

study deserves high praise. It not only deepens our understanding of modern Taiwanese nuns but also expands our knowledge of Buddhist women in general.

Becoming Buddhist, Becoming Buddhas, Liberating All Beings. By Gregory G. Gibbs. Ryukoku University Translation Center: Kyoto, 2011. vii+194 pages. Paper \$24.95.

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Reverend Greg Gibbs is a unique voice in Shin Buddhism today. This very interesting and stimulating collection of short, but diverse, essays represents the fruit of his mature reflections over a forty-year period and clearly demonstrates the distinguished contribution he has made, as a thinker and practitioner, to a better understanding of this important Buddhist tradition. As it would be difficult to do justice to the book by commenting on all thirty-four essays, this review will focus instead on four in particular insofar as they represent Gibbs's best thinking on the three central concepts of Shin Buddhism: Amida Buddha, the realization of *shinjin*, and the practice of *nembutsu*. It is hoped that a treatment of these subjects will pave the way to a better understanding of other topics canvassed in this work, which, while certainly not uncontentious, clearly provide plenty of food for thought.

In "Amida Buddha is Not a Symbol," Gibbs offers a valuable corrective to the glut of misconceptions that plague contemporary discussions of the ultimate reality in Buddhism. He makes the very important point that Shin Buddhists perceive this "Fundamental Reality" through a host of forms such as Amida Buddha, the sound of the voiced *nembutsu*, or the depiction of *Namu Amida Butsu* on scrolls. However, these are not symbols in the sense of representing or recalling "something else by possessing analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought" (p. 93). In other words, they are living and organic embodiments of the formless reality that pervades all things as "non-substantially One" and through which that reality is expressed. For example, Gibbs rightly stresses that "Amida Buddha is not a symbol that we have calculated to represent the deep Truth about reality. Out of Life itself emerges the compassionate urge to liberate all suffering beings and this becomes Amida Buddha" (pp. 92–93). This is a critical point as it puts paid to the commonplace view that these are forms that are simply concocted by

our benighted minds to deal with the ineffable mysteries of life. The fact is that all these forms that have inspired and saved millions of Buddhist faithful are liberating precisely because they do not have their origin in human contrivance and are efficacious because they are forms assumed by the Fundamental Reality itself for our spiritual benefit.

It is hard to overestimate the impact that such a distinction has on our understanding of these matters. The former perspective commits us to an entirely this-worldly adaptation by human minds to something we can never fully comprehend, whereas the latter offers a properly transcendent source of the forms we use to venerate a reality that is, ultimately, inconceivable. This, indeed, is what allows us to feel fully embraced by the vow of Amida Buddha and take profound joy in it. If we can accept this, then it is difficult to maintain another common misconception; namely, that any talk of a real vow is but an illusory fiction to which we simply ascribe our human needs and limitations in the quest for meaning. In light of this, perhaps we can reinvigorate terms such as “symbol” to suggest, not a reductionist notion of a finger pointing at the moon, but true reality itself clothed in a form accommodated to our finite understanding. This is far from the lifeless view of symbol we often find today and is one that brings us closer to the traditional Mahayana notion of *upāya* as “saving means.” It is, therefore, very refreshing to encounter passages such as this: “On the Mahayana Buddhist view of the Fundamental Reality it is neither fixedly personal nor utterly impersonal. Therefore we do not rely on metaphorical language when we say that the Fundamental Reality takes form as Amida Buddha to liberate all beings. That reality was not impersonal in the beginning and later personified via symbols and metaphors” (p. 92). This is a fine statement which reminds us that, without the salvific initiative of Amida Buddha, our spiritual lives are rendered nugatory—they simply become the projection of subjective delusions without a foundation in that which is true and real. One is, indeed, grateful to Gibbs for reminding us of this fact.

The next essay under consideration is “Shinjin is More Than Just Faith,” in which Gibbs seeks “for a return to balance in Buddhist theorizing” about the nature of personality and “to a concrete, embodied, human approach to living our lives as Buddhists” (p. 184). He commences by noting that the notion of faith features in all spiritual traditions and usually denotes “something like trust in persons, practices, teachings and institutions found to be worthy of trust” (pp. 177–78), while observing that how this manifests can vary greatly. Gibbs argues that *shinjin*, while certainly containing aspects of this understanding of faith, “is illumined by applying a model

of religious experience and a model of transformation in one's identity" (p. 178). So what does this mean? He says: "With the receipt of *shinjin* our new center of self, the true locus of our identity, becomes the activity of Amida Buddha to liberate all suffering beings. Thus we may say that our former self has become de-centered as its essence is found in the vast trans-personal project of universal liberation. . . . When we receive *shinjin* we discover a vast surrounding Self within which our finite subjectivity finds its real home, its deepest meaning, its true identity" (pp. 178–79). This is a perspicacious insight and opens the door to some very important implications for our understanding of the self. One consequence is a renewed focus on the integrity and importance of the human personality in the fulfilment of our deepest realization of the Dharma. The older Buddhist view which sees us as transient and impersonal *skandhas* or "heaps" is considered limited and unsatisfactory—it simply fails to do justice to the inscrutable enigma of the human person and its spiritual potential. Indeed, Gibbs rightly acknowledges that "the nature of individual identity remains a mystery" and traditional scholastic discussions of *anatta* are certainly a long way from exhausting this mystery.

One often sees *shinjin* translated as "endowed trust" in certain Western circles as a way of making the notion more accessible. Gibbs shows us why this rendition is limited. It is so because it fails to address the transformative nature of the *shinjin* experience as the awakening of true wisdom (*prajñā*) and the resolve to save sentient beings once we become fully enlightened Buddhas following our "birth" in the Pure Land—the inconceivable realm of nirvana. While Gibbs is right to stress that this consummation of our spiritual path is posthumous, the guarantee of its fulfilment occurs in our everyday lives even now, notwithstanding the myriad passions and delusions that afflict our human condition (from which, also, we begin to develop an aversion thanks to the "medicine" of Amida Buddha that is dispensed when we awaken to *shinjin*). As with his valuable insights into the nature of spiritual symbolism, Gibbs also provides a salutary redress to the rather barren discussions of this matter in much modern debate. He aims to remove the dynamic and powerful lived experience of *shinjin* from the clutches of scholarly dissection and endeavors to inject the vital element of liberating awakening and personal transformation into the very heart of what realizing *shinjin* means in Shin Buddhism.

In "Awakening to the Nembutsu," Gibbs continues his reflections on the nature and meaning of *shinjin*. He commences with a valid observation: "The aspiration of all Buddhists is Awakening to enlightenment. Since the time

of the earliest recorded Buddhist teachings we can see that adherents have also hoped for lesser, somewhat preliminary, levels of Awakening. In the Japanese streams of Pure Land tradition, it is *shinjin* which is the hoped-for awakening in this life” (p. 117). He goes on to say that “the moment of religiously relevant experience occurs again and again after its first dawning upon us. That experience . . . is awakening to the Nembutsu” (p. 118). How should we understand this central term of the Pure Land tradition? “The nembutsu is the mode in which Suchness, the True Reality of things undistorted by our prejudiced discrimination, penetrates our delusion and awakens us for a moment” (as manifested in our invoking the name of Amida Buddha, p. 118). But why only a moment? “The momentariness of our experience of *shinjin* is caused by the limited human capacity to have and hold onto experiences of deep religious import. Human ability to be faithful is imperfect and our concrete sense of being sure, of feeling confident in the teaching, varies from moment to moment” (p. 118). Nevertheless, “*shinjin* is awakening to the nembutsu. Such an awakening puts us in touch with something true and reliable. That something, the compassion of Amida, is a source of confidence despite worries. Awakening to the beauty and trustworthiness of the nembutsu will bring hope into our lives” (p. 119).

In this way, we come to see that *shinjin* and *nembutsu* are inseparable. *Shinjin*, as the arising of Amida’s mind within us, finds expression in our saying of the Buddha’s Name although, in fact, this saying is none other than the very voice of the Buddha infusing our heart and mind with its presence. Gibbs is keen to stress that this experience is conducive to our real happiness and well-being as ordinary human beings, despite the difficulties and sorrow in our lives, because awakening to the *nembutsu* is to receive the Buddha’s compassion which is “always present . . . always surrounding us . . . always accepting of us just as we are” (p. 121). Once again, Gibbs reminds us that this fundamental realization at the heart of the Shin Buddhist experience is not just a point of view, an intellectual perspective, or an academic opinion. It is the breaking through of limitless Light and Life into our world of unsatisfactory transience which it transfigures through the tangible compassion that emerges as the *nembutsu* from our mouths—a joyful proclamation of spiritual emancipation and deep gratitude.

The final essay I would like to consider is “Meeting Our Needs without Fooling Ourselves.” What attracted the reviewer to this piece was Gibbs’s attempt to revive what he calls a “secondary naivety” in our reflections on the Pure Land teachings in a post-modern age. In doing so, he revisits some

of the themes he raised in the first essay we discussed. For example, he asks “If Amida Buddha is a symbol, we are left with the question, ‘What is being symbolized?’” (p. 106). After demonstrating the conceptual error of thinking along these lines, Gibbs makes a confession which will no doubt make many contemporary Buddhists cringe (wrongly in our view): “I am willing to go so far as to say that Amida Buddha is a person. . . . The compassion we receive on the nembutsu path is not accidental. . . . If Amida Buddha is a subject of compassionate action a significant part of the notion of personhood must be applicable” (pp. 106–7). A common response that is often encountered in the face of such an admission is: “Surely, people who say this are simply projecting their own need for care, security, and comfort onto an imagined objective reality.” Not necessarily and certainly not in this case. Gibbs again: “This process of internalizing and then projecting kindness, comfort and protection may not be a way of fooling ourselves. Sometimes we may have to imagine something or someone in order to encounter a reality that lies behind our longing. Modern people often seem to assume that the fact we are internalizing kindness and then projecting it means that it must not really be out there. Perhaps some realities, such as bodhisattvas and even Buddhas, have to be imagined before they can be perceived” (p. 105). We see here a crucial rehabilitation of the role the imagination can play in awakening us to higher non-discursive modes of spiritual apprehension, instead of dismissing it as the product of subjective fancy.

There is plenty to think about in what Gibbs is saying here—in fact, he holds the key to explaining why there is so much deep unhappiness in the lives of modern people, including among those who profess to be spiritual in their outlook. We find ourselves constantly falling back on our own meager resources to attain true fulfilment which is clearly impossible to secure on such terms. Rather than seeing our deepest needs as merely subjective projections, destined to remain unfulfilled, perhaps we might entertain the possibility that these needs are testament to the existence of a higher reality that meets them and without which our lives remain forlorn and incomplete. But how can we know this to be true?

Gibbs’s suggestion is that the proof of the pudding is in the eating: “Whatever a Buddha, his Pure Realm and his attendant bodhisattvas may turn out to be exactly, they seem very real to me when I am saying the nembutsu. When I say ‘Namu Amida Butsu’ the Buddha seems to be present in and as his name. . . . The nembutsu encountered in the vocalization of another or felt in my own voice is a permeating of my delusions by Reality-

such-as-it-truly-is . . . this is a point of contact with the realm of the sacred” (p. 108). In a very human and rather moving conclusion to this essay, Gibbs addresses those who are apt to remain sceptical: “All of these ways of speaking about it are my attempts to share the safe haven I have found in the nembutsu. If all I’ve said has not convinced you to rely on the nembutsu path, I hope you will find another way to have a secure base, a safe haven. We all need this” (p. 108).

In a sense, this is the primary message to emerge from this valuable and thought-provoking collection of essays. As a sincere and committed wayfarer on the Shin Buddhist path for almost five decades, Gibbs has experienced the difficulties and joys in the quest for spiritual freedom and seeks to share with us the treasures he has found on his journey. This book is both an invitation and an exhortation to seek the “pearl beyond price” in a world of specious and vapid substitutes.

In the Company of Friends: Exploring Faith and Understanding with Buddhists and Christians. By John Ross Carter. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2012. 348 pages. Paper \$26.95.

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In the Company of Friends is a collection of John Ross Carter’s essays, papers, and articles produced for various fora between 1986 and 2008 and compiled into a cohesive whole. Drawn from insights gleaned over two decades of active engagement with Buddhists (rather than just with “Buddhism” at a purely intellectual level), Carter’s thesis, as the title suggests, is a call against arms: against the arms, that is, of polemical and apologetic debate, and towards sincerely friendly, multi-lateral colloquium between people of faith.

The last term is used advisedly, because “faith” is something that Carter insists all such people share, at least in part (Introduction, p. xxxii). This “faith” is, according to Carter, “a religious dimension in human life . . . as old as homo sapiens” (p. 5), an external impetus which propels one along a certain religious path, whether it be the *mārga* of Theravada Buddhism, the White Path (*byakudō* 白道) of Shin Buddhism, the *derekh* of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Way (*hodos*) of Christ. Carter thus sets the trajectory of