



Hōnen

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*The Founding Master of Jodo Shu
(The Independent Pure Land School of Japan)*

By Bishop Joji Atone

Jodo Shu North America Buddhist Missions

Pure Land Buddhism, a form of Mahayana Buddhism, articulates a system of “posthumous enlightenment” attainable in the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss, a celestial realm established by the virtue of Amida Buddha’s compassion. According to this ideology, one who attains birth in the Pure Land will enjoy eternal life and unending bliss—while also achieving enlightenment.

Hōnen (1133-1212) founded Jodo Shu in order to give the ordinary, suffering people of Japan a path to attaining birth in the Pure Land regardless of their gender, age, social status, or the extent of their defilement. At the center of his method is the recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, called nenbutsu in Japanese. Reciting the words *Namu*

Amida Butsu (“I pay homage to Amida Buddha”) assures the speaker birth in the Pure Land, as Amida’s name contains within it no less than the religious merit of his enlightenment. According to Hōnen, because nenbutsu recitation is ‘easy’ compared to meditation, common mortals can practice it continuously until it is their time to be born in the Pure Land.

An American ethics scholar once said that when compared to other Buddhist practices, “Nenbutsu provides for far more people a more accessible venue for bringing a peaceful heart and consciousness where before there had been only a writhing soul and psyche of insatiable desires. Nenbutsu turns on within us the emotion of calmness.”

Great Short Message Introduced by “Essays in Idleness”

By Bishop Kosen Ishikawa

Hawaii Council Jodo Missions

Nowadays I am so grateful to have more and more opportunities to join in the online lectures and services broadcasted from Japan. Before this Pandemic, we needed to be physically there at a certain place and at a certain time in order to attend these lectures. We needed an expensive air ticket and lots of time just to go there. So we ministers in Hawaii rarely had this opportunity to take lectures while ministers in Japan have many chances to participate in the workshops and



The simultaneous Nenbutsu Recitation Meet in 2021 was sponsored by Jodo Shu Young Ministers’ Association. When you recited Nenbutsu and registered it, the lotus flowers were indicated on the map. .

lectures. It is amazing we can now easily join in the online lectures and they are mostly free!

It is true these online events made us busier, but I appreciate these opportunities, thanks to technology, especially chanting “Namu Amida Butsu” together with Dharma friends all over the world. Because January was the month when Hōnen Shonin passed away, I was able to join in the special Nenbutsu retreat called “Betsuji Nenbutsu” four times which were sponsored by different organizations.

Usually, one hour passes very slowly while chanting Nenbutsu because it is such a simple repetition of “Namu Amida Butsu.” If you are having fun time, one hour is nothing. It passes in no time. On the other hand, reciting “Namu Amida Butsu” for one hour is something. Sometimes people misunderstand and blame reciting “Namu Amida Butsu” is so boring. But if you can experience Nenbutsu for a long time beyond feeling boring, there is time you can feel oneness with Amida Buddha in addition to the merit of the birth in the Pure Land. That’s why I always chant Namu Amida Butsu for longer periods of time.

But when I participated in the Zoom Nenbutsu recently, I felt one hour passed so quickly. Wow, is it already one hour? Later I watched the video at YouTube after the service.

“Oh, my goodness!” I saw myself dozing off while chanting. No wonder time passed incredibly fast. But as I looked at myself, I knew somehow I was continuing to chant Namu Amida Butsu.

This reminded me of a famous episode of the Essay called “Tsurezuregusa” or “Essays in Idleness.” It is one of the best known medieval collections of



“The 1st Zoom Nenbutsu -Chanting “Namu Amida Butsu” internationally hosted by Hawaii Jodo Shu.”



essays written by a Buddhist monk, Yoshida Kenko (1283-1352).

Among 243 short passages, the author wrote about an interesting episode of our founder, Hōnen Shonin in the 39th passage. This is what the author learned, based on the question and answer between Master Hōnen and one of his students:

“One day, somebody asked Hōnen Shonin, “While reciting Namu Amida Butsu, I sometimes doze off. This may be very lazy. What will you suggest, Master?” Hōnen Shonin simply answered, “Just recite Nenbutsu when you wake up. That’s it.” What a precious teaching! Hōnen Shonin also said “It is for sure you can be born in the Pure Land if you surely think it’s possible. It is not sure about the birth in the Pure Land if you are not sure about it.” This is also very valuable.

Then Hōnen Shonin continued, “Even if you may have doubt, (don’t worry!) yet you can attain Ojo by reciting Namu Amida Butsu.” Again, this is also very precious!” (from Tsurezuregusa, the 39 Dan or passage)

What a great episode and essay! I love this essay not because I dozed off while chanting Nenbutsu lately but because of the great teachings of Hōnen Shonin were introduced in shorter words. It is very clear “Nenbutsu” is top priority for Hōnen Shonin. “Nenbutsu first and foremost” is his essential teaching because it gives us all chance of Ojo or the birth in the Pure Land equally without exception.

This episode tells us it doesn’t matter whether you are lazy or not. It doesn’t even matter whether you believe it or not. But whether we chant “Namu Amida Butsu” or not is nothing but an issue. In a sense, I understand Hōnen Shonin is telling us “Just do it!” for the sake of all the people. What a great short message!

The history of Jodo Shu missionary work in South America is the most recent among all and brings us one particular feature. Reverend Ryoshin Hasegawa was our first leader that advocated about the three basis to sustain a true mission. They should be Religion, Education and Social Work. At that time, Dr. Hasegawa noticed a large number of Japanese families with children of special needs but, unfortunately, the level of empathy and knowledge about the issue was very low.

Many veteran missionaries have witnessed sad episodes denoting social discrimination against these children and their families, as well as the missionary monks involved in these activities. Just to mention one single example, the missionaries were asked if they were going to “fix” these kids by chanting Nenbutsu. Not to mention the social marginalization the very siblings of these children suffered for being just brothers and sisters. No matter what, having a special needs child was also an issue that perpetuated their own families in poverty. “Kodomo No Sono” was established in 1958 in order to shelter children with special needs.

Few years later, a shelter for the elderly with no families was established in 1975 by Reverend Yomei Sasaki, naming it “Wajunkai” Shelter for the Elderly. Usually people associate an idea that people living in a nursing home supposedly have their own family. But, in this case, it is necessary to emphasize that those living there happened to have



Kodomo No Sono, shelter for children with special needs

no family at all. Given all this beforehand, finally we reached the point to start what matters here.

When we talk about Buddhism, its history and its teachings, we easily visualize a peaceful temple in the middle of wonderfully colorful greenery, with flower perfumes hard to describe, with a sound of birds never heard of before, and a monk reciting the sacred sutras that elevate the spirits of our hearts and minds to engage wisdom and compassion. However, we are so self-centered and selfish to the point that only when we are ready to learn, when we are at the right place and we are at the right time, we are prepared to deal with the teachings.

There are places like that in the real world but, nevertheless, for most of us have to deal with tasks beyond the Four Noble Truths, sort of speaking. When we actually deal with social work we take all these issues into consideration while living it 24 hours a day. It looks like a mess at a glance but there is an order that accommodates even chanting Nenbutsu. Beginning with the person that’s taken care of, for instance, the one living in the nursing home, the person has a name, a history, a personality, a place he or she was born and raised, his eating habits, health, sociability, and so on. Then come the entire team of professionals that take care of this person, not to mention his or her new friends met at the new place. And so on.

Life can be chaotic as it



Wajunkai, shelter for the elderly

is, but if one takes a good look at it, you will humbly take a step back and notice that, although that person you're taking care of doesn't verbalize well, his or her eyes are addressing a whole bunch of feelings and teachings that you end up realizing he or she was actually a true teacher of the nature of existence, to which all of us should be grateful. One

great mistake we do in social work is to presume that "we take care of them". Really? Maybe it is time to reconsider this perspective.

Namu Amida Butsu

<https://kodomonosono.org.br/>

<https://www.facebook.com/asilowajunkai>

Hōnen

By Rev. Tetsuyu Wilson

Jodo Shu Buddhism Community of Australia

The monks of Jodo Shu have been transmitting the teachings of their founder Hōnen Shonin (1133 – 1212) for nearly 850 years. His teachings are as relevant today as they were in his times. His message is clear. Simply chant the nenbutsu and one can be born in the Western Paradise of Amida.

Hōnen lived in a time of Japanese history that was marred by plague, famine, and civil wars. In addition, society was divided along feudal lines and it was the mass of commoners that suffered the most. Hōnen took pity on them. They toiled their whole life and there seemed to be no reprieve for them for this was also the time of Mappo, the Final Age of the Dharma. The Age when people were incapable of reaching Enlightenment.

Through his compassion, Hōnen searched the teachings of the Buddha to find a way for the common person or bonbu to escape the burning house of Samsara. At last, he came across the words of the Chinese monk, Shan-tao (613-681) who spoke of the salvific power of Amida. Shan-tao's commentaries and the three Pure Land Sutras gave Hōnen the impetus to leave the Tendai temples of Hiei-san and preach the nenbutsu.

The nenbutsu gave hope where there had been



Students enjoying Japanese cakes and tea after their Japanese lesson in our temple's *terakoya*

despair. It was an easy Buddhist practice that was accessible to all. By merely chanting the nenbutsu ten times, one was assured of birth in Amida's Western Paradise. This appealed to the common masses who had previously been excluded from salvation. Illiteracy prevented them from reading the sutras and hard toil prevented them from taking part in practices such as meditation. However, the nenbutsu could be chanted while sitting, standing, or walking. The bonbu was at last freed from the dread of being reborn into the harsh world that he had just left.

Having found hope, the bonbu could come to terms with life. Life was no longer intolerable. Civil strife, disease and famine persisted but one could begin to accept these harsh realities with equanimity. An end to suffering was achievable. And furthermore, it did



Members of Amidaji in Brisbane, Australia



Sutra copying at Amidaji

not matter who you were. Nenbutsu was there for everyone equally. One day, a prostitute asked Hōnen if she too, could be reborn in the Pure Land. He assured her that she could.

With the passage of time, our way of life has changed but we still find cause to despair the harsh realities that assail us from time to time.

Fortunately, when this happens Hōnen's teachings are still with us. They have been transmitted without change down through the ages by the monks of Jodo Shu. Moreover, the nenbutsu still gives hope and creates inner peace in the hearts of its devotees.

Namu Amida Butsu

Trusting in the immeasurable

By Rev. Koryu Koso
Jodo Shu European Buddhism Center

The principal teaching of Jodo Shu is to worship Amida Buddha while calling his name "Namu Amida Buddha" (Japanese pronunciation: "Namu Amida Butsu") repeatedly. Amida Buddha is one of the Buddhas who was mentioned and taught by the teaching of Gautama Buddha. In the Buddhist countries in Asia, Amida Buddha, also known as the Buddha of compassion has the largest number of followers.

Then what is the meaning of "Namu Amida Buddha"?

First of all, "Amita" in Sanskrit is an abbreviation of both Amitabha and Amitayus. Amitabha means "Infinite Light" and Amitayus means "Infinite (immeasurable) life". The word "Amita" can be divided into two parts; "A-" and "mita". The first syllable "A-" means "non" as a negation. On the other hand, "mita" means "measuring". So Amida is "something you cannot measure" or simply "unmeasurable".

Then, "namo" means "to take refuge in", "to adore" and "to respect". It is a flection of the Indian word "namas" which is used in the common greeting "namas+te", meaning "bowing to you."

Finally, "Buddha" is "the one who awakened to the truth".

So, "Namu Amida Buddha" can be translated as



Obon at the maison of the Bois de Boulogne in Paris

"I take refuge in the Buddha who cannot be measured beyond human knowledge". It is a powerful formula which we can use anytime when we are happy, sad, in any



Practice the Bon dancing

situation where we want to express our gratitude or, ask for salvation or purify our heart. Furthermore, Amida Buddha made vows to take you to his Pure Land when your life comes to an end.

Our founder of Jodo Shu, Hōnen Shonin (1133-1212) strongly believed that this simple phrase "Namu Amida Buddha" contains and expresses the whole Buddhist teaching in one expression.

Today, Jodo Shu has approximately 7,000 temples including branches in Hawaii, North America, Brazil, Australia and Europe (France).

Let us give a short introduction of the Jodo Shu European Buddhism Center which is located in France. Our Association meets once a month, and we study the teachings and history of Buddhism, pray together to Amida Buddha and call his name by reciting "Namu Amida Buddha". Moreover, we celebrate the annual ceremonies of Japanese Buddhism like "Gautama Buddha's Birthday", the commemoration of our ancestors, the O-Bon ceremony of gratitude to our ancestors, and other Buddhist ceremonies. Other activities consist of cultural exchange or convivial evenings.




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Hōnen Shonin (1133-1212)



Credit for the cover portrait of Hōnen Shonin: Saishoin Temple, Tokyo

The founder of Jodo Shu

Hōnen studied and practiced Buddhism at Mt. Hiei, the center of Buddhist study at the time.

He read through all of the Buddhist scriptures available and it was Master Shantao's commentary on the Meditation Sutra which inspired him to put aside all practices other than nenbutsu. He had conviction only nenbutsu was rightly activity that would lead to salvation without fail, for it accorded with the essential vow of Amida Buddha.

This religious conviction occurred when he was 43 years old. After realizing the truth of nenbutsu, Hone left Mt. Hiei for Kyoto and began to spread the teaching of nenbutsu. In the spring of 1175, he founded Jodo Shu.