

THE TEACHING OF IPPEN SHŌNIN
(1239-1289,

1

The following is one of the letters by Ippen in which we find his teaching of the Nembutsu characteristically expounded:

“In your previous letter, you asked me to write what mental equipment is necessary for the Nembutsu followers. To this I must reply that beside reciting Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu no mental equipment is necessary and that except saying this there is no faith. It is true that we have various doctrines taught by various scholars but they are merely provisional, being set against varieties of confused thoughts. It is good for the Nembutsu followers, therefore, not to worry about these things but devote themselves to reciting the Nembutsu. When Kūya Shōnin¹ was once asked in what state of mind one should recite the Nembutsu, he answered simply. “Abandon”, and did not say anything further. This is recorded in Saigyō’s *Senjūshō*.² This saying is really the

¹ Kūya (903-972), whose other name was Kōshō, is said to have been an Emperor’s son. He became a monk in his twenties and learned various doctrines of Buddhism, but afterwards believed in the Pure Land teaching and propagated the “Dancing Nembutsu” among the common people and was called the “Saint of the Market”, for he exhorted the Nembutsu in the market thronged with people. He was also a social worker; going throughout the country, he built many bridges, dug wells, nursed lepers and other loathesome patients, cremated deserted corpses, and so forth. He had much influence on Ippen.

² Saigyō (1118-1190), a priest-poet. As a layman, he was called Yoshikiyo Satō and was a samurai in the service of the Imperial Household. He became a monk, realising the uncertainty of life by the sudden death of his friend. He is noted, however, more as a poet than as a priest. The famous *Sangashū* is a collection of his poems. The *Senjūshō* here mentioned contains anecdotes of this celebrated priest, his personal observations while travelling all over the country, and many interesting talks on poetry.

golden rule. The Nembutsu followers abandon wisdom, folly, the knowledge of good and bad, the thought of one's social position, noble and mean, high and low, the fear of hell, the desire for a land of happiness, and even the aspiration for enlightenment as exhorted by different schools of Buddhism. In short the Nembutsu followers abandon all these. When the Nembutsu is thus recited, it is in perfect accord with the incomparable Original Vow of Amida. When the Nembutsu is recited without interruption with this frame of mind, there is no thought of Buddhahood or self-hood, not to say anything about the presence of an argumentative mood; the world of good and bad is no more than the Land of Purity itself and beside this there is nothing for which we cherish a desire or from which we turn away. The universe, with all its beings, sentient and non-sentient, with blowing winds and roaring waves, is no other than the Nembutsu. You must not imagine that man is the only being who is embraced by the incomparable Vow. But if my words are hard to understand, leave them as they are, giving no further thoughts to them, and just recite the Nembutsu putting your absolute trust in the Original Vow. As for the Nembutsu, whether you recite it with a believing heart or not, it never fails to be in accord with the incomparable Original Vow of *taviki*. In the Original Vow of Amida, nothing is wanting and nothing is superfluous. Beside this, what mental equipment do you wish to have? Only going back to the state of mind found in a simple-minded Nembutsu devotee, recite the Nembutsu. Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu."¹

2

When we contrast Eastern thought with Western, we cannot but acknowledge that each has its characteristic feature, the Eastern in its unifying power and the Western in its analysis. The oriental mind always seeks to go back

¹ Ippen's letter to Kōgan Sōzu, contained in Ippen's Sayings.

to the original oneness from which we come, to one undivided reality where there is no such opposition as subject and object, while the occidental mind always wants to come out of the oneness of things, analysing it into an infinite variety of multitudes. The Westerners are expansive and the Easterners are inclusive. Things oriental all follow this rule. Food, clothes and dwelling of the East testify to this statement. This inclusiveness and unifying tendency is what may be termed Buddhistic in a broad sense.

It is true that there are many schools and branches in one Buddhism properly to be so called, but how diverse its expressions may be, the one spirit of Buddhism pervades them all. The difference between the Zen and the Pure Land, between the Shin and the Nichiren, is only the difference in form which is determined by the temperament of the founder of each sect, and according to the circumstances in which he moved. But this difference sometimes ceases to be noticeable, for instance in the case of Ippen, in whom the Pure Land ideas are perfectly mingled with those of Zen Buddhism. In the following pages I wish to study this character who is the founder of the Ji Sect.¹

3

Of all the Pure Land masters advocating the Nembutsu, the celebrated Ippen differs most widely from others. He is not only a Pure Land devotee but in a sense a Zen Buddhist. As far as the Nembutsu is concerned, he does not differ from that of the other Pure Land followers, but Ippen's Nembutsu is identifiable with the One as referred to in the Kōān exercise of Zen Buddhism. He did not lay so much stress on faith as some Pure Land masters did, but

¹ In its flourishing days, there were twelve branches in it but they are now united into one. Its headquarters is Shōjō-kōji at Fujisawa near Yokohama. The number of the temples belonging to this sect is about five hundred and that of the believers 216,000, according to recent statistics.

he told us to direct our thought exclusively to the practice of the Nembutsu which is also the discipline advocated by Zen masters. Thus he says: "When the Nembutsu is recited without interruption in this frame of mind (giving up all other thoughts), there is no thought of Buddhahood or selfhood, not to say anything about the presence of an argumentative mood; the world of good and bad is no more than the Land of Purity itself and beside this there is nothing for which we cherish a desire or from which we turn away."¹

This peculiarity of his teaching may be ascribed to his own inner understanding but it may also be considered coming from the various external influences which he underwent while going through all forms of trials and hardships in this actual life.

4

Ippen, whose posthumous name was Enshō Daishi, was born in 1239, twenty-seven years after the death of Hōnen (1133-1212) who was the father of all the Pure Land schools in Japan. The time was when the social revolution in the Kamakura period had been completed, although the agitation thus caused in the minds of people had not yet settled down. Owing to this social condition, the newly-born schools of Buddhism were asserting themselves strongly among the people. The teachings of Zen and the Pure Land doctrine had already taken deep root and the Nichiren had about come to the front.

From his childhood, Ippen was very clever and was sent to a temple while still young to study Buddhism. At ten he lost his mother, and when thirteen was sent to Harayama in Kyūshū where he further pursued his study of Buddhism under Shōtatsu, a disciple of Shōkū² who was the founder of the Seizan School of Pure Land Buddhism.

¹ Ippen's letter to Kōgan Sōzu.

² Shōkū. See the *Eastern Buddhist*, Vol. V, No. 1, pp. 80ff.

He stayed here for twelve years, when his father's death brought him back to his native place. This death of his father's and the subsequent family troubles made him realise the illusiveness and meaninglessness of this life. This must have been his state of mind at that time: "Life is like a bubble; there is nothing left when it disappears. The duration of human life is like a shadow cast by the moon. It does not wait for the inhaled breath to come out once more. . . . It is indeed a lamentable fact that since time immemorial we have not been able to procure what we desire."¹

In this mood, he stayed for some time in his native place, now studying and now engaged in worldly matters. One day he wandered out and found several boys in the street playing with a *riugo*, a toy which is made to dance along a line tightly held between two hands. To divert his mind perhaps, he joined them and when he took up the *riugo* himself, it slipped off the string, and fell on the ground rolling away. The incident, with no significance in itself, impressed him deeply. His mind's eye is said to have suddenly opened as if the scales dropped off his eyes.

"Hereupon I realised," later he told Shōkai, one of his disciples, "that our transmigration is exactly like this spinning of *riugo*. The *riugo* spins when we let it go; but it keeps quiet when we check its moving. So is our transmigration. An incessant passing from one state to another throughout the six paths of existence is due to our evil doings in the triple way of speech, body, and mind. Therefore, when we stop our evil doings, no transmigration can take place. Here for the first time in my life I clearly saw where the bondage of birth and death is and what Buddhism means to us all sentient beings."²

¹ Betsugan Wasan (Hymn of the Special Vow).

² Ippen-Hijiri-E (Ippen-the-Saint-Pictures). One of the most famous picture-scrolls in Japan. The pictures were painted by En-i and the explanatory passages were written by Shōkai, a disciple of Ippen's. Also called Rokujyō Engi.

5

Now it is quite natural that this awakening caused inner struggles in him. He saw, according to the Buddhist way of thinking, the actual state of pain in "our transmigration", and the cause of it in "our evil doings" or "the bondage of birth and death." He saw at the same time that we can get out of the actual pain when we are delivered from our evil doings. But to know is one thing and to actually experience is quite another. Are we not originally defiled? Is not this world originally incomplete? How can we be delivered from our evil doings?

Let me quote another of his sayings which illustrates his state of mind at that time. "This triple world is indeed transient and conditioned. Everything here is uncertain and vision-like. Therefore, no matter how earnest our desire and endeavour may be, we cannot be living here for ever nor attain peace of mind, as a boat upon the rough waves of the ocean cannot be kept from rocking."¹

His soul was wrung with agony and he set out on his pilgrimage in the quest of the truth which liberates. He visited masters one after another to show him the way of salvation. He prayed at shrines and temples for the way of deliverance. But he failed to find a way to escape the result of karma. Eight years were passed thus in storm and stress.

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In the spring of 1271, he came to Shinano province and for several days he confined himself in Zenkōji temple and offered prayers to Amitabha Buddha to be saved; and in the autumn of the same year, he came back to his native place and began the Nembutsu practice in a hut, secluding himself from the outer world. This Nembutsu practice continued for three years when his mind was matured. His inward eye opened. He gradually came to see into the original one-

¹ Ippen's Sayings.

ness of things. He moved a step toward the realisation, which can be seen in the following poem composed at the end of three years' seclusion.

“Ten kalpas ago, Amida attained Buddhahood in the world of all sentient beings.

In one instant when we call on his name, we are reborn in the Land of Amida.

When we realise that the ten kalpas past and the one instant are not two, here no-birth is realised.

When we realise that Amida's Land and our world are one, we join the Bodhisattvas' Great Assemblage.”

Amitabha Buddha and we sentient beings, the Pure Land and this defiled world, the ten kalpas elapsed since Amida's attainment of Buddhahood and this very instant of our calling on Amida's name—these are not dualities the one opposing the other, but the two aspects of one Reality. “Na-mu-a-mida-but-su” expresses this truth, for it signifies the simultaneous accomplishment of Amida's Buddhahood and of our rebirth in the Pure Land. Accordingly, when we understand this by means of the Nembutsu, we come to a higher world where nothing is born or created and where the great Bodhisattvas are assembled.

What Ippen states here is the *tarikī* life foreshadowed. Hitherto he sought for the way of salvation in the *jiriki* life, discriminating with his own intellect between sentient beings who are ignorant and the Buddha who is enlightened, between a life short and meaningless and a life eternal and full of meaning; and he endeavoured, relying on his own efforts, to give up the former and obtain the latter. But now he recognises that this way of thinking is of no avail. Because, as he says, “In the *jiriki* way of thinking where our ego works, we imagine that we can be ourselves learn and practise the way of severing ourselves from the bondage of birth and death. This inevitably tends to cultivate in us a feeling of pride in self-assertiveness, and this at the same time tends to assume a contemptuous attitude towards

others, because of learning and discipline attained by ourselves.”¹ As long as one stays in this state of mind, there is no spiritual equanimity which is sought after by all religious souls. This is where the *jiriki* fails.

Thus he was obliged to turn his eye from outward attainments to the inner self. He dug deeply down into the contents of inner self and found there his own defiled self and the defiling passions and was convinced that these passions are the cause of pain. He dug further into the contents of his inner self and here he perceived the original oneness where there are no discriminations, no opposites such as subject and object, but where Buddha is unified with us, and this world with the Pure Land. He saw that, when we get out of the false discriminations and go back to the original oneness, there is a life eternal and full of meaning. To effect this, he thought, we must understand the Nembutsu which is the name of the original oneness. When it is understood, there is nothing bothering us. When we live life as we find it, there is no more trouble with anything.

Then let us live our life as we find it, believing the doctrine of *Ichinen* (“one-thought”). Here is our deliverance. So he thought. His soul’s agony subsided. Now full of joy, he wished to give this truth to people in general. He left Iyo, which was his native place, and came to Osaka and at Shitennōji he preached his first sermon, emphasising faith in the doctrine of *Ichinen* and distributing cards bearing the name of Buddha.

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This idea of *tariki* was not final with him. For it was still a philosophical interpretation and not a religious experience. Even though non-duality was here emphasised, it was not yet strictly monistic. Because there were yet two things, the idea and the one who grasps it. While in this

¹ Ippen’s Sayings.

state, we cannot escape anguish which is caused by our inability to attain the state of identification. Not long after his first sermon, he had a chance to testify to his faith, which was to be elevated into a still higher sphere of religious experience.

He was one day on his way from Kōya to Kumano in 1275. As usual, he went on exhorting the Nembutsu and distributing cards with the name of Buddha. He met a priest and said to him, "Please accept this card and say Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu, believing in the doctrine of *Ichinen*." The priest answered, "I have no faith in it just now. If I accept this card, I shall be deceiving you." Ippen retorted, "You believe the sutra, do you not? If you do, why should you reject this card?" The priest said, "I believe the sutra but I have no faith yet in the doctrine of *Ichinen* and I am powerless." While they are thus arguing, people gathered about them. Ippen thought, "If this priest does not accept my card, people around here may not also accept it." Reluctantly he said to the priest, "Never mind, then, about your faith. Just accept this card." So the card was given to him which also made the bystanders accept it by his example.

This incident stirred in him a feeling of uneasiness. Was it not for all sentient beings that Amida vowed and worked and attained Buddhahood, whereby our rebirth in the Pure Land is assured? If there is any single person who cannot embrace this faith in *Ichinen*, Amida's Vow and Attainment will come to nought. How was it that that priest had to confess his inability to believe in *Ichinen*?

8

Troubled with these questions, he came to Kumano Shrine where Kumano Myōjin was enshrined. The Myōjin was believed at that time to be the incarnation of Amida himself, temporarily manifesting in the form of a Japanese god in order to save the people there. He shut himself in

the shrine and prayed to the Myōjin to solve his questions for him. He fell asleep. The Myōjin in a white robe appeared to him, saying, "You are a holy man, engaged in the propagation of the Nembutsu of Interpenetration, but why do you resort to such a bad method of propagation! That all sentient beings are reborn in the Pure Land is because Amida attained Buddhahood ten kalpas ago as Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu, and not because you propagate the teaching. Distribute your cards, therefore, without discriminating recipients, whether they are good men or not, whether they have faith or not."

The faith thus revealed to him by the Myōjin of Kumanō made him experience the deepest truth of the *tariki* doctrine of salvation. Tradition tells us that, with this unexpected revelation of the truth, he was filled with joy and jumped up into the inner shrine, exclaiming, "I in this earthly body am Buddha." Two poems were composed by him.

One of them is:

"Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu is Ippen's faith,
The ten worlds with all their contents primary and
secondary are Ippen's body,
Ten thousand deeds detached from thoughts—this is
Ippen's Realisation.
One who understands this is of all beings the most ex-
quisite of lotus flowers."

The other is:

"In Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu
No birth-and-death from the first;
When it is recited even for once,
No-birth is instantly realised."

Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu is the content of Ippen's faith, in which he was delivered from the bondage of birth and death. When Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu is recited with singleness of thought, it puts an end to all kinds of delusion, bringing us back to the original oneness which is the state of no-birth-and-death. This absolute faith in the Nembutsu is the last

word to our false discriminations and any other forms of faith, whatever their claims may be, lie in the world of attachment. They are unable to effect final emancipation. Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu alone assures us of the rebirth in the land of the Buddha Amitābha.

Outside Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu Ippen has no mind-and-body of his own. For merged in it is Ippen's entire being, together with all sentient beings. All sentient beings are Ippen himself and Ippen is all sentient beings. The Nembutsu is thus the universe itself and from this oneness rises this world of an infinite multiplicity. Although defiled by our attachments, the world itself is pure and unspoiled. Ippen's faith in Nembutsu is this faith in the original essential purity of all things as viewed from the point of identification.

In the *Banshū-Mondō-Shū*¹ compiled by one of his disciples we read, "Our practice does not consist in the meditating on a no-form and no-thought, nor does it aim at the realisation that your self-nature is no other than Buddha himself; as we are beings of inferior wisdom and forever in the bondage of birth and death, what we have to do is to abandon ourselves, mind and body, to the Original Vow with the absolute faith in it. When the Nembutsu is recited thus with singleness of thought, there is just one Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu in which there is neither self nor Buddha. Is this not the meditation which seeks for the identity of self-nature and Buddha, is this not the realisation of no-form and no-thought? So in the Meditation Sutra we have a state of recognition of no-birth (*anutpattikadharmakshānti*) when there is a sudden outburst of enlightenment." This sums up the thesis of Ippen's faith. Those who realise this state of mind are the most excellent ones and compared to the white lotus flowers growing out of mud, the most beauti-

¹ This book is said to be the record of Ippen's answers to the questions set by a disciple of his. It clearly elucidates his position in Pure Land Buddhism.

ful of all flowers, which are said to blossom once in one thousand years.

Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu—there is here no mixture of self and therefore no birth and death. Birth and death belong to this world where our egoism rules. It is this Nembutsu that assures us of our rebirth.

Ippen thus upholds the life of the absolute *tariki*. Finding no way to save himself in the *jiriki*, nothing was left to him but to turn to *tariki*; in the beginning even in the *tariki* it remained with him on the conceptual plane of thought, which finally ripened into a personal experience. As long as *tariki* presented itself in the form of a concept, he still had to struggle to go beyond into the sphere of absolute conviction. He knew that the way was opened before him but that he was not actually walking in it. This struggle lasted for a while until he came to the Myōjin of Kumano where he was finally enabled to come to the experience of realisation. The understanding as long as it is a form of intellection is the result of discrimination. This discrimination comes from ignorance. However excellent our understanding is, it still harbours the shadow of ignorance, hence falsehood. Enlightenment is not found here which grows only from Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu.

In this Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu everything finds its way. There is no longer he who is in the bondage of birth and death, nor is there Buddha who attained enlightenment. The universe is in the state of *mu* (nothingness) in its original features. Troubles are gone and doubts disappear. The stronghold of egotism is fallen at last. When a man is in this state, he is completely liberated. There is nothing that checks living his own life.

Ippen was now in this state of mind and for the first time realised that he was now a completely new person identified with Amida; his mind was Amida's mind, his life was Amida's life, and his words were Amida's words. He realised that the universe, with all its sentient and non-

sentient beings, with its blowing winds and roaring waves, was no other than the Nembutsu itself. He was an absolutely free man in this world of relativity.

A new life dawned on him. He began to propagate his doctrine throughout the country, distributing cards with Buddha's name and sometimes dancing to the Nembutsu-recitation. After fifteen years' journey of this Nembutsu propagation, he ended his earthly career in 1289 at Hyogo at the age of fifty-one.

9

In conclusion let me quote Ippen's letter to a Tendai priest called Shinnen Shōnin. "That we come to know one another in this world is the result of our previous friendship in many lives and that we all believe in one Buddha is a matter for joy. Birth-and-death is a delusion resulting from ego-attachment and enlightenment is gained when one mind is detached from disturbing thoughts. As there is no such thing as birth-and-death from the first, even learning cannot do away with it. As there is no such thing as enlightenment from the first, no meritorious deeds can get it for us. Nevertheless those who do not study grow all the more ignorant as to how to obtain their own deliverance, and those who do not practise those meritorious deeds are liable all the more to transmigrate in the six paths of existence. This being the case, we must devote ourselves to the practice of meritorious deeds abandoning thought and body and using up all our mental energy. This is the truth embraced alike by the Pure Land as by the Holy Path Buddhists, though they may express it differently according to their respective terminology. Therefore, the *Saddharma Pundarika Sutra* has this, 'What I love is not my body, is not my life, but the supreme enlightenment,' and the *Meditation Sutra* says, 'After living this body, we are assured to be reborn in our next life in the Land of Purity.' As the Holy Path teaching is *jiriki*, it is quite natural for its fol-

lowers to realise the truth by abandoning their all, body and life. As the Pure Land teaching is *tarikī*, its followers give themselves, body and life, to Amitabha Buddha and attain Buddhahood after their death. For the salvation of common mortals that we are, there is no other way than to recite the Nembutsu with singleness of thought. In the *Smaller Sukhavativyūha Sutra*, we read, those who recite the Nembutsu will be protected by all the Buddhas innumerable in number and in the six quarters, and are sure to be reborn in the next life in the Land of Purity. Outside Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu there is no mind-and-body which I can call mine; the Nembutsu pervades all sentient beings, which is Ippen himself. . . .”

SHIZUTOSHI SUGIHIRA