



Momiji もみじ

Mind the Gap

For the past century or so, human life has been dominated by the grand project of seeking happiness through unlimited sensual gratification. Originally developed in the West, this is now the one truly universal principle of modern humanity: that if something pleases us it is also good for us, and that our very existence can only be justified by a perpetual drive to maximize our pleasure.

Eastern civilizations have traditionally held that sensual gratification is actually the single biggest obstacle to happiness, and that only by restraining and regulating sensual stimuli can we ever achieve true peace of mind. This ancient perspective is still as alive and relevant as ever, but is rapidly losing ground as the Western promise of heaven on earth sweeps across continents and effortlessly wins over the

minds and hearts of entire peoples.

Westerners who understand the destructiveness of this trend often attempt to seek refuge from it in intellectual pursuits. Supposedly, the life of the mind is able to counterbalance the growing obsession with the pleasures of the body. But anyone who has tried to find comfort in rational contemplation of philosophical, scientific, political, or any other fields of thought knows that they are rarely able to provide any real, sustained sense of meaning to life.

This is hardly surprising if we consider what sensual pleasure actually means. In the West we think in terms of five senses: sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste. However, Indian thought, and particularly Buddhism, identifies six senses, with the mind being the sixth. When Buddhism teaches that in order to reach peacefulness we must break our craving

for things that gratify our senses, that is not limited to what we do with our eyes or hands, but also includes—and crucially depends on—what we do with our minds.

Trying to find meaning in intellectualism is, therefore, just as futile and counterproductive as indulging in extravagant feasts or gazing at beautiful art. All of these equally inflame our dissatisfaction and constant craving for more of the same. What is the answer, then? It starts with changing our state of mind so that we, and our pleasure, no longer stand at the center of the universe. It takes a certain leap of faith to achieve this—but the good news is that in Buddhism, even huge leaps can be taken in small steps.

(Dan Bornstein)



Leaves of Scripture

On the surface of the pools, there are lotus blossoms as large as cart wheels. These are blue colored, with a blue sheen; yellow colored, with a yellow sheen; red colored, with a red sheen; white colored, with a white sheen; they are delicate and fragrant.

(Land of Bliss: The Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light. By Luis O. Gómez. University of Hawai'i Press and Higashi Honganji Shinshū Ōtani-ha. 1996, p. 146.)

You Are Fine as You Are

The *Amida* Sutra describes a pond with blossoming lotus flowers that are as large as carriage wheels and have a sublime, pure scent. Each one is said to be luminous and beautiful, with green flowers being green, yellow flowers being yellow, red flowers being red, and white flowers being white. Why does this sutra contain such a straightforward, obvious description?

If we take a moment to reflect on ourselves, it becomes apparent we are unable to see ourselves as we really are. Even though each of us shines with the colors we were born with, we get depressed and grow anxious over how we are. We might feel happy sometimes when comparing ourselves to others. We might even look at those who are closest to us from that narrow point of view.

While we are getting caught up in our own thoughts and lose site of such essential brilliance, the *Amida Sutra* teaches us that there is a world where we can encounter each other in our true forms. It's letting us know that we are fine as we are.



Things Worth Knowing about Shin Buddhism

The Go-Honzon

The word Go-Honzon refers to the Buddha or Bodhisattva serving as the basis of a Buddhist school's religious belief. It is often translated as primary object of veneration with Go an honorific prefix, *Hon* meaning primary, and *-zon* respect or veneration. Each Buddhist school has their own *Go-Honzon*. In the Zen schools of Rinzai and Sōtō, it is often Shaka (Śākyamuni) Nyorai, in the Kegon School Birushana (Vairocana) Buddha, and in the Shingon School Dainichi (Mahāvairocana) Nyorai, with variations between temples. In the Jōdo Shinshu, the True Pure Land School, the Go-Honzon is Amida Nyorai. An Amida statue is usually found enshrined in a Jōdo Shinshu temple's main hall.

It is said that before enlightenment, Amida Nyorai as Hōzō (Dharmakara) Bodhisattva engaged in eons of religious practice and vowed to create a Pure Land in the west for all sentient beings who recited the Name, *Namu*

Amidabutsu, while wishing to be born there. Amida Nyorai and the said paradise are described in the three major texts of the Pure Land tradition: *The Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, *The Contemplation Sutra*, and *The Amida Sutra*. All of them been translated into English by various groups.

The word Amida Nyorai as Immeasurable Life comes from the Sanskrit names *Amitāyus* and *Amitābha* (Infinite Light). The word *Nyorai* or Tathāgata in Sanskrit means the truth manifesting itself in us. Since truth has neither color nor form it cannot be depicted or explained. Instead it is expressed as a functioning or working or activity that transcends our thoughts and calculations. In other words, Amida is not an historical being or god but a *Nyorai* manifesting the truth in us.

The iconography of paintings and statues presents Amida Nyorai as the one who saves suffering beings. With right hand raised and left hand lowered with

their palms facing forward, the tips of thumb and index finger on each hand touch each other. This *mudrā* indicates a Nyorai's unlimited wisdom and compassion. The nimbus or halo represents the pervasive light of a Nyorai's activity that illuminates everything.

The Jōdo Shinshu believers recite the Name of Amida Nyorai, *Namu Amida Butsu*. *Namu* means to take refuge or pay homage, and *Butsu* means Buddha. It spontaneously arises within us due to the working of Amida Nyorai, and is thus different from the practices found in other Buddhist schools. Meditation, for instance, is based on one's individual effort to awaken or save oneself. Although we place our hands together when reciting the Name, it is not a form of prayer. To recite the Name is to be aware of our foolishness, our inability to realize what is truly precious in our lives.

(Based on an article appearing in the monthly magazine Dōbō).

The Amida Hall

Rebuilt for the fourth time in 1895, the Amida Hall (Amidadō) is the second largest building within the precincts of the Higashi Honganji. With a length of 52 m, 47 m width, and 29 m height, it is also one of the largest wooden structures in Japan. The hall houses a statue of Amida Buddha as the Go-Honzon, the main object of worship.

To the right, there is a scroll depicting Shōtoku Taishi (574–622), a prince regent during the Asuka period (538–710). Legendary accounts portray him as a manifestation of Kannon Bodhisattva and praise him for establishing Buddhism in Japan. To the left, there is a scroll depicting Hōnen Shōnin (1133–1212), teacher of our founder Shinran Shōnin (1173–1262). In a letter, Shinran Shōnin's wife Eshinni tells of a revelation Shinran Shōnin had on the ninety-fifth day of a hundred day retreat at the Rokkakudō temple. In it Shōtoku Taishi appeared before him and composed a verse for him, in which he advises him to visit Hōnen Shōnin. After this occurrence, Shinran Shōnin went to see Hōnen Shōnin at his Yoshimizu residence and became his disciple.

Further to the right and left of these scrolls are images of the other six patriarchs of our school: besides Hōnen Shōnin Nāgārjuna (c. 150–250), Vasubandhu (c. 400–480), Tanluan (476–542?), Daochuo (562–645), Shandao (613–681), and Genshin (942–1017).

Compared to the Founder's Hall (Goeidō), the Amida Hall's interior is far more splendid and elaborate with bright gold as its most prominent color. This is meant to reflect the grandeur of Amida's Pure Land. On the sliding doors you can see paintings by famous Meiji era (1868–1912) artists such as Gesshū Hata and Chikudō Kishi.

The Amida Hall underwent renovation from 2012 and was opened to the public again in April this year.

