

Thoughts on Shin Buddhism

PART III

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LET ME CONTINUE a while on the subject of the Name, which I began discussing yesterday. I feel that a valid Christian counterpart of the Name in Shin Buddhism is God's declaration to Moses on Mt. Horeb, "I am that I am," or "I am the God who is," or even simply "I am." In Buddhism, as I mentioned previously, the Name can take such forms as "Eternal Life," "Infinite Life," "Tathagata of Eternal Life," "Tathagata of Infinite Life"—any of these will do. I think it is highly significant, though, that in Japan these rather technical-sounding terms never came into general use, and that what found favor were more intimate epithets like "Amida Sama" and "Amida Nyorai."

I find the word *nyorai* very interesting and meaningful. *Nyorai* is the Sino-Japanese translation of the Sanskrit *tathagata*, meaning "thus-come" or "thus-gone." The characters of the word *nyorai* stress the "thus-come" aspect of *tathagata*, though I am told that in Tibetan Buddhism the "thus-gone" connotation is preferred. Either way, all that is involved is a slight difference in the reading of the original Sanskrit—when *tathagata* is read as *tathā āgata* it means "thus-come," and when it is read as *tathā gata* it means "thus-gone." I think either one will do, for Amida's coming and going both take place in the mode of thusness.

In English there is the word "becoming," connoting change or transformation, in contrast to the word "being," which deals with the existent.

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We may take *nyorai* in the sense of “becoming” rather than of “being,” that is, as something ever-changing and infinitely transforming, not something static and ontological. “Becoming” means that something does not remain in the same form, but that *a* becomes *b*, *b* becomes *c*, *c* becomes *d*, and so on. That is, *a* becomes non-*a*, non-*a* becomes something else, etc. This process of change is called becoming, in the sense that something ever changes into something else. Here, in “thus-coming” and “thus-going,” being is becoming and becoming is being. Were we to abide only in being we would find ourselves stagnating in mere emptiness. Emptiness can never be static, though, it thus-comes and thus-goes even in its emptiness. The word *nyorai* is so meaningful.

II

The term *Amida Nyorai*, Amida the thus-come and thus-gone, may be viewed in the sense of *Amida* representing Great Wisdom and *Nyorai* Great Compassion. A one-sided consideration of Great Wisdom can easily lead to a static repose in *sunyata*, the void. We must not stop there—the dynamic element is also necessary, and that is none other than Great Compassion. Here arises the working of Great Wisdom and Great Compassion, and this working takes form in the Name *Namu Amida Butsu*.

This is a very important point. Not understanding, I once interpreted the Name to be a mere appellation. When I call this gadget in front of me a microphone, a division between the name and the gadget itself occurs. When I call someone Harry, the name Harry and the man so called become separate, they become quite different things. In Buddhism, however, the Name is not a name in this sense—the Name is none other than Harry himself. Still, we end up thinking of them as separate things. Dividing things is very convenient, as in mathematics when we think in terms like “two apples” and “three pears.” “Two” and “three” here are nothing in themselves—“two apples” or “three pears” are things which actually exist, but a mere “two” or “three” is nothing. When we think of figures apart from things, figures become names in the mathematical sense. Figures in mathematics are separate from apples and pears—mathematics comes about when we deal with figures as actual things, separate from apples, pears, people, dogs, and cats. In actuality, however, such independent figures do not exist—figures always apply to something

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concrete, for example, three apples or three people. The Name must always be used in this latter sense, never as something separate from reality.

Thus it is not enough for us to merely pronounce the Name, we must become the Name itself. Even the expression "become the Name itself" is inadequate—what I am saying is that pronouncing the Name must be an actual living of the Name. Thus to pronounce the Name is not a simple verbal repetition of the six characters *Na-Mu-A-Mi-Da-Bu(tsu)*. The Name *Namu Amida Butsu* works vividly in the living body and mind of each man, and in this lies the true meaning of pronouncing the Name.

Thus *Namu Amida Butsu* does not mean a simple verbal repetition of the Name—the Name in Shin Buddhism is *Namu Amida Butsu* as life, *Namu Amida Butsu* becomes life itself. Here the Name is reality and reality is the Name.

At this point someone is sure to object, saying that this is a lot of nonsense, that the Name is nothing but a sound written down in a certain way. This question may confuse us, but there is really no problem. Pronouncing the Name *Na-Mu-A-Mi-Da-Bu(tsu)* is itself *Amida Nyorai*—when this is fully realized, there is religion.

III

Shin Buddhism has produced a number of *myōkōnin* (wondrous, good people), people of deep faith like Shōma and Asahara Saichi. There are many of them, but I know of only a few. For these people, *Namu Amida Butsu* is not mere verbal repetition, but something they have become one with and which spontaneously expresses itself from within. When the founder of the Ji Sect of Pure Land Buddhism, Ippen Shōnin, was receiving Zen instruction from the master Shinchi Kakushin, he was given the Name as a koan. Asked to express his understanding, Ippen recited the following verse:

In reciting Nembutsu
There is neither Buddha nor I,
Only the voice of *Namu Amida Butsu*.

The master thereupon said, "You've not yet got it!" Ippen then submitted the following verse:

In reciting Nembutsu,
 There is neither Buddha nor I.
 Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu.

The phrase "only the voice of Namu Amida Butsu" suggests an understanding that is still incomplete. However, in the expression "Namu Amida Butsu, Namu Amida Butsu," made without comment or apology, there lives *Namu Amida Butsu* itself. We can say that the "person" himself is working here.

In Zen Buddhist terms, this state may be expressed in the following way:

The mind changes in accordance
 with the myriad of objects.
 [The mind becomes red when it sees red,
 black when it sees black—DTS.]
 The way it changes is wonderfully mysterious.
 In the mind that perceives the nature of objects
 according to their flux,
 There is neither joy nor sorrow.

Thus "becoming" is in accordance with the flux of things, change is continuous, and in this flux the nature of things is perceived. "Nature" here is the Name. When the mind perceives the Name in the midst of flux, the Name is reality and reality is the Name. In Chinese there is an expression which goes, "Names are the guests of reality," "guest" here referring to that which is subordinate or non-central. The Name is not a name in this sense, but reality itself. Once it is perceived and grasped that the Name is reality and reality the Name, then "there is neither joy nor sorrow." This expression, though, can be the source of error. If you stop at "there is neither joy nor sorrow" you are already off the mark—it is better to say, "there is both joy and sorrow." Thus although the original verse reads, "In the mind that perceives the nature of objects according to their flux, there is neither joy nor sorrow," if the phrase "there is both sorrow and joy" is added then the entire verse comes to life. The Name never remains static. With the Name, it is not a matter of "neither joy nor sorrow," but of "both joy and sorrow"—the Name never implies that we should be like pieces of wood, lying around from morning till night feeling "neither joy nor sorrow."

Something that is seldom mentioned in Shin Buddhism but that is often heard in Zen is the admonition, "Never be attached to letters." The Zen saying, "A special transmission outside the scriptures, not relying on words and letters," means that one must not be attached to language. Thus in the case of the Name too we can say, "Don't be attached to the sound of the Name, become the Name itself." Even the teaching, "Become the Name itself," is a kind of expedient, though. It isn't really a matter of "becoming" or "not becoming" the Name—as long as the Name is not a spontaneous outflowing, it cannot be said that the Name is reality and reality the Name. Thus there is no Buddha with a shining halo who exists apart from the Name of Amida—it is the Name itself, emitting light, which lives on eternally. The Name must be understood in this way.

IV

There is a story I would like to tell. It is a Zen story so some may feel it unsuitable for Shin, but I personally believe that in Buddhism there is essentially no division between these two schools, and that people are drawn to one or the other depending on their capabilities.

In Sung Dynasty China there lived a Zen master named Goso Hōen. During the Sung Dynasty there seems to have been many government officials who practiced Zen meditation, and among these was a man named Teikei, an official, perhaps, in the Ministry of Justice. One day Teikei called on Hōen and said, "As I must depart for the provinces I will no longer be able to visit you very often. Please give me some advice that will help me in my study of Zen." At that time there were no koans as we know them in Japan today, so Hōen replied, "Do you know the 'Poem of a Beautiful Girl,' in which the romance of a young couple is described? There is one verse which reads, 'The young lady calls repeatedly to her servant girl, but her only reason for doing so is that she hopes her lover will recognize her voice.'" What is important here is the voice, there is nothing particular that she wants her servant girl for. Hōen asked the official who was leaving the capital, "Have you heard that voice?"

After this interview took place a monk named Engo came to see the master (Engo later became Hōen's Dharma successor, and is known for his commentaries in the *Blue Cliff Records*). Engo asked, "I heard that someone visited you this morning and that you gave him some advice—could you tell me about that visit?" Hōen thereupon recounted the whole

story, and asked Engo, "Have you heard that voice?" Engo went off for a while, then said, "I've got it!" Hōen replied, "No, I don't think you have." This is important. The voice here is the same as the Name, so we can ask whether Engo took the Name as merely the sound of the six characters or as something alive. He said that he had heard the Name, but this would be useless if he hadn't recognized the subject that did the hearing. Thus when Hōen told him that he didn't yet understand, Engo left without being able to answer. He was standing outside when he suddenly heard the cock-a-doodle-doo of a rooster, and he realized, "That's it!" When he first answered, "I've got it!" he didn't really understand, but with the rooster's cry he was fully awakened. That cry was the Name. One is still far, far away if he views the Name only as a succession of sounds or as a mere word made up by humans to symbolize a certain thing. Even if one says he understands the Name as something alive he is way off the mark. It would be better to say that the living Name issues forth in one's heart. In other words, one's entire existence becomes the Name, or rather, it doesn't just *become* the Name, it *is* the Name. In this we attain a certain realization, a realization to which we may apply the Shin term *ōchō*.

v

The word *ōchō*, which can be roughly translated as "leaping crosswise," indicates a direct leap into a different dimension, regardless of whether this leap is up, down, or across. In Shin this word is usually understood to mean the direct attainment of Pure Land faith, but I believe that it applies equally well to the Zen experience described above, which would ordinarily be considered a kind of self-power enlightenment, or *juchō* ("leaping lengthwise"). As I look at it, when Engo at first merely heard the voice, that was *juchō*; when the living voice issued forth the instant the rooster crowed, that was *ōchō*.

There is no stopping place here. One leaps to a different level, and that instant of leaping is called "*ōchō*." "Leaping" is *ōchō* expressed in spatial terms; "instant" or "moment" is the same thing expressed in temporal terms. There is no division or fragmentation of time here, but an actual living of eternity itself. This is the reality, the actual experience, of the Name.

Thus the rooster's "cock-a-doodle-doo!" was itself *Namu Amida Butsu*, and the one who heard was also *Namu Amida Butsu*. Here the

question might arise, "If this, that, and everything is *Namu Amida Butsu*, then isn't Buddhism pantheistic?" This question is often asked, especially by people with a philosophical turn of mind. Buddhism, however, is not a kind of pantheistic mysticism—Buddhism has its own special experience of the world.

This reminds me of the Sung Dynasty poet Su Tung-po's poem:

The murmuring mountain stream
 is the Buddha's broad, long tongue;
 The mountain itself in its many hues—
 is this not his Pure Body?
 Eighty-four thousand gathas were recited
 during the night,
 How will I be able to convey
 this to others?

Here "84,000 verses were recited during the night" refers to the entire teaching of the sacred scriptures. Thus what the poet is saying is that the holy teachings expounded in the 84,000 sutras are none other than the mountain's majestic figure and the sound of the valley stream, and that all of this is the Buddha's voice.

The Pure Land is described in this same sort of way in the *Sutra of Eternal Life* and the *Lotus Sutra*. In the Pure Land, the singing voices of the *kalavinka* birds praise the virtues of the Three Treasures (Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha) and from out of the lotus flowers in the pond is emitted a wonderful light and the noble fragrance of Amida Buddha. All of this is said to be the Buddha's eloquent speech. The sacred verses are mentioned too, not only 84,000 of them but verses innumerable and inexhaustible—of this is formed the totality of the Pure Land. This can all be called *Namu Amida Butsu*.

VI

The statement that the Pure Land is the Name itself should not be interpreted in pantheistic terms. A voice is a voice: cats meow, dogs bark, wolves howl, cicadas sing—all of these, just as they are, are "*Namu Amida Butsu*, *Namu Amida Butsu*." But just because they are all *Namu Amida Butsu* does not mean that they are all one and the same. A cat is a cat, a dog is a dog, I am I, you are you, flowers are red, willows are

green, joy is joy, and sorrow is sorrow. It can be said that there is an element of pantheistic unity here, but at the same time all of these things are completely different. In the midst of diversity there is the One, and in the midst of the One there is diversity. The One is the Many and the Many is the One—this is quite different from pantheism.

In Islam, God is called Allah. I once heard that the meaning of “Allah” is “I am.” This is the same as God’s statement to Moses, “I am that I am”—this “I am” is the Name. I am reminded here of a term that Meister Eckhart used, the word “*istikeit*,” usually translated as “is-ness.” It is sometimes also rendered as “being,” but as this word has certain set philosophical nuances it should be distinguished from “is-ness.”

It can be said that *Namu Amida Butsu* is “is-ness.” Not only *Namu Amida Butsu*, but also “I am,” “Allah,” the *kalavinka* birds’ singing in the Pure Land, the sound of water moving in a pond—all of these equally are sounds in praise of “is-ness.” No, all these are “is-ness” itself. Thus a realization of this “is-ness” is an absolute necessity. We mustn’t stop there, though—true Buddhism cannot be attained unless one leaves the world of *satori*, the world of “is-ness,” and returns to the world of everyday reality. In Shin, the realization of “is-ness,” that is to say, the attainment of enlightenment through the realization of Pure Land faith, is called *ōsō ekō* (lit. “out-going merit-transference,” so called because it is believed that “going out” to the world of Realization is achieved through the aid of Amida’s world-saving merit-transference). In contrast, returning to the world of everyday reality is called *gensō ekō* (lit. “returning merit-transference,” since returning to the world to save all beings is also accomplished through Amida’s merit-transference).

When the Name is understood in this light, the meaning of the term “great living” in the following quote from Shinran’s *Kyōgyōshinshō* becomes clear: “I find in *ōsō ekō* the Great Living and the Great Faith.” In other words, Great Living (which means pronouncing the Name) is itself the working of Amida’s vow leading us to Realization. In the past I couldn’t understand why pronouncing *Namu Amida Butsu* was an act so full of merit, but now, realizing that *Namu Amida Butsu* is not a mere succession of sounds but the living Buddha himself, I can see the true meaning of the expression, “In this Living are embraced all good things and all the roots of merit.”

VII

We have seen that Great Living and Great Faith are none other than *ōsō ekō*. However, they inevitably lead to *gensō ekō*, the returning merit-transference; in other words Great Living and Great Faith lead us in the direction of Realization, but with the attainment of Realization the life of *gensō ekō* begins, the life of forgetting one's own personal salvation and returning to the world to work for the salvation of others. Zen monks often use the phrase "delivering sentient beings in the interest of others." But if one gets caught up by the idea of doing it "in the interest of others," he can do nothing but complicate things. It is, of course, necessary to work for the sake of others, but one should do this naturally, without becoming attached to such concepts as "What I am performing now is *gensō ekō*," "I am doing this in the interest of others," "I am putting into practice the Buddhist ideal," and so forth. In this, I believe, is expressed the true meaning of the word "unconscious"—what can be called "unobstructed supernatural power" or "unobstructed freedom."

The Bodhisattva's activity of *gensō ekō* is often likened to the music of the Harp of Asura, which flows forth even though no one is plucking the strings. Shinran Shōnin often uses this analogy, taken from T'an-luan's *Commentary on [Vasubandhu's] Treatise on the Pure Land*.

The activity of the Bodhisattva must be free and creative, just like the music of the Harp of Asura. Creativity is like the movement of my hand: viewed externally, my hand is merely seen to move a certain distance from, say, right to left, but if we look more deeply we realize that there are limits beyond which my hand cannot go and that it is in these very limits that my freedom and creativity lie.

Thus we see that unobstructed freedom is that way precisely because it is obstructed and unfree. In this way, the Bodhisattva's life is one of non-exertion and no-merit, and yet at the same time it is meritorious beyond limit. In no-merit is true merit and true virtue, and in non-freedom is true freedom. Here we find poetry.

VIII

A French poet, awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature several years ago, remarked in his acceptance speech, "The shortcoming of modern man is that he is not sufficiently aware of the relation between finite time and

infinite time." That is, in the mind of modern man finite and infinite are divorced, and a free and unobstructed relationship does not exist between them. I found this remark extremely interesting.

There are several old sayings to the effect: "Let your mind be like that of an infant," "A truly mature man is one who has never lost the mind of an infant," or, in Christian terms, "Unless you become like little children again, you shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 18: 3). This does not mean, though, that an adult should go about acting like a naughty child. Far from it. We cannot become truly human unless we have fully experienced both the passage from childhood to discriminating adulthood and the subsequent return from there back to childlike innocence. As our discriminative nature increases we gradually leave the realm of childhood, and then, after the passage of 30, 40, or 50 years, we attain this anew. This new birth into childhood is completely different from the birth of a crying infant. Unless one attains this second childhood, true human maturity cannot be realized. I believe that this development is of utmost importance for the life of *gensō ekō*.

I once read a review of an interesting book in the *New York Times*. In the book a child went out to play early one morning. When he came back home at noon for lunch, one of his parents asked him, "Where have you been?" He replied, "Out." When his parents asked, "What did you do?" he simply said, "Nothing." This is very interesting! He said that he had been outdoors, but that he had done nothing. In actuality, of course, he did all sorts of things that playing children always do: he ran and he jumped, and after playing all morning he went home for lunch. How interesting! For him, doing all these things was the same as doing nothing. Running and jumping are marvelous activities, but in the eyes of a child there is nothing special about them—they are nothing. This is what unobstructed freedom is.

Here someone might ask, "Do you recommend that we spend our lives just playing around?" Anyone who puts such a question to me is already far off the mark—he will, so to speak, fall into hell as swiftly as an arrow. The playing of which I speak is not a matter of merely playing around, but of living in unobstructed freedom. We find this clearly written in Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*. If he were here, how I would enjoy talking with him on this subject! It seems, though, that I was born just a bit too late.

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