

Kōsō Wasan 7

*The ocean of birth-and-death, of painful existence, has no bound;
Only by the ship of Amida's universal Vow
Can we, who have long been drowning,
Unfailingly be brought across it.*

WHO IS AMIDA BUDDHA?

People whose view of life is built on a foundation that excludes the dharma, find the figure of Amida – Buddha of Immeasurable Light (*Amitābha*) – almost impossible to fathom. Amida appears to resemble a deity; the kind of being that Judaeo-Hellenistic (European) culture calls ‘God’.

Confusing the issue is the question of whether it's legitimate to employ words such as ‘saviour’ and ‘person’ in a Buddhist context. Is the use of these terms strictly correct?

If we take Śākyamuni as an example, then we only need to consider for a moment how we would have encountered him if we were one of his disciples during his time on earth. Of course, his relationship with us would have been as a person, and not a mere abstraction; neither is Amida Buddha just an impersonal reality. Śākyamuni's teaching was directed at freeing us from suffering; what better word can describe this than ‘salvation’?

From the perspective of the dharma, gods of all kinds are individual beings within samsāra, including the realm of desire (Sk. *kāma-dhātu*); they are a species of intelligent life that deserves the respect due to all sentient beings. By contrast, buddhas – as ‘Dharma-Body as Suchness’ – completely transcend samsāra yet enter it of their own volition – in the guise of ‘Dharma-Body as Compassionate Means’ – to teach others.¹

‘Inconceivable Light’ (wisdom-compassion) is Amida's ‘personal’ attribute because it's derived from that Buddha's unique vows. Just as Śākyamuni's physical presence made the dharma accessible to his disciples in the realm of desire, so Amida's manifest presence – in the

¹ The ‘Dharma-Body as Compassionate Means’ may take form as an apparitional manifestation in the physical realm (*nirmāṇakāya*) or as a fulfilled body (*sambhogakāya*) such as Amida Buddha.

form of the Name – calls to all beings, within the six realms of birth-and-death, to entrust themselves. And the power of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow ‘saves’ by freeing us from the thrall of samsāra.

Can the reality we know as Amida support a more subtle and refined notion of ‘deity’ compared to what we find in European religion? Does it correspond to ideas of divinity that are found in the writings of great theologians such as Saint Basil, Michael Psellus, Saint Anselm, or Meister Eckhart? In my view, not at all. Furthermore, such comparisons debase both traditions.

Each religion is equally noble but has its own profound philosophy, patterns of thought and experience. Differences may be subtle, but they are also often important. Comparisons, it seems to me, are not always fruitful. We do better to respect the uniqueness of each. Even though it may be possible to use similar terminology across traditions, the questions with which each is concerned are not exactly the same.

In the Larger Sūtra, Śākyamuni suggests that his primary goal was to reveal the dharma of Amida Buddha so that future generations may awaken to shinjin of the Primal Vow. He also concludes his discourse by saying that this sutra will endure, when all other Buddhist teachings disappear over time. As the Mahāyāna developed, Amida Buddha and his two attendant bodhisattvas became the principal refuge of most followers of the dharma; Śākyamuni began to fade from view. In Jōdo Shinshū, Amida Buddha – in the form of his Name, *Namo Amida Butsu* – stands alone as our sole refuge.

At the time that Nāgārjuna Bodhisattva was writing, appreciation of Amida had begun to grow. In fact, he was a very important proponent of this Buddha and gave significant emphasis to him in his works. In the verse which inspired this hymn of Shinran, Nāgārjuna gives a moving description of Amida:

Carried on the ship of the Eightfold Path,
One crosses the ocean difficult to cross.
One crosses oneself and also ferries others across;
For this reason, I worship Amida, the one freely working.²

Here we discover the seminal concept of Amida that inspires this verse.

² CWS, p. 24.

Kōsō Wasan 95

*My eyes being hindered by blind passions,
I cannot perceive the light that grasps me;
Yet the great compassion without tiring,
Illumines me always.*

OPENNESS

This verse signifies a phenomenon that I think is almost unique in religious discourse. It's the remarkable quality that is an especially strong feature of the Pure Land way: personal honesty. One repeatedly encounters the most disarming vulnerability and openness in people of the nembutsu.

This is particularly notable within the Jōdo Shinshū tradition. It's not the kind of 'false humility' that begs for contradiction and a surge of ameliorating, if reluctant, praise – like that of the famous character named Uriah Heap in the novel *David Copperfield* by Charles Dickens. It emerges especially from the Chinese and Japanese dharma masters (along with Shinran Shōnin), in quite a guileless and unselfconscious manner. Such direct candour is, surely, the mark of a person who is absolutely secure in their faith and who has a sure knowledge of their destiny.

Shinran was clearly very fond of this confession from Genshin's *Collection of Essential Passages Concerning Birth*:

Although I too am within Amida's grasp, blind passions
obstruct my eyes and I cannot see [the light]; nevertheless,
great compassion untiringly and constantly illumines me.¹

This passage was very significant for Shinran, and he clearly identified with it. Hence, his arresting preference for the phrase 'inconceivable light' as the primary epithet for Amida Buddha. The use of such a phrase makes it clear that even a person of shinjin is not yet enlightened, and is therefore unable to directly behold the 'light that outshines the sun and the moon'. The fact that we are 'blinded by our passions' suggests that we're often confounded by the seeming reality of the mundane world, samsāra, in which we are inextricably bound. We're unable to see, let alone comprehend, such a supramundane light.

¹ CWS, p. 93.

Shinran refers to Genshin's admission in the *Shōshinge*, which is the central *gāthā* of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* (used for taking refuge every day in our Jōdo Shinshū liturgy). Shinran was no mystic and made no claims to special attainments of his own. How, then, is Genshin able to be so confident that 'great compassion untiringly and constantly illumines me'? If he cannot see the light, how does he know that it's there?

Shan-tao, who visualized Amida Buddha in *samādhi*, provides compelling empirical evidence that this great compassion does indeed 'constantly illumine' us. It's the way in which people of Other-Power faith spontaneously discern that binding desires can impede their spiritual progress and how Amida's Vow – expressed in the Name – simultaneously addresses this problem. This is 'the two-fold deep mind' that is *shinjin*.

It is this inward awareness which frees people of nembutsu to be open – and to feel no need to claim special qualities – that discourages us from any affectation of superiority.
