

# Shakyamuni's Recommendation

*Dharma-talk for Kanbutsu-e 2009*

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*“...there is nothing whatever that has not been fulfilled through Amida [Buddha's] directing of virtue to beings out of the pure Vow-mind.”* (Passages on the Pure Land Way; CWS, p. 300.)

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In one of his verses, Shinran Shonin reminds us of the reason why we celebrate the birth of Shakyamuni every year at this time:

*"The fundamental intent for which the Buddha appeared in the world Was to reveal the truth and reality of the Primal Vow (CWS, p. 340.)"*

As a result, Shakyamuni took many opportunities to recommend the nembutsu way. Over two hundred of the sutras that he delivered teach the dharma of Amida Buddha and his Pure Land.

When we come to focus on a key aspect of Pure Land teaching in all these sutras, the single most discussed practical recommendation by Shakyamuni regarding the nembutsu is that we should *"hold steadfast to the Name"* of Amida Buddha. This advice can be found in the Amida Sutra, which we have just chanted.

What did Shakyamuni intend when he recommended that we *"hold steadfast to the Name"*? It helps to know the answer to this question because the exact nature of nembutsu practice is the question that people ask about most often when they know that you are a follower of Pure Land Buddhism. Today, I would like to try to explain something of how I understand this recommendation.

In all areas of human endeavour, not all recommendations are reliable, and some can easily be misunderstood. While undoubtedly reliable Shakyamuni's recommendation is easily misunderstood. Here is a story to illustrate what I mean.

*Once a barrister telephoned the state Attorney General just after midnight, insisting that he talk to him regarding a matter of utmost urgency, and that it couldn't wait until the morning.*

*The Attorney General's wife was still awake so she woke him up. After a while the Attorney General came to the phone. He was growling to himself and sounded really grumpy.*

*Not wanting to sound hypocritical by exchanging pleasantries, the barrister wasted no time in blurting out his request. "I'm terribly sorry to ring you at such a late hour, and I do apologise for waking you up, sir, but I wanted to be the first to make a very important and urgent recommendation."*

*"So, what is it?" the Attorney General said impatiently.*

*"Mr Justice Smith has just died," said the barrister, "and I want to take his place."*

*The Attorney General replied: "Well, it's alright with me if it's OK with the undertaker."*

That's just a joke, of course, but it illustrates the fact that we need to listen carefully to everything that is said, and we need to listen deeply, if we are to understand. Shinran did this when he thought about what Shakyamuni meant in his strong recommendation that we should "*hold steadfast to the Name*".

The Chinese Pure Land Master Fa-Chao, who lived about one thousand two hundred years ago, coined the saying "*Attaining Buddhahood through the nembutsu is the true essence of the Pure Land way.*" Shinran uses this saying in his Jodo Wasan and, on the face of it, it seems to suggest that ceaselessly repeating the nembutsu is the way that we should follow in an effort to gain birth in the Pure Land and become buddhas.

So sometimes it is said that in order to become liberated from birth-and-death, from samsara, and become a Buddha, we need to repeat the nembutsu – *namo-amida-butsu* – over and over again. When you read the entire passage in the sutra that contains Shakyamuni's recommendation to "*hold steadfast to the Name,*" you can see how easy it is to interpret it in that way.

But I am quite certain that Shinran saw it quite differently and that he was clear that such an idea, and that kind of practice, was not what Shakyamuni intended.

Shinran wrote this:

*"... Whether with regard to practice [that is, saying the nembutsu] or to the entrusting heart there is nothing whatever that has not been fulfilled through Amida [Buddha's] directing of virtue to beings out of the pure Vow-mind."* (Passages on the Pure Land Way; CWS, p. 300.)

One of the richest resources for understanding the nembutsu teaching was contrived by the Chinese nembutsu sage Shan-tao, who lived about one thousand four hundred years ago, two hundred years before Fa-Chao. Here is a picture of Shan-tao's famous allegory of Two Rivers and a White Path. I think it illustrates, perfectly, just what Shakyamuni intended when he told us to "*hold steadfast to the Name*".



You can see the river of fire, which represents anger; the river of water represents greed. They wash over the man on the path ceaselessly.

The white path is the entrusting heart, which has been laid down by Amida Buddha, who stands on the far western bank. The rivers stretch to either side of the white path endlessly, so that there is no way around them, except to cross them.

Behind Amida Buddha is the goal of Buddhist practice, the Pure Land and the liberation of nirvana. Near the man crossing the river is Shakyamuni Buddha, whose teaching (you can see the sutra scroll in his hand) recommends that we “*hold steadfast to the Name*”. You can see that robbers, sages, Buddhist clerics and wild animals are pursuing the man. The wild beasts represent the often distressing nature of human existence, our thoughts and fears that torment and alarm us.

The robbers are trying to confuse him, calling him to come back; calling to him that, by crossing the path, he is making a terrible mistake.

The man has taken a few steps along the white path.

Shinran says that the first few steps along the path represent the passage of time. The white path is the entrusting heart given by Amida Buddha.

At first we think that it is our walking along the path that is the most significant thing but eventually we realise that the white path is the only support we have - and that we depend on it alone. If there were no white path, there would be no walking; there would be no practice.

Before the man decides to cross the rivers he is finally caught in a "Catch 22" dilemma. He is on his own without friends who can advise him properly, and in desperation he thinks, "If I should turn around and go back, I am sure to die. Still, if I stay, I am sure to die. If I am to die, I would rather take my chances in crossing this Path. Ah! the path is before me now. I will cross it without slipping!"

When I was a young man I got to the point where I realised that I was too stupid and self-indulgent to gain enlightenment in this life and a friend told me about the nembutsu way. Ever since my late teens I had believed that to help other people properly you would have to be perfectly compassionate and enlightened. After some years of practice I had reached the point of being quite adept at Hatha Yoga in pursuit of this naïve objective.

When a friend told me about the nembutsu I decided that I would endure this life as it turned out, and have a go at enlightenment in the next, so I gave up Hatha Yoga, and began to take up Shakyamuni's recommendation that I "*hold steadfast to the Name*".

I bought a huge *japa mala* with one hundred and eight beads and tried to recite the nembutsu continuously. This was not without its problems – sleep for example. I also remember the time I got the *japa mala* caught in the steering wheel of the car, and nearly killed myself trying to untangle it and drive in a parking lot at the same time. It's hard to combine such a passionate quest with the demands of everyday life. It was no good because I was back in the same bind as I had been in before with Hatha Yoga. This was just another path that needed special conditions and, therefore, it was limited in its relevance.

Then, I stumbled upon what Shakyamuni actually said and realised how mistaken I had been. I chanced upon a translation of the Sanskrit version of the Larger Sutra, where it says:

*“... all beings who hear the Name of Amithabha, and raise their thought with joyful longing, even for once only, will not turn away again from the highest perfect knowledge.”* Let me repeat the salient words again – “hear” – “once” – “ultimate enlightenment”. Of course, that needs explanation.

When Shinran was staying with his dharma master Honen Shonin a vote was proposed to determine who among his disciples emphasised whether practice or the entrusting heart determined one’s destiny. Shinran and Honen both sat with those who emphasised the entrusting heart.

To “*hear the Name*” is to awaken to the entrusting heart.

If we look again at the picture of the allegory of the Two Rivers and the White Path we see that the white path, which is the entrusting heart, undergirds everything. It is shinjin that is at the heart of things. When it is settled, we know the embrace of the Buddha, and in this life we are settled in the liberation that is to come. Saying the Name then becomes happy, spontaneous, free and full of thankfulness for Amida’s Vow, for Shinran, our teachers, and for just being alive each day.

So, Shinran explains “*holding steadfast to the Name*” in this way:

*“‘Hold steadfast’ is the mind that is single. The mind that is single is the entrusting heart.”* (Passages on the Pure Land Way, CWS. P. 315.)

A equals B, B equals C. “*Hold steadfast*” equals the entrusting heart, and the entrusting heart is provided by Amida Buddha.

What about the entrusting heart? How does that come about? If we do not already know I believe that the answer to these questions will come to us if we follow Shinran’s example and not that of the Attorney General in the joke I told. Listen deeply and closely to the teachings and discover what Shinran means when he says (as I quoted him before):

*“... there is nothing whatever that has not been fulfilled through Amida [Buddha’s] directing of virtue to beings out of the pure Vow-mind.”*