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# RUNNING TIDE



Issue 34: Twelve Steps Part Two

# RUNNING TIDE

*Running Tide* offers a voice for faith and practice, as well as critical, existential and socially engaged enquiry within the broad framework of Pureland Buddhism.

We publish short articles, poetry, pictures, interviews, comment and Buddhist resource materials.

Opinions expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Amida Order, Amida Trust, or other associated organisations.

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## Amida Order & School

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# EDITORIAL

Firstly, may I wish you all a happy and prosperous 2016. I have had an enjoyable break over the holiday period and looking forward to the next year. This Saturday, 9th January, 2016, we will host our first chanting day in Birmingham and there are many other events I am excited about coming up in the next few months.

This edition of Running Tide is the second part of our series thinking about Twelve-Step Programmes and how the Twelve-Steps may be linked to Pureland Buddhism. The previous issue looked at the first six steps; this issue concludes the series and looks at the steps seven to twelve.

Dharmavidya writes about how, by giving ourselves to the Buddhas, we can feel more accepted and less self-conscious. Sujatin explains her understanding of contrition and talks about the importance of intention. Kaspa thinks about apologies and Richard Thorogood about examining and evaluating our own actions. Richard Ollier looks at faith and doubt and my article discusses how we might share the Buddhist message with others.

Thank you to all of the contributors to this edition and especially to John Croxon who has helped with some of the formatting and with finding images to illustrate the articles; thank you you have been a great help. Also thanks to Satya and Aida Nakanwagi Lubega for proofreading the magazine, although, of course, all mistakes that remain are mine.

I hope you enjoy reading Running Tide and I hope to see you at an event soon.

—Sanghamitra Adrian Thompson

## STEP SEVEN: AMIDA'S BLESSINGS

### Dharmavidya

Step Seven: Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings

**I**t is better that things not be taken away until we have fully learnt the lessons of them. In Pureland Buddhism we do not ask for our shortcomings to be removed so much as observe that our body, speech, and mind endlessly generate behaviours good, bad, and indifferent and give thanks to Buddha for accepting us as we are. We trust that by putting ourselves in the hands of the Buddhas we will naturally find ourselves upon a good and noble path.

A person of great faith has, in general, little self-consciousness. Self-examination is something she does from time to time as a salutary spiritual exercise but it is not an on-going obsession. Pureland mostly operates at a less self-conscious level. In the matter of awareness of shortcomings there is a middle way and to ask for them to be completely removed would be to abandon one's humanity which is, in fact, one's most precious possession and gift.

Self-consciousness can operate on a general and on a moment by moment basis. In the former, a person knows about his or her traits: one might know that one is a lazy person, or a bad-tempered person, or a sociable, or industrious, or reclusive person, and so on. In the latter, a person notices their own agency in doing things that have good or bad consequences: one might notice that the sink is filling up with unwashed crockery and that one has no inclination to do anything about it, or that the person that one lost one's temper with yesterday is not speaking to one this morning, and so on. This kind of self-observation is not useless. Depending on the case, it may lead one to make improvements or to despair of oneself. In any case, such self-knowledge is bound to be an imperfect science. However, the most important dimension of this kind of observation is the reflection that this is



*Goodbye to winter . . . for the time being* courtesy of Bert Kaufmann [Flickr] under CC BY-SA 2.0





the way that human beings are. It is this more global reflection that can be the foundation of a compassionate attitude, acceptant of others as well as oneself. In fact, it is easier to accept others than to accept oneself, but a person with Amidist faith knows that even if he does not and should not accept himself, he is, nonetheless, accepted by the Buddha and this knowledge makes all the difference. It also eliminates the need to be self-consciously aware of every shortcoming individually. What Pureland has in common with the Twelve Step Tradition, here, is that one does not believe that one has to take total responsibility, and therefore blame, upon oneself. Such self-blame only leads to self-hatred which is a many layered delusion productive of no good. The contemporary pop-psychology concern with self-love is just the flip side of the coin of self-hate; in true spirituality the whole self-obsession is reduced in importance as one's attention shifts to the source of true refuge.

The Pureland version of the seventh step would, therefore, be something more like:

Humbly stood before him and gave thanks  
for being accepted, shortcomings and all.

Pureland is not a system in which we strive to perfect virtues, though with increasing faith it is natural that some selfish forms of behaviour do drop away as they cease to be of such interest. This is largely a question of naturalness. A lazy person, for instance, is not simply a person with little energy. Different people have different energy levels for all kinds of physical reasons from genetic make-up through diet and life-style to disease and health. No, a lazy person is one who is on strike. At some level they are refusing to live and this is because they do not have faith in life. Similarly, an aggressive person is one who does not trust. A greedy person does not trust in the abundance of life or the generosity of others. All "shortcomings" come back to lack of faith. When a Pureland practitioner becomes self-conscious she responds in a characteristic way. If it is consciousness of her traits, then she

takes this as evidence of human nature in general and puts it in perspective. She offers what she is to the Buddhas, in confidence that they will receive her offering happily. We could, therefore, say that a second way that the seventh step could be reformulated in Pureland terms would be:

Offered all of himself, whether virtue or short-coming, confident that the Buddhas will use him in a good way and bestow whatever is needed.

If it is consciousness on a more immediate basis, because the practitioner has faith, he is not in rebellion. There are dirty crocks in the sink, the grass is growing too long, there is dust settling on the book shelves, there are always a hundred things to do and one cannot possibly do them all. Not looking for perfection, the practitioner takes whatever task he chooses to do as his song for that time. For the person of faith there are no chores, for life is a playground. The fact that there are plates and a sink and bookshelves and grass growing are all miracles. How fortunate one is that such things evolved, were invented, or were granted by the gods. If the plates get washed and the shelves stay dusty or the shelves get cleaned and the crocks wait until later, he does not feel that it is a judgement upon himself, but rather that whatever he does is part of celebrating the miracle. One has to do something, and if one has faith one can enjoy whatever it is.

A person may have virtues and vices, but in Buddhism what we think of as shortcomings are seen not as sins, but as mistakes. They spring from ignorance (*avidya*) and ignorance is always with us, but it is exactly ignorant beings such as ourselves who are invited to Amida's Pure Land, nobody else. Amida does not take our sins away, he smiles at us indulgently. We will grow out of most of them naturally in due course as we come to see things differently. It is the common passions that mature as higher wisdom. It is more important to focus upon the love than upon the failings.

Sins are only so because of their consequences and a person only sins when he or she either does not see the bad consequence that will follow, or thinks that he or she can somehow avoid being affected by them, or, is willing to suffer the consequence because they desire that others suffer more than they fear their own fate. From the Buddhist point of view, these are all instances of mistaken thinking. So blindness is the root of all evil. It is, therefore, not so much our shortcomings that need to be removed as our blindness. However, there are two kinds of spiritual blindness and one is much more important than the other.

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Humbly asked that all may be illuminated and blindness fall away.

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The less important blindness is the one that prevents us from even seeing our own deficiencies. It is useful for this blindness to be cured because from the examination of our own traits and behaviours we can learn a lot about ourselves and others and about life in general. But such learning is auxiliary to practice. It helps us to know what kind of creature is calling the Buddha's name, but it is not the goal in itself.

The more important remedy is the cure for the blindness that prevents us seeing how we are loved and benefited. When we see more clearly the riches that we are in receipt of, we feel overwhelmed with gratitude. Generosity of spirit then rises naturally and many so-called shortcomings dissolve naturally.

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Opened his eyes to the love and beneficence that endlessly flow into his life and was filled with awe that one as full of short-coming as himself was so held and blessed.

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Faith and practice manifest through gratitude. From this comes joy and deep peace. ■

## STEP EIGHT: CONTRITION

### Sujatin

Step Eight: Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all

Just take the first half of the sentence “Made a list of all persons we had harmed. . . .” Not merely a tall order but impossible—we spend most of our lives trying to avoid acknowledging such instances of harm. We are short-termists, wanting comfort now. Wanting to avoid looking at consequence. We may no longer be, may never have been, practicing Christians, but we seem haunted by spectres of unworthiness, original sin, the Protestant work ethic, retribution, damnation, and so. To look at the harm we have caused is to confirm our deep-seated fears that we can never do enough or be enough to be acceptable. No wonder we become addicted

to avoidance and dishonesty to ourselves and others about our own pitiful case.

We are driven by primitive actions and reactions, self-preservation and personal comfort. We may hope, in principle, to overcome some of that selfish drive. But, let’s be realistic, we don’t always succeed, and sometimes we don’t really want to. We may aspire to be angels, but Mara drips enticing poison into our ears throughout our lives. Only a Buddha can transform Mara’s arrows into flowers.

The Pureland message tells us, however, that we are already loved and saved by Amida just as we are!<sup>1</sup> Amida provides us with the unconditional love we have longed for all our lives. Yet how easy is it to accept? How could I be worthy of that? It took me a while to even begin. . . .

Many years ago, in France, I had a vision of a circle of people sitting in the grass, with Amida as part of that circle, and me, sitting outside the circle. So it was to Quan Yin that I turned



*In the Magic Circle, Moray* courtesy of Geraint Rowland [Flickr] under CC BY-NC 2.0





Sunrise courtesy of Uditha Wickramanayaka [Flickr] under CC BY-NC 2.0

at first. Maybe her gentleness could accept me. When an experience of Amida appeared to me, much later, as a palpable presence, it was out of the blue, as I was chanting the nembutsu in the shrine room—and came as grace, completely unexpected and unbidden.

Before we engage in ceremonies of Refuge, Ordination or Advancement, we recite the “Sange Mon,” the “Gate of Contrition,” as we cannot take on new vows unless we look at, acknowledge and relinquish the lesser, damaging vows by which we have already been living. The long version that we use includes the words,

“We now confess our offenses and repent them. From the beginningless past up to now, we have killed or destroyed, we have stolen property and belongings, we have approached with lascivious thoughts, we have deceived with lies, we have ridiculed with insincere words, we have slandered, abused, and rebuked with harsh words, we have caused enmity and mutual destruction with harmful words, to all the members of the Three Treasures, teachers

and friends, parents and relatives, and sentient beings throughout the universe, whose numbers are beyond calculation.”<sup>2</sup>

The exercise of reciting this fills one with a sense of shame and humility—“oh, there was that instance. . . and that one. . . and. . .” And those are only a few instances that we can remember in this lifetime and can bear admitting to ourselves—a tiny proportion of the whole sticky mountain of our oh-so-human greedy, hate-filled, deluded actions.

Dharmavidya explains contrition like this:

[It] does not mean having a life in which one never makes any mistakes, but one in which, as soon as one realises that one has done something harmful, one faces up to it, feels sorrow, and strives to change any habit that may have contributed so that one becomes less likely to repeat the offence. At the same time, if we do examine our lives carefully in this way, we learn that there is a tendency to harmful action that is deep



set in our nature. If we can really face this, accepting that we are foolish beings, we will have a more modest assessment of ourselves and this antidote to pride is an essential foundation.”<sup>3</sup>

So what are we to do? When we realise that we are surrounded by love we are gradually able to peep at ourselves in the mirror a wee bit longer and to acknowledge that we are of the nature to do such-and-such. Even so, we are already accepted, already loved, already saved. There’s no impossible requirement of perfecting ourselves.

How shall we deal, now, with our propensity for harm? Have we looked honestly enough that we at least have an intention to avoid harming in the future? Intentions give rise to actions; from our actions karmic seeds arise, which then ripen into karmic results.

“*Cetana*” a Sanskrit word meaning “intention” is not only the energy source from which our karma is generated, it is also the energy source from which our karma can be neutralized. This is because our intentions are the primary mover of all of our other mental actions, like feelings and thoughts, and determine the direction of our mind, which then determines our behavior and actions, or our karma. Buddhism teaches that we can purify negative karmic seeds through the Four Purifying Powers. . . .<sup>4</sup> But all these powers rely on our cetana. . . . As we touch the sadness, as the tears arise and as we face the devastation we’ve caused in the lives of our loved ones and the other people on our list, it is the Power of Regret that gives rise to the [determination] not to repeat our (unwholesome and unskillful) actions, and our intention to engage to repair or make amends.<sup>5</sup>

But, of course, however strong those intentions, we don’t have the strength and the will to follow through. That pain felt when I face

up to my demons may be enough for me to pause before I take another such action in the future, but it may not. This sticky bombu-ness is my lot.

Any impulse to behave better is not a prerequisite on a path to perfection, earning cosmic brownie points—it’s more as an offering to Amida, like the gifts made to a beloved schoolteacher when we were small.

At this point we may be in a position to express “willingness to make amends to them all.” We have taken an important step, faced ourselves and softened our hearts to the human condition, starting with our own case study. ■

#### NOTES

1. The Eighteenth Vow of Amida: “Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, living beings inhabiting other worlds who conceive a longing for awakening, who listen to my Name, who set their heart upon being reborn in my Pure Land, and who keep me in mind with settled faith, are not assured of meeting me standing before them in full retinue and glory at the time of their death, such death thus being completely free of anxiety.” *Two Pureland Sutras* (Order of Amida Buddha), accessed 29<sup>th</sup> December, 2015, <http://amidatrust.ning.com/page/useful-texts>.

2. *Nien Fo Book* (Order of Amida Buddha, 2004), 29.

3. Dharmavidya David Brazier, “Lesson 6,” *The Introduction to Pureland Buddhism Course*, last modified 18<sup>th</sup> April, 2013, <http://courses.zentherapyinternational.com/?q=page/welcome-ITP>.

4. The Four Purifying Powers are: the power of regret, the power of reliance, the power of remedial actions, and the power of the determination not to repeat the action. Eide, “Step 8 of Buddhist 12-Step Recovery System,” (see note 5).

5. Lee A. Eide, “Step 8 of Buddhist 12-Step Recovery System: Making Amends (Making Peace with your Past),” 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2014, <https://sobrietybytamingyourego.wordpress.com/2014/01/01/step-8-of-buddhist-12-step-recovery-system-making-amends-making-peace-with-your-past>.

## STEP NINE: MAKING AMENDS

### Kaspalita Thompson

Step Nine: Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

A deep sense of regret. That's the first thing that comes to mind when I read step nine. Why? Because "a list of persons I have harmed" comes to mind and I know that I have not made direct amends to them all, and I'm not sure that I'm going to either.

I haven't been through a Twelve-Step Programme (my spiritual practice is my programme) so I can't say how it is to approach step nine on the back of the working the first eight steps, although my own practice does have some parallels with the steps. I do have a sense of my own deeply selfish nature, and how it's been transformed by grace. I have spent time in retreat taking inventory of my own life and recognising the harm that I have caused to others. For the four years I lived in the Buddhist House I practiced Nei Quan formally each morning, which asks us to reflect on not only what we have received and given in return, but also what trouble our existence has caused.

It's from this position that I approach step nine: making direct amends.

I used to hate saying sorry, or even admitting that I had any shortcomings at all. Instead I would scabble around for excuses or rationalisations to explain away any mistakes I had made. "I had no part in this" I would insist, whilst attempting to pull the wool over everyone's eyes. In retrospect I think the only person I was fooling was myself.

Where did that deeply ingrained defence come from? I guess that somewhere along the way I learned that I had to be good in order to be acceptable. I imagine that I picked this up from more than one place, but an old Sunday School song comes to mind, "Envy, jealousy, malice, pride. They must never in your heart abide."

Part of me started to believe I was only



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acceptable without any of those faults. So I put a great deal of energy into refusing to acknowledge any selfish or foolish acts or impulses. The practice of Nei Quan and the accepting, loving atmosphere of The Buddhist House allowed me to begin to acknowledge my faults and to ease off on some of the defensiveness I had developed around my foolish nature.

Step nine is not just about apologising in the moments following selfish acts (that's covered by step ten), but about approaching all of the people you have wronged in all of your years on this Earth, and making direct amends to them. Direct, in this sense, meaning making amends directly to the people that you have wronged.

Now that I've been practicing for a while, and have developed some measure of generosity and compassion, I find it's easy to think something like, "I'll make sure I do a good job now, and that will make up for the mistakes I have made in the past." It's much harder to think, "Alright, here are the mistakes I made in the past—let me do something about those."

Buddhism teaches us that we have the tendency to form identities which suit us in some way. So if I create an identity for myself as someone who is able to do some good now and again that suits that old belief that I have to be good to be loved. If I have to acknowledge those selfish acts I committed in the past (and some of them were really selfish) it fits much less easily with that identity and those beliefs.

“But Kaspa”, you might say, “you admit selfishness and apologise much more quickly these days than you used to, how does that fit with your identity of being a good person?”

I guess you could say that in those moments something honest breaks through my identity and I’m able to be genuinely humble for a moment, or perhaps that there’s something about “apologising quickly” that fits with being a good person, so it doesn’t disrupt the new identity too much. Probably both are true sometimes. Or perhaps it’s that my selfish acts were more selfish in the past, and they are harder to face.

Making direct amends to all those people we have wronged allows us to come to terms with our bombu nature in a very specific way. We have to encounter the most selfish parts of ourselves.

To honestly make amends we must first see clearly what the fault is. In order not to shy away from this clear seeing we need to develop a kindly mind towards our own selfishness. This is a difficult practice. We are lucky as Pureland Buddhists that even when we are not able to feel kindly to all the different parts of ourselves we can take refuge in Amida and trust that he is kindly towards us no matter what we think.

As we feel that all the different parts of ourselves are accepted we begin to become free from any power that they might have had over us – acceptance moves us in the direction of liberation.

Making direct amends is also a compassionate act for the sake of others. The most compassionate act in Buddhism is to consider the liberation of others. Making direct amends directly shows the possibility of awakening to love. If we can face the darkest parts of ourselves and hold



*Because He Loves Me* courtesy of Poppy [Flickr] under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

them in the light of acceptance, if we can feel contrition and still feel loved by Amida, we are demonstrating the process of enlightenment and showing that it is possible to turn back towards love.

As we develop a kindly mind, or experience being held in a kindly way, I have faith that our defences do begin to melt and this makes it easier for us to make amends. For me that experience of kindness also brings with it an understanding of the depth of my own karma and my own patterns of selfishness and defensiveness. Sometimes kindness allows me to make amends and sometimes kindness allows me to feel loved even when making amends feels too difficult. ■

## STEP TEN: EVALUATING OUR ACTIONS

**Richard Thorogood**

Step Ten: Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.

Having been involved in a Twelve-Step Group for the past six and a half years, I have found this step reminds me that self-searching should become a regular habit in order to keep an emotional balance and to live well under all conditions. I personally need to take stock of my actions to others on a daily basis: a lifetime of negative emotions of anger, fear, jealousy and the like seem to rear their ugly heads on a regular basis. If I do not take action promptly, my life can spiral out of control.

Daily meditation and a time spent afterwards in accurate self examination are bound to make

my day a better and happier one. It also helps me to realise when I become angry or fall into thoughts of jealousy, envy, self-pity or hurt pride and to adjust my behaviour. In difficult situations we need restraint, honest analysis, a willingness to admit when the fault is ours and an equal willingness to forgive when the fault is elsewhere. We need not be discouraged when we fall into the errors of our old ways for these disciplines are not easy, we should look for progress not for perfection.

Our first objective should be to develop self restraint: when we speak hastily, or rashly, the ability to be fair minded and tolerant evaporates. An unkind tirade, or willful snap judgement, can ruin our relations with another person in an instant. Nothing in my life works better than restraint of my tongue. I must avoid quick tempered criticism, furious argument or sulking in silence since these are the emotional traps of pride and should be avoided.

I see that most people around me, myself



*Pittville Lake capturing the rain courtesy of Julie Anne Johnson [Flickr] under CC BY 2.0*



included, are emotionally ill, as well as frequently wrong. So I need to practice daily. Such radical change in outlook has taken me the past six and a half years, and I am far from achieving it in all my actions—it is an ongoing process.

On a daily basis I have to ask myself “Am I doing to others as I would have done to me?” Since joining the Amida Temple just over four months ago, having just walked in off the street, to collect some literature, my attitudes have changed for the better. The practices I now embrace are at one with the steps which have sustained me in these past years.

My brother Ajita was a practising Buddhist for over 20 years in west Australia, and always said to me that, if I wished to achieve peace and contentment in my life, I should look to the Buddha. Ajita died of cancer in 2011, but, with faith and meditation, was able to survive the pain and discomfort of the last three years of his life and even managed to make a pilgrimage to India.

I spoke to Ajita almost daily in the last six

months of his life, and over that time we spoke of many things; the discussion often turned to beliefs, hope, faith. I would call him in the morning after his meditation session which took anything from two to four hours, and because of this time in meditation he was often very mindful and completely open and clear of thought. One thing we spoke of at length was my search for a “spiritual awakening” which I have been looking for most of my adult life and I believe that I have had an insight to that by walking into the Amida Temple four months ago.

So having found my spiritual home, I look forward to embracing Buddhism and being aware that I can live a better life. ■



*Meditation* courtesy of Moyan Brenn [Flickr] under CC BY 2.0



*Prière Prayer* courtesy of Gustave Deghilage [Flickr] under CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

## STEP ELEVEN: CONNECTING WITH AMIDA

Richard Ollier

Step Eleven: Seeking through prayer and meditation to improve one's conscious contact with God as we understand Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

I guess that when (after heaven only knows how many false starts) we summon up the strength to at least try to do without all the addictions, compulsions and obsessions that rule our lives, a space opens up in front of us which can be terrifying in the short-term, but immensely spiritually satisfying further on down what may turn out to be a long road.

Why terrifying? Well, the ego loves its props, the substances, habits and behaviours that make it feel good about itself, that keep it in business, and that it cannot contemplate life without. The ego thinks that only its small satisfactions can make life worth living, and cannot envisage the spaciousness of a life where it is not centre-stage. No-one who has "been there," or who has held someone's hand while they have been there, will ever understate the sheer, inexpressible anxiety of this particularly cold turkey.

So where, in this hell, does the immensely spiritually satisfying bit come in? Well, if we can keep our nerve (and I don't always keep mine, far from it) we can come to see that the spaciousness we encounter when we walk away from ego is the spaciousness of Amida or of God or of whatever "Significant Other" in whatever spiritual language we happen to encounter. Fleeting at first, and then for longer and longer periods, we can start to see that beyond the horror there lies a love which passes all understanding. Or perhaps it is better to say *in* that horror, rather than *beyond* it, for it is in the very heart of darkness that we become loveable and able to love. We gain confidence. We can start to dispense with our crutches. We can relax,

unwind, even smile. We begin to find ourselves at play in the Buddha-Fields of the Lord. We are in a Purer Land than we thought. A Buddha light suffuses the air. For now. Sadly, we might relapse, imprison ourselves once again within the confines of our smaller selves. But, once experienced, that sense of wider possibilities, the promise of a freer life with wider horizons never quite goes away. There can always be a steady gleam of hope, like the eternal sanctuary light on the altar of a church, forever in the corner of our eye.

If then, in all our ghastly addictions and obsessions, we can thus start to limp, tentatively, hesitantly and with bleeding feet, towards a less ego-centred life, what is there that can keep us steady on the path? The short answer: "conscious contact with God as we understand Him." The even shorter answer in "Amida language": the nembutsu. Repeatedly calling out to something "not-I" and greater than ourselves, to a sacred "Other" doesn't just keep us on the path, it is the path. Faith and practice cannot be differentiated, as Dharmavidya has written.<sup>1</sup> I know that sometimes people read Honen and think that his practice of continually chanting the nembutsu is extreme and unnecessary, but when all that may stand between you and the next catastrophic drink, or bet, or fix, or compulsive desire to do something unskilful, are three little words you start to see the real practicality of chanting "Namo Amida Bu" over and over again. As long as you can keep doing that, it is difficult for you to do anything else. Although I know very well that the receipt of grace is not dependent upon the number of "calls" I make, there are many times when a mere single recitation just will not do. For all of us, the repetition of the nembutsu (our "conscious contact" with Amida) is an act of resistance, a pushing back against all the destructive negativity which results from our false sense of our own importance and poisons our lives. For me, each word of the nembutsu is a stone, and each time I utter it I lay one stone on the other to build a tower which gives me a vantage point from which the Pure Land starts to

come into view. Thus, in a sense, the significance of “Namo Amida Bu” lies in what it does, rather than in what it means. This is the true heroism of the Buddhist life, to which we can all aspire. Through keeping our minds steadfastly on the nembutsu we can tap into a wider vision, live in relation to a limitless horizon and wander among bejewelled trees and meandering silver rivers. In doing this, we can come to see that we are not just enjoying this spacious panorama, we are serving and sharing it too. We are not practising alone, and we are bringing its merit to others.

How to keep going when we falter? With this practice, and with this vision before us, it becomes easier for us to endure. Doubt can undermine our practice, and we all, without exception, have times of doubt. At such times, we may feel drawn to a more “secular,” materialistic view of the world, come to think that our beliefs are irrational, or that we’re just “making it all up.” In such circumstance, we can feel that we have to “understand” our faith, to analyse it, to “prove” its truths, and fall into despair when we are unable to do so. This is a trap.

To step out of this particular snare, I would simply say that it is far, far, more important to love Amida than it is to understand him. Loving him sidesteps the doubt, brings about “conscious contact” with him, and triggers an awareness in us of just how much he loves us. It’s the old story: in order to receive, you have to give. This is also why devotion to Quan Yin is so important for me: I find it so easy to love her, and hence to try to put myself at her service. Does she “exist”? Does Amida “exist”? The questions are irrelevant, based on a false premise. The nembutsu is me loving them and them loving me and I’m very comfortable with that. Love does not interrogate, it trusts. The more I call out to Amida, the more I hear Amida calling out to me—Quan Yin, too.

In our travails and in all our attempts to live in the space which lies beyond ego, its addictions, and obsessions, we need to drown out the shrill calls of the self with the loving resonances and harmonies of the nembutsu. It reminds me a little of what I’ve heard about the *Tibetan Book*

*of the Dead*, when, at the time of our death, we are counselled to resist the magnetic pull of the various attractions which seek to lure us back to a rebirth in samsara, and to keep our minds fixed instead on the Enlightenment which lies ahead. Similarly, at the time of the “death” of our small selves that conquering addiction involves, the nembutsu is there to keep us in contact with the breadth and depth of a limitless love. If we can just manage to “hang on in there.” For me, it helps not just to keep the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in mind, in the shrine room and in my heart, but also sitting next to me, standing in front of me, above me, not always easily recognizable, sometimes disguised as ordinary mortals, but indubitably there. Keep the Buddhas close; love them, and be free. ■

#### NOTES

1. Dharmavidya, “Summary of Faith and Practice,” in *Nien Fo Book* (Order of Amida Buddha, 2004), 1.



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## STEP TWELVE: SHARING THE DHARMA

### Sanghamitra Adrian Thompson

Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Step Twelve instructs us that after having had a spiritual awakening, we should try to share what we have discovered with others. In Amida-shu this has clear links to the 137<sup>th</sup> precept for ordained members, “To create conditions in which others may hear the Name spoken, in their own language, secretly to their heart.”

It seems to me quite a puzzle to create conditions for change in others—whether it be to create conditions for others to hear the name Amida, or to create conditions for other positive change. For different people, different actions will help to create the conditions that are necessary for change, and it is very hard to know which actions and conditions will be right for which people.

One of my friends was recently involved in a demonstration to promote veganism, which took place just outside the large meat market in Birmingham. My friend and one of the other demonstrators decided to go inside the market with their placards and walk around the various butchers stalls. . . . It did not go well. The butchers hurled abuse and threw ice at them.

Afterwards, I discussed with my friend whether she thought the demonstration had been successful in promoting their cause. I argued that carrying out such a provocative demonstration in an area filled with meat-eaters was not likely to create conditions for change, but instead would probably get the protesters labelled as troublemakers and would be likely to make the shoppers feel extremely defensive.

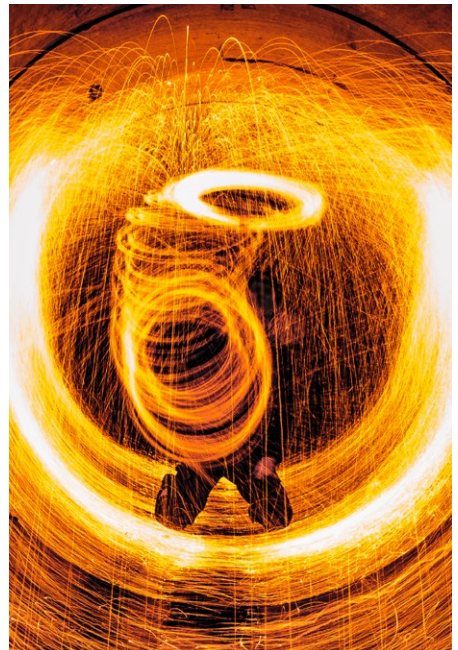
I remember being told a story about a suicidal child during a psychotherapy work-discussion group—he was the tutor’s foster son at the time.

He’d locked himself in the bathroom and was threatening to hurt himself. Our tutor said it was the hardest thing she ever had to do, but instead of arguing with him, she said she was going to put the kettle on and get out his favourite biscuits. She knew that if she began to fight with him about what he was doing, it could set up a tug-of-war and maybe make him even more determined. Perhaps he would have harmed himself out of spite.

I thought back to this story when I was discussing the protest with my friend. Trying to promote something positive, but in a very provocative way, may well have set up the same kind of resistance in the minds of the audience.

It’s tricky though. For some people a ball-busting, hard-line approach may be just what is needed. At other times, a softer approach may be right. It can be impossible to know which.

Since we are not Buddhas, we can just try to share the message as best we can, and try to be thoughtful about the consequences and



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intentions of our actions. Sometimes, as much as we can hope for is to act with the right intentions—although, of course, even actions with the best intentions can cause suffering and harm.

To go back a step, what is the message that we should be trying to share as Pureland Buddhists?

The 18<sup>th</sup> vow declares that those who listen to the name and set their hearts on being born in the Pure Land will be met by Amida at the time of their death. This is a vow for all beings, including us foolish beings here on Earth. It is this part of the Pureland message that I found the most revolutionary: we are all lovable just as we are. It is enough to have faith, and to say, and listen to the name.

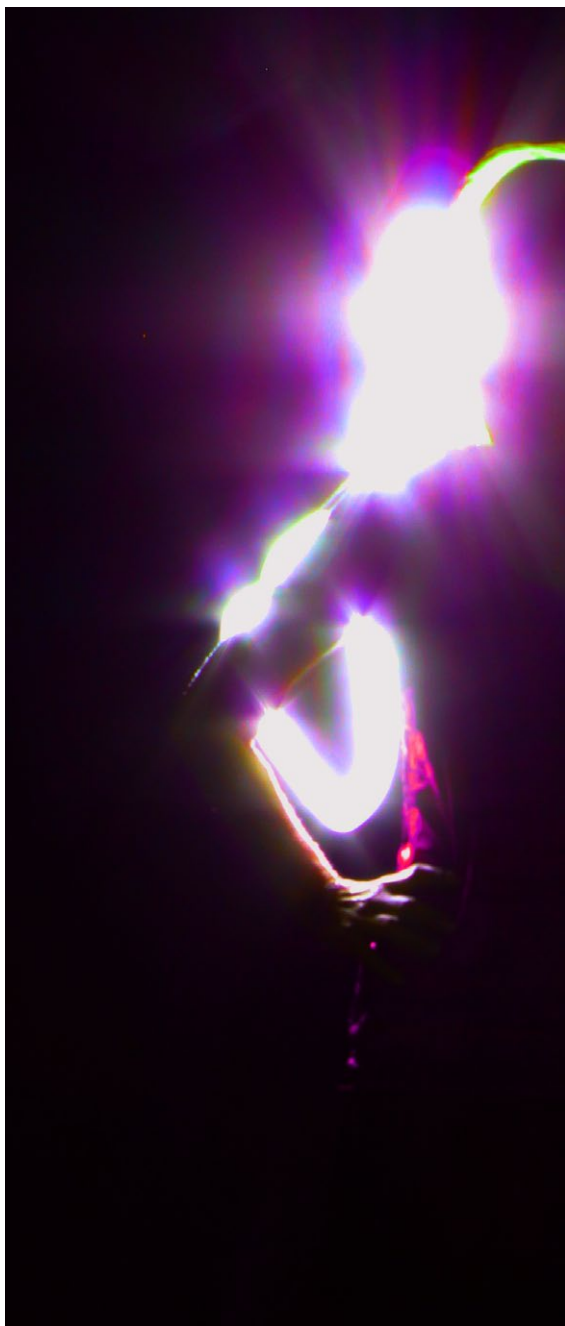
This is the spirit that I would like to share with others.

Jnanamati once rephrased this for me. He said that when we are sharing this message we, “are reflecting the light of Amida.” I like that. I am just one small human being. It’s enough of a struggle to recognise my own lovable nature besides trying to show others the way. The other-power way is to let Amida do it for us.

Furthermore, how do we imagine the “spiritual awakening” of which the Twelfth Step talks? I cannot claim to have had any earth-shattering spiritual awakenings of the type you can read about, for instance, in the writings of Roshi Jiyu Kennett. Although, I may well lust after such experiences when I am suffering from spiritual materialism—that is, most of the time.

I have been reassured by Dharmavidya talking about different kinds of spiritual awakening. He used the metaphor of snow falling off a roof. Sometimes the snow comes crashing down all at once, and sometimes it comes down piece-by-piece and drip-by-drip.

I was also comforted before my ordination when Dharmavidya said that becoming a gankonin or amitarya does not depend on these kind of experiences, but instead upon the sincerity of the heart of the practitioner. “Experiences are graces received from the



*Out of the light* courtesy of Eric Ray [Flickr] under CC BY-SA 2.0



Buddhas. If you receive them, be grateful. They are not something to achieve.”<sup>1</sup>

Hopefully, I have allowed myself to be filled with a little of Amida’s light. . . at least on good days.

The final part of the Twelfth Step asks us to practise these principles in our all affairs.

Working full-time in the secular world can make this challenging. Just yesterday, I was sat around the table in the staff room (I am a primary school teacher) while some of the other members of staff were making quite unkind remarks about a parent. It began in jest and I was slightly drawn in, but I gradually felt more and more uncomfortable. Later, I felt very guilty about not having said something. I felt conflicted in the situation about wanting to stand up for the parent, but also not to come across as being condescending and holier-than-thou. One of the other teachers had already described me earlier in the week as being “beatified”—it did not seem like it was meant as a compliment.

It is these kind of everyday situations that can help us to grow as spiritual people. Perhaps next time I may act differently. Fortunately the precept about right speech, like the others, is worded, “I pray that I may not fall into wrong speech,” so perhaps I can feel contrite about what happened without needing to beat myself up about it. We are all still training.

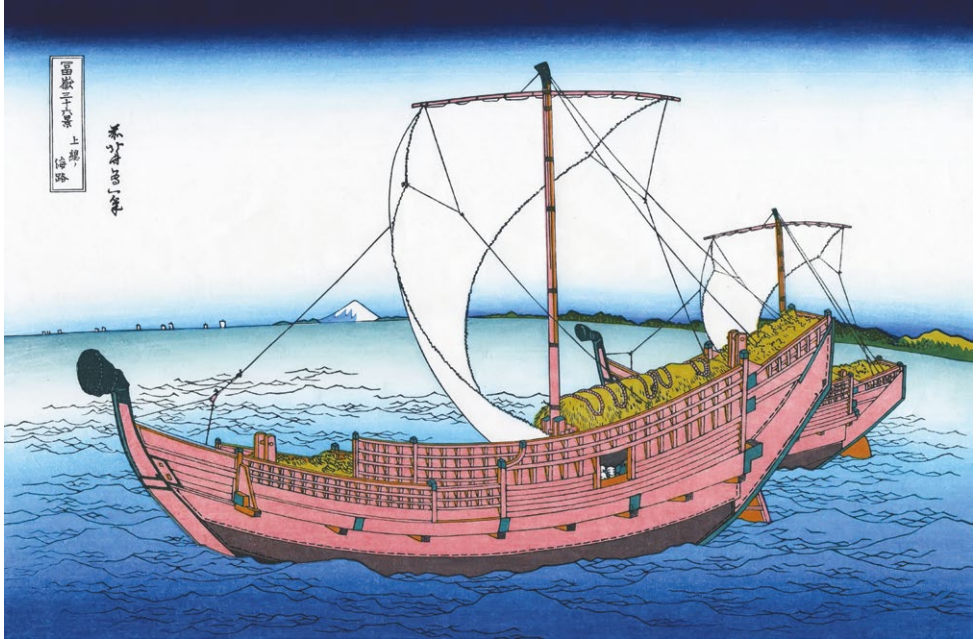
Although the Twelve Steps are most closely associated with Alcoholics Anonymous, most of us reading this are not suffering from that particular addiction. Nevertheless, we all are addicted to something. Maybe thinking about the Twelve Steps may help to loosen some of our own habits and perhaps give a new perspective to our own practice. I hope I will get better at practising these principles in all of my own affairs. ■

#### NOTES

1. Dharmavidya via Sujatin, e-mail to author, 23 October, 2014.

# Sea Route

Kazusa Province



The original and sacred vows,  
Are the unique and essential grace,  
By which to enter the Pure Land;  
Therefore, with body, speech and mind,  
We are devoted to the teaching,  
that all may attain the state of bliss.