

THE NEMBUTSU — a way of saying. © Milton Moon

T'an-luan, the holy sage of China,
late in the fifth century, or
sometime in the first half of the sixth century,
put into the words 'Other Power,'
the 'essence' and the essential core,
the summit of what we know
of the Pure Land teachings of Buddhism.

Many centuries later
in the nearby scattered islands of Japan
they made schools of teaching and
practice around these words.
They, of course, were not alone and
not that these words were new;
all religions have their spiritual pinnacle,
their own attainable summit
Pure Land or Heaven.
There have been many approaches
in search of the spiritual ultimate.

According to myths and legends
there have been many Buddhas
in each long kalpa of the past.
We don't know all they taught but
'enlightenment' was the pinnacle
however high it was
for that particular time and place.
Scholars surely disputed then, as they do now,
about the distant summit and the way to achieve
the success sought. The Buddhas' promise
of a Pure Land pinnacle would point out steps
on a journey towards emancipation.

The present Buddha, Gautama Siddhartha proclaimed,
more than five-hundred years,
before the Christian era taught
'enlightenment' was possible for all.
He also taught that an attainable Pure Land
was chosen by an earlier Buddha,
and of Vows that made this attainment possible.
That Buddha was known in Japan as Amida;
and his Pure Land in the West,
illuminates the darkness of this time,
therein dwell all deserving aspirants
only returning to Samsara
to fulfil bodhisattva vows.

The present Buddha Siddhartha proclaimed
that these Vows, arising in kalpas past, were
made to counter the Age of Mappo
the current period in the decline of the the Dharma.
One vow especially, created an easy practice;
the voiced *nembutsu*, the invoking of
the sacred name, *Namu Amida Butsu*.
With these words, aspiring devotees,

can visit the Pure Land for which they yearn.
with such a fervent desire.

Some say the *nembutsu*
is like a Zen *koan*.

Zen speaks of a flash of *kensho*,
or a deeper experience of *satori*.
The Pure Land devotees speak
of *shinjin*, but there is no measuring
the profundity of the experiences,
however self-delusion is common-place,
for both student and teacher.

What is common to both, in the beginning,
is a *genuine* desire or the human aspiration
to become liberated. To achieve that,
with both Zen and the Pure land,
one must have great aspiration
one must have great sincerity, and patience
and one must have great faith and certainty.
To genuinely wish, hope and desire
to solve a koan or go to the Pure Land
one must be genuine. The questions?
What is a genuine aspiration?
What is genuine sincerity?
As a human being it is a hard to be 'genuine'
without the taint of human calculation.

Is the *nembutsu* the same as a Zen *koan*.
in that it reveals itself after the
'seeker' has exhausted their efforts?
Also the deepest thinkers wonder whether
the Pure Land is an actual place
or whether the destination sought
is both 'within us and without' all the time,
a part of the Universal Mind, something
beyond our present understanding?

'*Enlightenment*' never ends — in all
likelihood it doesn't end for Buddhas either.
We don't know and we can't know
what form *enlightenment* takes, nor do we know
what the future holds for spiritual beings.
We *do* know what forms Heaven and Hell
take here on earth, and mostly,
if we are honest, Heaven is beyond our reach
and we hope Hell doesn't happen,
especially to us at the very end.

For several centuries many sects of Buddhism
have practised the *nembutsu* in one of its forms.
In Japan, some say *Namu Amida Butsu*
many thousand times a day, others 'up to ten times',
others again say it once and some only when facing death.
Others don't 'say' the name, but simply keep it in mind always.
The history of the Pure Land sects is extensive,
some adherents struggle to maintain aspiration, while others

don't find the *Way* as easy as expected
nor maintain faith without great doubt.

For some it certainly is the easy *Way*
yet others find it to be very difficult
every bit as difficult as the most
challenging of *Zen koans*.

Koans are not solved by the 'self'
and neither is to us who truly says *Namu Amida Butsu*,
although it might appear that way, in
that going through the struggle
brings its own reward.
T'an-luan put the struggle into words
when he called 'this Other Power.'

'Self-power' and 'other-power' or
'self-help' and 'other-help'.

In the language of Japan there is
jiriki which means 'by one's own efforts'
and *tariki* meaning 'help from without.'

The voiced *nembutsu*, *Namu Amida Butsu* or
the *koan* of Zen — what is the difference?

The lines begin to be blurred:

to ask these questions takes 'self-power,'
decisions of right and wrong also takes 'self-power'
but always there is guidance from 'other-power' —
if you are listening and if you are *hearing*.

Listening is *jiriki* but *hearing* is *tariki*:

one day, without you making a choice you'll find,
the *koan* or *Namu Amida Butsu* that you are pondering,
the answer will appear before you
and only then, and not before
will bring the mystery of *hearing*
and the *knowing* of *Other Power*' be fathomed.

When this happens the differences
between *tariki* and *jiriki*,
the *other-power* and *self-power*
merge and become *ONE Power*.

It happens
'of itself.'