

Object of Reverence-Amida Buddha

The figure of (Japanese) Amida Buddha, the Buddha of Immeasurable Life, Amitayus, (Sanskrit) and Infinite Light, Amitabha, (Sanskrit) occupies the central position in the altar. The image of the Buddha is a symbol. When we gassho/anjali/place our palms together (Japanese/Sanskrit/English) and bow before the image of the Buddha, we are expressing our deepest reverence to Wisdom and Compassion symbolized by the statue of the Buddha. In Hongwanji Temples or “Temples of the Primal Vow”, Amida Buddha is always depicted in the standing position expressing dynamic Compassion moving toward us, with eyes half-opened showing that part of the vision is directed inwardly for self-reflection, with the right hand held upward representing the Wisdom of Enlightenment and the left hand lowered representing the Compassion of Enlightenment. The Buddha’s palms facing outward and the thumbs and index fingers forming a circle representing the perfection of Wisdom and Compassion. The overall representation is one of gentleness and love emphasizing the Buddha’s continuous endeavor to reach out equally to all forms of life including and especially this “I” who is still perplexed by doubt and imperfections promising ultimate Peace and Happiness (Enlightenment). According to the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra, Amida Buddha, as a bodhisattva named Dharmakara, made a special vow that all those who sincerely entrust in the Buddha saying the Buddha’s Name, Namo Amida Butsu (Japanese), aspiring for birth in the Buddha’s Pure Land will assuredly accomplish their cherished aspiration of attaining Supreme Enlightenment. According to the Shin Buddhist Teachings as experienced by Shinran (1173-1262), the Sectarian Founder of Shin Buddhism, this is made possible by the Great Compassion of Amida Buddha and instantaneous with birth in the Pure Land is the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment. Shin Buddhism entrusts in the “Other Power” of Amida Buddha’s Wisdom and Compassion and does not rely upon our self-centered attempts to attain Enlightenment. The Historic Buddha, Sakyamuni Buddha, is recognized as a human manifestation of Amida Buddha who appeared to share the Nembutsu Dharma or Teachings of the Nembutsu. In Shin Buddhist Temples, Amida Buddha is the Object of Reverence.

In addition to the Buddha image, at larger temples, as one faces the altar, on the right is usually an image of Shinran and on the left is an image of Rennyō (1415-1499), the 8th Spiritual Leader descendant from Shinran who revitalized the Tradition. They are represented in the altar out of respect and appreciation.

In Jodo Shinshu/Shin Buddhism, Amida Buddha becomes a part of our life not through difficult religious practices or meditation and/or visualizations, but through the form of the Buddha’s Name. Hence, Shin Buddhism is often referred to as the “Path of Listening to the Buddha’s Name,” and people are encouraged to attend services to hear the Dharma or Teachings and become aware of the unfolding of Great Wisdom and Compassion. At the moment of Awakened True Entrusting (Shinjin in Japanese) there is the natural spontaneous recitation of the Nembutsu, Namo Amida Butsu, or the Name of the Buddha. In Jodo Shin Buddhism, the Nembutsu is not recited as a mantra or religious practice to gain merit, but recited in Awareness, Joy and Appreciation of Amida Buddha’s immense Compassion which embraces never to forsake promising that I will be able to attain Supreme Enlightenment at the end of this finite life. Until that attainment, a

reflective life of a Shin Buddhist is a life of lamenting this imperfect self and responding to the Great Wisdom and Unconditional Compassion of Amida Buddha which embraces, guided moment by moment by the Dharma or Teachings, and filled with a deep sense of unending gratitude and appreciation to the Buddha and all that make life possible aspiring to enter into a life of Enlightenment together with all others.

Namo Amida Butsu=Entrusting in the Buddha of Immeasurable Life and Infinite Light

Other Items of Interest

Candles-The candle symbolizes the Wisdom of the Buddha that illuminates the darkness of ignorance. It represents the realm of Nirvana or Enlightenment. As an offering, it is one of the three major offerings traditionally made to the Buddha along with flowers and incense.

Flowers-The flowers symbolize the Compassion of the Buddha representing purity and beauty. In addition, because the flowers wilt they represent the realm of Samsara. As an offering, it is said that to offer even a single flower creates a connection with the Buddha. Any flower in season may be used to adorn the altar or offered to the Buddha, but poisonous, dangerous and unusually strong fragrant flowers as well as artificial flowers are not recommended.

Incense- Incense is offered to pay homage to the Buddha, and its rich fragrance reminds one of the purity of the Enlightened State or Realm. The burning incense also symbolizes transience, change and impermanence. While the candles represent the Enlightened World and the flowers represent the Samsaric World, the incense represents the Oneness of the two Worlds when viewed from the perspective of the Ultimate.

Gassho-A gesture known as (Sanskrit) anjali is made by reverently placing one's hands together in front of one's chest with the palms of both hands placed together, with the fingers and thumbs extended and with the Onenju (see below) encircling both hands with the tassel hanging freely below the palms. The most common gesture at a Hongwanji Temple is to gassho and bow at a forty-five degree angle from the hips and then back to the original upright position. The Gassho is an expression of reverence and respect.

Nenju-Often referred to as the "Buddhist Rosary", it is also known as the juzu in Japanese. When not in use, it is placed on the left wrist or held with the left hand. When used, it is placed around the hands in gassho with the tassel hanging straight down. The nenju symbolizes oneness and is used out of respect for the Buddha. In Shin Buddhism, we prefer to use the term "nenju" or "O-nenju" meaning "Thought-Beads" in contrast to "juzu" or "O-juzu" which has the function of using the beads as a counter. In Shin Buddhism, the number of recitations of the Nembutsu is not the focus. Of primary importance is "True Entrusting" or Entrusting in Amida Buddha. The Nembutsu is recited in awareness, joy and appreciation of the Buddha's Great Wisdom and

Compassion and the most respectful expression in Jodo Shinshu is the gassho using the Onenju as one recites the Nembutsu. Today, the Wrist Nenju, worn around one's wrist, is also very popular. It is worn as an expression of one's faith as many others from other religious traditions might wear an item.

Offerings-Generally speaking, there are two ways to express gratitude: spiritual and material. Material offerings include flowers, incense, light, food, and, in today's world, money. Usually alcoholic and non-vegetarian offerings are avoided out of respect to the Buddha. Spiritual offerings of gratitude include chanting the sutras, the reading of other Buddhist writings and sharing the Teachings with others. The word used to describe offerings in Buddhism is Dana (Sanskrit) emphasizing "pure selfless giving."

Memorial Services-Memorial Services in Shin Buddhism are held as occasions of remembrance at which the virtues of the Buddha are praised, we listen to the Teachings of the Buddha, and express our gratitude to the Buddha. Memorial services are performed in awareness and gratitude and one way to honor those who have passed away. In Shin Buddhism, it is not a service for the sake of the deceased, but a time of reflection, dedication, learning, and fellowship among family, relatives and friends as we remember someone who was an important part of our life.

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