



Hi everybody. I hope you enjoyed last week’s talk about how Shakyamuni Buddha and Master Shinran first had to fail to succeed in their practice. In fact, we talked about how the Blessed One, the Buddha, managed failure in conducting his ascetic practices, and how Master Shinran was very brave to admit he was no longer capable of carrying on ascetic practices after being assigned extreme practices like years of chanting while walking around a giant Buddha statue on Mount Hiei.

Today, we will see how Shinran Shonin used his failure to increase his faith in the Buddha's teachings, and how he encountered refuge in the sutras and decided never to leave the sangha. Indeed, he opened the Buddhist path to everyone—to ordinary people like you and me—and I hope we can understand how we can benefit from Shinran's faith. You see, we can find realization even if we are not the best practitioners.

Let me remind you about Shinran's practice. His teacher assigned him to walk around a statue of the Buddha while reciting the Buddha’s name for year after year. Let's concentrate on this last part of his practice. The recitation of the Buddha’s name is one of the ways of recollecting the Buddha that was taught by Shakyamuni as an alternative practice to sitting meditation. We can find those teachings in the Pali canon, more specifically in the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the *Dhammapada*, the *Satipatthana Sutra*, and the *Theragatha* poems, which pointed to the recollection of the three jewels—the Buddha, the dharma, and the sangha.

In the *Anguttara Nikaya*, the numerical discourses of the Buddha, a monk, Mahanama, asks Shakyamuni what he should do when he was not practicing sitting meditation or didn’t want to practice it. The Buddha explained the practice of recollection as a path to reach complete realization. In the *Theragatha*—a set of poems by elder monks—a disciple called Tekicchakani declared he had an ultimate experience of bliss recollecting the Buddha [*Theragatha* 6.2].



In the *Dhammapada*, we can read that those disciples who constantly prayed in recollection of the three jewels always awakened happily. The recitation of Buddha's name is one of many ways to recollect the Buddha. This practice is called *nembutsu* in Japanese, *buddhanusmrti* in Sanskrit, *buddhanussati* in Pali, or *nianfo* in Chinese. Basically, in the word *nembutsu*, *nem*, the first half of that word, means mindfulness in ancient Japanese. *Butsu* means Buddha. Then *nembutsu* means nothing more than to be mindful of the Buddha's teachings, or to recollect the Buddha. This is pure Buddhism and it is supported by ancient Pali and Chinese scriptures.

In the Mahayana traditions, the nembutsu takes the form of the “Namu Amida Butsu” phrase because it is based on *The Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*, in which Shakyamuni describes another blessed one—another Buddha or Tathagata—who had lived many, many *kalpas* [aeons] ago in a distant land, or even in a distant universe. Shakyamuni called him *Amida*, *Amitayus*, or *Amitabha*. As soon as Amida Buddha attained Buddhahood he declared 48 vows, conditioning the realization of his Buddhahood. In three of them—the 18th, 19th, and 20th vows—he talks about the recollection of the Buddha. In those three vows, he presents the nembutsu as a powerful tool to awaken and attain realization.

It is important to mention that in *The Larger Sutra*, Shakyamuni predicted the decline of dharma in the coming ages, affirming that enlightenment would become harder to achieve during times without a manifested Buddha. After many, many centuries the dharma would be forgotten, so it would be impossible to attain enlightenment. That point in time is called the *Kali Yuga* [the epoch of Kali], a reference to the Indian goddess of destruction. In Japanese, it's called *Mappo*. During Mappo, the obstacles to enlightenment will increase due to the corruption of the dharma, lack of ethics, and moral decadence.

In the sutra, however, Amida presents an alternative way for those living in a time with obstacles to dharma practice. He said we can aspire to be reborn in his pure land [celestial realm], the



Sukhavati Pure Land, to finish our practice and achieve enlightenment there; immediately after that, we can reach nirvana. This passage caught Shinran’s attention—he immediately compared his own situation with the one described in the sutra. The Kamakura period [1185–1333] in Japan was characterized by heavy criticism of monks’ and temples’ behavior. In Shinran’s mind, he was living in the time of Mappo. If he was living in Mappo, it would be practically impossible to attain enlightenment, and he wouldn’t be alone in trying to achieve it using ascetic practices that he couldn’t successfully pursue. *The Larger Sutra* fit Shinran’s situation very well, as well as that of all ordinary people living at that time who couldn’t go to the temple to practice because they had no spare time or were full of passions they could not get rid of.

When Shinran met Honen at Kurodani Hermitage, he found a warm refuge among monks and laypeople who shared the same afflictions. In a very short time, Shinran became a prominent member of the sangha, establishing debates about how the Nembutsu would help ordinary people attain enlightenment. Honen and Shinran always insisted that every sentient being would be capable of being reborn in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha instead of in this defiled world. Their message was music to the ears of thousands of ordinary people living around Kurodani. Even people in distant lands started to hear their message and traveled to listen to the teachings.

The nembutsu practitioners caught the attention of some Buddhist sects that became very worried about how Honen, Shinran, and their fellow monks’ increasing number of followers could change the status quo. Needless to say, the involvement of Buddhist schools with politics was very complex in the Kamakura period, and even in later times. As a result, the nembutsu brotherhood started to suffer pressures from what they called the School of Sages.

Most laypeople at that time could not read or write. Even if they wanted to study the sutras and scriptures, they couldn’t. Even if they wanted to copy the scriptures, they couldn’t. Since they had to work from sunrise to sunset, they could not spare time to practice the physical practices such



as prostrations or walking. So when Honen and Shinran came with the nembutsu, a very simple practice, ordinary people quickly took up that method and felt closer to the dharma and those monks.

They started to see the monks as good friends with the same passions, spiritual troubles, and difficulties as them, producing a profound change in the way Buddhism would be practiced from that time on. Because of Shinran's failure, thousands, if not millions, of people could finally get in touch with the buddhadharma. I can affirm without any doubt that the Nembutsu Brotherhood was responsible for opening the dharma to the masses and simplifying it enough to be absorbed by any human being anywhere with any kind of intelligence or social status.

They started a brand-new democratic approach to the dharma by offering the easy practice of the nembutsu, which could be done anywhere and anytime, and was based on ancient scriptures unknown to the public until then. Today the Jodo Shinshu sect—the one founded by Master Shinran—has over ten thousand temples around the world and over three thousand ministers. They are impressive numbers, and they show the impact the Buddhist teachings have in people's hearts when we can show we are equals and when we compare mundane passions. Even imperfect beings, incapable of hours and hours of heavy practice, can awaken.

Shinran thought he was living during Mappo, or the Kali Yuga, but if we analyze our present time, we would say *we* are living in Mappo, too. We don't live in a different condition from those farmers and peasants from the Kamakura period. We might have different professions, but like them our lifestyles prevent us from having much time to go to a temple or dharma center to practice. At maximum, we try to go once a week and think it's okay. We are content if we can attend one retreat per year. Of course, we know people who abandon their profession, house, marriage, and family to dedicate their life in a monastery or dharma center, but what about the rest? What about us? What about you? Can't we attain Buddhahood too?

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Just because we fail to be cloistered, or we fail to carry on ascetic practice, doesn't mean we can't achieve enlightenment. It seems Shakyamuni thought about us and left a set of teachings tailored for anyone to use. Nembutsu is an easy practice, but it has complex meanings. We will explore the roots that support that practice in next week's video. I hope you enjoyed this little trip back to the Kamakura period to see how Pure Land Buddhism started in Japan. I hope we see each other next week. Namu Amida Butsu.