

Shin Buddhism: A Path of Gratitude

Shifting your outlook from “please” to “thank you”

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When I was a young child, my family had a walnut tree in our yard. One day, while I was playing on the lawn, my mother asked if I could see the walnuts themselves growing on the tree. Unaware that walnuts grow inside of a green husk, I pictured them with their brown shells and couldn't see any. Because my expectation was different from how they actually appeared, they were invisible to me.

Shin Buddhism (a school of Pure Land Buddhism) in America has much of the same invisibility. It is hidden in plain sight because most Americans have an image of what Buddhism should look like, a notion centered largely on the practice of silent meditation. Shin Buddhism's rituals and chanting of sacred words are commonly mislabeled even by other American Buddhists as some type of "Christian" Buddhism. This assessment needs correcting.

Jodo Shinshu, or “True Pure Land Buddhism,” is the formal name for Shin Buddhism, the largest Buddhist sect in Japan. Like other sects, it poses a path to awaken to the reality revealed over 2,500 years ago by Shakyamuni Buddha, a reality he found by seeking resolution to the perennial existential questions of sickness, old age, and death. Looking for happiness and peace within the harsh conditions of life that challenge all of us, the Buddha revealed that the source of our discontent is our attachment to ego. The path that he offered to minimize this attachment ultimately encouraged many to renounce ordinary life and become monastics.

In 13th-century Japan, Shinran Shonin, the founder of Jodo Shinshu, was at first a Tendai Buddhist monk. After twenty years of rigorous monastic practice, however, honesty and integrity persuaded him that he was unable to let go of his attachment to ego. He left the monastery on Mount Hiei to follow Honen, a monk who was advocating a new form of Buddhism that accepted our egocentric nature and was suited for the common working person—not just monastics. Honen’s new perspective, which Shinran developed even further, revealed that even *with* our egocentric attitude, a sense of wisdom and compassion referred to as *shinjin*, or “true entrusting heart,” still prevails. And so down to today the point of Shin Buddhist practice has been to shift our mind from the constant desires of the ego to an appreciation for this underlying aura and the benefits we have already received.

Shinran writes:

The light of compassion that grasps us illuminates and
protects us always;
The darkness of our ignorance is already broken through;
Still the clouds and mists of greed and desire, anger and
hatred,
Cover as always the sky of true and real shinjin.
But though the light of the sun is veiled by clouds and
mists,
Beneath the clouds and mists there is brightness, not dark.

In this verse, the clouds and mist represent the source of our discontent: the egocentric desires noted by the Buddha in the second noble truth (the cause of suffering). Our basic ignorance and attachment to our ego-self cover the sky of truth. Yet Shinran points out that even with these hindrances there is still brightness, not dark. The sun is always shining.

Shinran continues: “When one realizes shinjin, seeing and revering and attaining great joy, one immediately leaps crosswise, closing off the five evil courses.” This crosswise leap, which provides a profound shift of perspective, poses a path to awakening that is not reliant on a future expectation; instead, it’s based on a realistic assessment of our present condition. Shin focuses on what has been received as opposed to what may be achieved.

Thus the practice of *nembutsu*, invoking the Buddha of the Western Pure Land, called Amida in Japanese, by voicing “Namo Amida Butsu,” is an expression of gratitude. The characteristic posture for nembutsu, in *gassho*, with palms together close to the chest with head slightly bowed, may be seen as a posture of prayer, or petition to have reality bent to our favor. Voicing “Namo Amida Butsu,” however, creates a shift in the practitioner’s own way of thinking. We change our reality by seeing what is already here. As Shinran said, “There is brightness, not dark.” The nembutsu isn’t a prayer that petitions for something better than what we have now. Nothing changes on the outside; rather, the change occurs inside.

To simplify this idea, we might capture the attitude that asks reality to satisfy ego with the single word “please.” “Thank you,” on the other hand, describes the essence of the nembutsu by acknowledging gifts already received. The foundation of Shinran’s revolutionary approach to awakening is the practice of shifting our mindset from an attitude of “please” to the reality of “thank you.” Shinran tells us that by reciting the nembutsu we realize—though still beneath the clouds of ignorance, greed, and hatred—the joy of life. It is a message we need to hear at precisely this time in history.

Shin Buddhist practice is not based on belief in an uncertain better future but instead places emphasis on the present moment—a moment made possible by the causes and conditions of the past. Many take for granted the efforts that generations of humans have made, along with the interdependence of *all* life forms, that contribute to our being here now. Taking these factors into consideration, we may even realize that the odds of our human birth on this small planet in a vast universe, coupled with the condition of life we inhabit in this moment on our billion-year evolutionary timeline, are truly infinitesimal. With natural thoughts of gratitude in mind, we can move our focus from the dread of death to the joy of birth.

The practice of taking refuge in the three treasures—the Buddha, dharma, and sangha—is followed in most Shin services. The reading begins with this observation: “Rare, difficult, and wondrous is it to be born into human life. Now we live it. Rare, difficult, and wondrous is it to hear the teaching of the Buddha. Now we hear it.” It ends with this aspiration: “Let us thoroughly understand the true meaning of the Buddha’s teaching.” The practice of recognizing the bliss of our ordinary life counteracts our unrealistic expectation of attaining eternal comfort. By expressing gratitude for the gift of life, we rest the heart and mind in a place of humility and grace.

The gassho posture and recitation of the nembutsu are often directed toward a picture or statue of Amida Buddha in human form, which could create another false assumption, namely, that Amida is a type of god. The Japanese name Amida, from Sanskrit *amita*, “limitless, infinite,” represents the two Sanskrit appellations for the Buddha of the Western Pure Land, Amitabha (“Immeasurable Light”) and Amitayus (“Limitless Life”). Light and life are two phenomena that comprise all known elements of the Earth. This reality of limitless life and light are personified as Amida Buddha. For contemporary practitioners, the voicing of “Namo Amida Butsu” goes beyond bonding with a godlike human form. It’s an expression of gratitude as we become awakened to human life’s inclusion in the process of dependent origination, in our oneness with Amida Buddha.

Gratitude, however, is just an introduction to the complete experience of the nembutsu. “Namo Amida Butsu” encompasses the wholeness of mind, body, heart, and spirit—an experience whose depth cannot be described by words alone. It is best experienced with the ambience and supportive attitude of a Shin community at a temple. Reciting Amida’s name is like an alarm clock that says “Wake up!” to the joy of being alive each and every day. Awakening to this rare gift of life, we can accept and endure the wide spectrum of human grief and bliss and become a source of happiness for others.

And as our ordinary lives are affirmed, they become a sacred journey. We become aware of the ordinary conveniences of food and shelter and the intimacy of friendship. Gratitude emerges in the company of family and friends. Watching a sunset becomes a spiritual experience. Appreciating the many ordinary encounters we have leads to a broader and deeper experience of life. “Namo Amida Butsu” becomes a natural state of gratitude that elevates us to and sustains us in the realm of the sacred.

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