

## *Quick Dharma Series*

Thoughts on the *Nembutsu*

of the

Buddhist Pure Land Tradition

by Gyoshin

Eons ago in mythic time and space, a person named *Dharmakara* made 48 vows as part of his deep aspiration to lead all beings to enlightenment. The eighteenth of these vows is of central importance to the Buddhist Pure Land tradition and is known as the “Primal Vow.” At the moment of his enlightenment it is said that he acquired three bodies. This doctrine of the three bodies became known as the “*Tri-kaya*.”

The first body of *Dharmakara* is known as the “*Dharma-Kaya*” or “Dharma Body” which is beyond our perception of time and space, or even our ability to describe. It is the transcendental body of *Mahaprajnaparamitta* or Emptiness itself. Sometimes the Tibetans call this, “Vast Spaciousness.”

The second body of *Dharmakara* is known as the “*Sambhoga-Kaya*” or “Enjoyment Body.” In this body he is known as “*Amitabha/Amitayus*” (or “Amida” in Japan) Immeasurable Light (Wisdom) and Immeasurable Life (Compassion). In this body of Light he teaches the Bodhisattvas themselves. This Amitabha Buddha of Infinite Light became the central focus of Pure Land Buddhism. Interestingly, in the original Sanskrit, the name is male, in Chinese it is free of gender and in the great sweep of Pure Land tradition, gender was not important. Shan Tao (613-681ce) applied the term, “Compassionate Mother” to Amitabha. And in Japan the Amida (Oyasama) is better translated as “mother/father/parent.”

The Third body of *Dharmakara*, known as the “*Nirmaya-Kaya*,” or Transformational Body, is the perceivable form of the historical Buddha *Siddhartha Gautama*. This body is the form appropriate for the teaching of humans and is also the form of *Avalokitesvara* or the Kuan Yin. D. T. Suzuki even went so far as to see some Western religious leaders as

Transformational Bodies of the Buddha. In this sense, Our Lady of Guadalupe is none other than the Kuan Yin herself!

In the Mahayana tradition, from about 200CE on, these three bodies: the Dharma, the Enjoyment, and the Transformational, are characteristic of all the Buddhas.

The Primal Vow of the *Dharmakaya* went like this, "If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters who sincerely entrust themselves and aspire to be born in my land, performing even ten *nembutsu*, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment."

Prior to the Chinese Shan Tao it was the general belief that the *nembutsu* meant being mindful of the Buddha. From Shan Tao on it was considered to be the mantra itself (NAMO AMIDA BUTSU), rather than just being mindful of the Buddha.

The Japanese monk Shinran (1170-1263CE) clearly understood the Nembutsu as a recitation of "Namo Amida Butsu." However, he saw it differently than the "self-power" effort to gain the Pure Land by repeated recitation. He believed that the Nembutsu was awakened in us through the effect of the Vow itself, not through our own effort. This is a subtle, but extremely important, change in understanding.

This "primal vow" became totally identified with the Amida Buddha and the "calling on the Name" or "Nembutsu." Saying the name of the *Dharmakaya* embodies the Vow itself.

The Nembutsu Mantra is typically heard either in its Sanskrit form of, "Namo Amitabhaya Buddhaya," or in the more modern form recited by the Pure Land Sect of, "Namo Amida Butsu." According to Shan Tao "Namo" means to take refuge and Amida Butsu means the practice.

The importance of a powerful word or mantra is, of course, not unique to eastern spiritual traditions. In that wonderful intrusion of Greek Gnostic philosophy into our western tradition in the Gospel of John we read "In the beginning was the word..." In an interesting parallel of this thought that might be made in the Mahayana tradition we might say, "In the beginning was the Vow, and the Vow was with Amida, and the Vow was Amida and the Vow became manifest among all beings as the Nembutsu." This

parallel should not be pressed to far because Amida is not seen as a God in the sense that the Western traditions use the term God.

In our modern age it is important to try to plumb the depths of meaning in the practice of mantra beyond the sense of simple word magic. Many stories are told of absurdities that may happen when we are obsessed with saying the mantra exactly right. What happens if we don't have it correct? There is an old story about a Tibetan who had great faith in the wisdom of Indian Gurus. (We haven't changed much.) However, the Tibetan didn't speak Sanskrit very well. In spite of his deficiency in the language he traveled to India and called on a famous Guru. Unfortunately the Guru was having a bad day and with an impressive sweep of his hand he dismissed the Tibetan saying, "Go away." The Tibetan mistook the Guru's gesture as a powerful *mudra* and the shout, "Go away" as an equally powerful mantra. The Tibetan went home and for years, in his mountain retreat, practiced his *mudra* and *mantra* with great sincerity. Finally, having achieved a very high level of consciousness, he went back to the Guru to give thanks. The Guru, managing to keep a straight face, congratulated him on his achievement with unconventional practice and unswerving faith!

Whether we are "just sitting," visualizing the Buddhas, or our practice is simply being mindful in our everyday work, a contribution of the Pure Land tradition is that in all of these practices we believe that our own practice itself is brought forth by the Buddhas. We are, in other words, possessed by the Vow. It is manifesting itself through us rather than the other way around. In this sense we are at the receiving end of the "short lineage."

From this perspective we are not alone. We have help. However, it is faith in the power of sincerity and a pure heart, not sound magic that unlocks the power. "GO AWAY!"