

# Chanting

What do Jodoshinshu people do as a practice ?

They burn incense, they chant and they eat. When they burn incense They burn away the thick outer shell of the ego and allow the inner fragrance to be released and be enjoyed by all. We can then bow to Amida, the name of reality itself: *Infinite Light (space) Infinite Life (time)*. The fragrance of the incense, of *I (Namo)* connecting with *Amida (Amidabutsu)* remains, subtle and only periodically noticed.

The chanting then begins. Chanting as it is known in the east has few equivalents in western traditions. It is not singing but a kind of talking out loud from the pit of the stomach. Or more correctly, from the seat of one's being in the abdomen (called *kokori*). There are two kinds of chanting: chanting to a set melody, and chanting without a set melody. In chanting to a set melody, the meaning of the text chanted is usually understood. In chanting without a set melody (*dokkyo*) the text is simply read out loud. The hard, ground woods of the incense is transformed into ash and subtle fragrance, coming to life through being burned away.

The sound of awakening to the fundamental oneness of all things can now begin. When Shinran Shonin says "*Take refuge in the Pure Music*", chanting is as close as it gets. Each person becomes pure sound, his own sound, like no other. And when each voice is true to itself, it chants out loud - without embarrassment, without showing off, without calculating. Then each uniquely individual sound adds layer upon layer to the total sound - a sound uniquely Buddhist. Here the only bad voice is the voice that tries to imitate another. The source of one's embarrassment in chanting is ego, pure and simple. Like Bon Odori, where the point is to *just dance*, the trick here is to *just chant - easier said than done when we constantly catch ourselves* traditional chanting, it is the sound that is important, not the meaning of the sound. In many ways, knowing the meaning of the sound, is a hindrance to becoming pure sound. Chanting in most Buddhist countries is in a dead language, or at least, highly unintelligible one. The sound of Buddhist chanting is remarkably similar, even to the chanting of it in an unintelligible language. Singing the texts in English is more an activity of the objectifying mind than a meditative activity of the body.

In the late 1970's through mid-1980's, our Japanese service chanted the *Shoshinge* in its Japanese language form - called *Shinjin no Uta*. Though Fujikado Sensei and I preferred the *Shoshinge* chanted in *Kanbun* (Chinese characters), we dutifully chanted it for several years in Japanese. After about two years, the Japanese-speaking members of the Sangha asked us to return to the original *Shoshinge* written in Chinese. They said that although the original was much more difficult to understand, as chanting, it was more meaningful. It was more meaningful as *Pure Music*. One studies the sutras in translation or in its original language for intellectual meaning. One chants the sutras for body understanding. One is theory, the other is practice - both wings need to flap in balance for the *Kalavinka (bird of the Pure Land)* to fly. Our ego makes us control freaks, we want to understand things from our own point of view, in our own way, in our own time, and in circumstances under our control. Chanting is learning to join the flow not control it. And in that flow there is nothing to do but to appreciate and enjoy.

The next natural activity then is to eat together. Traditionally this eating together is called *Otoki* which simply means 'time' to eat. It means to eat together and appreciate and enjoy each other's company. When a true sense of connection takes place, true harmony is realized. When true harmony is realized, there is nothing better to do than to appreciate and enjoy each other's company while eating.. By tradition the meal was light, usually vegetarian so as to remind us of the difference between eating and gluttony.

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