

New Year's Dharma Message "the Nembutsu first"

by Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki

Namo-Amidabu. A Happy New Year!

How do you celebrate New Year in 2003? In recent years each New Year has been very different. I remember last year at New Year people felt insecure and sad because of the 9/11 tragedy. It was not a time of pure celebration; we had mixed feelings. New Year the year before was the first of the new century, so for many people it was full of hope and happiness. For those who had lost their loved ones in the past year, New Year must have felt lonely and quiet. On the other hand, for the newly wedded couple, New Year must have been a wonderful and exciting experience.

For me, New Year is a time to confirm what is the central and most important thing for our lives. With a fresh and clear mind, we need to meditate on our own lives. It is essential to look deep inside of ourselves rather than outside or to the surroundings. "What about me? How do I live my life?" We can ask ourselves and answer ourselves.

For my part, I want to live a Nembutsu-centered life this year. After the 9/11 incident, I learned and experienced that I have been given the way of the Buddha in saying Namu-Amidabu. When reciting Namu-Amidabu, I felt that I should always remember the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, and I felt very strong and secure knowing that I am embraced by Amida Buddha. When our minds are confused and chaotic, we need wisdom to understand things clearly; when we experience anger and hatred, we need compassion that embraces all without discrimination. For me this is the teaching of the Nembutsu. To keep wisdom and compassion at all times is to live the path of the Nembutsu. With it, I do the best that I can.

When a real emergency happens, many times all the knowledge that we have gained from various books goes away, but the Nembutsu stays with us. I believe that simply saying the Nembutsu is the most important practice, the practice that really can bring focus to our lives. Namu reminds me of being myself; Amida reminds me of the infinite light of wisdom (Amitabha) and compassion (Amitayus); Bu(tsu) reminds me always to wake me up and shake me up.

There is a phrase, "Nembutsu Ihon," or "Nembutsu Isen," meaning that the Nembutsu is taken to be fundamental or the first. Pure Land Buddhism begins with saying the Nembutsu. So, let us begin to say the Nembutsu in our daily life before asking, arguing and thinking within our usual human framework. Then, let us meditate on the world of Amida's vows not as knowledge from books or lying on our desk but based on our own experience.

"No less than people of Shinjin - true entrusting mind of Amida -
Practicers of doubt who cling to self-power should
Awaken to the benevolence of Amida's great Compassion
And endeavor to say the Nembutsu." (Wasan by Shinran Shonin)

Let me begin my New Year with saying the Nembutsu.

*Namo-amidabu, namo-amidabu,
Embraced by Infinite Light,
We celebrate this day today.*

*You and I, all together
Embraced by the morning sun,
Awaken to the Dharma-world,
Reciting the Nembutsu of wisdom and compassion.
(by Shaku Kenjitsu)*