

Sakyamuni Buddha and Amida Buddha  
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Have you ever wondered what the difference between Sakyamuni Buddha and Amida Buddha is? I sometimes hear that it is easy to understand Sakyamuni Buddha because he was a historical person, but it is hard to grasp who Amida Buddha is. If we understand the relationship between them, it would be easier for us to understand the teaching of Jodo Shinshu Buddhism.

According to Buddhist tradition, Prince Siddhartha Gautama (who later became Sakyamuni Buddha) was born at Lumbini Garden in Nepal about 2,500 years ago. One day, he left his castle, position and family to seek enlightenment because he saw the impermanence of human life with his own eyes. When he was 35 years old, he finally attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree and became Sakyamuni Buddha. He then spread the Dharma and taught many people the way to transform suffering into peace of mind. His teachings were compiled and organized into sutras later by his disciples. Thus, Sakyamuni Buddha was the founder of Buddhism. All Buddhist schools are based on the sutras. Buddhists celebrate his birth on April 8 (Hanamatsuri) and his enlightenment on December 8 (Bodhi Day).

Sakyamuni Buddha was only the historical Buddha who appeared in this world in human form. However, when he gave his guidance to people, he taught them that he was not the only Buddha and that there are many more Buddhas in the universe. Sakyamuni Buddha then introduced Amida Buddha who was deeply respected and praised by a number of Buddhas.

Amida Buddha is different from Sakyamuni Buddha and is neither a historical person nor an idol. Amida Buddha is the Buddha of infinite light and eternal life without color or form, but Sakyamuni Buddha personified Amida Buddha in order to make the characteristics easy to understand. Amida Buddha was first the Bodhisattva Dharmakara before he attained enlightenment. When he was still in the stage of Bodhisattva, he witnessed the suffering of sentient beings and established forty-eight vows because he sincerely wanted to save all beings regardless of whether they are good or bad. He then performed various practices for a very long time, attained enlightenment and finally became Amida Buddha. Among the forty-eight vows, the eighteenth vow is considered as the most important one. This Vow states that Amida saves all beings who sincerely entrust their hearts to Amida. Thus, Amida Buddha continues to save sentient beings over an infinite length of time.

However, since Amida Buddha has no form, it is very difficult for us to notice the existence. Therefore, Amida Buddha decided to become “the voice of the Buddha” so that people can hear it and become aware of the existence of Amida. I am sure that you have also heard this sound many times. It is “Namo Amida Butsu.” This sound keeps reaching our ears through the voice of people. We can hear this sound even through our own voice of “Namo Amida Butsu.” This phenomenon means that Amida Buddha is calling us and saying, “I am always with you. I will save you without fail. I will make you become a Buddha.” Amida’s calling voice keeps resounding in this world. This is the evidence that Amida Buddha embraces us all the time.

We cannot avoid having various worries, distress and suffering in our lives. However, through listening to the name of Amida Buddha and entrusting our hearts to it, we would be able to realize that Amida Buddha always embraces us and leads us to the Buddhahood all the time. This teaching certainly brings us great strength and changes our lives.

Sakyamuni Buddha appeared in this world and introduced Amida Buddha who certainly

saves us. It is like a physician makes a referral to a specialist who can cure illness. Shinran Shonin mentioned the relationship between Sakyamuni Buddha and Amida Buddha as follows: **“Sakyamuni Tathagata appeared in this world solely to teach the ocean-like Primal Vow of Amida. We, an ocean of beings in an evil age of five defilements, should entrust ourselves to the Tathagata's words of truth.”**

(The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way II: *Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 70)

Let us live our everyday lives with the teaching of Nembutsu. Namo Amida Butsu.