

International Shin Buddhist Conference in Switzerland

September 3 –6. 2002

“Thoughts on a pronunciation of the Nembutsu for the global community”

by

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1) Introduction:

Saying the Nembutsu is the central practice of Jodoshinshu Buddhism. As Jodoshinshu is international and universal, this essential practice of the Nembutsu needs to be given more thought. Language, I believe, plays an important role in spreading and sharing Shin Buddhist teachings in our global community. The Nembutsu is a common language among Buddhist countries, especially Mahayana Buddhist countries.

In many English service books, the Nembutsu is chanted as “Namandabu.” It is a shortened form of Namo-amidabu(tsu). As Jodoshinshu Buddhism spreads to the western world, we need to realize that the Nembutsu is not Japanese, it is Sanskrit. In fact, namandabu is a kind of dialect, not a standard form, of the Nembutsu, and is particularly well-adapted to the Japanese language. I see problems from the linguistic point view in the use the phrase “namandabu” in the western world. Here I would like to point out some of these problems and also suggest some directions that we may consider taking in the future. As I have pointed out, the Nembutsu is our central practice.

2) Various Pronunciations of the Nembutsu in other Buddhist countries;

Since I have become involved in the Buddhist Council of New York, a group which represents various traditions of Buddhism in the Greater New York area, including Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana, I have noticed that Nembutsu is a common word in the Mahayana traditions of such countries as Korea, China, Japan, Vietnam, and Tibet. In the Theravada tradition, sutra-chanting is in Pali and its variations and is very similar among such countries as Sri Lanka, Burma, Thai, Cambodia, Lao, Bangladesh etc., so that they can chant together. When Mahayana Buddhists get together, we have to decide what language to use. On such occasions as an annual Vesak Celebration sponsored by the Buddhist Council, Mahayana Buddhists end up chanting the English version of the Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra. Last fall (10/29/02) when we gathered at Union Square Park in New York city to observe the 49th day Memorial Service for those who lost their lives on 9/11/01, I chanted the Nembutsu slowly, pronouncing it as “namo ami dabu,” and I realized that many people were chanting the Nembutsu together with me. Not only Japanese Buddhists, but also Chinese, Korean, Tibetan and American Buddhists joined me reciting the Nembutsu.

Since the event at Union Square, I have collected pronunciations of 南無阿彌陀佛 in various languages. Since I am here in New York where there are many Buddhist traditions from different countries, I have been able to ask fellow monks about the pronunciation of 南無阿彌陀佛. I have learned that Theravada traditions do not use the Nembutsu. The closest thing in Theravada may be [na mo bud dha ya na].

3) Pronunciations of the Nembutsu in Mahayana Buddhism

Nembutsu 南無阿彌陀佛 originated as a Sanskrit term. It is not certain whether the original term was “Namo Amitabha” or a combination of “Namo Amitabha Buddhaya and Namo Amitayus Buddhaya.” The phrase was transliterated into Chinese texts. It is still under discussion whether the last word 佛[butsu] or [bu] means “buddha”(awakened one) or “(a)bha” (light). However, that is not my subject at this time.

Here are different pronunciations of the Nembutsu from Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese and Tibetan Buddhism, all of which are considered Mahayana Buddhism.

Chinese speaking people say [na mo a mi to fo].

Korean speaking people say [na mu a mi ta bul]

Vietnamese speaking people say[nam mo a di da phat]

Tibetan speaking people say [na mo a mi ta bh(a)].

4) Pronunciations of the Nembutsu in Shin Buddhist tradition

In Japan, when we chant “Shoshinge Wasan,” we say [na mo a mi dan bu] in the Nishi Hongwanji (Jodoshinshu Hongwanji-ha), and say [na mu a mi da bu] in the Higashi Hongwanji (Shinshu Ohtani-ha). Both are considered standard Nembutsus.

In English Shin Buddhist service books¹ as well as Japanese service books used in Japan, they use [na man da bu]², which is the shortened form of [na mo a mi da bu], as the standard form of the Nembutsu.

The Japanese Dictionary “Kojien” lists various forms of the Nembutsu such as [na n ma i da], [na ma i da], [na ma mi da], explaining that they derive from [na mu a mi da butsu]. Interestingly, Kojien does not list [na man da bu]. This suggests that there may be a gap between the common people and the people who are in the Jodoshinshu temples.

5) Comparison among different pronunciations of the Nembutsu.

From the perspective that the basis of the Nembutsu is the Sanskrit [namo amitabha], let me analyze the development of each form. (Underline means a variation in the pronunciation)

A. [na mo a mi to fo] six syllables

/ta/→/to/ [low back → mid back]

/bha/→/fo/ [voiced stop(→voiceless stop) → voiceless fricative]

B. [na mu a mi ta bul] six syllables

/mo/→/mu/ [mid back →high back]

/bha/→/bul/ [aspirated stop→unaspirated stop, low back → high back]

C. [nam mo a di da phat] six syllables

/na/→/nam/ [∅ → voiced nasal (epenthesis)]

/mi /→/di/ [bilabial nasal → bilabial stop]

/bha/→/phat/ [voiced stop→voiceless stop]

D. [na mo a mi ta bh(a)] six syllables

¹ Shin Buddhist Service Book, published 1994 by Buddhist Churches of America
Jodoshinshu Service Book, published 1986 by Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii
Jodo Shinshu Seiten, published 1991 by Buddhist Churches of Canada

² This shortened form of the Nembutsu is called “Tan- Nembutsu,” distinguishing from a standard Nembutsu. “Tan” means short.

- /bha/→/bh/ [mid back→∅ (deletion)]
- E. [na mo a mi dan bu] six syllables
 /ta/→/dan/ [voiceless stop → voiced stop, ∅ → voiced nasal (epenthesis)]
 /bha/→/bu/ [aspirated stop→unaspirated stop, low back → high back]
- F. [na mu a mi da bu] six syllables
 /mo/→/mu/ [mid back → high back]
 /ta/→/da / [voiceless stop→voiced stop]
 /bha/→/bu/ [aspirated stop→unaspirated stop, low back → high back]
- G. [na man da bu] four syllables
 /moami/→/man/ [mid back → ∅, bilabial nasal → alveolar nasal,
 front high → ∅, elision of vowels and assimilation of constant]
 /ta/→/da / [voiceless stop→voiced stop]
 /bha/→/bu/ [aspirated stop→unaspirated stop, low back → high back]

As this comparison shows, G[na man da bu] is linguistically very different from the other forms of the Nembutsu. The changes of the /moami/→/man/ and six syllables to four syllables are very significant, making it difficult to recognize the origin even though it is the same as the others. Phrases A-F are identified easily as the derived form from original Sanskrit.

6) Semantic aspect of A – G.

As people study Buddhism, they learn that the phrase “namo” or “namu” means taking refuge. Those who know Pure Land Buddhism should know the word Amida or Amitabha, and take the last word of the Nembutsu to mean either Buddha or (a)bha. Based on such knowledge, the meaning of A-F is understandable, but not the meaning of G.

- A. [na mo a mi to fo]
 B. [na mu a mi ta bul]
 C. [nam mo a di da phat]
 D. [na mo a mi ta bh(a)]
 E. [na mo a mi dan bu]
 F. [na mu a mi da bu]
 G. [na man da bu]

If the list is ordered to show which forms are closest to the original words, D comes first, because it is identical with the words it represents. B, E and F come the next. A and C come last. G is very difficult to decipher unless you have seen other forms such as E and F. (Note that the first syllable, the last syllable and the second from the last syllable are identical among E-G.)

7) Consideration of language families:

Sanskrit belongs to the Indo-European family, specifically Indo-Iranian³. English belongs to Indo-European as well, specifically Germanic. As members of the Indo-European language family, English and Sanskrit share a similar vocabulary and

³ Pali, which is the language that the Buddha spoke, also belongs to of Indo-European family (Indo-Iranian)

consonant system. On the other hand, Japanese does not belong to the Indo-European family (at this point, Japanese is thought to be uniquely independent).

Because of the difference of language family, western people may feel more at home with the Sanskrit language than with Asian languages belonging to other language families. In Japan, the foreign words of the Nembutsu have become “Japanized” or assimilated as [na man da bu] over a long period of time and feel at home⁴ for Japanese people who are used to more nasal, unaspirated, voiced sounds. In the western countries, we should consider using the phrase with a more familiar western sound.

Since saying the Name is an essential practice of Pure Land Buddhism, including Jodoshinshu Buddhism, we should pay more attention to what phrase we use, especially in the west where mainly Indo-European languages are spoken. It is certainly preferable to use [na mo a mi da bu] or [na mu a mi da bu] rather than [na man da bu]. We might also consider using [na mo a mi ta bha] in the western countries.

My partial conclusion is that it is better from the linguistic stand point NOT to use [na man da bu] in the west for the essential practice of the Nembutsu and for the purpose of spreading the Nembutsu teaching.

8) **History of adapting the Nembutsu**

When a language comes in contact with other cultures and languages, the speakers of the language find different ways to adapt it. Japan has come in contact with various languages and cultures. Even now we witness a variety of words coming from foreign countries. How new technological terms have been adapted is an interesting example. Many technological words are in English. When they come to Japan, they are pronounced in Japanese ways, such as [paso kon] for personal computer, [kon pyuu taa] for a computer, [terebi] for television. When the Nembutsu /namo amito fo/⁵ from China or possibly /namo amita bul/ from Korea came to Japan, Japanese people imported and adapted the word according to Japanese language patterns. Japanese language is made up of [consonant + vowel] or [vowel], except /n/ (which can be used as a vowel in a sentence). There is no sound for a consonant with no vowel. A consonant is always followed by a vowel in Japanese.

When the Nembutsu entered Japan, the pronunciation was adjusted to fit Japanese language patterns. One of the problematic areas of assimilation must have been the last syllable 佛 that contains a consonant without a vowel, which is not allowed in the Japanese language pattern. It is written with two syllables [bu tsu] in Japanese. But when we chant the Nembutsu, the last [tsu] disappears or is read as [tn] (nasalized t). Let me compare A-D focusing on the last syllable: (C= consonant, V=vowel)

- A. [na mo a mi to fo] (CV CV V CV CV CV)
- B. [na mu a mi ta bu] (CV CV V CV CV CVC)
- C. [nam mo a di da phat] (CV CV V CV CV CCVC)
- D. [na mo a mi ta bh(a)] (CV CV V CV CV CCV)

⁴ Most Japanese people consider the Nembutsu or /na mu a mi da bu tsu/ as Japanese.

⁵ The Chinese language is also a subject to change, therefore, we do not know how [na mo a mi to fo] was pronounced at that time. Most likely the last syllable contained a consonant, or the sound may have been much closer to the [bha] of the Sanskrit.

These pronunciations are present ways of saying the Nembutsu, which may be different from the time when the Nembutsu was introduced to Japan. Yet, judging from B and C, and the way [tsu] is added in Japanese, the last syllable must have ended with a consonant. In fact when I asked for the Chinese pronunciation of the Nembutsu, one person described the last syllable as [for] (CVC) with additional consonant [r]. What was the last consonant of the last syllable of the Nembutsu? Based on the data that I present, I can only say that it may have been [t] or [tn] or [h] or [l] or [r].

9) How did Shinran Shonin say the Nembutsu?

Honen Shonin (1133-1212) wrote [na mu a mi da bu] or [a mi ta bu] within the poems “Goeika⁶” and “Myogokuden⁷”. He wrote in a Hiragana style which represents each syllable with a character versus a Kanji (Chinese character) style can represent a few symbols with one character. This shows that Honen Shonin pronounced the last word of the Nembutsu as one syllable. Shinran Shonin, as a disciple of Honen, most likely pronounced the Nembutsu in the same way as Honen.

In Shinran Shonin’s writings, we find only the Nembutsu written with six Kanji characters, not with a Hiragana nor Katakana, however he added pronunciation footnote by Katakana, which is another style of Japanese (which represents each syllable with a character like Hiragana). In the footnote, he wrote a pronunciation for each Chinese character. Next to the sixth character 佛, he wrote ブチ [buchi], but the チ [chi] was used because there was no exact word available in writing corresponding to an independent consonant according to the Professor Jitsuen Kakehashi⁸. It is understood that the last character 佛 was pronounced as one syllable, either [bu] or [butn].

10) Discussion of [tsu] in [namo amida butsu]:

Based on the discussion of the sound of [butsu] in the previous section, we know that [tsu] represents what was originally a consonant without a vowel following it. It is not necessary to pronounce [tsu] when saying the Nembutsu. I would like to list some reasons why it is not suitable to say the Nembutsu with [tsu].

- a) Adding [tsu] means changing the number of syllables from six to seven.
- b) We should also consider the rhythm of saying the Name. With seven syllables it is difficult to say the Nembutsu repeatedly. Six syllables are suitable for repeating, since they create three beats (combining two syllables as one beat). [namo]-[ami]-[dabu] ([namo]-[ami]-[tabha])

⁶ e.g. “kobodaishino onutani gokurakuo kokoronookuni tazumureba namuamidabuno kuninikosoare” (In the words by Master Kukai, when you seek the ultimate happiness in your mind, it is in the land of namuamidabu.) - Honen Shonin Zenshu, compiled by Kyodo Ishii, 1955)

⁷ nanajitouiwa.... (na means....)

munajitouiwa... (mu means...)

anajitouiwa... (a means...)

minajitouiwa... (mi means...)

danajitouiwa... (da means...)

bunajitouiwa... (bu means...) - Honen Shonin Zenshu, compiled by Kyodo Ishii, 1955

⁸ Telephone conversation with professor Jitsuen Kakehashi, Gyoshinkyoko School, Osaka, Japan on August 24, 10:30am USA Eastern summer time

- c) In English speaking countries, [tsu] is not considered as a regular sound. It is viewed as a foreign sound. In other words, [tsu] is not one of the basic English segments. Therefore, it creates mispronunciations and sounds strange.

11) Conclusion:

I have tried to demonstrate the importance of paying attention to the language that we use to share the Buddha-Dharma with the western world, and especially of thinking about the pronunciation of the Nembutsu. It is a crucial to be able to say the Nembutsu together and to find a way for the Nembutsu to become natural for western people as we share the Dharma in the global community.

I hope that this paper encourages you to look at the words of the Nembutsu more closely and contributes to the universal saying of the Nembutsu as the central practice, not of Japanese Jodoshinshu, but of world Jodoshinshu.

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