

Mark Unno

*Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism*

Week One: “Blind Passions, Boundless Compassion: The Foolish Being and the Awakening of Infinite Light”

February 5, 2022



Welcome. My name is Mark Unno, and I'm a professor of Buddhist studies at the University of Oregon. I'm also an ordained priest in the Shin Buddhist tradition, which is one of the largest schools of Buddhism in Japan. Shin Buddhism is part of the larger stream of Pure Land Buddhism, which is the most widely practiced form of Buddhism in East Asia, China, Japan, Korea, and also Vietnam.

In this series of video dharma talks entitled “Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism,” I will be introducing some of the core ideas and practices of Shin Buddhism and illustrating them with stories. In this first video entitled “Blind Passions, Boundless Compassion: The Foolish Being and the Awakening of Infinite Light,” I will be introducing some of the core ideas of Shin Buddhism and the core practice of Shin Buddhism, and I'll be illustrating these ideas and practices with a somewhat humorous story from my own experience.

At the heart of Shin Buddhism is contemplative practice, as is the case with most schools of Buddhism. For example, in Zen Buddhism, seated meditation is one of the core practices of the Zen Buddhist tradition. Shin Buddhism as well has contemplative practice at its core, but rather than seated meditation, in Shin Buddhism, we do chanting. There are many chants in Shin Buddhism, but the main chant that we do is called the name of Amida Buddha. In Japanese, it is pronounced *namu amida butsu*. *Namu amida butsu* is a Japanese attempt to try to copy the sound that comes from the original scriptures of Pure Land Buddhism in India. In India, the same name is derived from the Sanskrit *namo amitabha buddha*, where *namo* means “I bow” or “I entrust,” and “Amitabha Buddha” means the Buddha of Infinite Light.

To break this down a little bit more, *namo*, the one who vows, vows because that person realizes that they have attachments, delusions, what in Shin Buddhism we generally call blind passions that cause suffering, but they realize that because they're illuminated by the deepest truth, the

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dharmas. Pure Land Buddhism being part of the larger stream of Mahayana Buddhism, this truth is emptiness, oneness beyond words, the *dharmakaya*, the buddha body, which, in Shin Buddhism, is expressed as Amitabha Buddha or in Japanese Amida Buddha, the Buddha of infinite light. But just as emptiness is not something out there, Amida Buddha is not a being out there but our deepest, truest self, our deepest, truest reality. Because emptiness, the deep flow of the oneness, of reality of the dharmakaya or Amida Buddha beyond words is not static but dynamic, probably the more accurate translation for Amida Buddha is the dynamic awakening of infinite light.

To return to this core practice of saying or chanting *namu amida butsu*, *namu* is this being, foolish, filled with blind passions, delusions, and attachments, but when illuminated by the deeper greater reality of emptiness, oneness, and the awakening of infinite light, is realized, illuminated, enveloped, and embraced into the deep flow of the oneness of reality, which leads one to naturally release the grip of the ego attachments, to bring one's palms together, and to bow in humility, through which the foolish being filled with blind passions realizes they are, have always been, and will always be completely one with emptiness, oneness, the dharmakaya, the awakening of infinite light.

I'd like to explain this to you using a story, but before I do that, I just want to illustrate briefly what this chanting is like.

[Chanting] *Namu amida butsu. Namu amida butsu.*

Thank you.

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The story I'd like to tell comes from my own experience from many, many years ago when I was still a graduate student studying Buddhist studies. My wife and I were living in the Bay Area in northern California. There are many temples, including many Shin Buddhist temples, in the area, so I started to get invited to give talks at local temples. One year, I was invited to give a talk in a Buddhist temple in San Luis Obispo, which is several hours down the coast of California. Being a poor graduate student, I had a very bad used car, which had broken down many times, so I decided to rent a car at San Jose airport. I had an upgrade coupon, so I got a nice new red Thunderbird. The old car had a knob for air conditioning but no actual working air conditioning, so I got a nice new red Thunderbird with working air conditioning.

My wife was coming with me, and my cousin Scott, who also lived in the Bay Area, said he would also join us. The three of us got in this nice new red Thunderbird. We were driving down the freeway. We left in early evening. So I was driving down the freeway, and it started to get a little dark, so I turned on the headlights. I think I was trying to be particularly attentive on this trip because this was my first weekend seminar that I was giving at a Buddhist temple, all day Saturday and then also part of Sunday. I straightened up my posture, and I was paying special attention driving down the freeway. But as I was driving down the freeway, I noticed that the cars coming from the opposite direction didn't have their headlights on. I put on my thinking cap. I thought, Ah, I know what it is. It's rush hour. Everybody's distracted. Some people are thinking, “What's on TV? Are the kids behaving? What's for dinner?” But not me. I'm not distracted. My reaction was immediate. As soon as I noticed it was getting dark, I turned on the headlights.

I continued to drive for another 10–15 minutes, and then there was a tapping on my shoulder. It was my cousin Scott. He said “Mark, Mark, you can take off your sunglasses now.”

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I like to tell this story because it fits so well with this Shin Buddhist teaching of blind passions and boundless compassion. Buddhism is fundamentally about practice and awareness, not about doctrines and beliefs. I think this story illustrates this very well. I had all the right ideas: I should be prepared. I should be calm. I should be focused. I should be paying attention. But really, what was going on was I was just full of myself, thinking I'm this upcoming scholar of Buddhism. I had been invited to a weekend seminar. No, I was so blinded by my ego self-image of who I thought I was or should be that I literally could not see the sunglasses directly in front of my eyes, and I thought everybody else was deluded, whereas who was the deluded being? Who was the foolish being filled with blind passions? It was Mark Unno.

And what brought me to that realization was my cousin Scott extending his hand of great compassion. This part also works very well for illustrating this teaching of Shin Buddhism: blind passions and the realization of boundless compassion, the foolish being and the awakening of infinite light. Because my cousin Scott is very gentle, and the way that boundless compassion, the realization of emptiness and oneness, works, is also very gentle. Why? Because emptiness has no judgment. There is no right and wrong. Instead, emptiness, oneness, the awakening of infinite light, is much more like a mirror. When you look into the mirror, then you see any faults, any distortions that you yourself might have. The mirror makes no judgment. The mirror merely reflects back the true nature of yourself. In this case, it reflects back the true nature of the karmic self, the self that has attachments, blind passions, and delusions.

And so this is the dance of the foolish being and the awakening of infinite light, of blind passions and boundless compassion, in the Shin Buddhist tradition, which we realize in the contemplative practice of chanting namu amida butsu. I, this foolish being filled with blind passions, am illuminated, enveloped, and dissolved into the great flow of the oneness of reality, of the realization of emptiness, of the awakening of infinite light. Thank you very much.