

Nembutsu as Remembrance¹

by

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Were one to put the question wherein consist the differences between Theravada, the Buddhism of the Pali Canon, and the Mahayana with its vast variety of schools and methods, one might for a start mention the particular emphasis laid, in the Mahayana teachings, upon the cosmic function of the Bodhisattva: saying this does not mean that in relation to the Theravada the Bodhisattvic ideal constitutes some kind of innovation; it suffices to read the Jâtakas or stories about the Buddha Sakyamuni's previous births in order to find those characteristic postures which the word 'Bodhisattva' came to imply in subsequent centuries here prefigured in mythological mode.² These stories were current long before the distinction between Theravada

¹ The word *nembutsu* is a compressed form of the phrase *namu amida butsu*, itself a Japanese reduction of the Sanskrit formula *namo 'mitâbhaya buddhaya*. The literal meaning is 'praise to Amitabha Buddha'; here *namo* must be taken as comprising the faith, veneration and gratitude which suffering beings owe to the Buddha as dispenser of light; the name 'Amitabha' itself means 'infinite light'. This formula has provided its invocatory *mantram* for the Pure Land school of Buddhism; this 'buddha-field' is named after Amitabha's paradise, symbolically situated in the West. The Pure Land teachings, first enunciated by the Indian masters Nagarjuna and Vasubhandu, reached Japan via China and became widely diffused thanks to the example of two great saints, Honen (1133–1212) and his preeminent disciple Shinran (1173–1262), who gave its present form to the tradition under the name of *Jôdô-Shinshu* (= Pure Land true sect): with us, 'sect' has an unhappy sound, but it has become conventional to use it in this context without any opprobrious implications. These elementary facts should be sufficient to prepare readers unacquainted with Japanese Buddhism for what is to follow.

² The epithet 'mythological' has been introduced here advisedly, in order to draw attention to an important feature of traditional communication which modern terminological usage has tended to debase. The Greek word *mythos*, from which our word derives, originally just meant a story and not a particular kind of story, supposedly fictitious, as nowadays. It was taken for granted that such a story was a carrier of truth, if only because, for the unsophisticated mentality of people brought up on the great myths, anything different would have seemed pointless; the idea of a fictional literature intended as a passing means of entertainment was quite alien to that mentality, and so was allegory of a contrived kind, however elevated its purpose. As a factor in human intelligence a 'mythological sense' corresponds to a whole dimension of reality which, failing that sense, would remain inaccessible. Essentially, myths

and Mahayana came in vogue; since then they have remained as common means of popular instruction extending to every corner of the Buddhist world. Nevertheless it is fair to say that, with the Mahayana, the Bodhisattva as a type steps right into the center of the world-picture, so much so that 'the Bodhisattva's Vow' to devote himself consciously to the salvation of all beings without exception might well be considered as marking a man's entry into the Mahayana as such; viewed in this light, whatever occurs at a time prior to his taking this decisive step must be accounted an aspiration only, one waiting to be given its formal expression through the pronouncing of the vow, when the hour for this shall have struck.

By its root meaning the word 'Bodhisattva' denotes one who displays an unmistakable affinity for enlightenment, one who tends in that direction both deliberately and instinctively. In the context of the Buddhist path it indicates one who has reached an advanced stage;³ such a man is the dedicated follower of the Buddha in principle and in fact. If all this is commonly known, what we are particularly concerned with here, however, is to extract from the Bodhisattvic vocation its most characteristic trait, as expressed in the words of the Vow which run as follows: "I, so and so, in the presence of my Master, so and so, in the presence of the Buddhas, do call forth the idea of Enlightenment...I adopt all creatures as mother, father, brothers, sons, sisters, and kinsmen. Henceforth...for the benefit of creatures I shall practice charity, discipline, patience, energy, meditation, wisdom⁴ and the means of application...let my Master accept me as a future Buddha".

It can be seen at a glance that this profession of intent anticipates, by implication, the vow taken by the Bodhisattva Dharmakara from which the Pure Land teaching and practice stem. He

belong to no particular time; there is an ever-present urgency about the events they relate which is the secret of their power to influence the souls of mankind century after century.

³ In Tibet the word for Bodhisattva, side by side with its more technical uses, is often loosely applied where, in English, we would use the word 'saintly'; this is not surprising really, since a saintly person evidently exhibits traits appropriate to an incipient Bodhisattvahood.

⁴ The six *pāramitās* or Transcendent Virtues: according to Mahayana convention *dāna*, the readiness to give oneself up to the service of others, charity in the broadest sense, heads the list as being the 'note' whereby a Bodhisattva can be recognized. It is, however, unlikely that a man would have reached such a pitch of self-abnegation without previously espousing a religiously inspired life of discipline, *śīla*, under its double heading of conscious abstention from sin and positive conformity with the ritual, doctrinal and other prescriptions of the religion in question; such conformity does not go without effort, *vīrya*, the combative spirit. As complement to the above outgoing virtues, *śanti*, contentment, repose in one's own being, follows naturally. It is after a certain blending of these three virtues that the urge into *dāna* may be expected to be felt strongly, thus pointing the way to a Bodhisattva's vocation. The last two *pāramitās*, namely *dhyāna*, contemplation, itself implying discernment between what is real and what is illusory, and *prajñā*, that transcendent wisdom which is a synthesis of all other virtues, completes their scheme of life for followers of the Mahayana: obviously this general pattern is applicable in other religions besides Buddhism.

who first had vowed to dedicate himself wholeheartedly to the good of his fellow creatures, ‘down to the last blade of grass’ as the saying goes, after treading the Path from life to life or else, in an exceptional case like that of Tibet’s poet-saint Mila Repa, in the course of a single life, finds himself clearly set for the great awakening; his unremitting efforts, canalized thanks to the proper *upâyas* (means) matching each successive need, have placed him in possession of *prajñâ*, that wisdom whereby all things in a formerly opaque world have been rendered transparent to the light of Bodhi—it is at this crucial point that the Bodhisattva renews his vow to succor all beings. This time, however, he gives to his vow a negative as well as a more intensive turn by saying that ‘I shall *not* enter nirvana unless I be assured that I can draw after me all the other creatures now steeped in ignorance and consequent suffering’: through this vow the Bodhisattva’s compassion becomes endowed with irresistible force; aeons of well-doing pass as in a flash; countless creatures are lifted out of their misery, until one day the cup of Dharmakara’s merit overflows, and lo! we find ourselves face to face with Amitabha radiating in all directions his saving light. By this token we are given to understand that the vow has not failed in its object; the Buddha himself stands before us offering tangible proof of the vow’s efficacy through the communication of his Name under cover of the *nembutsu*; henceforth this will suffice to ferry across the troubled waters of *samsâra* any being who will confidently trust his sin-weighted body to this single vehicle, even as Zen’s stern patriarch Bodhidharma once trusted the reed he picked up on the water’s edge and was borne safely upon its slender stalk across to the other shore. Such is the story of the providential birth of Jôdô-shin.

* * *

Reduced to bare essentials *nembutsu* is first of all an act of remembrance, whence attention follows naturally⁵ thus giving rise to faith in, and thankfulness for, the Vow. From these elementary attitudes a whole program of life can be deduced.

Given these properties comprised by the *nembutsu* as providential reminder and catalyst of the essential knowledge, it should cause no one any surprise to hear that comparable examples of the linking of a divine Name with an invocatory *upâya* are to be found elsewhere than in China and Japan; details will of course be different, but the same operative principle holds good nevertheless. To point this out is in no wise to impugn the spiritual originality of the message delivered by the agency of the two great patriarchs, Honen and Shinran Shonin, within the framework of Japanese Buddhism with effects lasting even to this day; on the contrary, this is but further proof of the universal applicability of this method to the needs of mankind, and more especially during a phase of the world-cycle when the hold of religion on human minds seems to be weakening in the face of a vast and still growing apparatus of distraction such as history has

⁵ In the Islamic world the word *dhikr*, remembrance, is used of the invocation practiced by members of the Sufi confraternities with the Divine Name as its operative formula; the Buddhist term *smṛti* and the Sufic *dhikr* bear an identical meaning.

never recorded before. The fact that the obvious accessibility of such a method does not exclude the most profound insights— indeed the contrary is true—has turned *nembutsu* and kindred methods to be found elsewhere into potent instruments of regeneration even under the most unfavorable circumstances: this gives the measure of their timeliness as well as of their intrinsic importance.

As an example of mutual corroboration between traditions, I have chosen a form of invocation current in the Tibetan-cum-Mongolian world where however, it is not, as in Japan, associated with any particular school but is in fact widely used by adherents of all schools without distinction. Other examples might also have been chosen belonging to non-Buddhist traditions, but it has seemed best to confine one's choice to places nearer home both because one can continue to use a common terminology and also, more especially, because in the Tibetan version the Buddha Amitabha figures in a manner which makes this tradition's kinship with Jôdô-shin clearly apparent.

The operative formula in this case is the six-syllable phrase *Om mani padme Hum* of which the acknowledged revealer is the Bodhisattva Chenrezig (*Avalokitesvara* in Sanskrit, *Kwannon* in Japanese). It is his intimate relationship with the Buddha Amitabha which provides the mythological link between the two traditions in question. In order to illustrate this point it will be necessary to hark back to the moment when the Bodhisattva Dharmakara became transfigured into the Buddha of Infinite Light; what we shall have to say now will be something of a sequel to the history of Dharmakara's ascent to Buddhahood as previously related.

If one stops to examine that history somewhat more closely one will become aware of a fact replete with meaning, namely that it would be possible without the least inconsistency to reverse the emphasis by saying that it is an Amitabha about to be who has been replaced by a Dharmakara fulfilled. In other words, if Buddhahood as such represents a state of awareness or knowledge, Bodhisattvahood when fully realized, as in this case, represents the dynamic dimension of that same awareness; *it is* that awareness in dynamic mode. It is moreover evident that this latter mode of awareness can only be realized in relation to an object in view; if the rescue of suffering beings be its ostensible motive, then this dynamic quality will necessarily take on the character of *compassion*, the Bodhisattvic virtue already specified in the elementary version of the vow; such a virtue moreover postulates a given world for its exercise, apart from which compassion would not even be a possible concept.

As the dynamic expression of *that* which Buddhahood is statically, Bodhisattvahood belongs to this world; it is with perfect logic that the Mahayana teachings have traditionally identified compassion with 'method'. Method is the dynamic counterpart of 'wisdom,' the quality of awareness: try to separate these two ideas and they will forfeit all practical applicability, hence the Mahayana dictum that Wisdom and Method form an eternal syzygy excluding any possibility of divorce. The Bodhisattva incarnates method as exercisable in *samsâra*; the Buddha personifies wisdom as everpresent in nirvana: this leaves us with two complementary triads, namely

‘Bodhisattva—this world—method’ and ‘Buddha—Buddha field (= Pure Land)—wisdom’. ‘Human life hard of obtaining’ is the opportunity to realise these complementary possibilities; if the saying be true that at the heart of each grain of sand a Buddha is to be found, it is no less true to say that in every being a potential Bodhisattva is recognisable, in active mode in the case of a man, in relatively passive mode in the case of other beings but nonetheless realizable by them via the prior attainment of a human birth.⁶

From all the above it follows that a Bodhisattva’s activity on behalf of beings does not lose its necessity once Buddhahood is attained; the ascending course from Dharmakara to Amitabha, as confirmed by the Vow, must needs have its counterpart in a descending course under a fresh name. This name in fact is Chenrezig or Kwannon who, as the story tells us, took birth from the head of Amitabha himself, thus becoming the appointed dispenser of a mercy which is none other than a function of the nirvanic Light; in Chenrezig we see a Dharmakara as it were nirvanically reborn, if such an expression be permissible. Here again the story of this celestial event is illuminating, since we are told that Chenrezig, in his exercise of the merciful task laid upon him by his originator and teacher Amitabha, began by leading so many beings towards the promised Buddha-land that the very hells became emptied. However, when this Bodhisattva looked back upon the world, just as his predecessor Dharmakara had done prior to taking his vow, he perceived the horrifying fact that as quickly as one lot of beings climbed out of the infernal round of birth and death following in his wake, another lot of beings, in apparent unconcern, hastened to fill the vacant places, so that the mass of samsaric suffering remained virtually as bad as ever. The Bodhisattva was so overcome by disappointment and pity that his head split in fragments, whereupon the Buddha came to the rescue with a fresh head for his representative. This same thing happened no less than ten times until, with the bestowing by Amitabha of an eleventh head, the Bodhisattva was enabled to resume his mission without further hindrance.

In the Tibetan iconography Chenrezig is frequently portrayed under his eleven-headed form, appropriately known as the ‘Great Compassionate One’; multiple arms go with this portrait, as showing the endless ways in which the Bodhisattva can exercise his function as helper of beings. The most usual portrait of Chenrezig, however, is one with four arms, the whole figure being colored white; in one hand he holds a rosary and it is this object which symbolizes his communication of the *mani* as invocatory means. Some details of how the invocation with *mani* is carried out by the Tibetans will serve to relate the practice to other similar methods found in Japan and elsewhere.

⁶ For an unusually illuminating commentary on the relationship Bodhisattva—Buddha the reader is referred to Part III of *In the Tracks of Buddhism* by Frithjof Schuon, published by Allen & Unwin, a work to which the present writer gratefully acknowledges his own indebtedness [Editor’s note: An augmented edition of Frithjof Schuon’s *In the Tracks of Buddhism* is published by World Wisdom Books, entitled *Treasures of Buddhism* (1993). See especially the chapter, “Mystery of the Bodhisattva”].

First, about the formula itself: the most usual translation into English has been ‘Om, jewel in the Lotus, Hum’. Obviously, such words do not immediately lend themselves to logical paraphrase; one can reasonably assume, however, that since in the traditional iconography Buddhas are normally shown as seated upon a lotus, that serene flower resting on the waters of possibility and thereby evocative of the nature of things, the jewel must for its part represent the presence of the Buddha and the treasure of his teaching inviting discovery, but this by itself does not get one very far. As for the initial and concluding syllables, these belong to the category of metaphysically potent ejaculations whereof many figure in the Tantric initiations: one can safely say, with this kind of formula, that it is not intended for analytical dissection, but rather that its intrinsic message will spontaneously dawn upon a mind poised in one-pointed concentration. This view, moreover, was confirmed by the Dalai Lama when I put to him the question of whether the *mani* would by itself suffice to take a man all the way to Deliverance. His Holiness replied that it would indeed suffice for one who had penetrated to the heart of its meaning, a ruling which itself bears out the saying that the *Om mani padme Hum* contains ‘the quintessence of the teaching of all the Buddhas’. The fact that the Dalai Lama specifically exercises an ‘activity of presence’ in this world in the name of the Bodhisattva Chenrezig, revealer of *mani*, renders his comment in this instance all the more authoritative.

As in all similar cases an initiatory *lung* (authorization) must be sought by whoever wishes to invoke with *mani*, failing which the practice would remain irregular and correspondingly inefficacious. Once the *lung* has been conferred it is possible to invoke in a number of ways, either under one’s breath or, more often, in an audible murmur for which the Tibetan word is the same as for the purring of a cat. It is recommended, for one invoking regularly, that he precede each invoking session by a special poem of four lines and likewise repeat a similar quatrain by way of conclusion. Here is the text:

I

Unstained by sin and white of hue
Born from the head of the perfect Buddha
Look down in mercy upon beings
To Chenrezig let worship be offered.

II

By the merit of this [invocation] may I soon
Become endowed with Chenrezig’s power.
Let all beings without even one omission
In his [Chenrezig’s] land established be.

No need to underline the reference to Amitabha in the first verse and the reference to the Buddha-land in the second in order to show how close to one another *mani* and *nembutsu* stand as regards their basic purpose.

Mention should also be made here of the standard treatise on the *mani* invocation, in which are outlined the various symbolical correspondences to which the six syllables lend themselves, each of which can become a theme for meditation. These sixfold schemes range over a wide field, starting with deliverance from each in turn of the possible states of sentient existence and the realization one by one of the six *pâramitâs* or Transcendent Virtues (see again footnote on page 105); the latter parts of this treatise lead the mind into still deeper waters which it is beyond the scope of this essay to explore.

To turn to more external features of the *mani* invocation, it is common practice to use some kind of rhythmical support while repeating the words of the mantra, which can be either a rosary or else an appliance peculiar to Tibet which foreign travelers have rather inappropriately (since no idea of petition enters in) labelled as a 'prayer-wheel'. This wheel consists of a rotating box fixed on the end of a wooden handle and containing a tightly rolled cylinder of paper inscribed all over with the *mani* formula. A small weight attached by a chain to the box enables the invoking person to maintain an even swing while repeating the words; sometimes, especially with elderly people, the practice becomes reduced to a silent rotatory motion, with the invocation itself taken for granted.

Very large *mani*-wheels are commonly to be found at the doors of temples, so that people as they enter may set them in motion; likewise, rows of smaller wheels are often disposed along the outside walls so that those who carry out the *pradakshinam* or clockwise circuit of the sacred edifice may set them revolving as they pass. But remembrance of the *mani* does not stop there; immense *mani*-wheels ceaselessly kept going by waterfalls exist in many places, while flags bearing the sacred words float from the corners of every homestead. Lastly, flat stones carved with the formula and dedicated as offerings by the pious are to be found laid in rows on raised parapets at the edge of highroads or along the approaches to monasteries. These '*mani*-walls' are so disposed as to allow a passage on either side, since reverence requires that a man turn his right side towards any sacred object he happens to pass, be it a *stupa* or one of these *mani*-walls; being on horseback is no excuse for doing otherwise. The popular dictum 'beware of the devils on the left-hand side' refers to this practice.

If it be asked what effect all this can amount to, the answer is that it serves to keep people constantly reminded of what a human life is for; reminiscence is the key to a religiously directed life at all levels, from the most external and popular to the most interior and intellectual; 'popular' may often be allied with deep insights, of course, for the above distinctions are not intended in a social sense. Certainly in the Tibet we visited while the traditional order there was still intact the whole landscape was as if suffused by the message of the Buddha's Dharma; it came to one with the air one breathed, birds seemed to sing of it, mountain streams hummed its refrain as they bubbled across the stones, a dharmic perfume seemed to rise from every flower, at once a reminder and a pointer to what still needed doing. The absence of fear on the part of wild creatures at the approach of man was in itself a witness to this same truth; there were times when

a man might have been forgiven for supposing himself already present in the Pure Land. The India of King Ashoka's time must have been something like this; to find it in mid-twentieth-century anywhere was something of a wonder.

Moreover a situation like this was bound to be reflected in the lives of individuals, despite inevitable human failings; piety was refreshingly spontaneous, it did not need dramatizing attitudes to bolster it up nor any rationalized justifications. Each man was enabled to find his own level without difficulty according to capacity and even a quite modest qualification could carry him far. Among the many people using the *mani* one can say that a large proportion stopped short at the idea of gathering merit with a view to a favorable rebirth; the finality in view, though not entirely negligible in itself remained essentially samsaric: it did not look far beyond the limits of the cosmos. More perceptive practitioners would resort to the same invocation for the general purpose of nourishing and deepening their own piety; the finality here was 'devotional,' in the sense of the Indian word *bhakti*, implying a comparatively intense degree of participation; such a way of invoking represents an intermediate position in the scale of spiritual values. Rarer by comparison is the kind of person whose intelligence, matured in the course of the practice, is able to envisage that truth for which the invocation provides both a means of recollection and an incentive to realise it fully; this is the case to which the Dalai Lama was referring when he spoke of penetrating to the heart of the teaching which the six Syllables between them enshrine.

In a more general connection, the question often arises as to how much importance should be attached to the frequent repetition of a formula like the *mani* or the *nembutsu* compared with a sparser use of it; here one can recall the fact that in the period when Honen was preaching the Pure Land doctrine in Japan many persons, carried away by their enthusiasm, vied with one another as to the number of times they were able to repeat the formula, as if this were the thing that mattered. In the face of such extravagances Shinran Shonin applied a wholesome corrective by showing that the value of *nembutsu* is primarily a qualitative one, with number counting for nothing in itself as a criterion of effectiveness. The essence of a thing, that which makes it to be what it is and not something else, is not susceptible of multiplication: one can for instance count one, two or a hundred sheep, but the quality of 'sheepness' becomes neither increased nor subdivided thereby. The same applies to *nembutsu* or *mani*; each represents a unique and total presence carrying within itself its own finality irrespective of number, situation or timing. This is an important principle to grasp; were one able to penetrate as far as the very heart of the sacred formula a single mention of it would be sufficient to bring one home to the Pure Land; the various steps that have led one as far as the threshold become merged in fulfillment.

At the same time, on the basis of an empirical judgment, one is not justified in despising the man who finds frequent repetition of an invocatory formula helpful; to estimate the value of such repetition in purely quantitative terms is certainly an error, but to feel an urge to fill one's life with the formula because one values it above everything else and feels lonely and lost without it

is another thing. To rise of a morning with *nembutsu*, to retire to bed at night with its words on one's lips, to live with it and by it, to die with its last echo in one's ear, what could in fact be better or more humanly appropriate? Between one who invokes very often and another who does so with less frequency there is little to choose provided attention is focused on the essential. It is the effects on the soul which will count in the long run, its alchemical transmutation in witness of the Vow's power, thanks to which the lead of our existential ignorance is enabled to reveal its essential identity with the Bodhic gold, even as Dharmakara's identity with Amitabha is revealed in the Vow itself.

There is one more question of practical importance for all who would follow a contemplative discipline outside the monastic order which here does not concern us, namely the question of how one may regard the interruptions imposed by the need to transfer attention, during one's working hours, to external matters either of a professional kind or else, in the majority of cases, as means of earning a livelihood. Does not this, some may well ask, render the idea of a lifelong concentration on *nembutsu* virtually unrealizable? And, if so, what result will this have in regard to the essential awakening of faith? Some such question has in fact always worried mankind in one form or another, but has become more pressing than ever as a result of the breakdown of traditional societies formerly structured according to religiously linked vocations. The individual is now left in so-called freedom to make choices which his ancestors were mercifully spared. Nevertheless, there is sufficient precedent to enable one to answer this question in a way that all may understand.

The criterion which applies in such cases is this, namely that so long as a man's work is not obviously dishonest, cruel or otherwise reprehensible, that is to say as long as it conforms, broadly speaking,⁷ to the definitions of the Noble Eightfold Path under the headings of Proper Ordering of Work and Proper Livelihood, the time and attention this demands from a man will not *per se* constitute a distraction in the technical sense of the word; rather will the stream of contemplation continue to flow quietly like an underground river, ready to surface again with more animated current once the necessary tasks have been accomplished for the time being. Here 'necessary' is the operative word: activities undertaken needlessly, from frivolous or luxurious

⁷ 'Broadly speaking': this reservation was necessary, inasmuch as no person is in a position to assess all the repercussions of his work or his livelihood in an ever-changing world. All he can do is to avoid practices of a self-evidently wicked kind, while conforming to a reasonable degree with the circumstances in which his karma has placed him. In earlier times, when vocations were more clear-cut and also religiously guaranteed, discrimination was relatively easy though by no means infallible in practice. Nowadays, with the bewildering complications which beset almost everybody's life in the modern world a man can but do his limited best to conform to the ideal prescriptions of the Eightfold Path under the two headings in question; there is no call for him to scrape his conscience by looking far beyond what lies obviously within reach of a human choice. This does not mean, of course, that one need have no scruples as to what one does or does not undertake; where discernment is still possible, it should be exercised in the light of the Buddha's teachings.

motives such as a wish to kill time because one expects to feel bored when not actually working, cannot on any showing be ranked as work in the proper sense. A vast number of so-called ‘leisure activities’ fall under this condemnable heading: these do, on any logical showing, constitute distractions in the strict sense of the word. One would have thought that the briefest portion of a ‘human life hard of obtaining’ could have been put to better uses; yet nowadays such abuse of the human privilege is not only tolerated but even encouraged on the vastest scale by way of tribute to the great god of Economics, Mara’s fashionable alias in the contemporary world. By rights most of these time-wasting practices belong to the category of noxious drugs, addiction to which comes only too easily.

Apart from this question of man’s occupational calls and how these properly fit in, the invocation with *nembutsu* or its equivalents in other traditions will always offer a most potent protection against distractions of whatever kind. A life filled with this numinous influence leaves little chance for Mara’s attendant demons to gain a footing. I remember one lama’s advice when he said, ‘Finish the work in hand and after that fill the remaining time with *mani* invocation.’ This sets the pattern of a life’s program, details of which can be left to settle themselves in the light of particular needs.

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The heart-moving tale of Dharmakara’s journey to enlightenment, on which our own participation in the teachings of Jôdô-shin depends, may at first sight appear to record events dating from long, long ago. It is well to remember, however, what has already been said (see note 2 on page 103104) about the timeless nature of mythological happenings, whereby they are rendered applicable again and again, across the changing circumstances of mankind, as means of human illumination. There are certain truths which are best able to communicate themselves in this form without any danger of entanglement in the alternative of belief versus disbelief which, in the case of historical claims, is all too likely to be raised by the very nature of the evidence on which those claims rest: question the factual evidence, and the truths themselves become vulnerable, as has been shown in the case of Western Christianity during recent times where the attempt to ‘demythologize’ its sacred lore, including the Scriptures, has only made the situation worse for present-day believers. Historical evidence of course has its own importance—no need to deny this fact. In relation to history a traditional mythology provides a factor of equilibrium not easily dispensed with if a given religion is to retain its hold over the minds of men.

As it stands, the old story of Dharmakara represents the Wisdom aspect of a teaching whereof the Method aspect is to be found when this same story comes to be reenacted in a human life, be it our own life or another’s, thanks to the evocative power released by the original Vow, following its confirmation in the person of Amitabha Buddha. Hence the injunction to place all our faith in the Other Power, eschewing self. The consequences of so doing will affect both our thinking and feeling and all we do or avoid doing in this life.

Here it is well to remind ourselves of what was said at the outset, namely that the Bodhisattva's compassion, his dynamic virtue, needs a field for its exercise as well as suffering beings for its objects, failing which it would be meaningless. For a field one can also say 'a world' either in the sense of a particular world (the world familiar to us, for example) or in the sense of *samsâra* as such, comprising all possible forms of existence, including many we can never know. A world, by definition, is a field of contrasts, an orchard of karma replete with its fruits, black or white, which we ourselves, in our dual capacity of creators and partakers of these fruits, are called upon to harvest in season, be they bitter or sweet. This experiencing of the world, moreover, also comes to us in a dual way, at once external and internal: for us, the external world is composed of all beings and things which fall into the category of 'other,' while to the internal world there belong all such experiences as concern what we call 'I' or 'mine,' the ego-consciousness at every level. One can go further and say that man, in this respect, himself constitutes something like a self-contained world; it is not for nothing that the human state has been described, by analogy with the Cosmos at large, as a 'microcosm,' a little world. It is in fact within this little estate of ours that the drama of Dharmakara and Amitabha has to be played out if we are truly to understand it, this being in fact the Method aspect of the story which thus, through its concrete experiencing, will reveal itself as Wisdom to our intelligence. It is with this, for us, most vital matter that the present essay may fittingly be concluded.

The three principal factors in our symbolical play are, first, the psychophysical vehicle of our earthly existence which provides the moving stage and, second, the faculty of attention under its various aspects including the senses, reason, imagination, and above all our active remembrance or mindfulness. These between them represent the Bodhisattvic dynamism in relation to our vocational history; third and last, there is the illuminative power of Amitabha as represented by the unembodied Intelligence dwelling at that secret spot in the center of each being where *samsâra* as such as inoperative⁸ or, to put the point still more precisely, where

⁸ By way of concordant testimony one can profitably recall the teaching of the great medieval Sage of Western Christendom, Meister Eckhart, when he said that in the human soul 'is to be found something uncreated and uncreatable and this is the Intellect'; to which he adds that were it entirely such, it too would be uncreate and uncreatable. Substitute 'Bodhic Eye' for the word 'intellect' and you have there a statement any Buddhist might understand. In the traditions issuing from the Semitic stem, where the idea of 'creation' plays a dominant part, to say of anything that it is 'uncreate' is the equivalent of 'beyond the scope of samsaric change'. It should be added that, at the time when Meister Eckhart was writing, the word 'intellect' always bore the above meaning, as distinct from 'reason' which, as its Latin name of *ratio* shows, was a faculty enabling one to relate things to one another apart from any possibility of perceiving their intrinsic suchness, which only the Intellect is able to do. The modern confusion between intellect, reason and mind, to the practical emasculation of the former, has spelt a disaster for human thinking.

samsâra reveals its own essential identity with nirvana; but for this Bodhic Eye enshrined within us, able to read the Bodhic message all things display to him who knows where to look, human liberation through enlightenment, and the liberation from suffering of other beings via a human birth, would not be a possibility; the door to the Pure Land would remain forever closed. Thanks to Dharmakara's example, culminating in his Vow, we know that this Pure Land is open, however; herein consists our hope and our incentive. What more can one ask of existence than this supreme opportunity the human state comprises so long as that state prevails?

Before quitting this discussion one other question calls for passing consideration, affecting the manner of presenting Jôdô-shin ideas in popular form today. Writers on the subject seem much given to stressing the 'easy' nature of the Jôdôshin way; faith, so they say, is all we really need inasmuch as Amitabha, Dharmakara that was, has done our work for us already, thus rendering entry into the Pure Land as good as assured, with the corollary that any suggestion of responsibility or conscious effort on our part would savor of a dangerous concession to Own Power and is in any case redundant. In voicing such ideas a sentimentally angled vocabulary is used without apparently taking into account the effect this is likely to have on uncritical minds. Though this kind of language is doubtless not actually intended to minimize the normal teachings of Buddhism, it does nevertheless betray a pathetically artless trend in the thinking of authors who resort to it. Some will doubtless seek to defend themselves by saying that the writings of Shinran and other Jôdô-shin luminaries also contain phrases having a somewhat similar ring; those who quote thus out of context are apt to ignore the fact that a teaching sage, one who is out to win hearts but not to destroy intelligences (this should not need saying), may sometimes resort to a schematic phraseology never meant to be taken literally. Lesser persons should show prudence in how they quote from, and especially in how they themselves embroider upon, such statements of the great.

When, for example, Nichiren, that militant saint, declared that a single pronouncing of the *nembutsu* was enough to send a man to hell, he was obviously exaggerating for the purpose of goading his own audience in a predetermined direction; religious history offers many such examples of rhetorical excess, albeit spiritually motivated. The proper reply to such a diatribe would be to say, in the tone of respect due to a great Master, 'Thanks Reverend Sir, your warning brings great comfort; for me Hell with *nembutsu* will be as good as Heaven; without *nembutsu* paradise would be a hell indeed!'⁹

The above example can be paralleled by another, taken this time from Eastern Christianity, where it is said that the crowns of the perfected Saints are made of 'Uncreated Light,' or, as we might also say, the diadems of the perfected Bodhisattvas are made from Amitabha's own halo.

⁹ My friend Dr Inagaki Hisao has supplied a quotation from Shinran's teachings as embodied in the *Tannisho* (Chapter II) where the same sentiment is expressed consonantly with Jôdô tradition and using its typical dialect: 'I would not regret even if I were deceived by Honen and thus, by uttering the

Let us, however, for a moment, as an *upâya* nicely matched to the occasion, carry the argument of the very people we had been criticising a little further by putting the following question: if Dharmakara's compassionate initiative, culminating in the Vow, has come to the aid of our weakness by completing the most essential part of our task for us, leaving it to us to take subsequent advantage of this favor, how best can we repay our debt of gratitude for the mercy shown us? Surely an elementary gratitude requires, on the part of a beneficiary, that he should try and please his benefactor by doing as he has advised and not the contrary. The Eightfold Path is what the Buddha left for our life's program; in following this way, whether we are motivated by regard for our own highest interest or by simple thankfulness for Amitabha's mercy makes little odds in practice, though this second attitude may commend itself to our mentality for contingent reasons. To bring all this into proper perspective in the context namely that the *nembutsu* itself comprises all possible teachings, all methods, all merits 'eminently,' requiring nothing else of us except our faith, which must be freely given. A genuine faith, however one may regard it, does not go without its heroic overtones; how then are we to understand it in relation to the finality of Jôdô-shin, as symbolized by the Pure Land? Surely, in this same perspective, faith is there to act as catalyst of all the other virtues, whether we list them separately or not. In this way an attitude that may sometimes seem one-sidedly devotional can still rejoin Buddhism's profoundest insights; for one who does so, the way may well be described as 'easy'.

What is certain, however, is that no Buddhist, whatever his own personal affiliations may happen to be, can reasonably claim exclusive authority for the teachings he follows; as between an 'Own Power' and an 'Other Power' approach to salvation we can perhaps say that if the latter may sometimes take on a too passive appearance as in the cases previously mentioned, the former type of method, if improperly conceived, can easily imprison one in a state of self-centered consciousness of a most cramping kind. The best defense against either of the above errors is to remember that, between two indubitably orthodox but formally contrasted teachings, where one of them is deliberately stressed the other must always be recognized as latent, and vice versa. This excludes moreover any temptation to indulge in sectarian excesses. No spiritual method can be totally self-contained; by definition every *upâya* is provisionally deployed in view of the known needs of a given mentality; there its authority stops: to say so of any particular teachings implies no disrespect.

The stress laid on 'Other Power' in Jôdô-shin provides a salutary counterblast to any form of self-esteem, a fact which makes its teachings peculiarly apt in our own time when deification of the human animal as confined to this world and a wholesale pandering to his ever-expanding appetites is being preached on every side. In the presence of Amitabha the achievements of individual mankind become reduced to their proper unimportance; it is in intelligent humility that a truly human greatness is to be found.

nembutsu, fell into hell...Since I am incapable of any practice whatsoever, hell would definitely be my dwelling anyway.'

One important thing to bear in mind, in all this, is that the Buddha's mercy is providential, but does not, for this very reason, suspend the Law of Karma: if beings will persist in ignoring that law while coveting the things mercy might have granted them, that mercy itself will reach them in the guise of severity; severity is merciful when this is the only means of provoking a radical *metanoia* (change of outlook), failing which wandering in *samsâra* must needs continue indefinitely. The *nembutsu* is our ever-present reminder of this truth; if, in reliance on the Vow, we abandon all wish to attribute victory to ourselves, the unfed ego will surely waste away, leaving us in peace.

Apart from all else, reliance on 'Other Power' will remain unrealizable so long as the egocentric consciousness is being mistaken for the real person; it is this confusion of identity which the great *upâya* propounded by Honen and Shinran Shonin was providentially designed to dispel. Let *nembutsu* serve as our perpetual defense against this fatal error, through the remembrance it keeps alive in human hearts. Where that remembrance has been raised to its highest power, there is to be found the Pure Land.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

Therefore, both wealth and poverty are Divine gifts: wealth is corrupted by forgetfulness, poverty by covetousness. Both conceptions are excellent, but they differ in practice. Poverty is the separation of the heart from all but God, and wealth is the pre-occupation of the heart with that which does not admit of being qualified. When the heart is cleared (of all except God), poverty is not better than wealth nor is wealth better than poverty. Wealth is abundance of worldly goods and poverty is lack of them; all goods belong to God; when the seeker bids farewell to poverty, the antithesis disappears and both are transcended.

Hujwiri.