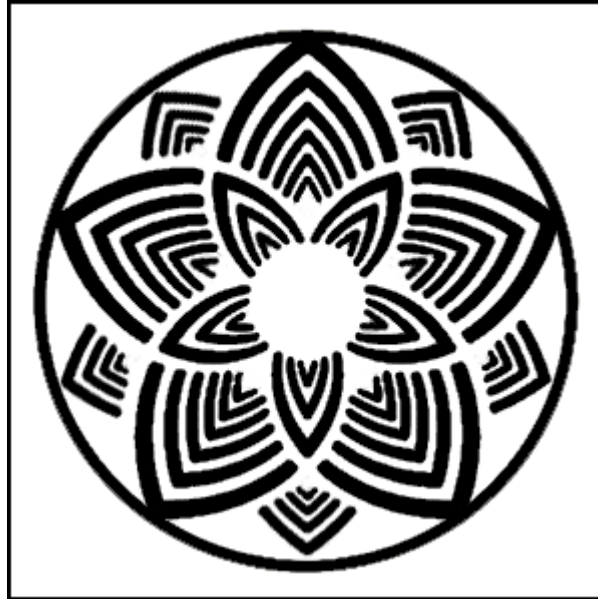


Shin Buddhist Fellowship UK



## STUDY 6A

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

Lines 1 - 20

# The title

'*Shōshinge*', 'Hymn of True Faith', is the title popularly used among Shin followers. The full title that appears in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Chapter on True Practice, is '*Shōshin nembutsu ge*', which literally means 'Hymn of True Faith in Nembutsu'. The author, Shinran Shonin, presumably meant to present in this hymn the faith and practice of Shin Buddhism which constitute the core of the Pure Land tradition transmitted to Japan through China from India.

Stated simply, 'faith' is trust in Amida, and 'practice' is the Nembutsu recitation. The faith and practice on our side are, at the beginning, naturally based on self-power, and therefore 'defiled' by selfish motivation, but thanks to Amida's virtuous power, these are gradually deepened and purified until the light of shinjin dawns on our spiritual horizon.

In a general religious context, 'faith' by and large implies 'unquestioning belief in God', which does not apply in Shin or any other form of authentic Buddhism. Nevertheless, we may well use this term to describe our mental state and attitude in our relation to Amida. We are at least satisfied that 'faith' is derived from the Latin word '*fidere*' (to trust) and is actually used in the sense of 'complete trust'.

Faith in Shin Buddhism basically shares the common ground of *śraddhā* with other Buddhist faiths. First of all, it implies complete trust in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha; secondly, it has the effect of purifying and calming one's mind (*prasāda*); and thirdly, it gives rise to pure aspiration and readiness for action to achieve some Buddhist objective (*abhilāṣa*).

Our faith in Amida and in his law of salvation realized as the Forty-eight Vows and the Name, is awakened by our contact with him through the Pure Land sutras and discourses. When established in our hearts, faith keeps our thoughts fixed on Amida and the Dharma.

Through faith, also, we can join the Sangha, which in Shin Buddhism means the Sangha of Bodhisattvas and other holy sages in the Pure Land and our teachers and friends, both priests and laymen, in this world.

As we read and chant the *Shōshinge*, we hear the live voice of Shinran urging us to take refuge in Amida, the supreme Dharma and the community of true friendship.

The title "*Shōshin nembutsu ge*" can be interpreted in different ways. An important doctrinal point is how to understand the relationship between *shōshin* (faith) and *nembutsu*. Considering the fact that another hymn of similar content which Shinran composed, presumably in later years, bears the title "*Nembutsu shōshin ge*", the order of the two words, *shōshin* and *nembutsu*, does not seem to constitute a basic difference. Faith without Nembutsu is impossible, and Nembutsu without faith is fruitless. Furthermore, if Nembutsu and faith are based on selfish motivation, they are described as 'self-power faith and practice'. Such faith and practice are impure and so fail to bring true peace of mind with the assurance of Enlightenment.

In the Mahayana system of practice leading to Enlightenment, faith or acceptance of the teaching generally precedes practice. We follow a certain method of practice because we believe that the teaching which prescribes it is true. This pattern does not apply to Shin Buddhism. We do not say the Nembutsu because we *believe* that it is the cause of our salvation. We say it with *no* reason whatever on our part. On the one hand, we are too ignorant to discern with certainty between true and false, right and wrong. On the other, in our experience of shinjin the presence of Amida Buddha is beyond any doubt; and so we do not have to believe it.

Here we are reminded of Shinran's remark recorded in the *Tannishō*, Chapter 2: "I am entirely ignorant as to whether the Nembutsu is really the cause of birth in the Pure Land, or whether it is the karma which will cause me to fall into hell". To the outsider, this statement may appear to be an expression of uncertain faith, but the fact is that Shinran was fully aware of Amida's irresistible saving power which was working within him "Here and Now".

We are, from the beginning, ignorant and powerless, but we have unconsciously created a false image of ourselves which we assume to be true and real. Shin Buddhism brings us face to face with our real self, and effectively destroys this illusion of ego. It is painful to face one's own reality. But the whole operation is carried out *naturally* by Amida's compassionate means. The pain of facing one's ugly and delusory self is more than compensated for by the joy of encountering one's true Parent and finding in him our ultimate refuge.

Once the Nembutsu is planted in our hearts, it takes root in the deep layers of our minds, where our karma from past lives is stored like the dangerous energy in a dormant volcano or an active fault. Since the Nembutsu is Amida's Mind and Body, it does not belong to me. However many times we may recite it, it does not become ours, but remains his. By our complete trust in Amida, we find that we belong to him, not as his servant but as part of his Dharma-Body. The Nembutsu which we find on our lips is a natural expression of Amida's everlasting, universal presence and activity.

*Shōshin*, or *shinjin*, and Nembutsu are thus Amida's self-expression through our hearts and mouths. We rejoice at participating in his eternal activity, helping to spread the sound of the Dharma, and making the Voice of Amida heard by other fellow beings. This joy accompanies our *shōshin-nembutsu: Namu Amida Butsu*.

Those who recite the Name of Amida Buddha  
With Sincere Faith  
Are always mindful of him  
And wish to repay his Benevolence. (*Hymns on the Pure Land 1*)

END OF SESSION ONE - 694 WORDS

# Adoration to Amida Buddha (lines 1-2)

**I take refuge in the Tathāgata of Infinite Life;**

**I take refuge in the Buddha of Inconceivable Light.**

The *Shōshinge* begins with adoration: the author Shinran praises Amida and professes his whole-hearted trust in him. The Tathāgata of Infinite Life and the Buddha of Inconceivable Light are one and the same person, but are distinguished in accordance with his two characteristic features. In fact, the *Smaller Sutra* states that 'Amida' has these two connotations:

For what reason, Sāriputra, do you think that Buddha is called 'Amida'? Sāriputra, the Buddha's light shines boundlessly and without hindrance over all the worlds in the ten directions. It is for this reason that he is called 'Amida'. Again, Sāriputra, the lives of the Buddha and the people of his land last for innumerable, unlimited and incalculable kalpas. It is for this reason that the Buddha is called 'Amida'. (chap. 4)

Amida is the Buddha of Infinite Light and Life, and is often called by his Sanskrit names, Amitābha (infinite light) and Amitāyus (infinite life). Furthermore, speaking in terms of light, since Amida's light has twelve qualities or functions, he is given twelve epithets, as mentioned later in the *Shōshinge*.

The second line comes from T'an-luan's *Hymn in Praise of Amida Buddha*. In this work, T'an-luan, the Third Master, first praises Amida's supreme virtues in terms of the twelve epithets, and then further glorifies Amida and describes brilliant adornments of the Pure Land based on the Larger Sutra. After that, he expresses his sincere wish to be favored by Amida's Light of Compassion and attain birth in the Pure Land with other aspirants. It is at this point that he states:

I take refuge in the (Buddha of) Inconceivable Light;  
With singleness of heart I entrust myself to him, bow to and worship him.

It is presumed that here Shinran does not simply praise or adore Amida's Light for its own sake, but wishes that his fellow beings may equally benefit from the Light of Compassion and attain birth in the Pure Land.

The two qualities or attributes of Amida Buddha, Infinite Life and Light, are suggestive of important points in the Buddhological sense. These two can be considered in the relationship of essence and function as well as that of time and space. The Infinite Life represents the essential quality of Dharmakāya, which is not only shared by all Buddhas but also pervades all living beings and even non-sentient existence. From this life-essence emanate pure activities and glorious manifestations, which appear in the form of light. The *Larger Sutra* describes the endless unfolding of the light as follows:

Lotus-flowers of various jewels fill the Pure Land; each has a hundred thousand kotis of petals with lights of numerous colors. The brilliance of these lights is so magnificent that it outshines the sun and the moon. Each flower emits thirty-six hundred thousand kotis of rays of light, each sending forth thirty-six hundred thousand kotis of Buddhas.

Each Buddha emits a hundred thousand rays of light and expounds the wonderful Dharma to beings in the ten directions, thus setting innumerable beings on the right Path of the Buddha. (chap. 21)

## Dharmakara's Vows (lines 3-10)

**Dharmākara, at the outset of his career as a Bodhisattva,  
Was in the presence of Lokeśvararaja, the Enlightened One.**

**He saw the pure lands of many Buddhas, observed how they had been  
established, And examined everything, good and bad, about the humans and  
devas inhabiting them.**

**He then brought forth the unsurpassed and most excellent Vows,  
The Great Vows, immeasurable in scope and depth, which the world had never  
known.**

**Dharmākara chose and cherished his Vows after contemplation for five  
kalpas. He further vowed that his Name would be heard throughout the ten  
directions.**

Amida, as a Sambhogakāya Buddha, does not come into the sphere of our direct sense perception. His presence and activity are far beyond our normal perceptive faculties; they can only be intuitively known in the state of concentration and absorption - Samādhi. From the beginning of Mahayana Buddhism, we know of a great number of Samādhis which Sākyamuni is presumed to have taught to his disciples. One of them, the Samādhi of Recollection of Amida, known in more general terms as 'Samādhi of Recollection of the Buddha' (Nembutsu-Samādhi), has been the one through which the practitioner is enabled to visualize Amida Buddha and his Pure Land. The method based on the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi Sutra (the Sutra on the Samādhi of All Buddhas' Appearance)* is simply concentration on Amida and recitation of his Name for seven to ninety days. Nāgārjuna recommended the practice of this *Samādhi*, and Shan-tao, in his works, fully explained and discussed the method and significance of this practice.

Even though we, in the age of Decadent Dharma, are not able to practice this Samadhi and visualize Amida, we are at least convinced of his presence in a spiritual realm far beyond our sense perceptions. This conviction leads us to accept the mysterious truth about Dharmākara Bodhisattva.

The *Larger Sutra* has the most detailed account of Dharmākara's Bodhisattva practices. This sutra takes us to a certain period in the distant past, when a Buddha, called Lokeśvararāja ('World-Sovereign-King'), a Nirṇānakāya Buddha like Sākyamuni, appeared in this world. There was a king, who, having heard the Buddha's exposition of the Dharma, rejoiced in his heart and awakened aspiration for the highest, perfect Enlightenment. He renounced his kingdom and the throne, and became a monk, named Dharmākara ('Treasury of Dharma').

The awakening of Bodhi-Mind means resolving to become a Buddha. Becoming a Buddha means attaining the three bodies of a Buddha: *dharmakāya*, *sambhogakāya* and *nirmānakāya*. By the cultivation of the highest wisdom one attains Dharmakāya, the body of the ultimate reality. By the fulfilment of one's vows, one attains Sambhogakāya, the body of bliss, and Nirṇānakāya, the transformed body. Since the vows of Bodhisattvas are primarily meant for sentient beings, they seek to establish special "spheres", where, upon their attainment of Buddhahood, those beings who aspire for birth there and fulfill certain prescribed "conditions" are to be born. Such spheres are outside the realms of Samsara and also beyond the static Nirvana. Although they are popularly called "pure lands", they are manifestations from their specific Sarnādhis. Before Dharmākara made his own vows and planned his pureland, he asked Lokeśvararāja Buddha to show him the pure lands of other Buddhas and how they had been established.

The *Larger Sutra* describes, in the following words of Sākyamuni Buddha, how Dharamākara learned about the pure lands of other Buddhas and resolved to establish his own:

The Buddha said to Ananda, "... the Bhikṣu Dharamākara said to the Buddha Lokeśvararāja, 'Respectfully, World-Honored One, I announce that I have awakened aspiration for the highest, perfect Enlightenment. I beseech you to explain the Dharma to me fully, so that I can perform practices for the establishment of a pure Buddha-land adorned with infinite excellent qualities. So, please teach me how to attain Enlightenment quickly and to remove the roots of affliction of birth-and-death for all'."

The Buddha said to Ananda, "At that time the Buddha Lokeśvararāja replied to the Bhikṣu Dharamākara, 'You yourself should know by what practice you can establish a glorious Buddha-land'. The Bhikṣu said to the Buddha, 'That is far too great and deep for my comprehension. I sincerely beseech you, World-Honored One, to explain in detail the practices by which Buddhas, Tathāgatas, established their pure lands. After I hear that, I wish to practice as instructed and so fulfil my aspirations'.

At that time the Buddha Lokeśvararāja recognized the Bhikṣu Dharamākara's noble and high aspirations, and taught him as follows: 'If, for example, one keeps bailing water out of a great ocean with a pint-measure, one will be able to reach the bottom after many kalpas and then obtain rare treasures. Likewise, if one sincerely, diligently, and unceasingly seeks the Way, one will be able to reach one's' destination. What vow is there which cannot be fulfilled?'

Then the Buddha Lokeśvararāja explained in detail the greater and lesser aspects of two hundred and ten kotis of Buddha-lands, together with the good and evil natures of heavenly and human beings living there. He revealed them all to the Bhikṣu just as he had requested. Then the Bhikṣu, having heard the Buddha's exposition of the glorious pure lands and also having seen all of them, resolved upon his supreme, unsurpassed vows. His mind being serene and his aspirations free of attachment, he was unexcelled throughout the world. For five full kalpas he contemplated the vows, and then chose the pure practices for the establishment of his Buddha-land". (chap. 6)

According to T'an-luan and other masters, when Dharamākara resolved to establish his own pure land, he was already a Bodhisattva of a high stage. He had attained a deep samādhi in which he realized voidness of all phenomena and became free from attachment to them and to his own self. At this point, he was completely delivered from karmic bondage, and so there was nothing more to learn or practice for his own salvation. But with deep insight into the ultimate reality, he knew at the same time that sentient beings were infatuated by their own delusory view of ego and driven by insatiable desires, thus repeating endless cycles of birth-and-death, which were both painful and meaningless. This knowledge then gave rise to an irresistible desire to deliver them from self-infatuation and suffering in Samsara. This led to the awakening of Great Compassion. It was out of Great Compassion that Dharamākara sought to establish a pure land where sentient beings could rest in true peace and realize enlightenment.

What is stated in the *Larger Sutra* concerning Dharamākara's Vows and the Pure Land which he later established may appear to be mythical, but it cannot be stressed too much that this sutra tries to explain in words what actually happened or is happening beyond our world of ordinary experience.

In Buddhism, according to different levels of consciousness fraught with various degrees of karmic defilements, this world of experience, which we call 'Samsara', is divided into three realms: (1) the realm of desire for those with the lowest level of consciousness and heavy karmic defilements; (2) the realm of form for those with higher level of consciousness and less karmic defilements, which means more freedom in action and more blissful states of existence;

and (3) the realm of non-form for those with the highest level of consciousness and the least karmic defilements.

We humans live in the realm of desire, and the spiritual beings, known to us as devas or gods, live in the higher planes of the realm of desire and the realm of non-form. When karmic defilements are completely eliminated, one attains the highest level of consciousness, accompanied by the highest state of bliss and freedom, which is called 'Nirvana'.

Where the individualistic pursuit of the ultimate goal ends, a bodhisattva's 'universal' aspiration begins. By breaking through the nirvanic tranquillity with the power of insight, he discovers his 'universal' personality, and finds himself to be one with all that exists, including all living beings. This discovery gives him an unspeakable joy and exhilaration and, at the same time, a deep sense of responsibility. With infinitely expanding vistas he sees the whole breadth and depth of the universe, which is not only the physical universe we are familiar with, but contains all the spiritual realms of different dimensions. He finds that the entire universe is an organic whole, a living network of interrelated causes and conditions, and the utmost perfection above all dichotomizing concepts. When he sees living beings caught in the net of karma, repeating endless cycles of delusion, wrong-doing, and suffering, he is moved to deliver them by all possible means.

Dharmākara's Vow is based on the common ground of bodhisattvahood, and is a manifestation of this universal awareness in a concrete form. But it distinguishes itself from those of other bodhisattvas in that it provides a way of immediate salvation for the most wicked through the Name and Light that Dharmākara as Amida later attained, leading them to the same enlightenment as his in his land of the highest virtue and pure karmic activity, called Sukhāvati.

### END OF SESSION THREE - 968 WORDS

The whole scheme of salvation in Shin Buddhism centers around the Name: *Namu Amida Butsu*, literally 'I take refuge in Amida Buddha' or 'adoration to Amida Buddha'. The Name is not just a name in the ordinary sense of the term. It comprises the supreme merits that Dharmākara accumulated by doing various meritorious practices for innumerable kalpas while living among sentient beings. The *Larger Sutra* describes his career in terms comprehensible to us, as follows:

He did not harbor any thought of greed, hatred or cruelty; nor did he allow any ideas of greed, hatred or cruelty to arise. He was unattached to any form, sound, smell, taste, touch or idea. Possessed of the power to persevere, he did not avoid undergoing various afflictions. Having little desire for his own sake, he knew contentment. Without any impure thought, enmity or stupidity, he dwelt continually in tranquil samādhi. His wisdom was unobstructible, and his mind free of falsehood and deceitfulness. With an expression of tenderness in his face and with kindness in his speech, he spoke to others in consonance with their inner thoughts. Courageous and diligent, strong-willed and untiring, he devoted himself solely to the pursuit of the pure Dharmā, thereby benefiting a multitude of beings. (chap. 9)

Dharmākara's Vows, unprecedented in scope and depth, were fulfilled by the performance of various meritorious actions, known collectively as the Six Pāramitās, lasting for aeons. One life-time was not long enough to cultivate even a small portion of the merits required to fulfil the Vows. His Bodhisattva practice extended over many lives for innumerable kalpas. To explain this, the Larger Sutra says:

He avoided all wrong speech that would bring harm upon himself or others or both; he engaged in right speech that would bring benefit to himself or others or both. He

abandoned his kingdom and renounced the throne, leaving behind wealth and sensuous pleasures. Practicing the Six Paramitas himself, he taught others to do the same. During innumerable kalpas, he accumulated merits and amassed virtues. (chap. 9)

Further, this sutra states:

He was reborn as a rich man, a lay devotee, a member of the highest caste or of a noble family, a kṣatriya king, a wheel-turning monarch, a king of one of the six heavens in the world of desire, or even higher, as a Brahmā-king. He revered and worshiped all Buddhas by making the four kinds of offering to them. The merit he thus acquired was in-describably great. (chap. 9)

The amount of merit and virtue accumulated is dependent upon the length of time of the practice. It is, therefore, natural that Dharamākara should have attained "the ocean-like mass of merits" by performing Bodhisattva practices for innumerable kalpas. What is more important is the moral quality of such merits. If one's action is based on a wrong idea or motivation, it will not yield true merit. In the case of Dharamākara's practice, each and every action was free of attachment and was firmly based on the fundamental Mahayana principle of 'voidness' (śūnyatā), for it is said in the *Larger Sutra*:

He dwelt in the realization that all dharmas are empty, devoid of distinctive features, and not to be sought after, and that they neither act nor arise; he thus realized that all dharmas are like magical creations. (chap. 9)

#### END OF SESSION FOUR - 550 WORDS

T'an-luan, by way of explaining Dharamākara's true merit, distinguishes two kinds of merit:

Regarding the phrase 'the embodiment of true merit', there are two kinds of merit: (1) The merit which accrues from the activity of a defiled mind and is not in accordance with the Dharma-nature; such merit arises from the various good acts of ordinary men and devas. It also refers to the reward of their attaining human and heavenly existence. Both the cause and effect of such good acts are inverted and false; hence, they are called 'false merit'. (2) The merit which is produced from the wisdom and pure karma of Bodhisattvas and which serves to glorify Buddhist activities. It conforms to the Dharma-nature and has the characteristic of purity. This dharma is not inverted and false; hence, it is called 'true merit'.

The true merits which Dharamākara accumulated are manifested in conceivable, and even perceptible, forms. Vasubandhu, who presumably succeeded in visualizing the Pure Land, distinguished Amida's true merits into three categories: (1) the Pure Land, (2) Amida Buddha himself, and (3) Bodhisattvas in the Pure Land. He also noted that the Power of the Vows was working to sustain those glorious manifestations and, at the same time, to deliver sentient beings from samsaric suffering.

Shinran paid special attention to the name by which Vasubandhu addressed Amida, that is, 'the Tathāgata of Unhindered Light Shining throughout the Ten Directions'. To call Amida by this name is to glorify him and praise his virtues. This is a radical development from mere repetition of the popular Nembutsu formula, 'Namu Amida Butsu'. By so doing, Shinran enhanced the quality of the Nembutsu from the level of practice by self-effort to that of the practice of the Buddhas. He found the logical basis for this in the Seventeenth Vow.

The development of the concept of Nembutsu from verbal practice, based on one's effort of saying 'Namu Amida Butsu', to Amida's working, which irresistibly makes us call his Name, features in Shinran's theory and practice of salvation by the Other-Power. He paid special attention to the Seventeenth and the Eighteenth Vows, and found the intrinsic relationship between them.

In the tradition of Sino-Japanese Pure Land Buddhism" the Eighteenth Vow is the pivotal point around which revolves the whole doctrinal system. In Shin Buddhism, too, the Eighteenth Vow remains the center of the teaching, and so its true meaning is to be revealed. The text of this Vow reads:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten directions, . 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 offences and abuse the right Dharma. (chap. 7)

Taken in its literal meaning, both entrusting and calling of the Name are based on self-effort, but Shinran found that Amida's Power was working behind this faith and practice. But how does Amida's Power work and how does it reach the aspirant?

This question led Shinran to investigate the meaning of the Seventeenth Vow, which reads:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, innumerable Buddhas in the lands of the ten directions should not all praise and glorify my Name, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment. (chap. 7)

Apparently this Vow is not directly linked up with the Eighteenth VOW, but Shinran found that the internal relationship between those two Vows was clearly stated in the passage of the *Larger Sutra*, which shows, in Sākyamuni's words, how they had been fulfilled. The passage in question reads:

All Buddhas, Tathāgatas, in the ten directions, as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges, together praise the inconceivable, supernal virtue of the Buddha of Infinite Life. All sentient beings who, *having heard his name*, rejoice in faith, remember him even once and sincerely *transfer the merit of virtuous practices to that land*, aspiring to be born there, will attain birth and dwell in the Stage of Non-retrogression. But excluded are those who have committed the five gravest offenses and abused the right Dharma. (chap. 22)

It is now clear that the entrusting and joyous faith is aroused through hearing Amida's Name, which is praised by all the Buddhas. In other words, it is the virtue of the Name that has aroused all the Buddhas to glorify it and also arouses sentient beings to entrust themselves to Amida. Since it is entirely Amida's Power that is working behind the devotee's faith and practice, the real agent who 'transfers the merit of virtuous practices' is also Amida. That is why Shinran, without changing the Chinese diction, made this sentence read: those who... remember him even once and, *through his merit-transference*, aspire to be born there, will attain birth, etc

Looking back on the Eighteenth Vow from Shinran's viewpoint, the practice of saying 'Namu Amida Butsu' even ten times is significant only in so far as it is linked up with the Name glorified in the Seventeenth Vow. Our Nembutsu does not come from our heart, but from Amida's Heart of Great Compassion. It is the natural expression on our lips of Amida's all-embracing and all-pervasive Power manifested in the form of the Name. 'The inconceivable, supernal virtue of the Buddha of Infinite Life' stated in the passage on fulfilment of the Seventeenth Vow is the fountainhead of the salvific karmic Power, which runs through the Eighteenth Vow and effects our entrusting faith.

Dharamākara, after proclaiming the Forty-eight Vows, reiterated the importance of the Name in the hymn which follows, saying:

When I attain Buddhahood,  
My Name shall be heard throughout the ten directions;  
Should there be any place where it is not heard,  
May I not attain perfect Enlightenment.  
(*Larger Sutra*, chap. 8)

Shinran praises the wonderful working of the Name in a hymn:

The sentient beings throughout the ten directions, Who attain true entrusting Heart By hearing Amida's Name of ultimate virtue, Greatly rejoice at what they have received.  
(*Hymns on the Pure Land* 25)

## Amida's Light (11-16)

**Amida sends forth universally the immeasurable and boundless Light, The unimpeded, incomparable and majestically flaming Light,**

**The pure Light, the Light of joy, the Light of wisdom, The unceasing, inconceivable and ineffable Light,**

**And the Light outshining the sun and the moon; with these Lights he illumines the innumerable worlds.**

**All sentient beings are shone upon by his Light.**

Dharamākara's Vows having been fulfilled, he became a Buddha, named Amida, ten kalpas ago. In terms of cause and effect, his Forty-eight Vows and sustained practices of the Six Pāramitās for innumerable kalpas are the cause of his Buddhahood. Concerning his attainment of Buddhahood, the *Larger Sutra* explains it in the form of a dialogue between Sākyamuni and Ānanda:

Ānanda asked the Buddha, "Has the Bodhisattva Dharamākara already attained Buddhahood and then passed into Nirvana? Or has he not yet attained Buddhahood? Or is he dwelling somewhere at present?"

The Buddha replied to Ānanda, "The Bodhisattva Dharamākara has already attained Buddhahood and is now dwelling in a western Buddha-land, called 'Peace and Bliss', a hundred thousand kotis of lands away from here". Ānanda further asked the Buddha, "How much time has passed since he attained Buddhahood?" The Buddha replied, "Since he attained Buddhahood, about ten kalpas have passed". (chap. 10)

In accordance with the law of karma, when Dharamākara's causal practices matured, he attained the fruition of Buddhahood. Since, as T'an-luan observes, the cause was pure, being in accord with True Suchness, the resultant fruition of Buddhahood, manifested as Amida's glorious appearance and the Pure Land, is also pure.

The most illustrious aspect of Amida's Buddhahood is his Light, which is infinite and the most glorious of the lights of all the Buddhas. According to the distinct attributes and functions of Light, Amida has twelve names, as stated in the *Larger Sutra*: Buddha of Infinite Light, Buddha of Boundless Light, Buddha of Unhindered Light, Buddha of Incomparable Light, Buddha of the Light of the King of Flame, Buddha of Pure Light, Buddha of the Light of Joy, Buddha of the Light of Wisdom, Buddha of Unceasing Light, Buddha of Inconceivable Light, Buddha of Ineffable Light, and Buddha of the Light Outshining the Sun and the Moon. (chap. 11)

Even though we, ordinary beings full of blind passions, are not able to see Amida's Light, we can feel with our bodies and minds that we are always embraced by it. We can indeed 'see' his Light with the eye of Faith endowed by the Other-Power.

The *Larger Sutra* further says:

The Light of the Buddha of Infinite Life shines brilliantly, illuminating all the Buddha-lands of the ten directions. There is no place where it is not perceived. I [Sākyamuni Buddha] am not the only one who now praises his light. All the Buddhas, śrāvakas, pratyekabuddhas and bodhisattvas praise and glorify it in the same way. If sentient beings, having heard of the majestic virtue of his light, glorify it continually, day and night, with sincerity of heart, they will be able to attain birth in his land, as they wish. (chap. 11)

To praise and glorify Amida's Light is none other than to call his Name, '*Namu Amida Butsu*' or '*Kimyō Jinjippō Mugekō Nyorai*' (Adoration to the Tathāgata of Unhindered Light Shining throughout the Ten Directions). By calling his Name while contemplating his universal and transcendent working, we feel assured that his Light of Great Compassion continually illumines us, even though we tend to be forgetful of it.

Since Amida attained Buddhahood, Ten kalpas have passed;  
The Light of his Dharma-body shines boundlessly, Illumining those who  
are spiritually blind and ignorant. (*Hymns on the Pure Land 3*)

Far-reaching is the Light of Compassion;  
Wherever the Light reaches,  
There arises the joy of Dharma.  
Take refuge in the Great Consoler. (*Ibid. 10*) (Stutt text: 838 words)

#### Addendum

### The Twelve Lights and Twelve Names of Amida Buddha

A central pillar of Shin Buddhism, the *Ojo Raisan* was composed by the Chinese Pure Land Master Shantao (613-681), and it became a widely chanted text during Japan's Kamakura period (12th–13th century). Within it, Shantao refers to T'an-luan (476-554) and his description of twelve individual lights that correspond to the twelve names attributed to Amida Buddha.

**1. The Buddha of immeasurable light:** The immeasurable light cannot be measured or calculated. It permeates all times: the past, the present and the future, and goes beyond any idea and any concept of time.

**2. The Buddha of limitless light:** The limitless light shines eternally everywhere. It fills all space and goes beyond our concept of space. It permeates all levels of being, even those we do not know.

**3. The Buddha of all-permeating light:** The all-permeating light cannot be stopped. No matter how far we are away from this light, how bad we might be, this light reaches us even in the worst situations.

**4. The Buddha of light:** The incomparable light is the greatest light ever. It comes directly from reality, directly from the freedom of awakening. Normal light can never be compared with it.

**5. The Buddha of ... the light of wisdom** lets us see with crystal clarity. With the help of its brightness, we can realise everything clearly. With the eyes of our hearts, we see clearly the reality of being.

**6. The Buddha of ... the eternal light** never ceases to exist. It is always there, regardless of whether we can sense it or not. Amida Buddha never sleeps, he shines on all living beings, who are open to reality – this is the light of Amida that protects all life.

**7. The Buddha of ... the pure light** is absolutely pure and has a purifying effect. It supports an internal purification process. It dissolves barriers, old patterns, lack of clarity and confusion. No matter how big problems may seem, everything returns to the simple state of being, where everything is interconnected.

**8. The Buddha of ... the light of bliss** is pure joy. Not a usual pleasure, but bliss. It is always there and not tied to any external circumstances. We are free, open, relaxed, full of vitality and joy. There are no problems.

**9. The Buddha of ... the light of liberation** means freedom. This light liberates us not only from our everyday problems, suffering and distress, it can first and foremost, guide us beyond death. With its help we overcome even the worst situations.

**10. The Buddha of ... the light of inner peace** stops the activity of the ego that creates anxiety. The ego with its patterns and barriers cannot disturb us anymore and we may enter into the state of inner peace that is our true nature.

**11. The Buddha of ... the incredible light** is inconceivably multifaceted; it will always surprise us. No matter, what light we imagine, what light we have seen or experienced, it is at most a small part of the whole. The light of Amida is beyond our imagination.

**12. The Buddha of ... the light outshining thousands of suns and moons** is a summary. It shows how incredibly powerful this light is. A master from the Amitābha\* tradition once said, if you can imagine ten thousand suns at once, you can surmise how powerful this light is.

\***Amitābha** (Sanskrit pronunciation: "Measureless" or "Limitless" Light), also known as **Amituofo** in Chinese, **Amida Butsu** in Japanese, **Amita-bul** in Korean, **Avid** in Mongolian, **A Di Đà Phật** in Vietnamese, and **Öpakmé** in Tibetan. One of the main Buddhas of Mahayana Buddhism and the most widely venerated Buddhist figure in East Asian Buddhism. Amitābha is also known by the name **Amitāyus** ("Measureless Life").(Addendum: 602 words)

# Saving Power of the Vow (17-20)

**The Name promised in the Primal Vow is the Act of Right Assurance;**

**The Vow of Sincere Mind and Joyful Faith provides the cause of our Birth;**

**To attain the state next to the Buddha and realize Great Nirvana**

**Is due to the fulfilment of the Vow which assures our unfailing attainment of Nirvana.**

Dharmākara's Forty-eight Vows can be divided into three groups: (1) those concerning his Buddhahood, namely, the Twelfth Vow which promised that his Light would be immeasurable, the Thirteenth Vow that his Life would be infinite, and the Seventeenth Vow that his Name would be praised by all Buddhas; (2) those concerning his Land, namely, the Thirty-first Vow which promised that his Land would be pure and immaculate and the Thirty-second Vow that his Land would be full of magnificent splendors; and (3) those concerning salvation of living beings, namely, the rest of the Forty-eight Vows.

In each Vow, Dharmākara expressed his firm resolution that unless it were fulfilled he would not become a Buddha. He actually fulfilled these Vows by doing many kinds of meritorious deeds and so became the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light - namely, Amida. The Land of Infinite Light, which on his attainment of Buddhahood came into existence beyond the realms of Samsara, is full of glorious adornments. This is the Land where he dwells everlastingly, welcoming beings from **other worlds** and enabling them to share the supreme joy of Enlightenment and Nirvana.

The third group of the Vows is further divided into two: the Vows concerning our salvation and those concerning the beings in the Pure Land. The Vows in the second division include those which assure us of acquiring supernatural powers and attaining special samadhis in the Pure Land. The beings born there are completely emancipated from delusions and passions, and so, they are essentially the same as Amida Buddha. But they are described as Bodhisattvas who help him with the work of saving sentient beings.

Of the Vows which directly concern us, the Eighteenth is most important, for through this Vow our salvation is actualized. By working with the Seventeenth Vow, the Eighteenth makes us one with Amida through his Name, *Namu Amida Butsu*. In other words, Amida comes to us in the form of the Name, and his heart directly enters ours to establish in us the unshakable Faith. This Faith is the cause of Birth in the Pure Land and of subsequent attainment of Enlightenment. Shinran Shonin emphasized that the Faith given by Amida is the Bodhi-Mind containing the Buddha's Wisdom and Compassion. In the Eighteenth Vow this Faith is presented as three minds, namely, Sincere Mind, Joyful Faith, and Desire to be Born in the Pure Land, but they constitute the undivided One Mind, as Vasubandhu professed when he took refuge in Amida in his Discourse on the Pure Land.

The Nembutsu that we utter becomes the Act of Right Assurance if we entrust ourselves wholly to Amida's Saving Power and let the Name work through our hearts and mouths. Each Nembutsu is Amida's self-expression through us, and each act of worship is the manifestation of his saving activity.

The Eighteenth Vow is the point of our union with Amida. When we come to believe beyond any doubt that Amida is our true Parent, we find it natural that we should be born in his Land and see him face to face. What a joy it will be, as Shan-tao says in his Hymns on the *Pratyutpanna Samādhi*, to see Amida in his glorious manifestation, seated on the lotus-throne and surrounded by Bodhisattvas, such as Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta Buddhism. Attainment of the same infinite life as Amida and enjoyment of the highest bliss

and pleasures are one aspect of the whole fruition which is promised us. The other aspect is attainment of Nirvana, the state of the ultimate tranquillity and the pure activity. The first aspect of our spiritual attainment is promised in the Eighteenth Vow, and the second aspect, in the Eleventh Vow.

\* In Buddhist cosmology, "other worlds" exist both as literal planes of alternative rebirth and as deep psychological states of consciousness. According to early texts like the [Anguttara Nikaya](#), the universe is not singular but consists of billions of distinct "world systems" (*loka-dhatu*) scattered across infinite space.

For more on the subject of Buddhist Cosmology please see entry #39 @ [www.purelandnotes.com](http://www.purelandnotes.com).

## END OF SESSION SEVEN – 695 WORDS

Speaking in ontological terms, the moment we encounter Amida through the Nembutsu-Faith of the Eighteenth Vow, we realize oneness with Amida, and thus we are immediately emancipated from bondage to Samsara. After the fruits of our past karma, that is, our bodies with all the defilements of blind passions, are relinquished at our bodily death, we will attain Nirvana. This process is shown in the Eleventh Vow - the Vow assuring our unfailing attainment of Nirvana. This Vow reads:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, humans and devas in my land should not dwell in the Definitely Assured Stage and unfailingly reach Nirvana, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment. (chap. 7)

We note that this Vow presents two stages of spiritual attainment which are of vital importance to Pure Land aspirants. One is 'dwelling in the Definitely Assured Stage' and the other, 'attaining Nirvana'. The *Larger Sutra* clarifies this point by stating:

The Buddha (Sākyamuni) said to Ānanda, "Sentient beings who are born in that Buddha-land all reside among those assured of Nirvana. The reason is that in that land there are neither beings who are destined to adverse conditions nor those whose destinies are uncertain. (chap. 22)

If, as the *Larger Sutra* says, the Pure Land is inhabited only by those who are sure to reach Nirvana, it is reasonable to think that those who will be born there should also be in the Definitely Assured Stage while in this life of Samsara. This point was emphasized by Shinran Shonin, who says in his *Ichinen tanen mon'i* (One Thought and Many Callings):

Those who *will* be born in that land all dwell in the Definitely Assured Stage, because in that Buddhaland there are neither those destined to the lower realms nor those whose destinies are uncertain. As I understand the teaching of the two Buddhas (i.e. Amida and Sākyamuni), 'immediately (assured of) birth' means abiding in the Definitely Assured Stage; this further means attaining in the Stage of Non-retrogression. Since those who dwell in this state unfailingly reach the unsurpassed great Nirvana, they are said to attain the 'stage next to the Buddha' or to attain the 'Stage of Non-retrogression'.

Besides those terms in the above quotation, there is one more in Shinran Shonin's thought, where he compares such aspirants to the future Buddha by saying that they are 'equal to Maitreya'. Since he is in the highest bodhisattva stage, they are the same because they will become Buddhas in the next life.

What a joy it is to be firmly established in the Stage of Non-retrogression! Amida has made this. Contrary to what many people believe, birth in the Pure Land is not the final objective in Shin possible by transferring all his merit and power through the Name: *Namu Amida Butsu*

## END OF SESSION EIGHT – 445 WORDS