

## The Main Topics of Japanese Pure Land Buddhist Poetry

The striking difference with almost all other Buddhist lineages in the world, excluding Zen, lies in the fact that in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism the significant importance is given to the explanation of the path and the spiritual realization presented in the form of poems. Some of these poems are among the canonical commentaries to the Three Pure Land Sutras, such as the ones composed by Hōnen (1133–1212) and Shinran (1173–1263), while other works of poetry were produced by the Pure Land Buddhists of various times and social position – ranging from priests such as Kobayashi Issa (1763–1828) to nearly illiterate laborers such as Saichi Asahara (1850–1932).

This presentation intends to delineate and discuss the main topics expressed by the Japanese Pure Land Buddhists in their poems. It is aimed at portraying the depth and particularity of Japanese Pure Land adherents' understanding of general Buddhist categories, as well as specific Pure Land Buddhist ideas through the use of poetry.

It is somewhat artificial to divide the deep and extremely inclusive works of poetic art into certain topics, for very often a single stanza involves several of such themes. Yet, in an attempt to present the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist poetry in a more systemized way, the 10 cardinal topics are singled out and grouped under the two broad categories: General Buddhist Topics and Specific Pure Land Buddhist Topics. The General Buddhist Topics category consists of The Four Seals of *Dharma*, constituting the core Buddhist categories, which are: 1) Impermanence (*anitya*), 2) Suffering (*duḥkha*), 3) Selflessness (*anātman*), 4) Perfect Enlightenment or Perfect Rest (*nirvāṇa*), and the focal concept of Mahāyāna Buddhism – 5) Compassion. The Specific Pure Land Buddhist Topics are: 6) Amida Nature, 7) *Bombu* Nature, 8) Devotion to Amida Buddha, 9) *Nembutsu*, 10) Complete Entrusting and Its Results.

### General Buddhist Topics of Japanese Pure Land Buddhist Poetry

#### 1. Impermanence

Impermanence (*anitya*) is one of the cornerstone ideas in Buddhism. It is the nature of all conditioned phenomena that they are not eternal, subjected to the natural flow of change. Complete acceptance of impermanence as the essential nature of all objects has always been one of the conditions for spiritual development. Śākyamuni Buddha instructed in Dhammapada: “All conditioned things are impermanent’ — when one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering.”

The Japanese worldview is deeply influenced by impermanence, which is perhaps the most evident fact of existence. The Japanese character was shaped to a great extent by the geographical location of the islands that have always been prone to natural disasters and the resultant devastation and havoc, as well as by the climatic conditions offering the variety of four seasons with sharp distinctions among them. Political instability and manifold social upheavals which resulted from them, also contributed substantially to the paradigm of the world as extremely fleeting and ephemeral.

One of the most famous expositions of impermanence in the whole Japanese poetry is the haiku of Kobayashi Issa (1763-1828):

this world  
is a dewdrop world  
yes... but...

This haiku was composed by Issa at the one year anniversary of his daughter's death. Here the idea of impermanence is stated as a fact, but the author adds "yes... but..." to express his grief over the loss of the daughter, even though he is perfectly aware of the fact of fleeting nature of life. Hence, a very powerful feeling is invested in just three lines.

One of the most respectable and famous Jōdo Shinshū contemporary masters Zuiken Inagaki (1885-1981) expresses the realization of impermanence in the following verse:

In this life of impermanence in the World of this  
Burning House, anything could happen at any time;  
Let us live each coming day  
in humble repentance.

Impermanence is always closely related to death. Rennyō, the 8th Head of Jōdo Shinshū school, was also a great poet and the theme of impermanence is often present in his verses:

Having lived for more than eighty years,  
My insipid life still lingers on;  
Wind blowing through the pine trees  
Carries the sound of Impermanence.

Since in this world of impermanence  
Breathing may stop at any moment,  
Let us quickly place our trust  
In Amida's Vow.

Zuiken tells about the same fact in the following verses:

Birth-and-death is a matter of great importance;  
And impermanence is quickly approaching.  
Are you prepared?

Death is coming closer and closer day by day;  
the law of karma is fearful indeed.  
At the moment of realizing this,  
we hear Amida's Call!

In a similar way *myōkōnin* O-Karu (1801-1856) states:

Whether morning or evening,  
Do not forget your  
Debt to your master.  
Obey him in every way,  
Because  
There may be no tomorrow.

Do not think  
Life lasts forever.  
A turtle is said  
To live ten thousand years,

But my life is uncertain,  
As is yours.  
We live for just a night  
Here at a temporary dwelling.

Just like in other schools of Buddhism the concept of impermanence is given a great significance both as a description of one of the fundamental facts of conditioned existence, as well as the impetus for spiritual practice, in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism it serves the same purpose. However, in the case of the later, impermanence and death are also implied to contrast the temporal phenomenal world with the Pure Land – the realm of *Nirvāṇa*. *Myōkōnin* Saichi Asahara (1850-1932) expressed it in the following verses:

Saichi's heart destined for death when his end comes,  
Is now made an immortal heart,  
Is made into the "Namu-amida-butsu."

Death has been snatched away from me,  
And in its place the "Namu-amida-butsu."

Also, since death for a Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist means the entrance to Amida's Pure Land and, hence, perfect enlightenment, it is often viewed with joy and expectation. Zuiken reveals:

Having died the Great Death,  
we go to the Pure Land  
embraced by Amida Tathāgata.

Since the Birth in the Pure Land is certainty for many Pure Land Buddhists, they often displayed their indifference to the pursuits of longevity. Thus Issa said in what is considered his death poem:

What matter if I live on –  
a tortoise lives  
a hundred times as long.

Impermanence thus is viewed in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism from many different angles and with various subtle meanings. It's the sad fact of life, as well as the liberating one. It's both beautiful and lamentable. But most importantly, impermanence and death signify the Pure Land Buddhist's entrance into the real world of Amida Buddha.

## 2. Suffering

Suffering (*duḥkha*) – also translated as stress, anguish, pain – its cause, eradication and the way to eradication, are collectively known as the Four Noble Truths – the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. In his first known discourse Śākyamuni Buddha described his realization of the Four Noble Truths in the following way: “Vision arose, insight arose, discernment arose, knowledge arose, illumination arose within me with regard to things never heard before: ‘This is the noble truth of stress.’” The same he repeated in respect to the realization of the other three truths.

Pure Land Buddhism in general has always been considered as the most “other-worldly” Buddhist school. As stated by Reverend Paraskevopoulos, “More than any other tradition of the Buddha-*Dharma*, the Pure Land school has been the most sensitive to the implications of suffering and samsaric life for sincere individuals who are struggling with personal weakness and the seemingly insurmountable barriers of

anger, greed and ignorance in the pursuit of enlightenment.” In Japanese Pure Land Buddhist poetry this world we live in is sometimes compared to hell. Saichi declares:

I am not to go to Jigoku (hell),  
Jigoku is right here,  
We are living right in Jigoku,  
Jigoku is no other place than this.

Issa described this world as a suffering one in many instances:

world of pain--  
and blossoms blooming  
add to it!

a corrupt world  
in its latter days...  
but cherry blossoms!

In the last verse Issa talks about the idea of *Mappō* or the ‘Age of *Dharma*’s Degeneration’, but contrasts it with the blossoming of the cherry. So even in the ‘corrupt world’ and within the *Mappō*, there is still beauty in this world. Although there is no direct relation between the cherries and the Pure Land, yet Issa might also mean that the Amida’s Land of Bliss is still available even in this age, as *Sukhāvātī* is always depicted as the Land of exquisite beauty.

The understanding of suffering nature of *Samsāra* is of course the impetus to transcend it. The contrast between the suffering nature of this world and the blissful nature of the Pure Land as well as Amida’s Great Compassion is often depicted in the poetic pieces of the Japanese Pure Land adherents. Shinran exclaimed:

The ocean of birth-and-death, of painful existence, has no bound;  
Only by the ship of Amida’s Universal Vow  
Can we, who have long been drowning,  
Unfailingly be brought across it.

In a similar way Zuiken writes:

When I am alone, oppressed by indescribable sadness,  
I feel that the compassion of my True Parent is  
trustworthy.

Whilst living in this distasteful world,  
we can experience the joy of mindful  
recollection of the Buddha!  
To what can it be compared?

He also advises:

If you let your suffering stay as it is,  
it will cease to trouble you;  
While resigned to persistent suffering,

and letting your mind dwell in the Pure Land,  
You will learn to live in unspeakable happiness.

Rennyō explains how suffering should drive the Pure Land Buddhist to transcend this world and strive for the Pure Land:

Being an old man, I suffer from pain  
Whatever I do;  
Why should I not aspire  
To the Land of Recompense?

How much longer will the illness  
Of this old man last?  
I wish Amida would come and take me  
Quickly to his Pure Land.

The realization of suffering in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism is both the recognition of the unsatisfactory nature of this world, as well as the driving force to leave it for Amida's *Sukhāvātī*. Although great emphasis is placed on the painful experiences of this life, suffering is also considered as a useful reminder and stimuli without which the adherents would not turn away from material existence and embrace Amida's Compassionate Vow.

### 3. Selflessness

The concept of selflessness or egolessness (*anātman*) is another focal point in all of Buddhism. Although having a lot of interpretations within various Buddhist traditions, there is almost unanimous agreement that the basic definition of *anātman* is that the five aggregates that constitute a sentient being lack any essence, or anything permanent. Śākyamuni Buddha explained in the *Anatta-lakkhana Sutta* that, "Form, ... feeling, ... perception, ... [mental] fabrications, ... consciousness is not self."

Japanese Pure Land Buddhist thought was shaped to a great degree by the Tendai tradition with its emphasis on the concept of Original Enlightenment (*hongaku*). Therefore, for the Japanese Pure Land tradition the concept of selflessness is very closely linked to the concepts of *Dharmakāya*, Buddha-nature and *Tathāgata*. In Jōdo Shū school the following explanation is a common position on the concept of emptiness: "The other power of Amida which the Pure Land tradition and Hōnen so emphasize is none other than the selfless and compassionate nature of the bodhisattva realizing his/her vows to save all sentient beings. When we open ourselves to the other power of Amida's grace through chanting the *nembutsu*, we open ourselves to the Not-self nature of existence which Shakyamuni discovered in his contemplations." According to the traditional Shin-Buddhist view, the term 'egolessness' is much more suitable, as it is wrong to say that we are completely selfless, because *Dharmakāya* is present in every sentient being, and is thus termed the Great Self. Shinran states:

The Supreme that is unexcelled is true emancipation;  
True emancipation is none other than Tathāgata.  
When we attain true emancipation,  
We become free of desire and free of doubt.

Saichi says:

How fine!

The whole world and vastness of space is Buddha!  
And I am in it--"Namu-amida-butsu!"

Namu-san and Amida-san--both are Amida:  
"Namu-amida-butsu!"  
This happiness is my happiness.

And even more directly:

"O Saichi, who is Nyorai-san?"  
"He is no other than myself."  
"Who is the founder [of the Shin teaching]?"  
"He is no other than myself."  
"What is the canonical text?"  
"It is no other than myself."  
The ordinary man's heart has no fixed root,  
Yet this rootless one takes delight in the Ho [i.e., Dharmal];  
This is because he is given Oya's heart--  
The heart of "Namu-amida-butsu."

Zuiken states:

No Tathāgata apart from me,  
No me apart from the Tathāgata.

In the ocean of the Vow, nobody hears  
or trusts the Vow;  
Only the voice of Amida's call sounds  
and resounds everywhere.

There is no 'I' who hears it but it is heard  
nevertheless.  
How wonderful!

It's due to Amida's presence as Buddha-nature within every sentient being that the response to the compassionate call of the *Tathāgata* is possible. Therefore, Zuiken says that "nobody hears or trusts the Vow... but it is heard nevertheless".

Just like the realization of the impermanence and suffering should lead one to entrust oneself to the compassion of Amida, the understanding of egolessness is seen in the same light. Rennyō instructs:

Those who hear  
That 'I' does not exist  
Should all lose no time  
In trusting Namō Amida Butsu.

Although the cardinal Buddhist concept of selflessness does exist in Japanese Pure Land Buddhism, it has a substantially different meaning, as it is mainly referred to the absence of ego among the five aggregates,

but it does not deny that a Great Self in the form of Buddha-nature is present in every sentient being, allowing for the eventual enlightenment to take place.

#### 4. Perfect Rest (*Nirvāṇa*)

Perhaps nothing in the history of Buddhist studies is more controversial and complicated than the concept of *Nirvāṇa*, which is the final goal of every Buddhist, either for oneself or for all sentient beings. There are numerous interpretations of what it actually means. It's generally accepted that *Nirvāṇa* is the end of suffering or, alternatively, the Perfect Rest. Śākyamuni Buddha teaches in the Pāli canon: "This, bhikkhu, is a designation for the element of Nibbana: the removal of lust, the removal of hatred, the removal of delusion. The destruction of the taints is spoken of in that way."

In Pure Land Buddhist tradition, apart from Jōdo Shinshū school, *Nirvāṇa* is thought to be attained after the period of training in Amitābha's Pure Land. However, in the case of Jōdo Shinshū, Shinran stated that Pure Land itself is *Nirvāṇa* for those who entered it upon complete reliance on the Original Vow of Amida Buddha. Shinran writes about such disciples that, "when they reach that lotus-held world, they immediately realize the body of suchness or *dharma*-nature." He states in the *Hymns of Pure Land*:

Tathagata is none other than nirvana;  
Nirvana is called Buddha-nature.  
Beyond our ability to attain it in the state of foolish beings,  
We will realize it on reaching the land of peace.

Further he says:

The mind that seeks to save all sentient beings  
Is directed to us through Amida's Vow of wisdom.  
Those who realize this true entrusting that is directed to us  
Attain great, complete nirvana.

Since the concepts of *Sukhāvātī* and *Nirvāṇa* are equivalent for the followers of Jōdo Shinshū, but yet they belong to Pure Land Buddhist tradition as a whole, in their poetic pieces they usually refer to this state as "Pure Land" as opposed to "*Nirvāṇa*". In this way Issa shares his feeling of the Pure Land - *Nirvāṇa*:

summer cool--  
the gate to Buddha's  
Pure Land

cool breeze--  
through the window  
Pure Land Paradise!

In the poetry of Saichi the sameness of Pure Land and *Nirvāṇa* is often expressed in a way of his becoming a Buddha:

What all the Buddhas of the Hokkai declare  
Is to make this Saichi turn into a Buddha--  
"Namu-amida-butsu, Namu-amida-butsu!"

Oya-sama is Buddha  
Who transforms Saichi into a Buddha--

How happy with the favor!  
"Namu-amida-butsu, Namu-amida-butsu!"

Rennyō also talks of the trust in Amida as a way of becoming a Buddha:

Simply trust Amida!  
His Vows, deep and penetrating,  
Will turn your five hindrances  
Into Buddhahood.

Since Pure Land tradition is a part of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the idea of personal liberation without first liberating all beings is alien to it. This is one more way to see that for Jōdo Shinshū followers Pure Land is *Nirvāṇa* itself, as upon entering it, one immediately returns to this world of suffering to help beings. Zuiken states:

The reason why we go to the Pure Land  
is to become Buddhas  
and promulgate the teaching of  
the Tathāgata's Great Compassion endlessly.

Riding on the wings of Great Compassion  
I shall sport throughout the universe (to save beings).  
How pleasant this will be!

Though in general Pure Land Buddhist tradition *Nirvāṇa* is thought of as somewhat distant, as it is achieved after the practices undertaken in the Land of Bliss, in the major Pure Land school of Japan – the Jōdo Shinshū – reaching Pure Land (*genso*) is equated with *Nirvāṇa*, and the emphasis is given to the act of returning (*eko*) to the defiled world for the benefit of all sentient beings.

## 5. Compassion

The most important feature of Mahāyāna Buddhism as a whole is its emphasis on compassionate activities of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. Although compassion (*karuṇā*) is also present and is quite important in Theravāda tradition, in the case of Mahāyāna it is given the greatest significance along with wisdom (*prajñā*). Compassion is the core of the path of Bodhisattvas, as it is the driving force behind all their activities. One of the most popular among the exponents of the path of Bodhisattvas, Shantideva, states: "Just as there is no mental pleasure in all sensual gratification whatsoever when one's body is on fire, likewise there is no way for the Compassionate Ones to be happy when sentient beings are in pain."

The whole understanding and practice in the Pure Land tradition is based on the compassionate nature of Amida Buddha, without which there would be no hope for the practitioners of the Defiled Age. It's only due to the Vows of Amitābha that the entrance to the Sukhāvātī is possible for those who deeply embrace the way of Nembutsu. Shinran states:

To the evil sentient beings of wrong views  
In the evil age of the five defilements, in this evil world,  
The Buddhas, countless as the sands of the Ganges,  
Give the Name of Amida, urging [them to entrust themselves to it].

Zuiken says:



From the Buddha's non-discriminative wisdom  
arises the Great Compassion;  
From the Great Compassion comes the Primal Vow.

Saichi explains this compassionate power as follows:

The most wonderful thing is  
That Buddha's invisible heart of compassion is visible  
While I'm right here;  
That the Pure Land, millions of millions of worlds away,  
is visible  
While I'm right here--  
"Namu-amida-butsu!"

Zuiken explains the nature of the Great Compassion striving to save all beings:

Nothing can be done to settle my mind;  
Then the call of Great Compassion is heard,  
"I will save you without fail."  
My mind is resigned with the thought,  
"I know nothing about good or evil."

Another aspect of compassion is the aspiration of the Japanese Pure Land practitioners for all sentient beings to attain the Pure Land. In this regard, Shinran states:

The mahasattvas and masters who spread the sutras  
Save the countless beings of utter defilement and evil.  
With the same mind, all people of the present, whether monk or lay,  
Should rely wholly on the teachings of these venerable masters.

Rennyō writes:

Since people are ignorant  
Of the true Dharma,  
My brush and mind are busy  
Defining the Dharma.

If my brush and mind are not employed  
To convey the Dharma messages,  
Who will teach people  
The true Way of salvation?

Issa pays his tribute to the masters who spread the *Dharma*:

praise Buddha's  
compassionate saints!  
pure water.

Shinran expresses the focal significance of compassion in the path of Pure Land Buddhism:

Such is the benevolence of Amida's great compassion,  
That we must strive to return it, even to the breaking of our bodies;  
Such is the benevolence of the masters and true teachers,  
That we must endeavor to repay it, even to our bones becoming dust.

In this way, compassion plays a tremendously important role in Japanese Pure Land Buddhist understanding and poetry. It is mainly referred to the Great Compassion of Amitābha Buddha and his Original Vow, capable of delivering all sentient beings who entrust themselves. Also, those who are assured of birth in the Pure Land (realized *shinjin*) should out of compassion instruct others and always aspire to return to the world of suffering for the benefit of all sentient beings.

## Specific Topics of Japanese Pure Land Buddhist Poetry

### 6. Amida Nature

The Pure Land tradition as we know it today is unthinkable without the figure of Amida Buddha. It is the center, the beginning and the end of the way of *Nembutsu*. As with many other core concepts in Pure Land Buddhism the nature of Amida Buddha is subjected to various interpretations. Hōnen supported the traditional position of the tradition, believing that Amida Buddha is the *Sambhogakāya* form of the Buddha. However, Shinran's perspective is somewhat more complicated, as he thought of Bodhisattva Dharmākara as the manifestation of the formless *dharmā*-body. According to Reverend Wilson, "Shinran taught that Amida is the Buddha in his dharmakaya form—his ultimate, liberated nature—and that the Pure Land is a poetic description of nirvana."

In his poetic expressions, Shinran described his vision of Amida as follows:

Amida, full of compassion for those lost in the great night of ignorance -  
The wheel of light of dharmā-body being boundless -  
Took the form of the Buddha of Unhindered Light  
And appeared in the land of peace.

The nature of Amida Buddha's greatness is also explained by the adherents of Jōdo Shinshū through his compassionate activities. Rennyō declares:

Since Amida's Dharma is to save  
Those with deep-rooted karmic evil,  
Is there a Buddha  
Superior to Amida?

Amida's activities are often presented through the power of the Original Vow. Rennyō says:

"Inconceivable" is the only word  
To describe the Vow;  
Inconceivable, beyond thought,  
And ineffable!

Zuiken exclaims:

"Dharmākara brought forth the unsurpassed and

most excellent Vow" (Shoshinge);  
How wonderful it is that he made the Vow  
urging us, "Come straight to me!"

Shinran advises:

The Buddha's majestic power and Primal Vow -  
Fulfilled, luminous, resolute, and ultimate -  
Are means of compassion beyond conceptual understanding,  
So take refuge in Amida, the truly immeasurable one.

Saichi, with his deep devotion, shares his feelings about Amida's Vow:

How grateful!  
'Now that Amida's 'Original Vow' is established as the 'Namu-amida-butsu,'  
You have no more to worry about yourself,  
Listen, listen!  
When you hear 'Namu-amida-butsu,'  
You have your rebirth in the Pure Land.

O-karu says in a similar way:

Amida's sacred Vow:  
Never to return  
The daughter  
To this (saha) world;  
Thus promised.  
Thus promised.

Amida Buddha's nature is thus praised and adored by the Japanese Pure Land Buddhists. It is also highly contrasted with the defiled nature of human beings.

### **7. *Bombu* Nature**

Pure Land Buddhist tradition in general and Jōdo Shinshū school in particular have a rather radical view on the nature of sentient beings and their potential for enlightenment based on their own self-power. Such nature is usually described as full of ignorance and blind passions. Shinran confessed that:

Although I take refuge in the true Pure Land way,  
It is hard to have a true and sincere mind.  
This self is false and insincere;  
I completely lack a pure mind.

O-karu tells about the shame knowing her *bombu* nature:

How frightening!  
The Buddha sees my  
Innermost heart,  
So full of evil,  
How ashamed I am!

I ask myself  
If I have  
A good heart/mind,  
But what I find  
Causes me only shame.

Saichi goes as far as to call himself “an evil spirit”:

Saichi feels within himself  
An endless flow of folly,  
An endless flow of greed;  
There is a fire constantly burning--  
No wonder, this burning,  
For Saichi is an evil spirit.

The common term used to describe the small, foolish beings living in the degenerate age of the decline of *Dharma* is *bombu*. Shinran explains:

Ignorance and blind passions abound,  
Pervading everywhere like innumerable particles of dust.  
Desire and hatred arising out of conflict and accord  
Are like high peaks and mountain ridges.

Shinran further laments:

Each of us, in outward bearing,  
Makes a show of being wise, good, and dedicated;  
But so great are our greed, anger, perversity, and deceit,  
That we are filled with all forms of malice and cunning.

Extremely difficult is it to put an end to our evil nature;  
The mind is like a venomous snake or scorpion.  
Our performance of good acts is also poisoned;  
Hence, it is called false and empty practice.

Rennyō describes the *bombu* nature as follows:

How many times I have been deceived  
By my own resolutions!  
The most unreliable thing:  
My mind.

Zuiken writes in a similar fashion:

Bombu, ordinary people, are beings  
who constantly create storms of greed and anger  
through self-attachment, self-love, and self-pride.

Saichi passionately remarks:

How miserable!  
Saichi's heart, how miserable!  
All kinds of delusion thickly arise all at once!  
A hateful fire mixed with evils is burning,  
The waves mixed with evils are rising,  
How miserable! A fire mixed with follies is burning.

There is thus no hope for such beings to attain enlightenment by themselves. Shinran states:

We may think that these times belong to the right dharma-age,  
But in us - the lowest of foolish beings -  
There is no mind that is pure, true, or real;  
How could we awaken the aspiration for enlightenment?

The aspiration for enlightenment through self-power taught in the Path of Sages  
Is beyond our minds and words;  
We foolish beings ever sinking in transmigration -  
How could we awaken it?

For Shin Buddhists it is very significant to fully understand their nature as *bombu*. Saichi says:

When the *bombu* is not understood  
It is wickedness;  
When understood, it is humility--  
"Namu-amida-butsu!"

For the Pure Land Buddhists such a polluted and defiled nature of themselves is highly contrasted with the pure and enlightened nature of Amida Buddha. It is only due to his Great Power and Great Compassion that there is a chance for liberation. Therefore, Rennyo instructs to accept the *bombu* nature, and entrust oneself to Amida:

Leaving intact karmic transgressions  
You have committed with the innate evil mind,  
You should seek to attain  
The single thought of trusting Amida.

He further notes that such a stark contrast between the *bombu* and Amida is a cause for rejoicing:

What a joy it is that I was born  
As a man of grave karmic transgressions!  
Because of my evil karma,  
I have come to trust in Amida's Vow.

Saichi shares his experience with the fellow practitioners, by instructing:

O you, my friends, looking at your hearts filled with wretchedness,  
Be not led to doubt Amida's mercy,  
Though there is indeed this possibility.  
But this is the greatest mistake you are apt to commit.  
An utter wretchedness we all guilty beings experience

Does surely turn into a priceless treasure  
This you will realize when karma ripens;  
For the "Namu-amida-butsu" truly achieves wonders.

Understanding one's self as inseparable from the negativity, the followers of Jōdo Shinshū school are thus led to entrust to Amida their spiritual destiny. Such deep realization of one's evil nature cannot but leave no trace of self-power efforts to remain within the practitioner. And it is exactly out of this realization that the devotion to Amida springs up.

### 8. Devotion to Amida

The practitioner on the path of Pure Land Buddhism has no choice but devote oneself to the Other Power of Amida Buddha. Without such power the emancipation would not be possible, and one would be left without any hope whatsoever. Therefore, there is tremendous energy which is invested in the act of devotion to Amida. Shinran composed many beautiful verses praising Amida as the object of great devotion:

Let Amida be praised for a hundred thousand kotis of kalpas  
By a hundred thousand kotis of tongues,  
Each tongue producing countless voices,  
And still the praise would be incomplete.

He states that praising Amida is the act of all Buddhas:

The Buddhas, infinite in number, all praise Amida,  
Whose majestic powers are boundless;  
From the Eastern Buddha lands, countless as the sands of the Ganges,  
Innumerable bodhisattvas go to pay homage.

Rennyō expresses his deep devotion, extolling Amida's great power:

Simply trust Amida!  
His Vows, deep and penetrating,  
Will turn your five hindrances  
Into Buddhahood.

It's important to note that Amida's Great Compassion does not require anything from the practitioner but the total devotion. The concept of *konomama* or "just as you are" is rather significant in Jōdo Shinshū school. It is the deepest realization of one's complete powerlessness in terms of spiritual attainment, and absolute reliance on Amida's salvific power. Zuiken states:

Having seen through my mind,  
to the farthest depths,  
Amida says, "I will save you as you are"  
To attain birth nothing is required, nothing!  
Indeed, just as you stand; nothing - really nothing - is required.

O-karu sincerely exclaims:

How can I  
Not be grateful?

Amida accepts me  
Naked,  
Just as I am!

This incomparable power of Amida's Great Compassion is believed to destroy all evil karma within the practitioner. Shinran explains:

The light of purity is without compare.  
When a person encounters this light,  
All bonds of karma fall away;  
So take refuge in Amida, the ultimate shelter.

Rennyō says:

Whatever karmic transgressions  
You have committed till today,  
You are freed from their retribution,  
If you put your trust in Amida.

Saichi expresses the same idea with more passion, which is typical for a *myōkōnin*:

How dreadful!  
This world known as shaba  
Is where we endlessly commit all kinds of karma.  
How thankful!  
All this is turned into [the work of] the Pure Land,  
Unintermittently!

Zuiken praises the great power of Amida, capable of destroying all evil karma:

Boundless is your wisdom, like the open sky,  
Limitless is your compassion, like the great ocean.  
I am at peace  
while my evil karma and spiritual hindrances remain intact.

For Jōdo Shinshū followers such an unconditional nature of Amida's Compassion is unquestionable, due to the Great Vows of Amida, leaving nobody outside the possibility of liberation. It is truly beyond the limited capacities of the dualistic mind to understand. Shinran thus writes:

The Buddha's light cannot be fathomed;  
Thus Amida is called "Buddha of Inconceivable Light."  
All the Buddhas, in acclaiming a person's attainment of birth,  
Extol Amida's virtues.

The Buddha's majestic power and Primal Vow -  
Fulfilled, luminous, resolute, and ultimate -  
Are means of compassion beyond conceptual understanding,  
So take refuge in Amida, the truly immeasurable one.

Rennyō's realization is of the similar kind:

"Inconceivable" is the only word  
To describe the Vow;  
Inconceivable, beyond thought,  
And ineffable!

Zuiken talks of this inconceivability as follows:

There is a limit to the wisdom of humans;  
Just think of how inconceivable the Power of the Primal Vow is.

Amida's Mind-Power and Vow-Power -  
Their working is inconceivable!  
Following it, I go to the Pure Land.

Completely devoting oneself to Amida Buddha and his work of liberating all sentient beings, leaving aside all self-powered efforts, is the highest aspiration for a Pure Land Buddhist. Such devotion reached its highest point in the case of Jōdo Shinshū school, where all notions of one's own efforts are rejected, and only the compassionate Other Power of Amida Buddha remains.

### 9. *Nembutsu*

The core concept and the main practice in the whole of Pure Land tradition is chanting the name of Amitābha Buddha. It was Hōnen who advanced this practice as the sole and the only necessary spiritual endeavor for the attainment of the goal of the tradition – the Birth in the Land of Bliss. In his well-known statement Shinran explains: “True and real shinjin is unfailingly accompanied by [saying] the Name. [Saying] the Name, however, is not necessarily accompanied by shinjin that is the power of the Vow.” Thus for Shinran and the whole Jōdo Shinshū school it is the true faith (*shinjin*) that is of utmost importance, and the repetition of the *Nembutsu* is the result of having *shinjin*. Shinran poetically expressed the same idea:

The Name embodying the Primal Vow is the act of true settlement,  
The Vow of entrusting with sincere mind is the cause of birth;  
We realize the equal of enlightenment and supreme nirvana  
Through the fulfillment of the Vow of attaining nirvana without fail.

Rennyō expresses this notion as follows:

In the two characters "na-mo"  
Is spontaneously contained  
The mind of faith  
That trusts Amida.

If you look for the mind  
Of someone who trusts Amida,  
You will find it  
In Namo Amida Butsu.

Zuiken explains that Nembutsu is the result of sincere faith in the Primal Vow:



Namo Amida Butsu -  
the Tathagata's Mind of Great Compassion -  
when reflected in our minds  
Becomes shinjin.  
When shinjin appears in our mouths,  
it is nembutsu.

Apart from the Tathagata's Great Wisdom Power,  
Great Compassion Power, and Great Primal Vow Power,  
My birth in the Pure Land would be impossible.  
Apart from Namō Amida Butsu, there is no shinjin;  
apart from shinjin, there is no Namō Amida Butsu.

Another rather significant Jōdo Shinshū concept is that the merit that allows a practitioner to be reborn in the Land of Bliss is coming from Amida Buddha and not from the practitioner's endeavors. This is a radical notion introduced by Shinran, greatly contrasting his teaching with the traditional Pure Land Buddhist theory. Therefore, the chanting of the *Nembutsu* is not a meritorious deed, and hence no calculation is attached to it.

The saying of the Name arising from true and real shinjin  
Is Amida's directing of virtue to beings;  
Therefore, it is called "not directing merit,"  
And saying the nembutsu in self-power is rejected.

Saichi states:

All the miraculous merits accumulated by Amida  
Throughout his disciplinary life of innumerable eons  
Are filling up this body called Saichi.  
Merits are no other than the six syllables "Na-mu-a-mi-da-but(su)."

Zuiken also depicts the *Nembutsu* as Amida's directing virtues towards the practitioners:

"Nembutsu of the Other-Power" is the practice  
which we do not need to direct to Amida;  
Hence, the all-powerful working of  
Namō Amida Butsu.

The way of Jōdo Shinshū school *Nembutsu* is chanting as a result of deep faith in the Original Vow and the response to Amida's benevolence. Such a pure *Nembutsu* can only happen when a practitioner has full and complete faith in the salvific power of Amida's Original Vow, which is termed *shinjin* or Entrusting.

### 10. Entrusting and Its Results

In Jōdo Shinshū attainment of *shinjin* – the unquestionable entrusting to Amida's Original Vow and, therefore, being completely assured of the Birth in the Pure Land (attainment of *Nirvāṇa* with subsequent return to fulfill the numerous bodhisattva activities) – is a spontaneous event or the “one thought-moment”. Such a moment is all that is necessary to attain birth in the Pure Land. Shinran explains:

Because of the Vow, "If they should not be born...,"

When the moment of genuine entrusting has come  
And people attain the one thought-moment of joy,  
Their birth becomes completely settled.

Those who attain true and real *shinjin*  
Immediately join the truly settled;  
Thus having entered the stage of nonretrogression,  
They necessarily attain nirvana.

Rennyō depicts the meaning of *shinjin* and its attainment:

If you trust Amida  
With singleness of heart,  
Your birth in the Pure Land  
Is beyond a shadow of doubt.

In a similar way Zuiken assures:

Having joyful faith awakened  
by the Vow-Power,  
Supreme enlightenment is certain  
in the Land of Peace.

What is important to note is that according to Jōdo Shinshū school such complete entrusting is Amida's gift and not a result of one's effort. *Shinjin* is actually equated with Buddha-nature and Great Compassion. It's also described as the working of the Other Power or working of the Name (*Nembutsu*). Rennyō says:

To awaken a single thought of Faith  
Of the supreme Buddha-Wisdom,  
I assure you, is due to the working  
Of Amida's Light.

Faith does not arise  
From within one's self;  
The entrusting heart is itself  
Given by the Other-Power.

As a result of attaining *shinjin*, Jōdo Shinshū practitioner is filled with joyful gratitude to Amida for his compassionate activities. And pronouncing the name of Amida is the way to express this feeling of enormous gratitude, as well as praising the Buddha. Shinran states:

Those who truly attain *shinjin*  
As they utter Amida's Name,  
Being mindful of the Buddha always,  
Wish to respond to the great benevolence.

Rennyō's words greatly resemble Shinran's:

Morning and evening  
I find peace of mind in Faith,

Remembering deeply  
The Buddha's Benevolence.

The mind that trusts Amida  
Is full of gratitude;  
I am always drowned  
With tears of joy.

Saichi exclaims:

By your favor I am turned into a Buddha;  
Infinitely great is this favor of yours  
"Namu-amida-butsu!"

O-karu is similar in her deep feelings to Amida:

How patiently  
Amida has brought me thus far.  
Morning and evening,  
I offer thanks.  
I offer thanks.

Zuiken expresses his *shinjin* realization:

My vain search for *shinjin* having ended  
I rejoice at the Compassion  
that seeks to save me by all means.

The great poet Issa composed several *haiku* poems on this topic:

come what may  
praise Buddha!  
mountain cuckoo.

even a layman  
praises Amida Buddha...  
cherry blossoms fall

winter voice drills--  
for this, too  
all praise to Amida Buddha!

It is crucial to point out that attainment of *shinjin* is not equivalent to being enlightened in the usual Buddhist sense. The person who was given the complete entrusting still possesses defilements and blind passions. Even the gratitude for the salvation is not always present. Shinran was the first to explain this seeming contradiction:

The light of compassion that grasps us illumines and protects us always;  
The darkness of our ignorance is already broken through;  
Still the clouds and mists of greed and desire, anger and hatred,

Cover as always the sky of true and real *shinjin*.

Zuiken shares his deep experience:

In daily life, selfish desires arise and anger fills my mind;  
Besides, I do not feel gratitude to Amida;  
Amida saves me just as I am;  
How grateful!

O-karu confesses:

I am an ungrateful person  
Who feels  
Not the least indebted,  
So Amida saves me  
Just as I am!

The attainment of *shinjin* is believed to be rather difficult, because, as noted earlier, it requires absolute submission to the Other Power of Amida Buddha and termination of one's own endeavors for spiritual self-improvement. Therefore, Shinran explains the difficulty of attaining *shinjin*:

More difficult even than trust in the teachings of Sakyamuni's lifetime  
Is the true entrusting of the universal Vow,  
The sutra teaches that it is "the most difficult of all difficulties,"  
That "nothing surpasses this difficulty."

Realization of true and real *shinjin*  
Is rare in the defiled world of the last dharma-age;  
The witness of Buddhas countless as the sands of the Ganges  
Reveals how difficult it is to attain.

Rennyō compares the attainment of *shinjin* to the blooming of magnolia fruit:

A magnolia has borne fruit;  
May Amida's Primal Vow,  
As rare as that fruit,  
Spread far and wide in the world!

The core concept and the focal point of the Jōdo Shinshū school of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism is *shinjin* – the unquestionable faith in Amida, which is spontaneous, non-calculative, effortless, and joyful. Although, it does not turn the practitioner into a liberated being immediately, and even does not necessarily significantly alter the defiled nature of the adherent, it does guarantee the attainment of *Nirvāṇa* at the time of death, and the posthumous return to the world of suffering to help all sentient beings. The attainment of true and real *shinjin* leads to the life of gratitude for Amida's benevolence – his Great Compassion, which manifests itself through the pronouncement of the *Nembutsu*. And this is the one and only realization that a follower of Jōdo Shinshū school effortlessly strives for, as even *shinjin* itself is given by Amida Buddha to those, whose self-power endeavors have extinguished.