

The Way of Nembutsu Faith. A Commentary on Shinran's *Shōshinge* by Hisao Inagaki. Published 1996 by Nagata Bunshodo for Horai Association. Now out of print.

The Title

[Authors commentary begins]
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'*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.

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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.

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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)

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