

How to Practise

Amida Dharma Pamphlet

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The Dying Buddha Said...

Parinibbana Sutta 5.26

“at a crossroads also a stupa should be raised for the Tathagata. And whosoever shall bring to that place garlands or incense or sandalpaste, or pay reverence, and whose mind becomes calm there — it will be to his well being and happiness for a long time.”

Parinibbana Sutta 5.28

"And why, Ananda, is a Tathagata, an Arahant, a Fully Enlightened One worthy of a stupa? Because, Ananda, at the thought: 'This is the stupa of that Blessed One, Arahant, Fully Enlightened One!' the hearts of many people will be calmed and made happy; and so calmed and with their minds established in faith therein, at the breaking up of the body, after death, they will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness.”

Those who have faith in Buddha have, therefore, ever since, made stupas and memorials, altars and shrines in honour of him and have worshipped him there, circumambulating and chanting, calling upon his limitless light and endless life and finding peace of heart, for the benefit of themselves and all sentient beings.

Everybody worships. Some worship money, some status, some celebrities, some science, some themselves. It does not matter whether Buddha is a god or not, what matters is whether your god is a Buddha. If what you worship has the qualities of joy, compassion, love, wisdom and unconditional acceptance, then that Buddha will live in your heart and you can have faith that it will work whatever transformation is needful.

Basic Principles

Faith and practice cannot be differentiated. If you have that kind of faith, if Amida grabbed you, then you can practise any way you like and it will be the same. To practise Amidism is simply to express the gratitude one has for such faith. Nor is this faith anything exclusive. Amida means limitless. Amidist faith is the kind of generic, deep faith that is the true root of all religion and spirituality. It is just that, since we live in a world of form, we need forms in order to express our deepest sentiments, just as we need forms to express the less serious aspects of life too. Consequently, Amidists have developed forms and if you like them, do use them, but don't let their existence make you feel guilty if you have different way of doing it.

Amidism is a tradition emanating from Buddha. In origin it is probably derived from the teachings that Buddha himself gave especially to his lay followers and to his cousin Ananda. It is not really centred on a monastic form. Buddha gave other teachings to those who wanted to be monastic renunciants. Essentially, what Buddha taught lay people was, 1. take refuge, 2. express gratitude and adoration for the Dharma you have received and the Buddhas that you have received it from, 3. live with a generous spirit, 4. do these three things in your personal life and get together to do them collectively with others regularly too.

Practice can thus be informal and formal and the two reinforce each other. Formal practice can take many forms. Some standardisation is valuable as it aids collective practice but there is nothing sacred about particular form. There are rituals that we perform together and practices that we often do and this booklet provides an introduction.

Refuge Calling

In Amidist practice nothing is more important than the nembutsu and everything comes back to it one way or another. The nembutsu, or “Nam”, is the calling of the name of Buddha. The simplest way of expressing gratitude to the Buddhas is to call their name. Amidists do this in the form of the nembutsu. The usual form of nembutsu in English speaking countries is

NAMO AMIDA BU

This is because the traditional Chinese form has six characters and the Japanese form “Namu Amida Butsu” is actually pronounced with only six. Alternative forms in Sanskrit are “Amitabha”, “Namo Amitabha”, “Om Amitabha Hum”, “Om Ami Deva Hrih” We use all of these for chanting sometimes using different melodies and rhythms. Then there is also the Chinese form “Namo Omito Fo”.

The usual form, Namu Amida Bu, can be used throughout the day, the more the better. If you are with Amida friends then it will be used in place of please, thank you, hello, sorry, never mind, jolly good and many other everyday expressions that punctuate ordinary activity. Something good happens, Namu Amida Bu!, something bad happens, Namu Amida Bu. You meet somebody, Namu Amida Bu. There is a gap in activity, Namu Amida Bu.

While walking one can say Namu Amida Bu. When ending a message one can write Namu Amida Bu. In fact, whatever is happening, Namu Amida Bu. If you are with Amidists or alone you might say it out loud and if amidst other company then to yourself. Meeting Amidists from East Asia, saying the nembutsu will bring joy to everybody's face.

Why is Nam So Important?

The sages Shan Tao in China and Honen Shonin in Japan realised that there was a need to revive the original practice of early Buddhism in a manner that was accessible to ordinary people with lives full of responsibilities and commitments. They, therefore, advanced Nam, the calling of the Sacred Name, as a simple way for the practitioner to reaffirm refuge and bring it into all the affairs of daily life without the need for a special place, special clothes, special ceremony, priestly support or any other special circumstance that cannot always be to hand in the midst of daily life. None of these supports are bad or to be rejected, but the core of practice is something extremely simple that involves body, speech and mind, and that is nembutsu.

Nembutsu, in the form Namo Amida Bu, is a very short formula of taking refuge and expressing faith in and gratitude toward the Buddhas. Amidism is based on the recognition that one cannot achieve one's salvation by one's own efforts, but that the awakening of faith is a liberation in itself. Namo Amida Bu is thus both a cry for help and an expression of gratitude for it. "Namo" indicates the one who calls, that is, oneself. "Amida Bu" signifies Amitabha Buddha, the cosmic buddha, the spirit of buddhahood, that does not die and is available to us in all worlds.

Amidism is possibly the simplest religion. It is religion in that it is a reliance upon spiritual help. However, it does not require one to think one knows the nature of that help or to have any particular further belief. There are plenty of myths and stories in Buddhism and one can take them literally or metaphorically, but all that is required in Amidism is the sense that one needs help and that such help is available to anyone who calls for it and feels gratitude for it.

The practice of Nam is found in many religions. Hindus and Sufi both use it extensively. Christians have the Jesus Prayer. It is quite likely that all these practices derive from the same Buddhist origin. In many religions such practices have acquired an exclusivist tinge and become not just a way of calling on the divine, but also of excluding those who call a different name. In the Amidist view, however, the form is not what matters. What matters is the sincerity of the one who calls.

Seven Factors of Awakening

Nam is all one needs as the basis of a spiritual life. From an Amidist standpoint, all other practices are auxiliary, that is, their function is to support or deepen the nembutsu. Thus the nembutsu is a window through which the whole universe of Buddha's teachings can be regarded. Within the frame of nembutsu we can grow as whole human beings. The sense that the Buddhas accept us just as we are actually makes us keener to be all that we can be. In Buddhism there are any number of teachings that can help us. One that is of great importance is called Seven Factors of Awakening.

Awakening, in Mahayana Buddhism, means the awakening of faith. The text called *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* is regarded by many as the founding work of the Mahayana movement and is fundamental to all its different schools – Pureland, Zen Tendai, Tantra, - in Tibet, Vietnam, Korea, China, and Japan.

Mindfulness. Nembutsu actually means mindfulness of Buddha. Nembutsu means mindfulness. Nembutsu means to keep in mind the basic axiom that one is an ordinary, limited, vulnerable, emotional being who makes mistakes, sometimes does regrettable things and is always in receipt of great blessings that far out-weigh the good one does, yet, nonetheless, even such as ourselves can participate in the wonderful project of turning this and all worlds into Buddha lands of love, compassion, peace and joy. This participation comes to us through the power of the vows made by our spiritual ancestors.

Investigation. The awakening of faith gives one the courage to investigate what is true. Knowing I am accepted already I do not have to be frightened and put so much effort into trying to look good and appear justified in everything I do. I can afford to look at my shadow side and also at my real strengths without having to pretend. This gives Amidism a natural affinity with personal growth and psychology. Faith in Amida creates a safe space

where we can look deeply at our own process and help one another to do likewise.

Enthusiasm (virya). The word enthusiasm implies an energy that come into one that lifts and inspires. Originally the term meant that a god enters in (entheos-ism). This is certainly the sense that comes from entrusting oneself.

Rapture. Amidism is a path of positive passion. We are human and through Nam we become fully human, with all the emotion that that implies. In Amidism practice is not intended to bring one to a specified state. There is no one right way to be. Each time you practise you may get something different. Life is constantly unfolding and changing. The nembutsu does, however, bring a deep confidence into all the eventualities of life.

Calm. Nam brings peace. Even though bad things happen, we are seeing them in a bigger context. Even though we ourselves may not be able to see that bigger context in detail, still we have faith that it is there. This big mind has room for everything and enables us to take the rough with the smooth.

Samadhi. The nembutsu samadhi is the sense of infiniteness that comes through entrustment. Everything in life takes its meaning from its context. Taking refuge in Amida gives one's life the biggest and best context available. Dwelling in this vastness all the detail of life takes on a new more radiant character, as if each little incident were a mirror reflecting a greater light.

Equanimity (upeksha). The ordinary mind tend to arrange things hierarchically on a vertical scale: more or less good, expensive, efficient, respectable etc. From the perspective of the Buddhas everything is arranged horizontally. All are loved, all accepted. Although we ourselves continue to live in the world of hierarchical thinking, taking refuge means that we are enfolded by the Buddhas and their acceptance is an ultimate source of comfort.

Mindfulness & Investigation

Mindfulness and investigation work together. As we bring the sense of the Buddhas' presence into all the details of everyday life we are also becoming aware of the processes that go on in us and between ourselves and others. Technically, we can say that we are investigating what Buddha called dependent arising.

In the course of a day we may have many different mind states. Buddha recommended us to notice how they arise and how they pass away. This directly gives us a sense of their impermanence. It also enables us to learn more about ourselves and others. One can see what kind of a foolish being one is.

In Amidism, one is not practising in order to reach awakening, one is practising within awakening. Whatever faith one has is the basis for practice. The intensity of practice is in proportion to the faith one has, but one cannot choose to have faith. It is like falling in love, either you do or you don't. However, everybody has at least a bit of faith.

Some people think that they do not have faith because they have doubts, but to doubt you have to have some faith first or doubting would be too frightening. This is quite paradoxical. From an Amidist point of view the person who presents as being certain probably does not really have much real faith. People cling on to “certainties” out of fear when they lack faith. Faith is what enables us to live in an uncertain world with a sense of assurance and confidence.

Mindfulness and investigation are ways in which we explore what it means to live this spiritual life. We are mindful of the blessings and benefits we receive and we investigate the effect that they have in our life. We notice how we respond to situations. This noticing requires objectivity. Since we are accepted as we are there is no need to bias our investigation. If we find

greed, hate, delusion, envy, pride, malice, or if we find love, generosity, shame, compassion, joy, or if we find grief, sympathy, anxiety, or even boredom, well, that is what is there. More interestingly, however, these things are not there as fixtures. They come and go. Each has an edge and that edge is often the most interesting place to look. When we look at the edge of a feeling it often tells us something important or it transmutes into something else that is more revealing.

Faith is a safe space. As Amidists we are constantly trying to create spaces that are secure and welcoming, beautiful and inspiring. We want to help to create little bits of the Buddha's Pure Land and support the emergence of a greater Pure Land for all. Even little bits, however, can have a powerful transformative effect. Creating safe space for one another can enable the release of old karma and bring about cleansing, healing and liberation.

Knowing that we are accepted by Buddha we can look at the fact that there are big areas of non-acceptance in ourselves. We shall never eliminate these completely, but we can learn through examining them. As we do so we grow in compassion through an increasing sense of fellow-feeling.

In this way we create an upward spiral. Whatever faith we already have grows and the satisfaction that it brings grows with it. Everything becomes *Namo Amida Bu* and we all learn to help one another, not superficially as a result of thinking we should, but deeply because we see into the reality of our – and everybody's – situation.

Shrines, Altars & Stupas

When Buddha died many of his followers were distraught. He had brought a great love and peace into their lives. They knew that this was related to their connection with him. They only had to be in his presence to feel resored and replenished. Places associated with the memory were, therefore, of great importance. Buddhists to this day have many ways of conjuring the remembrance. They carry rosaries, wear anklets, put up pictures, make statues. Many people have come to Buddhism through coming across a statue of Buddha somewhere and being struck by its serenity.

The creation of burial mounds goes back far into history. Humans have always drawn strength from visiting the place associated with the illustrious dead. All over England, for instance, one can find sites with such mounds that would have been places of gathering of ancient people. It was, therefore, natural for Buddhists to honour the greatest of sages in this way. The body may have decayed but the spirit continues. Spending time in the associated place is a source of power.

In the medieval period pilgrimage to sites associated with great saints was one of the primary forms of religious practice in most of the great religions. This practice is, therefore, universal. In Buddhism, the burial mound developed architecturally into the stupa and ultimately the pagoda. At the same time, on a more intimate scale, when the early Buddhists gathered they would put out an extra seat for the now absent sage. This developed into the shrine.

You can make your shrine in many ways, with a statue or scroll or just a vase of flowers, with offerings and candles. Make a sacred space and find peace there. Place tokens of your ancestors and of those you want to honour. Make it a work of love.

Simple Ritual

Meeting with Dharma friends you can make your ritual as elaborate and beautiful as you like. At its most simple, however, we say the nembutsu and make bows, sit in silence or chant, and make offerings, which may simply be a bowl of clear water.

With body, speech and mind
Humbly I prostrate
And make offerings
Both set out and imagined
I confess my wrong deeds from all time
And rejoice in the virtues of all
Please stay until samsara ceases
And turn the wheel of Dharma for us

Thus we ask the Buddhas and bodhisattvas to receive our prayers and offerings, we acknowledge our nature as foolish beings and receive peace.

Please do not make ritual into a burden and please do not think that it is some kind of magic. It is a way of honouring and saying thank you, and of drawing upon the power and grace promised to us by all the spiritual ancestors.

Ritual is a kind of theatre and, as such, a language in which to say the most important things, things that come from deep in our hearts. Better to offer a single flower in deep sincerity than a ton of gold in mere ostentation.

Examining the Evidence of One's Life

We have a practice that we call Nei Quan. Nei means inward and Quan means investigation. The Chinese character for quan contains a picture of a heron. The heron looks below the surface of the water in order to catch a fish. Much of Buddha's teaching is actually about the importance of not being taken in by a superficial view. The fish we have to catch is hidden below the surface and we have to look carefully.

This practice is essentially a matter of looking at the evidence of our life and this evidence is substantially outside of ourselves.

Nei Quan may be framed as a series of standard questions. A classic set are

- what have I received
- what did I do in return
- what trouble has my existence caused

In an intensive Nei Quan retreat these questions can be focussed upon a particular relationship at a particular time. Thus one can look at one's relationship with one's mother in the first five years of life. What did I receive? How many times did she clean me, feed me, dress me, protect me? This is quite practical. One can make a list. One can move on to other periods and other relationships. It can be a very sobering process. This type of exercise is not particularly psychological. It does not matter if she fed me with good grace or not, merely the fact that she did it. It soon becomes apparent that if we have survived we must have received more benefits from somewhere than we can ever possibly repay. What trouble did I cause? How many times did she get up in the night for me? How many other activities did she miss in order to care for me? The point here is not to make ourselves feel guilty so much as to honestly take stock of the facts. Buddha's mother died as a result of giving birth to him. What did he do in return? He gave us the Dharma.

As an everyday practice, Nei Quan can be a matter of reviewing the day just completed, or the past 24 hours, or the time since one last did the exercise. What happened in that time? What encounters did I participate in? What did I receive? What did I do in return? What do I feel? Honestly, what is the feeling and what is in that feeling? This may be more psychological, more analytical.

Or one may focus more generally. I am sitting here. I am receiving the support of the ground beneath me. I am receiving the protection of the walls of the building. I am receiving the support of warmth that comes ultimately from the sun. I am receiving the life-giving support of air entering my lungs. This ground, this building, this sun, this air, I did not make them, I do not own them, I did not earn them, they are not me, not mine, not myself. They are grace, free gifts.

There are many ways to do Nei Quan. They are all ways of amplifying the “Namo” part of the nembutsu. They help me to understand what kind of a creature it is that is calling out for help. They also help me to understand the reality of life, not just for myself, but for everybody. Amidism is not about trying to be good so much as trying to be real. When we see what is really true, some natural processes are likely to kick in that do make us easier to live with, but the aim is not primarily a moral one because Amidism does not believe that human nature is perfectable.

Receiving the Blessing of Peace

After a period of Nei Quan we commonly do a meditative exercise called Chih Quan. Either practice can be done on its own, but it is common to do them together. Chih means peace. This is related to the practice that in some forms of Buddhism is called Tranquil Abiding (Samattha), just as Nei Quan is related to Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

In Chih Quan one imagines a Buddha or bodhisattva before one and makes an offering. In this practice it is not necessary to imagine the presence in any detail. A mere sense is sufficient. Some people like to do this sitting in front of a statue, image or scroll, but that is optional. Whatever works for you.

The point is to gather together whatever is in one and offer it. This may be the thoughts, feelings, images and memories stirred by the previous nei quan or it might be material emanating from some other source. It does not matter whether what is there seems good or bad, worthy or unworthy, clever or stupid; one offers it. One imagines that the Buddha receives whatever we offer happily. He, in his greater wisdom and compassion, will have some way of recycling what we have offered and do so in a beneficent way.

As we make our offering and let go of all that we are carrying, we receive, in return, a blessing. This comes in the form of peace. We feel it descending into our physical being. As we start to feel this peace in our body we allow ourselves to go into it as deeply as feels natural. Deeper and deeper peace. If, in this descent, anything occurs to distract us or grab our attention anew, we gather it and offer it just as we did before, and so receive more peace.

We can dwell in this peace as long as we like. If we are practising with others then after a little time the bell will go and we shall chant some verses together. If you are alone you may use a timer or you may simply allow the time to extend. Eventually your mind will once again start to wander, but then this can again be a basis for a further offering.

Where nei quan is an experience of mindfulness, and investigation, chih quan is enthusiasm, rapture, calm, samadhi and equanimity, and it tends to go through these stages in this order. Thus the whole nei quan – chih quan practice forms a cycle in which we gain an experiential sense of the factors of awakening as well as of the deeper meaning of the nembutsu.

It is a characteristic of our practice to do Chih Quan second rather than first. This ensures that we end our practice with receiving the blessing. Just as Nei Quan expands the sense of “Namo” so chih quan expands the sense of “Amida Bu”. The Buddha exists in the blessing. Receiving the blessing of peace is the experiential knowledge of Amida Bu. We can thus see how nei quan and chih quan are auxilliary practices.

Beyond the Ego

Ego is a word originally from Latin that has become important both in Western psychology and in everyday speech. Its definition varies from one context to another. If we continue to use Western terms, we can say that spirituality is a matter of going beyond the ego, beyond the individual soul. Buddhists generally do not use the term soul, but if we use it in the sense that the European philosopher Hegel did to mean the unawakened basis of nature in us, then we can see that the awakening (shinjin) that is talked about in Amidism means living in the dynamic space between soul and spirit.

An important feature of Hegel's idea is the sense that spirit itself is constantly evolving. As we each reach out to it in our various ways, sublimating our natural energies in the longing for the sublime, so spirit also evolves. Not only does Amida Buddha help us by making our lives meaningful, but each of our small efforts helps Amida Buddha, and all the Buddhas. The Pure Land is not a fixed blue print, but an ever unfolding vision. No matter how far we go there will always be a Beyond, a Param-ita. This is why my Zen Teacher, Kennett Roshi used to translate the last line of the Heart Sutra as “Going, going, going beyond, always going beyond”. Such is the awakening of faith in the Mahayana.

We each have an unawakened nature which is the fruit of our past, the form of our species and the sum of our particular personal characteristics. Some part of this unconscious soul becomes conscious by an act of defiance or negation. Consciousness is at first about the ability to say “No”, to defend ourselves, to be wary, to fight, hunt and flee. Spirituality is the attempt to evolve a higher consciousness beyond this basic one, to transform wariness into awareness, fight and flight into love and compassion, hunting into co-operation. To go beyond fear and find faith.

The word Buddha just means awake. Those who are awake to this possibility of a higher evolution are in touch with something that comes from beyond our present condition. This Beyond (Param, in Sanskrit) is

what we mean by Spirit or holiness. The term holy is closely related to the word whole. What one awakens to is the intuition of wholeness.

Life beyond mere instinct has meaning only in terms of its context. My writing this pamphlet is meaningful in the context of a community of people who want to practise. A community of that kind is only meaningful in the context of a larger tradition. The larger tradition is only meaningful in the context of the human existential situation and so on. Each time we look for meaning we reach for a bigger context. One cannot derive meaning from components. The meaning of this pamphlet cannot be reduced to the meaning of pieces of paper or the words disaggregated into a heap. If you take it apart there is nothing there, but if you see it in a bigger frame the spirit is visible. This is true of everything - it is the spirit of it that is meaningful.

If you want to have a meaningful life then you have to look for a bigger context for your life. Spirituality is about reaching for the nearest thing to an ultimate context that we have intuition of. It is our primitive nature reaching for something Beyond. That reaching is the fundamental longing that is expressed as Nam.

Meditation & Mysticism

Spirituality is about going beyond the ego, not just once and for all, but over and over, a dynamic process ever repeating and renewing. The soul reaches for what is beyond. It calls out. In this calling its nature is revealed, offered, abandoned, resurrected, only to start the whole process again. An endless dance with forces always greater than oneself that hold us, Dharma.

In meditation one disappears. The aim, however, is not to remain disappeared. Basic nature is endlessly reasserting itself. Even though we enter into enthusiasm, rapture, samadhi and equanimity, we are still foolish beings, still thirsty. The fullness of life is a dynamic middle, neither more than momentarily falling back completely into nature nor completely into spirit, disappearing and reappearing endlessly.

A practitioner wrote to me...

“Your sentence that meditation is a way of disappearing turns in my mind! And also in my heart.... And my heart answers: yes, meditation is disappearing... to appear or to join or to melt in the Infinite Light by that to appear or shine more nearly or availably or concretely for all sentient beings? The Infinite Light seems to have different stages of form or colour or concreteness: the total Emptiness with nothing, the Pureland with all Buddha's, the energetic world with angels and the Earth with all sentient beings, connected with love but also isolated from love by their form and Self.”

Each person has their own experience. These experiences are not easy to articulate, but one senses the passion, the inspiration, the release. This life of Amidism, the life within awakening, has room within it for the whole gamut of religious feeling. It is a practical mysticism that brings the Power of the Beyond into the minutiae of everyday life. With the nembutsu, infinite light is reflected in the least of occurrences and the miscellaneous circumstances of daily life are ever fresh awakening.