

Myokonin Osono



by Jim Yanagihara

In the village of Tahara in Mikawa (present day Aichi prefecture) lived a woman, Osono, whose life exemplified a true disciple of the Buddha—a *myokonin*. She was the daughter of Yagi Gakueimon, a farmer and fisherman, and during her youth she was physically strong and very aggressive as well as very stubborn and arrogant. Being physically strong, she often helped her father in the fields doing various tasks which were normally done by young men.

After growing up, she married. Her married life, however, was both short and tragic. Her first child, a son, died at birth. Her second child, a daughter, lived until the age of three when she was bitten by a dog and died. After the death of her daughter her husband sent her back to her parents . . . a divorce.¹

Due to these tragic events in her life she experienced a period of depression which made her reflect deeply within. During this time, due to the urging of her father, she consented to remarry. She then married a devout *nembutsu* follower, Suzuki Gentsu, who was instrumental in guiding Osono to the teaching of *nembutsu*. Through immersion in the spring (*onsen*) of the water of absolute *tariki* her life changed to that of being gentle and humble. This life of *tariki* can be seen in the words uttered by Osono; "Everything seen and heard is the Buddha-dharma." The relevance of this utterance is expressed in the following incident.

While visiting a fellow-follower of the Way, Osono noticed the maid of the house preparing a pot of broth which she placed upon the stove. Into the pot of broth the maid placed some dumplings. Observing this, Osono said,

From the heat of the stove the pot, as well as the contents within, will begin to heat. The dumplings, unaware, are being cooked. Slowly the dumplings begin to heat and then at the right moment when the dumplings are nice and soft, the pot is removed from the heat of the stove. We sentient beings are like the dumplings; unaware of being bathed in the warm rays of Amida's Light, and ultimately being saved by the Name, Namu Amida Butsu.²

This profound awareness of Osono's is not the working of her intellect, but the working of *tariki*: a life which is identified with the illumination by *tariki*. This is the life of a *myokonin*.

In the village of Noda in Mikawa, there lived a *nembutsu* devotee named Wahei. Osono was often a guest at Wahei's home, where others gathered to discuss the Teachings.

On one occasion, after lunch, Osono went to the kitchen to get herself a cup of tea. There in the kitchen was Wahei's wife, who said to Osono, "Osono-san, whenever you come to visit us many people gather and talk about the Teachings, especially about *shinjin*, with great enthusiasm. However, I am so involved with worldly things and I don't care to hear about the afterlife." Hearing this, Osono replied,

That's right! That's right! Is it that way with you, too? I feel the same way. I always talk about the Teachings, but I really don't like Buddhism. To be honest with you, I really hate matters in reference to afterlife and I'm extremely fond of things in this world. But, you know, the joyful thing is that Amida Nyorai likes me who hates the afterlife and instead likes this world. Amida Nyorai makes it so that this me who likes this world and hates the afterlife is born first into the Pure Land. More than anything, I'm overjoyed in this. This is what we all gather to talk about every time I come to visit.³

One cold wintery day Osono and a group of devotees were traveling through Shiga prefecture on their way to Kyoto to attend a special service at the Hongwanji. As the group was crossing a bridge over a frozen river they saw some children, off to the east, building a snowman. As soon as Osono saw the snowman she rushed over to it, placing a mat she was carrying in front of the snowman, and sat down with her hands together in *gassho*, bowing to the snowman. The fellow devotees were surprised at seeing what Osono was doing. One of the devotees jokingly asked, "Osono-san, why is the snowman the object of your gratitude?" Without looking up Osono answered,

This snowman reveals to me the form of my shinjin, therefore I am grateful. The snowman will melt as the rays of the sun shine upon it. Just like my shinjin, the rays of Amida's compassion shine upon and guide me

(continued on page 29)

NOTE:

For doctrinal studies in English see Phillip Karl Eidmann's A Brief Introduction to the Topics for Discussion of Peace of Mind (Anjin Rondai); San Francisco, Buddha Associates, 1971. Also, Professor Ryosetsu Fujiwara's excellent study of Zendo in The Way to Nirvana; Tokyo, Kyoiku Shincho, Ltd., 1974.

The Shin Buddhism Translation Series is in the process of publishing the complete writings of Shinran Shonin. An introduction to the Six Aspects is found in volume 1, no. 1 of The Pacific Journal, which includes a digest by Bishop Seigen H. Yamaoka, and articles by BCA ministers, Toshio Murakami, Ken Yamaguchi, Kakuye Tada, Hiroshi Abiko, LaVerne Sasaki, and Professor Shojo Oi of the Institute of Buddhist Studies.

“REIKON” AND “SOUL”

(continued from page 25)

3. Snow, Elson B., "Mahayana Notebook; Demarcation," Wheel of Dharma, vol. 7, issue 7, July 1980.
4. King, Rev. June, "Answers to Common Questions on Buddhism," in leaflet published by North-West Buddhist Ministerial Association, 1980.
5. Compiled by the Ryukoku University, Bukkyo Yoron, 13th ed., p. 23, Hyakkaen Publication, Kyoto, Japan. 1967.
6. King, Rev. June, "Answers to Common Questions on Buddhism," in leaflet published by North-West Buddhist Ministerial Association, 1980.
7. See Shinshu Seiten, "Kyogyoshinsho," BCA, p. 512. 1978.
8. Suzuki, D. T., translator, Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Shinshu Otani-ha Publishers, Kyoto, 1973. Kawata Press, Tokyo.
9. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, pps. 431-432.
10. Suzuki, D. T., translator, Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Shinshu Otani-ha Publishers, Kyoto, 1973, Kawata Press, Tokyo. p. 206.
11. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, pps. 10-12. See 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 22, 19, 20, and 28th vows. Also see p. 441.
12. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Rennyō's Interpretation of the Name," p. 449.
13. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Gobunsho," p. 271.
14. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 85.
15. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Shoshinge," p. 152.
16. Suzuki, D. T., Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Published by Shinshu Otani-ha, Kyoto, 1973. Kawata Press, Tokyo.
17. Ibid. p. 206.

MYOKONIN OSONO

(continued from page 26)

*and the more I listen to the Teachings, my shinjin melts away, nothing remains, everything disappears. For this, I am truly grateful to the snowman.*⁴

Once, when Osono was walking on the road of a village in Ise she was saying the *nembutsu*. A man walking nearby heard her and said, "There goes the old lady mouthing empty *nembutsu*." Osono heard what the man had said and rushed back to him saying, "Thank you for saying that, thank you! You just don't know where you'll find a good friend." The man, startled by what Osono was saying, turned to her and said, "You don't have to get mad!" To this Osono replied:

*No, no, I'm not mad. I came to thank you. If the nembutsu that comes out of the mouth of this old lady turns into merit and I'm to be saved by that, what am I supposed to do??? I'm truly grateful for this empty nembutsu that comes out of me after I've been saved. I'm really grateful to you for letting me know; I'm really grateful to you for letting me know.*⁵

Years later, when Osono was on her deathbed, a devotee came to see her and asked, "Can you explain your understanding of the Buddha-dharma to me?" Osono answered, "I don't have any understanding to explain, just that during my lifetime I have come to realize that any understanding is beyond me."

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3. Unno, Tetsuo, Jodo Shinshu Buddhism, BCA, 1980.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.