



Hi, I hope you are all well. We are back with my Dharma Talk, *Buddhist Teachings for Fools and Losers*. Last week, we learned about the roots of recalling the Buddha as well as how and why Shinran dedicated his life to the *nembutsu*. We also talked about an important sutra—*The Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*—in which Shakyamuni presents us with another Buddha called Amida, or Amitayus. We also talked about the *Mappo* times or the *Kali Yuga*, the era of destruction and of the dharma’s decline. During that era—this era—the dharma will decay and it will be more difficult to attain enlightenment. We also talked about how Shinran’s teaching was embraced by ordinary people of that time and still impacts the lives of millions around the world.

Let’s go back to the sutras. As I said last week, we have several sutras which talk about the recollection of the Buddha, or *nembutsu*, as an alternative way to attain Buddhahood or to be reborn in the pure lands. The pure lands are realms created by Buddhas to help people to awaken. They are places where there is no suffering, no attachments, and no distractions, so it is easier to practice there than in this turbulent world we live in.

Some scholars say pure lands are physical worlds far away from here, and others say they are states of mind. I will not address that question in this series; I will let you choose which one you believe. Don’t worry, the effect is the same—believe me. A physical place or a state of mind—it makes no difference. Amida Buddha projected a pure land, as had all the other Buddhas who lived before and after him. That pure land is called *Sukhavati* in Sanskrit, and in Japanese it’s called *Jodo*. That’s why our school is called Jodo Shinshu, or the true school of pure land.

It is said that Amida’s Pure Land resides in the West. But don’t be excited; it’s not located close to California or Hawaii, unfortunately! It is west of Mount Meru—the center of the universe according to Buddhist cosmology, which is totally different from our conception of the universe. But this is a little complex, so let’s put this topic aside for now. Amida’s Pure Land is a land with



a lake in which lotus flowers grow as big as the wheels of a wagon. The lake is surrounded by trees higher than the Empire State Building, from which drop precious gems. The sun shines every day, there are no clouds, and the celestial beings who live there wake up every day to soft music and flower petals falling from the sky.

In other words, it's a very nice, warm paradise. Amida Buddha lives there, and he teaches the dharma every single day from the balcony of his palace. This description appears in the three Mahayana sutras called the *Amida Sutra*, the *Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*, and the *Contemplation Sutra*. The description of the Sukhavati Pure Land is the same in all of them even though the translations from Sanskrit into Chinese were made at different times and were done by different translators. The concept of the pure land also appears in the Pali canon in several suttas like the *Maha-sihanada Sutta*; in that tradition, the pure land is called *Suddhavaśa*, or “Pure Abodes.”

In both traditions, those reborn in those lands will never return to samsara. After attaining Buddhahood there, they follow to nirvana. It's curious that a lot of people can't connect the pure land teachings from Mahayana with ancient scriptures, but they are all connected. They are as valid as any other Buddhist teaching.

Shinran based his practice on four aspects: the nembutsu recitation, the pure land rebirth, the Primal Vow, and the confident mind.

We already talked about the nembutsu and the pure land. We need to talk about this Primal Vow and how it relates to the confident mind. Last week, I told you Amida made 48 conditioning vows to attain Buddhahood. Among those 48, three of them addressed the nembutsu, the recollection of Buddha—the 18th, the 19th, and the 20th vows. Let me concentrate on the 18th vow. In the Buddha's words, the vow states:



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. Excluded, however, are those who commit the five gravest offenses and abuse the right dharma. [*The Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*].

This vow is called the Primal Vow, or *hongan* in Japanese. It is very important because the Primal Vow was the basis of Shinran’s approach to guaranteeing we all can attain Buddhahood—some here in this time and era, but most of us in a pure land. We can all attain Buddhahood, even those who can’t practice, have a mind full of poisons, or those who have failed badly in life. When Shinran understood the power of those teachings, he started to call himself Gutoku, which means "foolish body." Yes, Gutoku, foolish body. He used it to say that if it were not for the Primal Vow he would be reborn in hell due to the lack of success in his practice.

Shinran put so much confidence in these teachings that he said something along these lines, “If I trust Shakyamuni Buddha, I trust my Master Honen. Because if Honen is wrong, Shakyamuni is wrong, and only hell could be my fate.” He was fully devoted to the Primal Vow and to the recitation of nembutsu as a key practice for attaining a rebirth in the [Sukhavati] Pure Land, then leading to Buddhahood. At this point, I think it is clear to all of you why these teachings spread so fast. It was because it freed ordinary people from having to depend on temples to practice. You may also understand why other Buddhist scholars and monks attacked the nembutsu group so vigorously.

We have four basic areas of practice: the nembutsu, the [concept of the] pure land, the Primal Vow, and the confident mind. Let's learn what the confident mind is. Remember, the Primal Vow states, “sentient beings in the lands of ten quarters, who sincerely and joyfully entrust themselves



to me...” Those are the Buddha’s words in the 48th vow. To “sincerely and joyfully entrust” means to recite the name of the Buddha with no doubt, without a single trace of misgiving. That is what we call confident mind, or *shinjin* [clear mind, faith] in Japanese. Once we acquire *shinjin*, our rebirth in the pure land is safe and guaranteed. And since there is no possibility of regression, we start to transform our minds here and now in this world. We declare we are not able to deal with our poisons and bad karma. We declare we’re unable to just erase our passions from our life. Instead of trying to be the perfect purified person that we will never be, the pure land teachings focus on the recognition that we are fools and losers in this realm. Because by recognizing we are full of passions and knowing we *still* can be reborn in a pure land, we will rest in *bodhicitta*—the pure mind, the Buddha mind.

That's why we call it the teaching for fools and losers, because we don't fiercely try to transform our minds at any cost and take the risk to cause harm to ourselves through extreme practices. We entrust ourselves to the Buddha's compassion and his Primal Vow. It is clear to most of you we practice with spiritual materialism generated by our egos. We can practice for hours, take part in endless initiation ceremonies, and go on dozens of retreats, but when we come back home, most of us are swallowed back into the reality of our daily lives. We are challenged to keep our minds clear and pure 24 hours a day, trying badly to produce only good karma. But who can do that? Who is capable of maintaining a practice like that?

Shakyamuni said we can get rid of the poisons of our mind by following the Middle Way. In a simple analysis, this would produce enough good karma to compensate for our bad karma. But let me ask you something: What did you eat for dinner five days ago? Only five days ago? What about 30 days ago? If we can't remember what we did 72 hours ago, how can we make karma count for our entire life? And if we had hundreds of other lives we lived before? Since we're harvesting the fruits of the karmic seeds planted in those lives, how much good karma do we need to produce to compensate for our bad karma?

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Yes, it's hard. When you consider all our passions and the over-stimulated situations we live in, everything becomes more difficult. Of course, history is full of people who overcame all of these situations and reached the goal. But as Shakyamuni said, we are living in the time of Mappo. We still have good practitioners around, but they are becoming scarce. The good news is we have a special method reserved for us. As the Buddha discussed and Shinran emphasized, we just need to really believe and entrust ourselves to the heart of dharma, symbolized by nembutsu, to attain a confident mind which will stamp our passport to the [Sukhavati] Pure Land where we will be able to practice free from suffering. Then, there, we can reach enlightenment. After that, we can go to nirvana.

I hope you enjoyed this explanation. Next week, we will talk about how to apply the recollection methods in our daily lives. We will talk about mindfulness—right speech, right actions—and how to develop compassion and wisdom using the nembutsu practice. See you later. Namu Amida Butsu.