tannisho*, which is to clear the doubts of his fellow practitioners and fight against divergences from the true teaching left to him by Shinran Shonin. Every one of the assertions discussed by him in the *Tannisho* appeared because people were not having the same shinjin (faith) as Shinran.

The matter of having the same shinjin as Shinran was repeatedly said to be of utmost importance. This shinjin, which is the same shinjin as that of Master Honen, is always received from Amida, but it comes only after listening to the true teaching. Without listening and accepting the true teaching, we can't receive shinjin from Amida.

Yuien-bo said in the preface:

*“For how is entrance into the single gate of easy practice possible unless we happily come to rely on a true teacher whom conditions bring us to encounter?”*

So, for listening to the true teaching we need a true teacher, and that teacher is Shinran Shonin. He is the one who clarified for us all we need to know about Amida Buddha's salvation. In doing this most important task he set aside the provisional and accommodated teachings of Shakyamuni's lifetime, which were useful for a limited number of people, and showed Shakyamuni's real intent of coming to this world.

In one of his letters, Shinran classified the Buddhist teachings according to “*two forms of relevance: first, limited relevance; second, universal relevance.*” Then he said: “*The Pure Land is the teaching of universal relevance.*”

Shinran didn't say that the rest of Buddhist practices and methods are bad, but if we take into account the true capacities of beings, the nembutsu of faith in Amida Buddha is the only teaching accessible to all, because it requires nothing from the practitioner.

All the other methods presented by Shakyamuni, with the exception of exclusive faith in Amida Buddha, are good in themselves, but not all people are capable of practicing and attaining realization through them. This is why they are of limited relevance while the method of attaining Buddhahood through faith in Amida Buddha is of universal relevance.

When we meet with Jodo Shinshu teaching, we see that Shinran, or Rennyō Shōnin, didn't talk about the many Buddhist teachings or practices that are emphasized in the many Mahayana sutras or other schools. For example, they didn't mention precepts, which are much emphasized in other schools or in sutras different from the Larger Sutra.

Why did they do so? It's simple – because the teachings on precepts are not useful for such beings as us, incapable of putting them into practice to attain Buddhahood through them. They also didn't recommend meditation or contemplation methods, not even the methods presented in the Contemplation Sutra, and the reason is the same.

On the contrary, Honen, Shinran and Rennyō took the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha to be of utmost importance. Shinran considered the Larger Sutra on Amida Buddha to be the main reason for Shakyamuni's appearance in this world, because in this sutra he told the story of Amida Buddha and his Primal Vow.

From all the Buddhist teachings, Shinran considered the words of the Primal Vow to be the most important in all Buddhism and the nembutsu of faith to be the most important practice.

If we consider ourselves to be disciples of Shinran, we should follow his intent, which is to abandon the reliance on other practices and teachings of Shakyamuni that do not accord with the words of the Primal Vow or the indiscriminative salvation of Amida. Yuien-bo encouraged us to do so: *“that we abandon the accommodated and take up the real, set aside the provisional and adopt the true is the Master’s fundamental intent.”*

This is because the method of total reliance on Amida Buddha is of universal relevance, truly capable of saving all beings, regardless of their capacities.

Yuien-bo warns us that *“in the scriptures in general, the true and real and the accommodated and provisional are mixed”* and that we *“must under no circumstances misread the sacred writings.”* On the contrary, we should *“read the sacred writings that accord with the late Master [Shinran]’s thought and that he himself used to read”*.

Shinran Shonin, like his Master Honen and like Rennyo too, was able to distinguish between the various practices and teachings presented by Shakyamuni and chose only the Larger Sutra which contains the Primal Vow and the nembutsu of faith (shinjin nembutsu). What he chose is all we need for us to be born in the Pure Land of Amida and become Buddhas.

For us, Jodo Shinshu followers, is important to have the same shinjin as Shinran and Honen, and we cannot receive this if we follow other teachings and practices.

## **Commentary on the Postscript of *Tannisho* (part 2) – our shinjin and shinjin of the great Masters is the same**

*“As the late Master once related, in Master Honen’s day, among his many disciples there were few who were of the same shinjin as Honen, and because of this, Shinran became involved in a debate with some fellow practitioners. It happened in this way. Shinran remarked, “My shinjin and the Master’s are one.” Seikan-bo, Nembutsu-bo, and others among his fellow practitioners strongly argued, “How can your shinjin be the same as the Master’s?” Shinran responded, “The Master possesses vast wisdom and learning, so I would be mistaken if I claimed to be the same in those respects, but in shinjin that is the cause of birth, there is no difference whatever. The Master’s shinjin and mine are one and the same.”*

*The others remained skeptical, however, asking how that could be. So finally they all decided that the argument should be brought before Honen to determine which side was right. When they presented the details of the matter, Master Honen said, “My shinjin has been given by Amida; so has that of Zenshin-bo [Shinran]. Therefore they are one and the same. A person with a different shinjin will surely not go to the Pure Land to which I will go.”*

I often felt so little and insignificant in comparison with the great Buddhist Masters of the past and discouraged that I will never attain what they attained, no matter how much I work to improve myself. Buddhism seemed to me like a challenge in which some were better and more successful than others.

Images of calm Buddhists, sitting in good postures, speaking wise words are so often to be seen in Buddhist magazines and in Westerners opinions about Buddhism. Everybody wishes to be like great Masters of the past and some people often try to copy their words and actions, forgetting that they are not them, and their words and deeds do not arise from the same mind as the Masters.

Into my opinion, most of today Buddhists are just monkeys who imitate the words and behavior of virtuous practitioners of the past, but lack their wisdom and compassion. It's much easier to speak about emptiness by quoting, for example, Nagarjuna's writings on this topic, but to really dwell in the sunyata from which the true compassion arise, remains impossible for almost all Buddhist practitioners of today.

So, we can't say that somebody has the same wisdom as Nagarjuna just because he read his writings and is able to explain them to others. In the same way, Master Honen was very well versed in all the Mahayana canon which it is said he read many times until he finally came to simply entrust in Amida Buddha. Very few if any could match his knowledge.

Many of us cannot even have the same knowledge of sutras and the ordinary wisdom of a simple monk who passed the examinations at a University, so how much more can we compare ourselves with Honen or Nagarjuna! And what Buddhist monk of our days, can say he has the same wisdom as Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Shan-tao or Honen! Indeed, it would be a sign of self pride to consider oneself to match these great practitioners.

However, through the story related in the postscript of *Tannisho* we clearly see that there is no problem with us lacking the wisdom and learning of the sages from the past. What wonderful news indeed!

Imagine all those people who challenged Shinran, waiting for Master Honen's answer, and their shock when he said to them:

*"My shinjin has been given by Amida; so has that of Zenshin-bo [Shinran]. Therefore they are one and the same. A person with a different shinjin will surely not go to the Pure Land to which I will go."*

"What!?" – I am sure they said this in their minds while Shinran heard the exact answer he was expecting to receive. He was respectful to his



Master and was aware how much knowledge of Buddhist scriptures and wisdom he possessed, but at the same time he knew that Amida makes no difference in his saving activity, asking no special quality from those he saves.

The message of the Primal Vow was clear to him: those who entrust in Amida, say his Name and wish to be born in his Pure Land, will go there. Nothing more is needed, no mentioning of special knowledge or wisdom can be found in the Primal Vow. Just entrust in Amida and let him take you to his Pure Land where you yourself will become a Buddha.

This simple faith which Amida caused to appear in our hearts is the only one that will cause us to be born in the Pure Land and become Buddhas. This simple faith makes us equal with Honen, Nagarjuna, Vasubandhu, Shan-tao and all the great Buddhist Masters who entrusted in Amida Buddha. We don't have their knowledge and wisdom, but we have the same simple faith (shinjin) through which we go to the same Pure Land as they did.

How wonderful this is! What a relief I feel when I realize that I don't need to compare myself anymore with Buddhist Masters of the past and virtuous sages, falling in the discouragement that I will not be capable to attain the same realization as them, thus spending in vain this rare chance of being born as a human being! I am now made capable to become a Buddha and be finished, once and for all, with this perpetual misery and suffering in Samsara. And for this I need nothing more than to entrust in Amida!

Do you, the reader of this book really understand what a relief I feel and what chance we ordinary people have? We can't be sages, we can't even maintain a calm mind during a single day, we can't follow precepts, we don't know all the sutras and commentaries, and yet we will become Buddhas only by entrusting in Amida!

What else do you want in this life? Why have you become a Buddhist if you don't want to become a Buddha and finish your endless suffering and misery as well as the misery and suffering of others that you harmed or those you love?

Why should you spend your life in vain, looking for a wisdom which you will never find because you are incapable, filling your head with wise Buddhist quotes about emptiness, Buddha nature, speaking about virtues that you will never have, etc. when you can finish all your misery here and now by entrusting in Amida Buddha?

Just entrust yourself now and at the end of your life you will become a Buddha in the Pure Land! This is the promise of Amida Buddha, presented to us by Shakyamuni in the Larger Sutra, and not a sophisticated philosophy that some people can understand while others can't.

This promise of Amida Buddha is the only thing you need to know in the whole Buddhism. This simple faith, and not your knowledge or lack of knowledge, will cause you to become a Buddha.

It is a pity that Nagarjuna, the great sage, considered to be the second Buddha after Shakyamuni is known by many only because of his complicated explanations on emptiness, while few know that he was also an Amida devotee, saying in his "Twelve Adorations":

*"With reverence I bow my head to Amida, the Sage, The Most Honored One, who is revered by humans and devas. You dwell in the wonderful Land of Peace and Bliss, Surrounded by innumerable children of the Buddhas."*

*"I prostrate myself to the ground and worship Amida, the Holy One."* – this is how he chose to end every verse in his "Twelve Adorations" (Junirai), finishing this hymn by aspiring to be born in the Pure Land. So, he himself had a simple faith in Amida and through this simple faith he was born in the Pure Land. This is all you need, as well.

Also, Vasubandhu, the great exponent of Yogacara teachings which explain all planes of existence in terms of consciousness and which taught the meditation about the relationship between personal conscience and the universe, he entrusted in Amida Buddha, saying:

*“O World-Honored One, with singleness of mind, I take refuge in the Tathagata of Unhindered Light Shining throughout the Ten Directions, and aspire to be born in the Land of Peace and Bliss.”*

This is all you need, too, and not the complicated Yogacara teachings he taught in other treatises.

Master Shan-tao, the one who successfully practiced contemplation techniques and visualizations in accordance with the Contemplation Sutra, had the same simple faith in Amida Buddha.

Master Honen, who knew by heart the many Mahayana sutras and kept the monk’s precepts all his life, said that the true Buddhist teaching he preached *“is nothing but saying ‘Namo Amida Butsu’ with a conviction that by saying it one will certainly attain birth in the Pure Land.....If your faith is based on other grounds than this, you may not be received by the Compassion of the two Buddhas and may be left outside the Primal Vow.”*

How closely connected these words are with the ones recorded in *Tannisho*:

*“A person with a different shinjin will surely not go to the Pure Land to which I will go.”*

So, as you see, all these great Masters never considered their wisdom or knowledge of Buddhist scriptures to be the cause of their birth in the Pure Land. On the contrary, they all did exactly what Master Honen encouraged everybody to do in his one-page testament:

*“Those who accept the Nembutsu in faith, however well versed in the lifetime teachings of the Buddha, should consider themselves as illiterate, stupid persons, and without pretensions to wisdom, should single-heartedly recite the Nembutsu with ordinary devotees of Buddhism of little learning, whether men or women.”*

By receiving faith in Amida Buddha we are all equally assured of birth in the Pure Land and attainment of Buddhahood, no matter whether we are wise or stupid, whether we have much knowledge or we know only the words of the Primal Vow, whether we observe precepts or not.

Only because of Amida will we become Buddhas. The cause of our Buddhahood is in Amida’s hands, not in ours. This is the ultimate teaching of Shakyamuni, the very reason for his appearance in this world and the goal of Shinran’s life.

## **Commentary on the Postscript of *Tannisho* (part 3) – the Primal Vow is for you alone**

Yuien-bo quoted a saying of Shinran which is very close to my heart:

*„When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone! Then how I am filled with gratitude for the Primal Vow, in which Amida resolved to save me, though I am burdened with such heavy karma.“*

These words show that religion is something very personal and intimate.

I think that if you don't come to the point where you realize the teaching is addressing you personally, then everything is in vain. Treat the Dharma as if Shakyamuni, Amida, Avalokitesvara, Mahasthamaprapta Bodhisattva, Shinran, Rennyō and all the patriarchs speak directly to you. Think they are before you, addressing you personally.

And this is not just a symbol or metaphor, but the real truth. Perceive the teaching as being an exclusive, intimate, friendly and maternal relationship between you and Amida Buddha. Tathagata doesn't treat sentient beings as numbers, but addresses each one individually, so his relationship with you is like that between mother and child. Think that Amida Buddha addresses your own personal suffering, to all the forms that suffering manifests in your life and that he wishes to heal you once and for all.

Add your name to the words *“when I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone! ...”* and say, *“I realize that it was entirely for the sake of me, - John or Mary, etc, - alone.”*

Also, you may say to yourself, *“how I am filled with gratitude for the Primal Vow, in which Amida resolved to save me, Jim or Mary,”* depending on what your name is. Because indeed Amida thought of you personally when he made his Vows and when he practiced as a Bodhisattva for so many long kalpas.

Buddhas are not myths, symbols or fictional characters, but real Enlightened persons who don't seclude themselves in their ultimate nature (Dharmakaya), but come to you personally like a true friend, looking after you, caring about you, until you are liberated from the suffering of birth and death. Buddhism is a personal relationship between you and the Buddhas and especially between you and Amida Buddha. You never walk alone, dear friend, once you take refuge and entrust yourself in Amida Buddha. Please, meditate on this.

Unfortunately, instead of realizing the profound maternal and compassionate aspect of Buddhism, too many Buddhists followers nowadays dwell in thoughts of personal spiritual evolution, staring at the sun of Enlightenment portrayed in the books, while they can't see their feet and their whole body is drowned in the dung of delusion and evil karma.

I wonder what chance of reaching the sun has a person who has lived in darkness for so many kalpas, just by talking about the sun. In the Western countries, self power Buddhism has so much success because people like to talk a lot about Enlightenment and final liberation, about ultimate nature of things or emptiness, because like monkeys they like to superficially copy the masters of the past and stare into the ideal without realizing their true capacities and the desperate situation they really live in.

They are unaware of the Compassion of the Buddhas and how far this Compassion can go in order to bring them to Buddhahood. Instead, they lose themselves in provisional teachings such as “Buddhas are only teachers and guides” or “you have to be your own

light”, ignoring the true capacities of this age and people living in it – or, as I said, being unaware of the fact that Buddhas are not immovable in their wisdom and freedom, but are always active and present like a loving mother is always present at the bedside of her sick child. They are unaware of how much they need the helping hand extended to them by the Buddha called Amida who especially vowed that he will help such people as us.

*“We are in delusion, knowing nothing at all of the depths of our karmic evil or the vastness of Amida’s benevolence”* says Yuien-bo in the postscript of *Tannisho*.

Who is ready in this world filled with “how great we are” kind of visions, to see himself or herself in the words of Master Shan-tao, quoted by Yuien-bo:

*“Know yourself to be a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation.”*

This is exactly the starting point in Jodo Shinshu, when you realize your failure in reaching spiritual emancipation. If in other Buddhist methods you start with acknowledging that every being has Buddha nature and is a potential Buddha (which is true), in Jodo Shinshu you start with the realization that for you it is actually impossible to become a Buddha by yourself.

That awareness is strong and definitive, knowing deeply that there is no condition, ever, for you that will lead you to emancipation. Once you have this strong and profound conviction about yourself, just like an alcoholic recognizes his present situation and accepts help, you no longer need to dwell in thoughts of self power and personal evolution, but you become ready to receive the hand of Amida Buddha that has been extended to you.

Superficial talk about good or evil can be left to those who wish to busy themselves with them, but for you, the helpful hand of Amida is all that matters.

I often have the feeling of living in a world I don't really understand, which if I am to describe it in only one word I would chose "chaos". My mind is chaotic and so are the minds of others.

For example, I couldn't understand, no matter how much I tried, why some dear persons have left me, until I finally realized there is nothing to understand. There can be an understanding of why some people do this or that if they have a clear and stable mind, but what can one understand from a chaotic mind led by unknown and unstoppable karmic impulses?

In chaos you cannot see a clear path with a beginning and an end, with reasons why some actions were done and others were not done. In fact, the majority of people act without knowing why, led by strong impulses like madmen, and you are also crazy if you imagine you can somehow find an explanation of their deeds.

Of course, people give a lot of explanations to their actions, especially when they hurt another one, but my advice that, for example, I often give to those who pass through the suffering of a divorce, is to not care about these explanations, just as you wouldn't take seriously the explanations coming from mentally disturbed persons. People instinctively hurt one another because they are mentally ill and the power of their evil karmic tendencies is so overwhelming that there is no chance to stop them.

It is like living in the same house with persons who have been mentally sick from birth. You are crazy if you imagine that you can find some long lasting peace or warmth or reason in this place.

To me the words of Shinran: "*... in this fleeting world - this burning house - all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity*" illustrate best what I wrote above, which



are my own personal experiences and thoughts about the world I live in.

I often repeat to myself these words of Shinran in times of great sorrow when the chaos, misery and stupidity of this world hits me hard, so that I renew my awareness of the true nature of the place I am forced to live in due to my past karma.

I sometimes encourage myself with the thought that for a person living in the Amazon jungle is normal and natural to be bitten by mosquitoes and is stupid to wish things would be otherwise. In the same way, this being the nature of this world, it is normal that I suffer.

Living in the middle of so much suffering with various adverse circumstances coming to us every day, driven as we are by unconscious karmic impulses, how can we truly know what is good or bad? How can we truly see with calm eyes how things really are?

If one is in the middle of a narrow street with very high buildings on his left and right, how can he have a general survey of the entire city? He in fact sees only the street he walks on and where he spends his entire life, but without flying above the city with an airplane he will never have a complete vision of the city.

It is the same with the vision of ordinary unenlightened people and the vision of the Buddhas. The first is limited by ignorance, blind passions and karmic tendencies, while the latter is free and unrestricted by anything. This is, I think, the meaning of Shinran's words:

*"I know nothing at all of good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as Amida Tathagata knows, that an act was good, then I would know good. If I could know thoroughly, as the Tathagata knows, that an act was evil, then I would know evil..."*

In fact, for *"a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world - this burning house - all matters without exception are empty*

*and false, totally without truth and sincerity.*” Nothing can be truly understood by an unenlightened mind, living a life full of suffering resembling fire, in an impermanent world where he cannot rely on anything stable, be it physical or mental.

Only one thing is true and trustworthy here in this unending chaos and nightmare – the helpful hand of Amida extended to us in the form of the nembutsu of faith, as Shinran assures us at the end of this true description of life and the world: *“the nembutsu alone is true and real.”*

This quote from Shinran helps me to pass through this life with a clear awareness of its true nature and the path I need to follow. I do hope it will have the same effect on you, dear friend.

## About Amida Buddha and his Pure Land

I try to explain here in easy terms who is Amida Buddha and how we should understand the Pure Land.

First of all, what is a Buddha, or more exactly, what is a Buddha not?

A Buddha is not somebody like us, although at some point in his history he was. In a well known dialogue, a brahman called Dona asks Shakyamuni Buddha who he is:

*“Sir, are you a god?”*

*“No, brahman.”*

*“Are you an angel?”*

*“No, brahman.”*

*“Are you a yakkha?”*

*“No, brahman.”*

*“Are you a human being?”*

*“No, brahman.”*

*“When asked, ‘Are you a god?’ you answer, ‘No, brahman...’ When asked, ‘Are you an angel?’ you answer, ‘No, brahman..’ When asked, ‘Are you a yakkha?’ you answer, ‘No, brahman...’ When asked, ‘Are you a human being?’ you answer, ‘No, brahman...’ Then what sort of being are you?”*

*“Brahman, the defilements by which — if they were not abandoned — I would be a god: those are abandoned by me, their root destroyed, made like a palm tree stump, no longer subject to future arising. The defilements by which - if they were not abandoned - I would be an angel... a yakkha... a human being: those are abandoned by me, their root destroyed, made like a palm tree stump, no longer subject to future arising.*

*“Just as a blue or red or white lotus born in water grows in water and stands up above the water untouched by it, so too I, who was born in the world and grew up in the world, have transcended the world, and I live untouched by the world. Remember me, brahman, as a **Buddha.**”*

The state of human beings is limited by various kinds of delusions, so we are mistaken if we say, for example, that Buddha was a human being. This is because the state he attained is higher than the human state of spiritual evolution. Especially some Christians accuse Buddhism that its Founder is just a human, thus inferior to Jesus who was the son of God, or even some Buddhists say that Buddha was a human being in order to show that we don't promote idol or gods worshipping.

Both methods of speaking about a Buddha are false, because **although the physical appearance of a Buddha may be human, the state which he has attained and in which he dwells is supreme in the whole universe.**

The ego's permanent course, led by its desires and karma, is followed by suffering, birth and death and does not end until Enlightenment or Awakening is attained. A Buddha is one who escapes from this maddening run. The word “Buddha” means “The Awakened One”, that is, awakened to the true reality. He goes beyond birth and death, escaping the chains of karma. His existence in the Universe is supreme and beyond our thinking, which is still enslaved by illusions.

A Buddha has Infinite Wisdom and Infinite Compassion, helping sentient beings to break free from birth and death.

In Buddhism the situation is different from Christianity because there isn't a Creator God, a Ruler, nor a Judge. Everything depends on karma and a Buddha is not a creator, a ruler nor a judge; but his existence in the Universe is supreme. **He is just “The Awakened One” and he acts as a guide and Saviour, capable of true**

## **Compassion which is no longer enchained by the attachments or the illusions of ordinary beings.**

Through Buddhism, the Ultimate Reality, the Liberation or Nirvana is accesible to all beings who observe the path given by the Buddha.

A very important doctrine in Buddhism says that we can become Buddhas because we already have in us this possibility or potentiality. Thus, it is said that all beings, no matter their delusion or actual misery, have in themselves the Buddha-nature, the potentiality to become Buddhas.

It doesn't matter if you are a worm, a cockroach, a dog, a human being, a hungry ghost or a god, etc,: you have in yourself, like an unknown jewel thrown in the mud, the Buddha nature and the possibility to become a Buddha.

This is good news, but unfortunately it doesn't keep us warm very much, because those who really come to liberate themselves from delusions and attain this state of a Buddha are extremely few and in our times, as Shinran said, they are completely nonexistent.

Therefore, only the Path of faith in Amida remains the most accessible method.

Any Buddha is completely free and continues to manifest himself in various ways and forms in order to guide others to Liberation. All Buddhas attain the same ultimate absolute reality, this is why it is said that all have the same essence or nature, often called **the Dharma body of ultimate reality or Dharmakaya**.

Further, every Buddha has multiple transcendent manifestations, visible only to those well trained in Samadhi or profound concentrated states of mind. These manifestations can take various forms to help unenlightened beings.

Various Buddhas create spheres or fields of personal influences, known as “pure lands” where beings who entrust in them and create special links with them can be born after their physical death. In order to better understand how things are with these pure lands or spheres of influence, please try to remember how is it that in the presence of some peoples you suddenly feel better or worse or sometimes more excited or tired.

Every person has something like his own sphere of influence – which is the natural manifestation of his inside states of mind – and can influence more or less the others. Some people automatically change the atmosphere in a room by their presence, for example a beautiful woman will surely make many men to feel aroused or a killer will create an atmosphere of fear and coldness. In the same way, the presence of a Buddha inspires and influences, but this influence is one which brings Enlightenment or positive states of mind.

When we are in the presence of a killer and we are influenced by him, we may say that we are in his “land” or his sphere of influence. Also, when we are born in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha, we automatically arrive in his field whose influence makes us become ourselves Buddhas. This Pure Land of Amida is real and effective, being the manifestation of Amida’s Enlightenment in a form that we all can accept and in which we all can aspire to be born after death.

It is not at all impossible for the supreme Enlightenment of a Buddha to take various forms for the sake of unenlightened beings. These special and transcendent manifestations of a Buddha are called **Sambhogakaya or the Body of Recompense**.

Various Buddhas have different bodies of recompense, due to the vows they made when they engaged on the Path. Let’s say, for example, that a person named Jim begins to follow the Buddhist Path and he makes a vow to save especially the beings with physical disabilities.

In the moment he becomes a Buddha, he automatically has access to the ultimate reality (Dharmakaya), which is the same for all Buddhas, but he will have different transcendent manifestations, especially made to help that category of beings for which he made specific vows – that is, he will have a Sambhogakaya different from other Buddhas.

This body is named the “body of recompense” because it is the effect or the “recompense” of his practices and virtues, of the special vows he transformed through his Enlightenment in effective methods of salvation.

Next, the physical body in which somebody becomes a Buddha is called **Nirmanakaya or the body of transformation**.

Thus, if Jim becomes a Buddha he will be called Buddha Jim ☺ and he will have a body of flesh (Nirmanakaya), which has a visible beginning and a visible end, a transcendent body (Sambhogakaya), with a beginning in the moment of the attainment of Buddhahood, but without end, which is the result of his vows, different than those of other Buddhas and an ultimate “body” (Dharmakaya) – without beginning and without end, which is the same with all Buddhas.

In the same way, the Buddha we call Amida, was a long time ago, in another era than which we are living now, a monk named Dharmakara. He made the aspiration to become a Buddha. But what makes him so different from other Buddhas is that he made special vows which promise salvation (Buddhahood) not only for those capable of hard practices and virtues, but for all, and especially for those who are incapable of any practice.

Dharmakara promised the creation of a special Pure Land in which everybody can have access and, once born there, they will themselves become Buddhas, completely free of birth and death and capable to save other beings. In accordance with his Primal Vow, only faith is necessary to become a Buddha in his Pure Land, this faith being manifested in the saying of his Holy Name.

Faith (shinjin) is not something complicated, but a simple entrusting in Amida, that is to consider his Primal Vow to be true and efficient.

In the moment Dharmakara became Amida Buddha, the vows and his Pure Land became real and effective in the salvation of sentient beings. Thus we may say that Sambhogakaya of Amida Buddha is also his Pure Land.

This is, in short, the story of Amida, told by Shakyamuni (the historical Buddha) to his disciples and which we, as Jodo Shinshu followers, consider it real and trustworthy.

Any Buddhist teaching can be considered authentic if it was approved or presented by Shakyamuni Buddha himself. The teaching about the path of faith in Amida Buddha and his Pure Land, where all beings can attain supreme Enlightenment, no matter their capacities, is a part of these teachings taught by Shakyamuni.



## Faith and nembutsu are not our creations

The reason why in a nembutsu follower's heart both faith in the Primal Vow and his blind passions and illusions coexist is that **faith doesn't belong to him**. This is another important aspect of the Jodo Shinshu teaching. It is said that in an Eranda<sup>29</sup> forest grow only Eranda trees and not the famous Chandana<sup>30</sup> trees with their fine fragrance. It is a miracle if a Chandana tree grows in an Eranda forest. Similarly, it is a miracle if faith in Buddha flourishes in the people's hearts.

How can it be possible that from human passions the faith in Buddha can be born?

The answer is that this phenomenon is practically impossible and the faith in Buddha is not due to our power, it's just what Buddha "plants" in us. That is why shinjin or the entrusting heart is called "rootless faith" for it has no roots in the man's mind but in Buddha's Compassion.

The same thing happens when saying the Name which expresses faith and gratefulness. **Everything comes from Amida and manifests like an echo in our souls and on our lips, just like a child who faithfully answers his mother's calling.**

A mother calls her child and the child answers immediately. The answer of the child is due to the mother's call, not to the power of the child. In the same way, shinjin (entrusting heart) is not our own creation, but the natural answer to the call of Amida Buddha, the Compassionate Mother of all beings.

Because of Amida, we entrust ourselves in Amida and say nembutsu. Only because the mother always sends unconditional love to her child can he trust and rely on her. The faith of the child is in fact,

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<sup>29</sup> Trees from Asia that bear poisonous fruits.

<sup>30</sup> Trees from Asia that bear perfumed flowers.

the love of the mother which manifests in him. The mother is the one who actually feeds and makes the child grow. A child is nothing without a mother. The power of her love makes him grow, not his own power.

Shinjin and nembutsu are the echo – manifested in us, of the powerful call of Amida. When one is in the mountains and shouts in a loud voice, one automatically hears the echo. If you do not shout, no echo can be heard. In the same way, if Amida would not compassionately call to us, there would be no shinjin and nembutsu.

This matter – *shinjin and nembutsu come from Amida and are not created by us* – is very difficult to explain in words. In fact, these are beyond conceptual understanding. I am using here images to make my mind and heart, and the minds and hearts of the readers, to understand this important truth – that there is nothing we can call “ours” and “our creation”, especially shinjin and nembutsu.

I do not know if these images are the best. Just please use them, if you consider them useful, to abandon your thoughts of personal merit in receiving shinjin and birth in the Pure Land. Just rely on Amida Buddha and don't think on anything else. I do not use by chance the term “receive” and not the term “attain” when referring to shinjin.

Eiken Kobai Sensei explains in his book, *Understanding Jodo Shinshu*:

*“The shinjin that is the acceptance of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow and the nembutsu that we recite with our mouth, are absolutely not things that depend on our efforts. Rather, because they result solely from the Buddha-centered power, we refer to them as the shinjin of merit transference based on Buddha-centered power (tariki eko no shinjin) and the nembutsu of the merit transference based on Buddha-centered power (tariki eko no nembutsu.”*



