**Pure and Simple Practice**

**Though this chant to foster gratitude and connection is the main practice of one of Buddhism’s major schools, many are surprisingly unfamiliar with it.**

**By Dharmavidya David Brazier. Tricycle Magazine Winter 2018**

Pure Land practice is simple. It doesn’t require that the practitioner be learned in Buddhist thought or exceptional in moral virtue, meditation, or spiritual discipline. It is suitable for those with busy lives, and it is as suitable for those who are struggling with self-destructive habits or feelings of despondency, anger, sadness, or confusion as it is for those who are full of joy in living. It connects us with the beauty in the world, is full of art and poetry, fosters gratitude for all we receive, and restores basic faith.

The origins of Pure Land practice lie in Shakyamuni’s teachings to laypeople and the devotion that people felt toward him during and after his lifetime. The great popularizers of this approach—Shan Tao in 7th-century China and Honen Shonin in 12th-century Japan, and their teachers, disciples, and associates—were people who lived exemplary Buddhist lives and knew the whole range of Buddhist teachings, yet chose to emphasize an approach to practice that was accessible to the ordinary person, no matter what their circumstance, personal virtue, gender, status, or history was. These teachers lived in dark times and offered hope.

Honen Shonin saw his father killed in civil war. He worried about the fate of his mother, who was a Korean immigrant. He was shocked by what he saw of human brutality in the Hogen uprising (1156). He understood that many people were trapped in oppressive social conditions they could do little or nothing about. He instituted the *nembutsu*, the recitation of the Buddha’s name, as a practice of solidarity with and solace for the oppressed.

The questions at the heart of Pure Land Buddhism are perennial and universal: How can we put ourselves in relationship with unconditional love and live a life that is open, spontaneous, compassionate, and full of trust, given that we are only ordinary human beings living in a world that is, as Buddha said, on fire with greed, hate, and delusion? We ourselves are not immune: we are part of this world. How can we entrust ourselves to a way that goes beyond the worries and small-minded concerns that clutter ordinary existence and be part of something greater that contributes to the welfare of all sentient beings, when our capacity is so limited and we are already corrupted by beginningless karma?

**THREE CORE ELEMENTS**

In Pure Land Buddhism, the great unconditional love that we intuit is embodied in Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light. In Mahayana Buddhism, of which Pure Land is a part, there is a strong sense that the being of Buddha is not something limited to a single place and time but is universally present and available, inspiring and benefitting us. This is known as the Buddha’s *sambhoghakaya*aspect. In Pure Land, enlightenment is not so much something to be achieved by personal attainment but rather something that constantly bathes us, a light for the world already given by the boundless presence of buddhas and their teachings.

Then, in contradistinction to this inspiring intuition, Pure Land practice also begins with a recognition that in oneself, one does not perfectly embody such wisdom and compassion; that as a matter of fact and daily evidence, we are deluded beings, emotionally vulnerable and prone to all kinds of errors. This is the state that ordinary people recognize when they say, “I’m only human.” In Japanese it is our *bombu*nature. In this sense we are literally “foolish beings,” and it is this humble self-recognition that is the second foundation of Pure Land practice.

Putting these two things together—recognition of universal love on the one hand and of our own limited nature on the other—we may suddenly experience a shift, or even a shock. Here we are, prone to greed, hate, and delusion in all their many forms, often acting selfishly and making mistakes, sometimes with dire consequences, yet from the perspective of universal compassion, loved and accepted *just as we are*. In the language of Pure Land Buddhism, we are accepted by the love of the buddhas, Amida Buddha in particular. In Pure Land practice we recite the Buddha’s name to express our feeling about this, especially our gratitude and wonderment.

These, then, are the three foundations of Pure Land practice. First, to recognize the universal presence. Second, to face our own limited nature. Third, to express wonderment through calling out the name of the Buddha. As we continue with such practice, the calling, as it were, turns around and turns us around. We start to experience it not so much as me calling to the Buddha, but more and more as Buddha calling me. Pure Land Buddhism is, therefore, a “calling” in both senses of the word. It is a practice of calling out, and it is also a sense of being called—a practice that shapes one’s life and provides a spiritual security that transcends even birth and death.

**PRACTICING THE NEMBUTSU WAY**

There are many ways to call the Buddha’s name, and throughout the Buddhist world devotees do so in one way or another. It may be “Namo Buddhaya,” “Namo Tassa,” or “Buddham saranam gacchami.” In China it may be “Omito Fo” and in Japan “Namo Amida Butsu.” In the West this last tends to be Anglicized as “Namo Amida Bu” in order to preserve the six-syllable form of many Japanese chants. This method of calling the Buddha’s name is known as *nembutsu*.

The term *nembutsu*means “mindfulness of Buddha.” *Namo Amida Bu*means “I call upon measureless Buddha.” However, in reality this practice is not an intellectual or cognitive assertion; it is an expression of sentiment and a way of opening one’s heart to receive. When one recites the nembutsu it is an expression of gratitude and wonderment but also an expression of whatever spiritual feeling is arising at that time. In this sense it is an offering of oneself and a reception of grace. Reciting nembutsu is a two-way street connecting you with Buddha. It is not a straitjacket, not an attempt to squeeze oneself into a prescribed form or arrive at a prespecified state of mind. Each time one says the nembutsu, something different may arise. Whatever one is, one offers, and one receives what one needs. The hallmark of Pure Land is great acceptance, and one of the most difficult things may be to accept that one is already accepted.

Nembutsu can be said, called, chanted, or expressed in any of a great many different ways, rhythms, forms, melodies, and formats, in groups, in big, beautiful formal ceremonies, or while out on one’s own having a walk. Something good happens, “Namo Amida Bu.” Something bad happens, “Namo Amida Bu.” Stuck at traffic lights, “Namo Amida Bu.” Meeting another practitioner, “Namo Amida Bu.” As one gets into it, other practices also start to become forms of nembutsu. Bowing is nembutsu with the body. Acts of generosity are nembutsu for others. Visiting a shrine is nembutsu, because it brings us into mindfulness of Buddha.

What we are talking about is not really a technique but more an approach or orientation. It involves a positive use of imagination and a mobilization of emotion. The whole person is accepted. Pure Land is expressive and poetic. It encompasses the fullness and the pathos of life. It is sometimes said that Pure Land is for those of us who have already failed at more disciplined, ascetic, or demanding approaches, who are perhaps too sensitive, or too artistic, or too ordinary for the more heroic paths. Just say the nembutsu, and keep on saying it, and see.

One thing that we may well see is that insofar as we do take on board the sense that we are accepted even as we are, we tend to become more accepting of others. After all, they are flawed and fallible human beings just as we are, and they are up against the same samsaric difficulties burdened with their own karma, just as we are. We become more sympathetic to the failings of others. We feel loved and more able to love others in return. This is the foundation of true compassion and fellow feeling, which is the universal flavor of the dharma. When we take up the Pure Land orientation, the failures and tragedies that occur confirm rather than shake our faith.

Time to fall  
is time to float  
for a lotus blossom  
     –Zuigen Inagaki

In order to start the practice, you don’t need a clear idea of exactly what Amida is or how nembutsu works. Don’t inhibit your imagination, intuition, or emotion. This is not a creed or a dogma; it is a style. You can generate a sense of Amida as an unfolding wholesome energy, as the spirit that moved the Buddha to live a good life, or as unconditional love, but don’t worry about precision or accuracy. If you just have the sense that nembutsu might be a good thing and do it trusting that it will do its work, that is fine. In fact, it is more than fine, and for a special reason. Where many spiritual practices are about becoming more and more conscious, alert, and sharply aware and precise, Pure Land is more a matter of letting the spiritual sense sink down into one’s unconscious. It is not really that we do the practice so much as that the practice works on us, and it does so quietly, in the background, little by little transforming one’s life. Try it. If it works for you, keep going!

A good way to start practicing nembutsu may be to chant “Namo Amida Bu” for five minutes, once or twice a day. That’s it. You can either say the words or listen to a recording of the chant, which you can find online. Feel free to chant along with audio, or chant alone and vary the speed or pitch to suit your own voice. Some people feel self-conscious when they first start chanting, or worry about whether they’re getting it “right.” These feelings will likely fade after a few days [see “Getting Started” for more tips on beginning your practice].

If it helps, you can also simply incorporate nembutsu into daily life. The founders were aware that many ordinary Chinese or Japanese people would have to do their practice while planting rice seedlings or sailing a boat. In our case it might be mowing the lawn or driving the car.

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it will depend upon what you need.**

Then again, as in any practice, it is good, if possible, to associate with other practitioners. In East Asia this is easy enough, but in the West one might have to reach out through the Internet. It is excellent when we can meet in person and chant together. Chanting is a practice that brings people closer, even if it is via a video link. A nembutsu meeting with some time for chanting and some time for personal sharing can be a great support to practice even when only two or three people are present, although this is even more helpful in a larger group.

In all of these ways we can express thanks for what we receive. A core element of the dharma is the teaching of dependent origination. Everything arises from causes and conditions, which means that everything that we are and everything we have depends upon other things to which we can express gratitude. Nembutsu is the way to do that—a way that not only gives thanks for the specific circumstance but also simultaneously, in a mere six syllables, invokes and connects all involved to the infinite wisdom and compassion of the buddhas. When you get your cup of coffee, “Namo Amida Bu.”

One can’t say exactly how this wholesome energy will affect you—it will depend upon what you need. Sometimes we don’t even know what’s best for ourselves, so we must trust that something good will begin to unfold. As the days go by, you may begin to feel more peaceful or gain more perspective on your problems. Some people notice that they are dealing with their emotions differently and having more patience with themselves and those around them. Most people feel more settled and more secure, less anxious and more natural.

Shinran, the most famous disciple of Honen Shonin, says in one of his songs that the Pure Land is *jinen*, which is sometimes translated as “naturalness,” or “things in their natural state.” Or as the Pure Land teacher Zuigen Inagaki writes:

Just as you are,  
really,  
just as you are!

I hope that you enjoy your explorations with nembutsu, and that it brings you the inspiration, peace, courage, and comfort that it has brought me.

Namo Amida Bu!  
**GETTING STARTED**

* You may want to practice at the same time every day to help form a habit. If you’re a morning person, set your alarm ten minutes early. Some people chant during their lunch break or in the evening before they go to bed.
* Choose a quiet space to practice. If you enjoy being outside, try chanting in the garden or while walking.
* Some people like to light a candle or light an incense stick before they begin.
* Chant along with recordings (URLs below), chant alone, or find a friend who’s interested in joining you and chant together.
* If finding privacy for chanting is difficult, just move your lips without making a noise or say the words silently in your head.
* Sometimes you may want to chant for a longer period of time. Some days you won’t find the time, or you’ll forget. That’s OK—just say “Namo Amida Bu” and carry on the next day.

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