

# Shin Buddhism

## PART TWO

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IN GIVING NAMES to objects we commonly fall into the error of thinking that the names stand for the actual objects themselves. This is a danger that is always present in name-giving, but we cannot on that account disregard the importance of names. Names represent a form of discrimination; they help us distinguish one thing from another, and this enables us to know their nature to some extent. Without a name, an object could not be distinguished from other objects. Distinguishing or discriminating helps us in this way to understand the objects around us. But names are not everything.

Man is also distinguished from other beings in that he is a tool-maker. Names are also a sort of tool; we can put them to use to better deal with the objects around us. But there is also a tyranny of tools. We make and surround ourselves with tools of all kinds, whereupon the tools begin to tyrannize us. Instead of us using them, they turn against their inventor. We become the tools of the tools we make.

This situation is especially noticeable in modern life. We invent machines, and they in turn control human affairs. Machines, especially in recent years, have inextricably entered our lives. We now must try to adjust ourselves to machines, for once they are out of our hands they refuse to obey our will.

In our intellectual endeavors, our ideas can be despotic too. We cannot always be in control of ideas. We invent or construct ideas and concepts to make life more convenient. Then these very ideas which we intended to be so convenient become unmanageable and control the

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inventors themselves. Scholars invent ideas and then forget that they invented them in order to deal with certain realities. For instance, each of the branches of science, whether it is called biology, psychology or astronomy, has its own premises, its own hypotheses. Each branch organizes the fields it has chosen—stars, animals, fish, and so on—and deals with those realities according to the special concepts its scientists have invented to enable them to handle the subjects of their research. Whatever situation comes along in the pursuit of their research or exercise of their ideas that does not happen to be amenable to those ideas, they drop. Instead of dropping the ideas and trying to create new ones in order to overcome the unexpected difficulties that arise, they stick to the old ideas they invented and try to make the new realities fit the old concepts. Or else they simply exclude those things which cannot easily be worked into the network of ideas they have invented.

I have heard that some scientists have themselves compared their methods to catching fish in a net with standardized meshes; those fish which fail to be scooped up in the net will be dropped and unaccounted for. They just take up those that can be caught in their net and try to explain their catch by means of their ready-made ideas. The fish that remain uncaught are treated as if they did not even exist. "These exist," say the scientists of those that have been caught in the net. All the other fish are nonexistent.

The same can be said of astronomy. Those stars which do not come within the scope of the telescope are usually neglected. Yet more powerful telescopes are developed to enable the astronomers to make more extensive and deeper surveys of the heavens. But when asked about the parts of space that lie beyond the scope of their present telescopes, they tend to disregard the question. Sometimes they go as far as to say that space is empty beyond a certain group of stars. Certain galaxies make up their astronomical maps, and beyond those, they say, there is a void.

But such conclusions are altogether unwarranted. If scientists would limit their conclusions to what they could survey or measure, and admitted that they did not know beyond that, and did not venture any theory or any hypothesis, that would be all right. But blinded by their success within these boundaries, they try to extend that success beyond them, as if they had already surveyed and measured those unknown parts. Most scientists make this mistake, and, unfortunately, people

tend to rely on what the scientists say.

To be truly scientific, they must always qualify their statements, because they always start from certain established hypotheses. Formerly scientists couldn't explain light, so they invented what they called "wave theory." But wave theory did not account for all the phenomena connected with light, so they then came up with what they called "quantum theory," which made explanations of certain other phenomena possible. But later they came to discover that to explain all the phenomena, they had to use both theories. The trouble with that, I am told, is that the two hypotheses contradict each other. If the wave theory is adopted, the quantum theory must be thrown out; if the quantum theory is taken up, the wave theory must be discarded. Yet the phenomena themselves exist, and scientists cannot deny their reality. So however contradictory it is on a logical plane, they have to adopt both theories, and somehow make them compatible.

All our surveys of reality are accomplished by means of our five senses. If we possessed another sense, or two or three more senses, besides the five we already have, then we might perceive an altogether different universe.

To say that what we experience via our five senses exhausts reality is a totally unfounded presumption on our part. We can say that within the limits of our five senses and intellect the world is understood so, explained so, interpreted so. But there is no way to deny the existence of something (though it may not be proper to call it a "thing") higher, deeper, and more pervasive which may lie beyond the ken of our five senses and intellect. If we do have some such extra sense within us, even though it is largely undeveloped—and some people do claim to have that kind of sense or faculty—then we may have another way of coming in contact with reality that is deeper and more extensive than our ordinary sensory and intellectual experience. It would be arrogant for someone to deny the existence of a higher and deeper "intuition," and declare, "Nothing can exist outside my sensory or intellectual perceptions."

Now let me write the six Chinese characters "Na-mu-a-mi-da-but-su" on the blackboard. This is called the Nembutsu and is the cornerstone of the entire Pure Land teaching. Namu-amida-but-su is also known as the *Myōgō*, or Name of Amida Buddha, although it contains

something more than the *Myōgō* itself. The efficacy of the *Myōgō* enables us to be born in Amida's Pure Land, to realize the highest reality, and fully grasp the ultimate truth. *Myōgō* does not work on the level of our senses and intellect, which are relative; it works on the part of our mind or being that lies beyond the senses and intellect. Those who are addicted to intellection would probably deny the efficacy of the *Myōgō* to explore those fields of human being which are beyond and cannot be surveyed by intellection, and deny as well the existence of such fields.

In religious life there is a phenomenon that we call "faith." Faith is a strange and wonderful thing. Ordinarily, we speak of "faith," or "belief," in a context of something beyond our ordinary comprehension that cannot be certified by our ordinary knowledge. Yet in religious faith there is something more to be considered. We have to venture into the life that is opened up by faith.

In the relative sense of faith, the one we use in ordinary life, we can say, "I cannot believe it unless I have seen it or heard it personally." We may nevertheless believe something not by means of direct personal experience but through the communication of our friends or books. And if we judge the basis of that belief to be strong and verifiable enough, we will accept it as true, even if the proof lies outside of our direct personal experience.

But in religious belief there is something more. Even if our intellect is unable to verify it objectively or scientifically, there is something in religious faith which somehow compels us to accept it as reality. Though we may not have experienced it, it still almost demands our acceptance, whether we will or not. Theologians talk about "accepting faith" as a kind of perilous decision we have to make. It is a venturesome deed or experience, a plunging into an unknown region and deciding to risk our faith and destiny.

I am afraid that people who accept such a theology are still on the plane of relativity. The fact is, we are compelled—there is no choice—to accept faith. All religions contain a similar element. Instead of Amida being taken into our life or being, we are carried away by Amida. This is how the *Myōgō* starts to live and become actual life within Shin devotees. Some people ask about the significance of the *Myōgō* and how it could possibly be so efficacious as to take us to Amida and make us be born in the Land of Purity. As long as a person

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has such doubt or suspicion or hesitancy in accepting the *Myōgō* in true faith, then he or she is not yet within its working.

The Indian sutras tell of a mythical golden-winged bird of enormous size that eats dragons for its food. The dragons live deep in the ocean, but when the golden-winged bird soaring high above detects the dragons down at the bottom of the ocean, it sweeps down from the sky; the waves open up and it picks the dragons out of the deep and eats them. Of course the dragons are afraid of the approach of the bird and dread becoming its meal.

Someone once asked a Buddhist teacher, "What does the bird who has broken through the net eat?" The mythical bird who has broken through the net is perfectly free, absolute master of itself. We ourselves are caught up in various kinds of nets, mostly of our own making. They may not really exist, but we imagine ourselves caught in them. This bird—that is, one of us who has been spiritually enlightened—is one who has broken through all the nets and now enjoys perfect freedom. Now the question to the Buddhist teacher, "What food does such a bird eat?" is the same as asking, What kind of life does an enlightened man, one who is spiritually free, lead? Or, What kind of life would a person lead who believes totally in the *Myōgō* and is possessed by Amida. What kind of person would he be?

Most people ask questions of this kind as if the question had nothing to do with them at all. What is the use of trying to know about such matters, when we should instead be such a person ourselves. But that is how we are made; this curiosity is a frailty of human nature. At the same time, this is what makes our lives distinguishable from those of the other animals—they don't ask these questions.

The master then said: "Come through the net yourself. Then I will tell you." Once through the net, no telling is needed. He will know for himself. Instead of asking idle questions about the life of the spiritually free, why not free yourself and see for yourself what kind of life it is? The same can be said of questions about the life of a Shin devotee. Americans sometimes ask me what significance the message of Buddhism has for our modern life. We may explain the kinds of benefits, advantages, material or otherwise, which come, for example, from belief in the *Myōgō*. But instead of being informed by someone else about the advantages that might accrue from accepting the *Myōgō*, they should just accept the *Myōgō*, and try . . . no, not try, just live it.

Then they will know what it means.

This is what distinguishes religious life from relative, worldly life. In the relative life we want to know beforehand all that may result from our doing this or that; then we proceed to take action expecting a certain outcome. But religious life consists in accepting and knowing, and at the same time living that which is beyond knowledge. So in knowing and living, living is knowledge, and knowing is living. This kind of difference sharply distinguishes the religious from the worldly life. In actual fact there is no such thing as spiritual life distinguished from worldly life. Worldly life is spiritual life, and vice versa. It is just that we become blinded and confused in our encounters with the world. Just as scientists are caught in the nets they weave for themselves, we too, in taking all our inventions for realities, are blinded by them. We have to fight these unrealities. Actually, to call them unrealities is not exactly correct, for they are, with reservations, real enough. That is something we frequently fail to recognize or acknowledge.

Now regarding the *Myōgō*, Shinran, the founder of the Shin sect, says, "One pronouncing of the *Myōgō* is enough to make you be born in the Pure Land." Birth in the Pure Land is not an event that happens after death, as is popularly assumed. It takes place as we are living this life.

I was reading a Christian book recently in which the author speaks about Christ being born in the soul. We generally think Christ was born on a certain date in history, at a certain place on earth. This occurred not in the usual biological way but through the miraculous power of God.

But this Christian author says that Christ is born in our soul. And when that birth is recognized, when we become conscious of Christ's birth in our soul, that is when we are saved. So Christ is born in the course of history, but that historical event takes place in our own spiritual life. Christ is born, and we must become conscious of his birth in us. He is not born just anywhere, but in us, every day, at every moment; not once in history, but repeatedly, everywhere, at every moment.

And according to this author, his birth is dependent on our dying to ourselves. We must die to what we call the ego. When the ego is altogether forsaken and the soul is no more disturbed, there will be no anxiety, annoyance, or worries whatever, for all worries come from be-

ing addicted to the idea of the self. Therefore, when the self is completely given up, all the disturbances are quieted, and absolute peace prevails in the soul, which, he says, is "silence."

It is remarkable to see this Christian writer speak of silence. When silence prevails in the soul, that is the moment Christ is born in our soul. So silence is needed. When everything is kept in silence, that is the time, the opportunity, for spiritual being to enter our soul. Silence is attained when the self is given up; when the self is given up, the consciousness of dualistic thoughts is altogether nullified; that is to say, no dualism exists.

When I say dualism does not exist I do not mean that duality itself is annihilated. While the duality remains, an identification takes place; the two are left as two, and yet there is a state of identity. That is the moment silence prevails. When there are two ("two" means more than two, that is, multiplicity), noise of various kinds usually results, a disturbance which needs to be quieted. But this silence is not achieved by the annihilation of multiplicity. Multiplicity is left as multiplicity, yet silence prevails, not underneath, not inside, not outside, but here. The realization of this silence is simultaneously the birth of Christ. They occur synchronously.

Similarly, the *Myōgō* enters our active life when there is no longer any *Myōgō* but Amida; Amida becomes the *Myōgō* and the *Myōgō* becomes Amida. The last time, I spoke about the relationship between *ki*, we ordinary beings, and *hō*, Amida Buddha, or the Dharma. When the *Myōgō* is pronounced and we are conscious of saying Namu to Amida, and when Amida is listening to us say Namu, there will be no identity, no silence. One is calling out to the other, and the other is looking down or looking up. There is dualism or disturbance, not silence.

But when Namu is Amida and Amida is Namu, when *ki* is *hō* and *hō* is *ki*, there is silence. That is, the *Myōgō* is absolutely identified with Amida. The *Myōgō* ceases to be the name of somebody who exists outside the one who pronounces the *Myōgō*. Then a perfect identity, or absolute identity, prevails, but this identity is not to be called "oneness." When we say "one," we are apt to interpret that one numerically, that is, as standing against two, three, four, and so on. But this oneness is absolute oneness, and absolute oneness goes beyond all measurement. In absolute oneness or identity, the *Myōgō* is Amida, Amida is the

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***Myōgō***. There is no separation between the two; there is a perfect or absolute identity of *ki* and *hō*.

This is when absolute faith is realized. This is the moment, as indicated by Shinran, that "Namu-amida-butsu (*Myōgō*), pronounced once, is enough to save you." That "once," an absolute once, is something utterly mysterious.