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## PREFACE

The Jodo Shinshu International Office would like to share with you, the following essays written by those who have encountered the Shin Buddhist teachings and have “crossed over” from various other religious traditions and backgrounds. Their essays are powerful and moving, as they share their unique life experience that brought them to Shinran Shonin’s teachings and the Nembutsu.

As a minister for 34 years, I have known many who have “crossed over.” Some have had to face ostracism and even disownment from their families, who could not accept their new faith. Those who have crossed over show us a depth of conviction to the teachings that both humble and inspire us.

May their essays be the start of a new era in which Shin Buddhism reaches many more who are waiting to hear and encounter the path that embraces and accepts all.

Rev. Marvin Harada  
Chairperson  
Jodo Shinshu International Office

# The Inexorable Call of Amida Buddha

*Rich Wolford*

Reciting the Nembutsu, Namo Amida Butsu, with a sincere and entrusting heart is our practice. To achieve this, we cultivate the art of deep hearing. The Nembutsu is often referred to as the name that calls. That is, when I recite the Nembutsu and say Amida's name, it is Amida calling me. Deep hearing asks that I forgo the practice of self power and listen to and embrace the boundless compassion of Amida Buddha; to surrender to this other-power and accept the gift of enlightenment rather than trying to achieve it from my own efforts. It is referred to as the easy path, but its subtlety and difficulty to stay the course makes success elusive.

After 20+ years as a Shin Buddhist, I've come to the realization that Amida's call is inexorable—unchanging and inescapable. No matter the level of ignorance, no matter what distractions I put before it, no matter the number of delusions I entertain, it is there for me. Sometimes it's hard to hear, sometimes it's hard to understand, but it's always there, ready to accept me as I am and guide me to the Pure Land. In reflecting on my path of deep hearing, I came to understand how Amida's boundless compassion called to me, guided me to Buddhism, and deepened my realization and internalization of the Nembutsu.

I was not raised in a specific religion. My mother was from the Mormon faith but left the church shortly after I was born. My father was a career naval officer and his religion was the navy. We followed the cultural practice of attending church services on Easter and Christmas, but over time, we stopped attending those services. As I entered adulthood, I was not on any spiritual path, but it didn't bother me, and I didn't give it much thought. I was always interested in nature and the environment, and in my 30's, I began to read and learn about the rainforest. I was enthralled by the biodiversity and amazed by the complexity and interdependence of its ecosystem. So much so that I had to see it for myself. I made two trips to trek through the rain forest in Ecuador and Belize. It was a transformative experience around the concept of interdependence and interconnectedness. After those treks, I had an awakening of sorts. I felt something was missing and that there was something of a lack of spirituality in my life. Looking back now, I believe it was my first hearing of Amida's call. Barely a whisper but one I could not ignore.

With no real sense of what religion was or path might be best for me, I began to explore different religions. I recalled taking a comparative religion course in college and remembered it included Buddhism and how it struck me as something that would interest me. I purchased a few books on Buddhism. The more I read, the more I was attracted to this religion. The general concepts of the life of Siddhartha,

the Four Noble Truths, and individual accountability for your spiritual transformation hit home with me.<sup>1</sup> Like many American Buddhist converts, I continued to read and learn more but soon reached a plateau. As you read and study Buddhism, it doesn't take long to learn about the Three Treasures—The Buddha, The Dharma, and the Sangha. They are the core concepts which are necessary to stay on the path to enlightenment. I had the Buddha, I had the Dharma, but I didn't have a Sangha—a community of like-minded people who help one another understand and embody the Dharma. Again, I believe Amida was calling to me, helping me move closer to the Nembutsu path, only this time the voice was much stronger.

Finding a temple and sangha close by to where I live turned out to be much easier than I expected. I simply opened the yellow pages (it was 1999 and yellow pages still existed) and under the header “Buddhist Temples” was a listing for Ekoji Buddhist Temple in Fairfax Station, VA—a mere 3 miles from my house. At first, I was very excited to visit. But like many American Buddhist converts, I began to feel a little intimidated by the prospect of actually visiting the temple. I felt like an outsider, crashing someone else's party. I am not Japanese-American. I am not really a Buddhist. Would I be welcomed? I drove by the temple many times but always put off actually entering the temple. When I found the courage to go into the temple, I felt as though I was receiving a nurturing, compassionate message

saying “it’s OK, you’ll be fine. Come as you are!” Amida’s inexorable call was reaching me again. And sure enough, I was warmly greeted and welcomed at the temple when I finally visited.

My experience at Ekoji was wonderful. I had many great teachers like Gordon Bermant, Reverend Shojo Honda, and Ken Nakamura to name a few. I fully immersed myself in the Dharma classes, seminars and retreats, discussion groups and book clubs, and Sunday services. I brought my son to the temple when he was 7 years old, and he participated in the Dharma School until he graduated from high school. I really enjoyed the learning and sense of belonging the Ekoji Sangha provided me. This led to a true sense of gratitude and appreciation, and I began to look for ways to volunteer and help at the temple. First helping with events, then outreach and membership, temple maintenance, and then joining the temple board and becoming Treasurer. After about 15 years of intense service to the temple I hit the proverbial volunteer wall. An unfortunate but not too uncommon occurrence some active Sangha members go through. My temple operation activities and commitments were crowding out the dharma. My temple involvement was starting to feel like an obligation, and I was feeling a bit of volunteer burnout. I felt I needed a break. I stopped being active in the temple, didn’t attend events, and even stopped attending services.

After being away from the temple for nearly two years, I began to feel that something was missing. At first I barely noticed. But this feeling persisted, and upon reflection, I identified the source. It felt very much like the feeling I had returning from my old treks to the rain forest. A lack of spirituality and the warmth and comfort its pursuit had once brought me. How wonderful that once again Amida's call was whispering in my ear and how wonderful that I could hear it. I began to re-enter the Ekoji Sangha, experiencing the Dharma and attending services. The Sangha was as warm and welcoming as ever. This led me back to contributing to the temple. Slowly, at first, and then more fully, but in a more balanced and healthy way.

I feel grateful for the spiritual journey I am on. And grateful for all who have helped me along the way. The practice of deep hearing and recitation of the Nembutsu has led to much learning and personal growth. I am reminded of Taitetsu Unno's book *Shin Buddhism: Bits of Rubble Turned to Gold*. In it, he talks about continual engagement with the Buddha Dharma and how this brings about the process of sedimentation:

Sedimentation involves continual absorption of the teaching, deep hearing of the call of Amida, its saturation into one's total being and its sudden, unexpected appearance, like a long-forgotten childhood memory, to help us through times of need and distress.

Throughout my journey the call of Amida Buddha has been there nurturing me, supporting me, guiding me and enabling me to stay on the path. The call of Amida Buddha is inexorable.

Namo Amida Butsu.

## CHAPTER NOTES

1. Four Noble Truths: Concepts central to Buddhism that describe the truths or realities of life and existence.