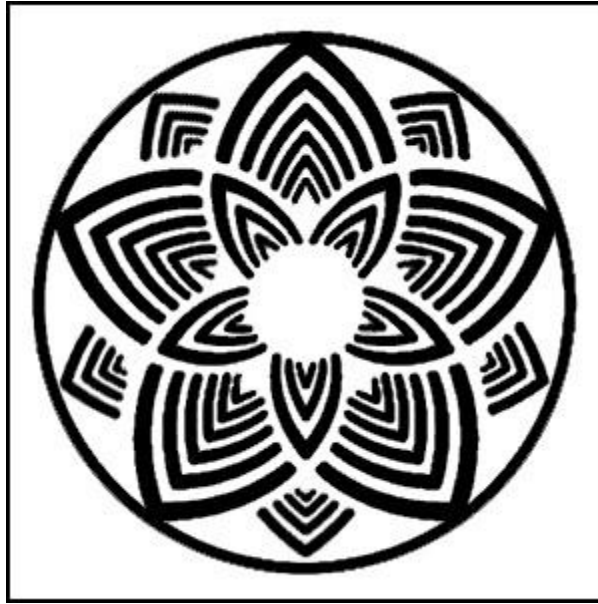




STUDY 6B

The Way of Nembutsu Faith
A Commentary on Shinran's Shoshinge
by Hisao Inagaki.

Lines 21 – 40

Sakyamuni's Sacred Task (lines 21-24)

**The reason for the Buddha's appearance in the world is, above all,
to expound the Primal Vow of Amida, wide and deep as the ocean.
All beings in the evil age of the five defilements
Should believe in the truth of the Buddha's words.**

Sākyamuni Buddha was born into a royal family in India about the 6th century B.C. Having seen the miseries of human existence, he renounced the world and became a mendicant to seek the way of salvation for himself and for all living beings. He tried various methods advocated by his contemporary religious masters, but found them useless in achieving his objective. He finally took to cross-legged meditation, through which he attained the highest perfect wisdom and thus became an Enlightened One - the Buddha.

Speaking in terms of our common-sense understanding, Sākyamuni was born and died as a man; he became a Buddha at the age of thirty-five and passed into Nirvana at eighty. For forty-five years he expounded the Dharma to people like a physician prescribing different medicines to patients of different illnesses or like an experienced instructor giving appropriate teachings to students of different capacities. Some are meant for the wise, some for those capable of difficult meditative practices, some for those capable of observing the precepts, and so on.

Since human beings are deeply attached to themselves, they are prone to depend on their own power to attain their objectives. It is for this reason that Sākyamuni, by skillful means, first provided them with various methods of 'self-power' practice which would be easier for them to begin with. By so doing, he prepared the way for the Other-Power teaching of salvation.

The concept of Buddha differs greatly in Theravada and Mahayana. The Theravada generally follows a pattern of thought acceptable to rational thinking, while the Mahayana presents theories transcending human reason. In the Theravada, Buddhahood is the result of practices over many lives. The Mahayana, while accepting this concept in its Bodhisattva ideal, further reveals a deeper truth which is transcendental and multi-dimensional.

Sākyamuni did not for the first time become a Buddha in India; he is originally a Buddha, an eternal Buddha. According to the Mahayana definition of Buddha, he has three bodies: (1) Dharmakāya, the body of ultimate truth and reality; (2) Sambhogakāya, the body of bliss with glorious manifestations of his supreme merit; and (3) Nirmānakāya, the body of incarnation. The first two bodies represent the transcendental nature of the Buddha, and the third body through his earthly manifestation saves living beings. Thus, in the *Lotus Sutra*, Sākyamuni is described as an everlasting Buddha, and the *Nirvana Sutra* stresses the ever presence of Buddhahood.

The relationship between Sākyamuni and Amida is not like that of humans which is based on diverse, and often mutually contradictory, wishes and interests. All Buddhas have one and the same body of truth, the same wisdom and compassion; in other words, they share the same Dharmakāya. Although different methods of salvation and different Buddha-lands are described in Mahayana sutras, they are multi-

dimensional contents of the self-same Dharmakāya. T'an-luan in his *Commentary on the Discourse on the Pure Land* states that all Buddhas and Bodhisattvas have two kinds of Dharmakāya: (1) Dharmakāya as the ultimate reality, and (2) Dharmakāya as manifested through skillful means. The former is the aspect of universality and equality, and the latter, that of particularity and diversity. It follows then that Sākyamuni and Amida are different but one, one but distinguishable. In the *Larger Sutra* we find the wonderful accord of Sākyamuni and Amida in their common objective of saving us. In the first place, Sākyamuni became one with Amida in the Samadhi of Great Tranquillity, and in that capacity he expounded Amida's Vows. Shinran accepted Amida as a manifested Dharmakāya Buddha and, at the same time, saw in him the universal and everlasting Buddhahood, as he says:

Having entered the Samadhi of Great Tranquillity, Sākyamuni Buddha
manifested his glorious countenance;
Hearing Ānanda's wise observation,
The Buddha praised him for asking an appropriate question. (*Hymns on the
Pure Land*
53)

The Buddha appeared in this world To reveal the truth of the Primal Vow;
It is extremely difficult to meet a Buddha,
As rare as seeing an udumbara flower. (Ibid. 54)

Since Amida attained Buddhahood
Ten kalpas have passed, so says the sutra;
But he appears to be an old Buddha,
More ancient than innumerable kalpas of the past. (Ibid. 55)

We humans have no real control over our lives; we are helplessly at the mercy of our self-created karma. But Enlightened Sages, like Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, have not only been liberated from the bondage of karma but have accumulated immeasurable good karma, with which they establish glorious Buddha-lands and engage in endless works of benefiting others. Having realized the ultimate principle of non-duality, they dwell neither in Samsara nor in Nirvana. This means that they have risen above Samsara and Nirvana, but because of the vows made at the outset of the Bodhisattva's career, they freely enter into samsaric worlds to save those beings who suffer there.

When Sākyamuni was born in this world, did he have a definite objective in view? This has been a popular topic of discussion among Buddhists for many centuries. Each school or sect has its own argument to claim that its teaching is the highest representing the Buddha's real intention and that other teachings were set forth as expedient means for those not yet ready to receive the ultimate teaching. Thus Zen, for example, asserts that the Buddha-Mind transmitted directly from Sākyamuni outside the written scriptures is the core of Zen and is superior to other approaches which are based on them. Tendai has an elaborate system of classification of the Buddha's teachings to prove that Tendai upholds the highest doctrine. Shingon claims that the esoteric doctrine revealed by the Dharmakāya Buddha, Mahāvairocana, is far superior to exoteric ways.

Life is not long enough to study all the practices to find the best. Even if we do enjoy a long life, it would be all but impossible to practice meditation as prescribed and to observe the precepts required for successful practice.

According to Shinran, the real intention of the Buddha's appearance in the world was to expound the *Larger Sutra* and save beings through the Nembutsu. In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, chapter on True Teaching, Shinran first declares that the True Teaching is the *Larger Sutra* and then explains its essentials as follows:

Amida Buddha made the unsurpassed Vow and opened widely the Dharma-store; taking pity on men of limited capacities, he selected the treasure of virtues (i.e. Amida's Name) and bestowed it upon them. Sākyamuni appeared in this world and expounded various teachings, but particularly desired to save multitudes of beings by endowing them with the true benefit of the Name. Thus the primary intention of this sutra is to expound Amida's Primal Vow, and the essence of the sutra is his Name.

Shinran's teacher, Honen, was dedicated wholly to the Nembutsu and recommended it to all, saying that it is the easiest and yet the supreme practice. While following Honen's teaching, Shinran went a step further and made clear that the Name and the Vow are actually working behind our recitation of the Nembutsu, not our own power. He thus cautioned us against reliance on our self-power which is both limited and defiled by blind passions.

Shinran's Other-Power teaching is clearly distinguished from the rest of the teachings of Sākyamuni which emphasize cultivation of wisdom by one's own power. Even if one follows a path of self-power, one will eventually realize that what actually enlightens one is the Power of the Buddha. When we come to take refuge in Amida, our eyes are opened to his boundless Wisdom, Compassion, and Power. Then we will see that there is nothing in the world that is not pervaded by Amida. As such Amida is appropriately called 'the Tathāgata of Unhindered Light Shining throughout the Ten Directions'. He made himself known to us through the Amida-Samadhi, and later the whole truth about Amida was related in the Larger Sutra. When we receive this sutra with joyful faith, we find ourselves bathed in the Light of Amida's Great Compassion.

Attaining Buddhahood through the Nembutsu is the teaching of the True Religion;
Ten thousand practices and various acts of merit are temporary teachings.
Unable to distinguish the true and real teaching from temporary and provisional,
Many fail to see the path to the Pure Land of Naturalness. (*Hymns on the Pure Land*
71)

Sentient beings, having remained long in the expedient ways
Of temporary and provisional teachings in the Path of Sages,
Have been subject to transmigration in Samsara.
Take refuge in the Ultimate Teachings of Great Compassion. (*ibid.* 72)

Amida's Salvation: Emancipation from Karmic Bondage (lines 25-28)

**If the single thought of Joy and Gratitude is awakened in us,
We shall realize Nirvana without severing our blind passions.
When ordinary people and sages as well as those who commit the
gravest offenses and abusers of the Dharma are taken into the Vow,
They become one in spiritual attainment, just as many rivers become
of one taste upon entering the sea.**

The English term 'salvation' as used loosely in Shin Buddhism has a different connotation from that in other religions. Usually, this term, like the other key-word, 'faith', presupposes three elements: (1) the existence of a certain divine being who is the savior, (2) those to be saved, and (3) the act of saving in response to their needs and request. Salvation will mean that through the special favor or grace of the divine being the faithful are delivered from their conditions of suffering and enabled to enjoy a happier life here and hereafter.

In Shin Buddhism (and for that matter in other forms of authentic Buddhism), there is no favor or grace to be given to special individuals. If one has gained what appears to be a special grace of Amida and attained shinjin, it is not because of the devotion which has been offered up to Amida, but in accordance with the law of karma, which was explored to its depth and fully utilized by Dharmakāra.

At all levels of existence, from the lowest hell to the Buddha-lands, the law of karma reigns with irresistible force. Those in the states of samsaric existence, including ourselves, are ignorant of this law and unable to use it for spiritual elevation. We are given to greed, anger and stupidity, and unawares allow ourselves to be at the mercy of karmic power.

Thus the first lesson in Buddhism is to know clearly how the law of karma is working at the level of our existence. We are taught that good acts bring about happiness and evil ones, suffering. Then we learn about ways of improving our karma: first the moral teaching which promises rebirth in heavenly realms in the world of desire; then meditation exercises which purify our karma and, if successfully practiced, will bring about its due reward in still higher spiritual realms of form and non-form. At a more advanced level, we learn how to put an end to our karmic activities so that we will not endure any more suffering in samsaric existence but dwell in the everlasting bliss of Nirvana.

In the earlier teaching of Buddhism, the existence of an individual is explained as a composite of the five aggregates (*skandha*). This is not a mere conglomeration of elements to be thought of objectively in mathematical or scientific terms, but some latent subjective agent that brings together constituent elements is alluded to, without admitting the existence of a permanent self, called 'atman'. In the Buddhist theory of karma, it is the momentum of psycho-physical energy that collects various elements to form an individual. If one does evil deeds, one's karma collects the elements which are unpleasant and not beneficial to oneself and others; in the

extreme case, the torments of hell. If, on the contrary, one does good deeds, one's karma is purified and attracts the elements which are pleasant and beneficial. In the process of purification, one's karma absorbs subtle material elements and, in a still more advanced stage, only spiritual elements. In the final stage, as one's karma is totally extinguished, it ceases to draw to itself any physical or mental element, leaving the complete serenity and bliss of Nirvana to pervade everywhere, into which the subjective agent itself merges as well.

That is not the whole story of the karmic law. Mahayana Buddhism gives the concept of karma new dimensions of meaning. First, it reveals that the law of karma is not restricted to individual beings but, in its subtle and deeper aspect, is working at the root of their karmic activities. In this sense, the theory of universal interrelation or dependent origination (*pratītya-samut-pāda*) should be considered as connected with the law of karma.

How one's evil karma is removed or compensated for is the most important practical problem in any Buddhist school. In the Pure Land tradition in general, the efficacy of the Nembutsu is emphasized over and beyond other practices. The Contemplation Sutra states that the Nembutsu can destroy even the worst karmic transgression and become the cause of birth in the Pure Land. The Third Master T'an-luan took great pains in his *Commentary on the Discourse on the Pure Land* to explain how this is possible. He first raises a question:

Some sutras explaining the law of karma state that it is like a balance, which a heavier object pulls down. According to the *Contemplation Sutra*, those who have committed the five gravest offenses and the ten evil acts and those with various adverse karma, will fall into the lowest realms, where they will pass many kalpas undergoing immeasurable sufferings. But if, at their death, they meet with a good friend, who urges them to recite the Nembutsu, and so repeat it ten times continually with sincere heart, then they will attain birth in the Pure Land of Peace and Bliss. There they will join the group of those who are rightly established in the Mahayana. Thus, they will not retrogress from the attainment of Enlightenment and will forever be free from various sufferings in the three evil realms. How is this explained in the light of the law of karma according to which a heavier load pulls one down? Furthermore, from the beginningless past, sentient beings have been immersed in various defilements and so they are tied to the three worlds of Samsara. If they can attain emancipation from the three worlds by merely remembering Amida Buddha with ten repetitions of the Nembutsu, what will become of the bondage of karma?

To this question, which is a perennial one for all Shin Buddhists, T'an-luan gives the following answer:

You consider the bondage of karma, such as the five gravest offenses and the ten evil acts, as heavy, and the ten repetitions of the Name by a man of the lowest level of the lowest grade as light Whether a certain act creates dominant karmic force or not is dependent on (1) the state of mind, (2) its object, and (3) the degree of concentration, and not by length of time. (1) The state of mind: The

evildoer in question has committed evils in a false and inverted state of mind, whereas the ten repetitions of the Name arise when he hears the teaching of Truth from a good friend. One is true and the other false. How can you compare them? Suppose there is a room which has been dark for a thousand years. If a light is cast into the room even for a short while, the room will instantly become bright. How could the darkness refuse to leave because it has been there for a thousand years?

(2) The object of mind: With deluded thoughts the evildoer has committed vicious acts to other sentient beings who have also come into existence as the result of evil passions and delusive thoughts. Ten repetitions of the Nembutsu arise from the unsurpassed

Faith taking as its object the Name of Amida Buddha who has a glorious body of upaya (skilful means) and comprises immeasurable merits which are pure and true

(3) The degree of concentration: The evildoer who has committed transgressions expects some result, and so his mind is distracted by other thoughts. Ten repetitions of the Nembutsu are based on a state of mind which does not anticipate any result and is, therefore, not deluded by other thoughts. From the above observation it is clear that ten re-petitions of the Nembutsu are stronger than the five deadly transgressions or the ten evil acts, and so it prevails, enabling the evildoer to escape from the three worlds.

Although Master T'an-luan mentions 'unsurpassed Faith' which underlies the repetitions of the Nembutsu, his general tone is that he admits the efficacy of the devotee's concentrated practice of it. For Shinran Shonin the Other-Power Faith is of paramount importance, and Nembutsu practice is not the prerequisite for birth in the Pure Land. But it should be emphasized that one who attains Faith, spontaneously achieves a high degree of concentration, in which one is totally encompassed by Amida and the Nembutsu continually arises in one's mind.

Conversion from self-power teachings to the Other-Power Way means a complete change in the basis for one's existence, accompanied by a reversal in the course of our karma. When the *Contemplation Sutra* explains the salvation of wicked persons through the Nembutsu, it refers to two aspects: (1) explicitly, the method of practice that the devotee should follow and (2) implicitly, Amida's saving power originating from his Vows. The explicit teaching of this sutra does encourage concentrated practice of the Nembutsu, and so, the Pure Land masters in China and Japan generally followed this and further developed systems of practice centering on the Nembutsu. But implicitly the *Contemplation Sutra* reveals the Other-Power aspect which is fully explained in the *Larger Sutra*. These two sutras had apparently separate origins and different courses of transmission, but in China they joined together to form a major current of Pure Land thought flowing through the whole history of Chinese Buddhism.

The relationship between the Name, Nembutsu and shinjin (Faith) is a delicate one, which needs to be clarified by the expositions in the sutras and by our experience of

salvation. In the *Contemplation Sutra*, in which the Nembutsu is first applied to grave karmic transgressors on their deathbeds, they are simply taught to say the Nembutsu because it is the most effective prescription for those who need immediate help. The evildoers mentioned in this sutra as those of "the lowest level of the lowest grade" have committed the gravest offences and various evils, and so, at their death, they are naturally full of agony and are terrified by the fearful signs of karmic retribution. Under these circumstances, they have no ears to listen to the Dharma and no time to reflect on the evils that they have committed. The Nembutsu given at that ultimate moment can penetrate to the depth of their minds and find its expression on their lips as "*Namu Amida Butsu*". The Nembutsu thus received in the mind and repeated with the voice has the effect of reversing the whole course of their karma, leading them safely to the realm of Enlightenment – the Pure Land.

T'an-luani's explanation of the efficacy of the Nembutsu, which was quoted above is relevant to the essential nature and working of the Name. Following the explicit teaching of the *Contemplation Sutra*, T'an-luan says that the Nembutsu which the evildoer says at the time of his death is the sufficient cause of his birth in the Pure Land, but T'an-luan implicitly refers to the *Larger Sutra* when he says, as quoted before, that the Nembutsu "arises from the unsurpassed Faith taking as its object the Name of Amida Buddha which comprises

innumerable merits". This explanation can be taken to mean that the truly efficacious Nembutsu must come from the Other-Power Faith and that such Nembutsu arises as Amida's self-expression through the Name.

Salvation in Shin Buddhism, as set forth straightforwardly by Shinran Shonin, reverses the popular belief in the efficacy of the Nembutsu based on one's power. He takes great pains in showing that the Nembutsu is nothing but the Name in action. When received deeply in the mind, the Name gives rise to Faith; then the Name expresses itself as the Nembutsu of acknowledgement and gratitude. Whether the Nembutsu is true or not is thus dependent on the state of mind in which it is practised. A Nembutsu devotee without Faith has no settled mind (*anjin*); when the Name is correctly received in the devotee's mind, Amida's Wisdom, Compassion and merits are also transferred to him at the same time. Such a state of mind is called *shinjin*, and for the Nembutsu practitioner of *shinjin*, true joy of salvation and gratitude to Amida naturally accompany the Nembutsu.

Even though we lack sincerity of heart and deep faith in the Dharma and also are incapable of diligent practice of the Buddhist Path, we are enabled by the Power of Amida's Vow to participate in the Great Work of Mahayana Bodhisattvahood. The "single thought of Joy and Gratitude" awakened in us marks the moment of our entry into this spiritual realm of truth and happiness.

Those who attain Serene Faith of Joy,
Rejoicing greatly in a moment of spiritual unity with
Amida, Through the Vow of Universal Salvation,
Shall be born in the Pure Land without fail. (*Hymns on the Pure Land* 26)

'Salvation' in Shin Buddhism means, above anything else, liberation from the bondage of karma. Since our defiled karma is created by our blind passions, which arise from our basic ignorance, our bondage to karma cannot be eliminated without removing our blind passions and ignorance. Let us first clarify the causal relationships between ignorance, blind passions, and the state of karmic bondage in accordance with the fundamental Buddhist theory of the "twelve causations".

As we all know, the Buddha Sākvamuni's renunciation of the world was motivated by a quest for the cause of the suffering of life. After six years' search for the answer, he finally found it while sitting in meditation under the Bodhi-tree. As he meditated deeply on the painful reality of life, he discovered that the condition of birth and death was caused by the state of existence. Next, he found that the state of existence was caused by grasping. In that way, his meditation brought him deeper and deeper inside, until he came to the ignorance at the base of his existence. The moment he realized it, that ignorance was gone and thus he attained Enlightenment.

Since, in Shin Buddhism, salvation is achieved when we receive Amida's Wisdom, Compassion and Merits through the Name, settling of shinjin should mean elimination of this basic ignorance. Let us first examine the implications of the twelve causations. (1) Ignorance (*avidyā*), which lurks in the depth of our existence; it covers up the mind at its root and hinders it from perceiving the ultimate reality. (2) Conditioned by ignorance, blind volition or force (*samskāra*) arises; this is the karmic energy before one's individual character is formed. (3) Next, consciousness (*viññāna*) arises; this is explained as the 'apperceptional principle' or the 'life potency of the sensory side of individuality', which may be considered as the subconscious or pre-conscious activity. (4) Next, conditioned by consciousness, 'name and form' (*nāma-rūpa*) are produced; they are the immaterial and material factors which together constitute an individual existence. (5) Next arise the six sense-organs (*sad-āyatana*), i.e., eyes, ears, nose, tongue, tactile organ, and mind, followed by, (6) contact with the external objects (*sparsā*), and (7) sensations (*vedanā*). (8) Next desire for pleasure (*trsnā*) arises; this includes strong craving and lust and represents all evil passions. (9) Next arises the act of grasping what one desires (*upādāna*), which is followed by (10) the state of existence (*bhava*). (11) Then, birth (*jāti*) and (12) decay and death (*jarā-marana*) occur.

The twelve causations reveal many inner facts about our samsaric existence. According to the popular view in early Buddhism, the first two are related to the cause in the past life, the next five are their results in the present life, and the following three, i. e., from desire to the state of existence, act as the cause of the next life; the last two are their result. In order to attain liberation from the cycle of samsaric causations, one must get rid of 'desire' and 'ignorance'.

The Buddha taught us various methods of liberation, each in correspondence with an individual's propensity and capacity. But it is clearly all but impossible to remove, with our own power, the factors which constitute our existence. Since all our efforts are defiled by 'desire' and 'ignorance', how can we make 'pure' efforts? The answer is given by the Buddha himself and the Pure Land masters. The Seven Masters invariably taught that we should avail ourselves of Amida's Power of the Vow. The heart of trusting in the Power of the Vow is shinjin. Since this heart does

not arise from our defiled minds but is Amida's Mind given to us, it is free of defilements. The moment we receive it, or rather we are received by Amida, our spiritual darkness is gone. Even though we have not yet severed blind passions, their roots have already been cut, so that they will not bear the fruit of suffering in Samsara. Thus attainment of Nirvana is promised us. After relinquishing the causes and effects of the samsaric existence, we will forever enjoy the pleasure of the Dharma for ourselves and help others to enjoy it as well.

The term 'salvation' is interpreted in various ways in different religions. Within Buddhism, this term has different meanings in Hinayana and Mahayana. Even within the Mahayana, various schools and sects give this term specific meanings. There are at least three clearly distinguishable levels of understanding about 'salvation'.

The first is the common-sense level, in which this term is used in a socio-religious sense. For example, to remove social evils and help the destitute and handicapped people is the popular activity of salvation. Since religious organizations exist in society, they are expected to fulfil their functions to remove causes of social evils and sufferings and establish a better society. So it is natural that every religious organization should have this aspect of activity, but the emphasis placed on it varies in each religion. Right from the beginning, Buddhism has had this aspect of salvation in its teaching, but the idea behind it has been above the level of morality or sociological concerns. While encouraging its followers to be kind to all living beings and engage in social welfare activities, Buddhism primarily aims at removing the root-cause of their sufferings.

The second level is attained by turning one's attention to the subjective self. This does not simply mean introspection or reflection on oneself in the ordinary sense of the term, nor do it involve deepening of one's guilty feelings for social evils. The focal point of understanding of the meaning of 'salvation' on this level is the law of karma. On the first common-sense level, the law of karma as taught in Buddhism is not yet fully appreciated. It has no deeper meaning to ordinary people than a didactic teaching. On the second level, one learns the law of karma as a guide to understanding the root-cause of sufferings. But we must be careful not to mix up the Buddhist teaching of the law of karma with the Hindu concepts of karma. Both believe in transmigration and propose methods of attaining liberation from it, but Buddhism is different from the ordinary Hindu views in not admitting the permanent self (*ātman*)

Buddhism conceives of one's existence as a process of becoming in the nexus of causal relationships. Of the twelve links of causations, we find that the first three, i.e., ignorance, blind volition, and consciousness, are the most important in the formation of one's existence but, because of the deep-seated ignorance in the mind, easily escape clarification even by great religious and philosophical thinkers of the past and present. These three elements form the murky area of the unknown force, which threatens one's existence from underneath and fills one with indefinable fear and anxiety. This anxiety intrinsic to one's existence could sometimes drive one to violent acts or fanatic faiths; this is the nursery of various superstitions and wrong views. From the Buddhist viewpoint, this is the area where one's karmic seeds are accumulated and 'fermented' until they become mature and are manifested

as mental and bodily actions. When this area is completely illumined by the light of wisdom, one attains liberation.

The third level is beyond the first two but, at the same time, includes them. In the Mahayana concept of salvation, an individual's liberation from delusion and suffering cannot be completed until and unless all sentient beings attain the same liberation. The awareness of the universal relationship with them gives rise to the resolution to save them all; this resolution turns one into a Bodhisattva. When Amida was a Bodhisattva, he made this resolution in the form of the Forty-eight Vows. Now that they have been fulfilled, he has already accomplished our salvation. The moment we hear the Name and, through it, attain shinjin, we realize that we have been in his Light of boundless Wisdom and Compassion. With the darkness of mind completely cleared, we everlastingly enjoy oneness with Amida Buddha. In the ocean of Amida's Wisdom, there is no discrimination between bombu and sages, evil-doers and good persons. They are equally taken in and never abandoned, and become one with Amida just as various river-waters are turned into one taste upon reaching the ocean.

The Buddha's Wisdom and Virtue have been praised
So that sentient beings in the ten directions may know
about them; Those who have attained Faith should always
Strive to repay the Buddha's Benevolence. (*Hymns on the Pure Land* 50)

Living in the Light of Great Compassion (lines 29-34)

**The Light of All-embracing Compassion always illumines and protects us; The darkness of ignorance has already been destroyed by it,
But still the clouds and mists of greed, desire, anger and enmity Continually cover the sky of True Faith;
Yet, just as the sunlight is obstructed by clouds or mists,
Below them it is light and there is no darkness.**

The difference between ordinary people and Shin Buddhists does not show in outward appearance, but is clearly found in their spiritual lives. First of all, Shin Buddhists are aware of Amida's Light of Great Compassion and so can enjoy its benefit, while ordinary people, ignorant of it, continue to walk in the dark. Second, Shin Buddhists are aware of their evil passions in their entirety, not through their own intellect or insight, but through Amida's Light; ordinary people may know part of their evil passions but are unable to see them all. Mere reflection does not go deep into oneself, nor can psychoanalysis possibly analyze away all that one has beneath one's consciousness. Meditation, when practiced under the proper guidance of a truly enlightened master, can penetrate deeper into one's mind, but does not necessarily promise a successful result.

Amida's Light which, above anything else, embodies Prajñā can penetrate to the depth of one's self and break its hard existential basis, bringing one to the realization that there is nothing that supports one's existence but a false image of ego. When the Light is perceived in us, all our evil passions and their karmic energy stored in our Ālaya consciousness are instantly cleared, or rather merged into Amida's pure merits. Even though there still is a lingering tendency of passions, which beclouds our minds, we are basically free of the fear and anxiety that are believed to be inherent in our nature.

Amida's Light takes various forms according to the conditions and needs of the beings to be saved, and functions in multiple ways. Since Amida has three "bodies", his Light can also be conceived to be of three kinds corresponding to them. First, Amida as the Dharmakaya Buddha sends forth the Light of non-dis-criminative Wisdom which is in perfect accord with True Suchness. This Light is all-pervasive and all-merging. In fact, there is in it no subject-object distinction, and things as they are clearly revealed in this, the Light of the Ultimate Truth.

Amida as the Sambhogakāya Buddha is a bodily manifestation. He has, therefore, the physical Light emitted from his body, as well as the spiritual Light emanating from his mind. The physical Light, as the *Contemplation Sutra* explains, "illuminates all the worlds throughout the ten directions". There is no place where that Light does not reach, but not all sentient beings are aware of this - indeed, very few realize it. When one hears the Dharma well and receives Amida's Compassion deep in one's heart, Amida's Light "embraces and never abandons this person".

The Light of Amida as a Nirrānakāya creates various images for sincere devotees, appearing in their dreams or at the time of death to guide them to the Pure Land.

Since the three Buddha-bodies are not separate but are an integrated whole, we simply look up to Amida as '*Jinjippō Mukekō Nyora*' - the Tathagata of Unhindered Light Shining throughout the Ten Directions. In the pure religious feeling arising from True Faith, there is no room for knowledge obtained by analytical methods. Even the knowledge of ourselves being full of evil passions does not remain in the mind as a stern and painful reminder. We realize that this knowledge does not come from our insight but is an image of ourselves reflected in the mirror of Amida's Wisdom. Any piece of knowledge, whether of Amida or ourselves, can become an obstacle to full realization of Amida's Compassion. If our knowledge is merged into Amida's Wisdom, we simply enjoy living in his Light without fear and sorrow.

Life of a Myokonin (lines 35-40)

**When we receive Faith, regard and revere the Dharma, and attain
Great Joy,
We immediately transcend the five evil realms.
If ordinary people, whether good or evil,
Hear the Dharma and trust Amida's Universal Vow,
Sākyamuni praises them as 'men of great and superior
understanding';
Such people are called 'white lotus-flowers'.**

The *Larger Sutra* expressly states in the *Verses on the Visits of Bodhisattvas to the Pure Land* (chap. 27):

To obtain human life is difficult in the extreme;
To meet a Buddha in this world is also difficult;
It is difficult, too, for a man to attain faith and wisdom.

Once you have heard the Dharma, strive to reach its heart.
If you have heard the Dharma and do not forget it
But regard and revere it with great joy,
You are my good friend.

For this reason,
You should awaken aspiration for Enlightenment.
Even if the whole world is on fire,
Be sure to pass through it to hear the Dharma,
Then you will surely enter the path of the Buddha
And everywhere deliver beings from the river of birth-and-death.

Contrary to the popular misunderstanding that Shin Buddhism is an easy-going teaching requiring no effort on our side, this sutra further stresses the importance of our diligent pursuit of the Way as follows (chap. 31):

That land is sublime, blissful, serene and pure. Why do you not diligently practice the good, reflect on the Naturalness of the Way and realize that it is above all discriminations and is boundlessly pervasive? You should each make a great effort to attain it. Strive to escape from Samsara and be born in the Land of Peace and Provision. Then, the cause of the five evil realms having been destroyed, they will naturally cease to be, and so you will progress unhindered in your pursuit of the Way. The Pure Land is easy to reach, but very few actually go there. It rejects nobody, but naturally and unfailingly attracts beings. Why do you not abandon worldly matters and strive to enter the Way?

Shinran has repeated in the first two lines the import of the verses and the passage quoted above, but does not encourage practicing good, meritorious acts. In his Shin Buddhist system, all meritorious practices conducive to the attainment of Enlightenment in the Pure Land are attributed to Amida Buddha. Since we are incapable of any practice, as Shinran is quoted as saying in the *Tannishō*, hell would

definitely be our dwelling place. Good acts which we think we can do are, at best, false and inverted, and cannot possibly yield the merits we require for attaining Enlightenment. Actually we can do nothing but commit evil karma. This is the conclusion Shinran reached after his twenty years' quest for Truth on Mt. Hiei. When he descended from the mountain, he left behind all the false visions of himself being capable of pursuing the good. Later, when he encountered Hōnen's Nembutsu teaching, he found in it the Dharma in action, which had been *pursuing him* to carry him across the river of birth-and-death. This Dharma is the embodiment of ultimate truth and pure merits, which is given to us through the Name. To hear and receive this Dharma means to join the stream of pure karmic activity of the Primal Vow.

When we hear and receive Amida's Dharma, we are awakened to twofold reality: (1) that we are full of evil passions, karma-bound and incapable of salvation with our own power and (2) that Amida with boundless saving power embraces and never forsakes us. In this awareness, however, we no longer stand in opposition to Amida, but we find our true identity in Amida, just as a child finds its identity in the mother's love. When we realize our true identity, all the false identities superimposed upon it fall off, and then we are able to walk along the Buddhist Path in the Light of Wisdom and Compassion.

One who has correctly received Amida's Dharma and thereby awakened shinjin is praised by Sakyamuni as 'a person of great and superior understanding'. This phrase comes from the *Section on the Teaching Assembly of Amitāyus Tathāgata*, another Chinese version of the *Larger Sutra*, which says:

Those who have in the past worshiped and made offerings to innumerable Buddhas will be enabled by the power of those Buddhas to enter this Great Dharma and be praised joyfully by all the Tathāgatas. Those who receive and hold fast to this Dharma will attain immense all-knowing wisdom and cultivate good roots as they wish. Those good men and women who attain great and superior understanding of this Dharma should further hear and greatly rejoice in it, hold fast to it, chant and expound it to others, and constantly follow it with joy.

Since our true identity is in *Namu Amida Butsu*, through the Nembutsu we keep reminding ourselves of it and express our gratitude to Amida for enabling us to realize our selves.

Those who receive Amida's Dharma have not only superior understanding and insight into reality, but also attain wonderful personality, as it is said in the *Contemplation Sutra* (chap. 32):

You should know that all who are mindful of that Buddha are like white lotus-flowers among humankind; the Bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta become their good friends. They will sit in the place of Enlightenment and be born into the family of the Buddhas.

Even though mired by evil passions, we are nevertheless 'white lotus-flowers' if our minds are firmly set on the Nembutsu. Shan-tao, in his celebrated commentary on

the *Contemplation Sutra*, gives five other words of high praise to the practitioner of the Nembutsu as follows: (1) *kōnin*, an excellent person, (2) *jōjōnin*, a superior person, (3) *myōkōnin*, a wondrous, excellent person, (4) *keunin*, a rare person, and (5) *sishōnin*, a most excellent person.

Contrary to the popular concept, a *myōkōnin* is not a special type of person, but can be anyone who lives up to the Nembutsu. A *myōkōnin* is fully aware of his or her true identity, grateful to Amida and his Bodhisattva incarnations, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, and seeks to share their Compassion with other beings. Thus a *myōkōnin* is a person of deep insight and warm personality. Although a *myōkōnin* is still full of evil passions like other ordinary, unenlightened persons, those passions do not hinder him or her from performing Buddhist activities, for they have already been cut at the root and absorbed into Amida's pure merit. Evil passions make troubles when they are left to run their course unbridled; when properly dealt with, they turn into pure karmic energy. In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Chapter on True Faith, Shinran explains that a person of shinjin gains ten benefits in this life, of which the third is the benefit of having evil turned into good. This benefit is made ours through Amida's wonderful virtue. It is said in one of Shinran's hymns on T'an-luan:

When many rivers of evil passions enter
Into the ocean of the Great Compassion and Great Vow
Of the Tathāgata of All-pervasive Unhindered Light,
They become one in taste with the water of Wisdom. (*Hymns on the Patriarchs*
42)