

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 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 built 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 summits
in the search for the spiritual ultimate
According to myths and legends
there have been many Buddhas
in each long kalpa past.
We don't know all they taught but
'enlightenment' was the summit,
however tall the pinnacle
for that particular time and place.
Scholars surely disputed then, as they do now,
about the distant pinnacle 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,
more than five-hundred years,
before the Christian era, taught
that 'enlightenment' was
possible for all. He also taught that
there was an attainable Pure Land
chosen by an earlier Buddha, and of Vows
made. This Buddha, known in Japan
as Amida; his Pure Land in the West,
lightens the darkness, and
where all deserving aspirants dwell
only returning to Samsara
to fulfil bodhisattva vows.

The present Buddha Siddhartha proclaimed
that these Vows, made Kalpas past were
preserved to counter the Age of Mappo
the period of the decline of the the Dharma.
One especially has been chosen for it's ease;
the vocal *nembutsu*, *Namu Amida Butsu*.
With these magic words
aspiring devotees would learn

the Pure Land to which they yearned,
and with such a fervent desire,
is mysteriously possible.

Namu Amida Butsu

Some say the magic words of the Vow
are like a Zen *koan* — others dispute.
Zen speaks of a flash of *kensho*,
and a deeper experience of *satori*.
The Pure Land devotees speak
of *shinjin*, but there is no measure
to compare the profundity of the experience.
Self-delusion is common-place
sometimes both with student and teacher:
what is called 'transmission'
is rarely 'enlightenment.'

What is common to both, in the beginning
is a *genuine* desire. With both,
one must have great aspiration
one must have great sincerity
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.
It is hard to be genuine, and
what is genuine aspiration?
What is genuine sincerity?
What do you *genuinely*
seek from The Pure Land?

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 is the future of special and spiritual
beings. We do know what forms
Heaven and Hell take here on earth and mostly,
if we are honest, Heaven is beyond us
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 and elsewhere the least difficult
is to say *Namu Amida Butsu*. Some devotees

say the Name many thousands of times a day,
whilst some say it once, or following the vow
'up to ten times', and some only when facing death.
Others don't 'say' but 'think' the Name —
always keeping it in mind.

The history of the Pure Land sects is broad:
some devotees who struggle to find
the sincerity or faith to maintain aspiration
don't find the *Way* as easy as expected,
nor without great doubt.
For some it certainly *was* the easy *Way*
others found it to be very very difficult,
every bit as difficult as the most
challenging of *Zen koans*.
Zen koans are not solved
by the 'self.' It might appear that way, as
by going through the struggle
brings its own reward — nor will the saying
the *nembutsu*.

T'an-luan put the struggle into words
which he called 'Other Power.'
'Self-power' and 'other-power' or
'self-help' and 'other-help'.
In the language of Japan is read
jiriki which means, 'by one's own efforts'
and *tariki* meaning 'help from without.'
the Universal Soul, The Universal Mind,
the mind known as the Alaya Vijnana.

The vocal *nembutsu*, *Namu Amida Butsu* or
the *koan* of Zen — the difference of
the line begins to be blurred:
to ask these questions takes 'self-power.'
Decisions of right and wrong also takes 'self power'
always there is guidance from 'other-power' —
if you are *listening*, and if you are *hearing*.
Listening is *jiriki* but *hearing* can be *tariki* :
one day, without you making a choice you'll find,
the *koan* or *Namu Amida Butsu* you are pondering,
the answer appears before you
and only then, and not before
will bring the mystery and the *hearing*
and the *knowing* of *Other Power*.'

The differences
between *tariki* and *jiriki*,
the *other-power* and *self-power*
merge and become *ONE Power*.
It happens
'*of itself*.'