

The essay is part of the follow-up nembutsu course. This is for people who have already completed *30 days of Nembutsu*. If you need to sign up for 30 Days first, do so here: <http://amidashu.org/30-days-of-nembutsu/>

A deeper understanding of nembutsu

In this short essay I'll lay out some of the key features of Amida Shu belief and practice – using the four themes of Amida Buddha, bombu nature, nembutsu and the bodhisattva way of life.

Our key practice is a recitation or chanting practice. Hopefully this essay will answer some questions like: What's that all about? Who am I chanting too? What's the end point? And so on. You've already had an experience of the practice, and will have begun to find your own answers to these questions. Here, I'll offer an Amida Shu approach to these questions.

Amida Buddha

We believe there is something infinite and ineffable that is characterised by wisdom and compassion, and that as much as we are reaching out to it, through our longing and our spiritual practices, it is reaching towards us. It can take the shape of many things. It is what inspires great teachers, moves people to create great temples and works of art, and invites us to reach into the world and assist the afflicted and to resist oppression. For us it most commonly takes the shape of Amida Buddha, but it has been known through different names throughout the ages.

'Amida' means measurelessness. 'Buddha' means awakened one. Amida Buddha is the Buddha of measureless light and life. Measureless light refers to seeing things clearly, to looking beneath the surface of everyday mind, and to not measuring one another. This is the wisdom aspect of the Buddha. Measureless life refers to unending compassion and to kindness. Compassion and wisdom come together to create unconditional love – this is the power of the Buddha.

Light also refers to space, and life to time. This lets us know that the power of the Buddha reaches throughout space and time and can be accessed wherever and whenever we are.

It is measureless in scope, and in attitude – it doesn't measure us – it is available unconditionally.

Some Buddhists speak of Buddha nature and position this power inside themselves. In Amida Shu we most often speak of it being outside of us. This wholesome energy is vast in scope – much bigger than our ordinary minds. It is like the view from the shrine room here at Amida Mandala, reaching as far as the eye can see in every direction, drawing us out of ourselves and into spaciousness.

Shakyamuni Buddha who lived in India and Nepal two and half thousand years ago told the story of Amida Buddha. A spiritual seeker called Dharmakara was inspired by meeting an awakened teacher, and vowed to create a place where all beings can easily become enlightened. He completed his vows and became Amida Buddha. The place he created is called Sukhavati – the Pure Land.

You can take this story literally, or as a metaphor. What's important is that it points to something that is available here in this moment. Amida's light shines through all worlds, in all moments: we are all illuminated. What is the light? The light is love.

Bombu nature

Bombu is a Japanese word that means foolish being. The greatest foolishness is conceit: imagining that we are something that we are not.

When I take some time to reflect on my own nature, I can see that I am a mixture of impulses and actions. Some of these are helpful and some are harmful. I wake up in a good mood, share practice with others in the community and buy some flowers for Satya when I'm out in town. Or I wake up after a night of bad dreams, and don't listen properly to someone first thing, and later I shout at the cat. Sometimes my good actions are completely altruistic, and sometimes they are tainted by selfishness: If I do this good thing, I'll get something in return, or you'll see me in a particular way...

Knowing our foolish nature offers two opportunities: the first – that we might try to curb our wayward habits; the second – that we might awaken to the fact that we are lovable just as we are. The light of Amida Buddha is already illuminating us, there is nothing that we need to do in order to receive this great blessing.

We are always hiding something from ourselves, but the Buddha sees us as we really are and loves us. Some would say we are loved not despite our foolishness, but because of it.

Paradoxically, the more deeply we trust in the Buddhas acceptance of us, the less likely we are to act from greed, hate and delusion.

Nembutsu

Nembutsu is the name of the chanting or recitation practice you have already been doing.

Literally it means to keep the Buddha in mind. 'Nem' is to keep in mind, 'Bu' is Buddha. Most often we practice this by saying 'Namo Amida Bu'. Namo Amida Bu means 'I bow to the Buddha of measurelessness'. Sometimes it is a calling out, 'Will you accept me just as I am?' and sometimes it is a prayer of gratitude, 'Thank you for accepting me and for loving me.' Sometimes it is just a reminder of our own nature, and of the nature of the Buddha.

Nembutsu practice anchors us in something greater than our own small minds and judgments. It reminds us of the great love of the Buddhas. Sometimes it is a practice of great intimacy, sometimes of great spaciousness.

Formally we might say nembutsu during Buddhist services or in our private practice in front of our own shrine. Informally we consciously remember the Buddha throughout the day. When I say 'Namo Amida Bu' it reminds me that there is a power greater than myself which is completely compassionate and reassures me that all will be well.

The more we practice, the more settled our faith in Amida becomes. It becomes the context to our whole lives, like a light that is always shining on us and on the whole world.

Bodhisattva

A bodhisattva is a person whose actions are inspired by the great light of the Buddha. They naturally work for the good of all.

Here at Amida Shu we have a history of social engagement, guided by three principles: resist oppression, assist the afflicted, and demonstrate an alternative. We can see that these three principles are one way of describing bodhisattva behaviour, and ask ourselves – how can we put this into practice?

The more we practice, the more like a bodhisattva we become. This happens naturally and without effort as our faith grows. We can also put energy into bodhisattva practice, asking “is there a little more good I can do today?”

If a small nudge in the direction of goodness will allow us to make a different kind of offering to the world, then it’s worth giving ourselves a small nudge. If we need to give ourselves a large push to do good, we should be mindful that this can create all sorts of resistance and rebellion later on.

A bodhisattva – a person who gives spontaneously and naturally – can be like a mirror for our own nature, showing us both our compassion and foolishness.

We have natural impulses towards compassion. When we act upon this, love flourishes, and then at some point our compassion gives way. This giving way can happen through tiredness, or through being triggered into other emotional states. When our compassion fails we might feel contrite. If we can practice nembutsu in this moment, we can experience the Buddha’s love and acceptance – even as one whose compassion has failed. This sense of acceptance can deepen our faith, and inspire us back onto the compassionate path.

Faith can come from practicing goodness. Compassion is good for its own sake – it brings more love into the world, and through practicing it we come closer to the Buddha.

We can also say that goodness comes from faith, and faith comes from encountering the Buddha just as we are. When we have the impulse to do good, faith allows us to follow it, and when we follow it – regardless of our skilfulness, or its results, faith grows.

Conclusion

These four themes - Amida Buddha, nembutsu, bombu nature, and the bodhisattva - are all windows through which we can explore spiritual practice. Having some sense of what each of them means can deepen our experience of practice. As our practice deepens, the more the Buddha will appear to you in a form that speaks to you, the more you will discover your own particular brand of foolishness, the more will taste the flavour of your own relationship with Amida, and the more you will be moved to acts of goodness. Namo Amida Bu.

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