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The True Self

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Introduction

Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination, and the goal of self-examination is discovery and realization of the true self. The realization of the true self is the most important thing in Buddhism. In this essay I want to discuss the following four issues concerning the true self. First, I will discuss Shakyamuni's view of the true self. Second, I will explain the meaning of the true self in Shin Buddhism, in the teaching of Shinran Shonin. Third, I will emphasize the importance of realizing the true self in our lives. Fourth, I will discuss how the true self can be realized in our lives.

Shakyamuni's View of the True Self

If I mention the words "true self," some people may wonder how I can reconcile it with "selflessness" (or the absence of a self) that Shakyamuni teaches. The concept of the true self and that of selflessness seem contradictory. But actually there is no contradiction.

Here it is important to know that Shakyamuni talks about two types of selves: the ego-self and the true self. When he teaches selflessness, he is talking about the absence (or non-reality) of the ego-self. The ego-self refers to the self that we mistakenly consider permanent, substantial, and autonomous because of our attachment to it, or because of our ignorance of the Dharma of impermanence (i.e., the truth that all things are constantly moving and changing). Shakyamuni, however, tells us that the true self—the self that is one with the Dharma of impermanence (i.e., the self that is constantly moving and changing)—does exist.

When Shakyamuni attained enlightenment, he clearly understood that all things were impermanent and the self that he thought permanent did not exist. He realized that his true self was part of the Dharma of impermanence—that it was nothing but a constantly moving and changing flow of life. Thus, having identified himself with the Dharma, he started to live his life as a constant seeker and learner. He realized that the dynamically seeking and learning self was the true self. Without being attached to any fixed values and without being complacent with whatever he attained, he kept on seeking new meanings in his life. It was because the people of his time saw a dynamic, powerful, and creative life in him that his teaching spread throughout India. Thus we can say that Buddhism is a teaching in which we see the non-reality of the ego-self and the reality of the true self.

Many Buddhist teachings refer to the true self. In the Ohana Matsuri (Flower Festival) Service, which commemorates the birth of Shakyamuni Buddha, we often talk about the legend that when the baby Buddha was born, he took seven steps and shouted, "Above heaven, below heaven, I alone am most noble." Here the "I" that is most noble is the true self. This statement may sound arrogant. But it isn't. Here the baby Buddha represents all humanity and is talking about the dignity of realizing the true self. By declaring, "I alone am most noble," the baby Buddha is saying that he is born in this world to realize the noble self, the true self, and that all human beings should do so, too.

We can see a similar teaching in Shakyamuni's words in the *Sutra of the Teaching Bequeathed by the Buddha*. As the final message of his life, Shakyamuni says, "Rely upon the self, not upon other things. Rely upon the Dharma, not upon human beings." His words, "Rely upon the self," mean that the most important thing that we should discover in our lives is the true self—the self that is one with the Dharma.

The Shin Buddhist Meaning of the True Self

Different Buddhist traditions explain the true self in different ways. Here let me explain the Shin Buddhist meaning of the true self. In Shin Buddhism the term that is synonymous with the true self is shinjin. Shinran explains shinjin with various terms such as “sincere mind,” “true mind,” “aspiration for birth,” “Buddha nature,” and “*bodhicitta* (aspiration for Buddhahood).” All these concepts are cited because Shinran identified shinjin with the spiritual qualities of Dharmakara, a bodhisattva who is described in the *Larger Sutra*.

Shinran considered the *Larger Sutra* the most important Buddhist text, and he systematized his doctrine on the basis of it. This text has a story in which a young seeker by the name of Dharmakara becomes Amida Buddha. Dharmakara symbolizes the true self, and Amida Buddha symbolizes the realization (or fulfillment) of the true self.

At the outset of the story, Dharmakara meets a Buddha and is deeply moved by him. Then he awakens an aspiration to realize Buddhahood. After praising his teacher in verses that are called “Praise of a Buddha,” he receives instruction from him and meditates for a long time. After his meditation he returns to his teacher and describes his aspiration for Buddhahood and a Buddha country in forty-eight vows.

Then in order to realize his vows, Dharmakara takes up various practices. The most important is the practice of visiting innumerable Buddhas in the ten quarters. In one of the verses in “Praise of a Buddha,” Dharmakara says, “Even though there are Buddhas as many as the sand grains of the Ganges River, I will visit all of them and study under them.” He indicates here that he will learn from a limitless number of Buddhas and deepen his wisdom.

In this visitation practice Dharmakara gradually loses his attachment to himself, to his own fixed ideas and opinions. He sees less importance in himself. At the same time, he deepens his respect for Buddhas. The number of Buddhas he respects increases limitlessly. This way, the wisdom he receives from Buddhas becomes greater and greater.

Here it is important to know the difference between human wisdom and the Buddha’s wisdom. What, then, is human wisdom? It is dualistic wisdom—the wisdom of two-ness. It divides things into two—into positive and negative, good and evil, pure and impure, and happiness and unhappiness. On the basis of this wisdom we always love the positive, considering it meaningful, and hate the negative, considering it meaningless.

In contrast to human wisdom that is the wisdom of two-ness, the Buddha’s wisdom is the wisdom of oneness. Dharmakara, who is seeking the Buddha’s wisdom, is not satisfied with loving only positive values and hating negative values. He is willing to discover new meaning in all things, not only in the positive but also in the negative. He discovers positive meaning even in extreme suffering. At the end of “Praise of a Buddha,” he says, “Even if I stay in the midst of extreme suffering, I will diligently keep seeking the Dharma and will never regret it.” Thus Dharmakara’s wisdom is called “the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive.” His wisdom is all-encompassing and all-appreciating wisdom.

Dharmakara’s entire being is permeated by the Dharma of impermanence—by the creative and dynamic flow of life. He is not complacent with whatever he has attained. He possesses a flexible mind and can immediately discover new meaning in all things.

Thus, Dharmakara perfects his practice and becomes a Buddha by the name of Amida (i.e., Amitabha [Limitless Light]). Since light is a symbol of wisdom, his name Limitless Light means Limitless Wisdom, i.e., the Buddha’s wisdom. This name means that Dharmakara has become a perfect student who can seek wisdom from a limitless number of Buddhas. It means that he has now become a perfect seeker, a perfect student, who keeps on endlessly learning from all things and people in this world. That’s why the *Larger Sutra* calls Dharmakara’s practice “the eternal practice.”

This way, the *Larger Sutra*, using the personal symbol of Dharmakara (or Amida Buddha), shows us the meaning of the true self. The true self is the self that is one with the Dharma of impermanence, or the dynamic and creative flow of life. It is the self that is not satisfied with any fixed meanings and keeps on endlessly discovering new meaning in all things. The *Larger Sutra* teaches us that the most important thing in our lives is to discover and realize the true self that Dharmakara symbolizes.

The Importance of Realizing the True Self: Two Types of Fire

Now let me give an illustration that shows the importance of realizing the true self in our lives. Suppose we go out and create two types of fire. One is a small candle flame and the other is a bonfire. Suppose a strong blast of wind blows on both.

First, what happens to the small candle flame when the blast of wind comes? Obviously the candle flame is immediately blown out. Then, what happens to the bonfire when the same blast of wind comes? The bonfire is not extinguished like the candle flame. On the contrary, it gets bigger and bigger because of the wind.

It's interesting that the same blast of wind extinguishes one fire and enhances the other. This means that the strong wind itself does not have any inherent role as an extinguisher or as an enhancer. Then, what makes the wind an extinguisher or an enhancer? What makes it a negative force or a positive force? It is the nature of the fire that determines the role of the wind. Whether a fire is small or large determines whether the wind becomes a negative force or a positive force. If a fire is small, the wind becomes an extinguisher, a negative force. But if a fire is large, the wind becomes an enhancer, a positive force.

Here I am using two types of fire as symbols of the two types of selves, the ego-self and the true self. A candle flame symbolizes the ego-self and a bonfire symbolizes the true self. Just as the wind easily blows out a small fire, difficulties in our lives can easily overwhelm us if we have only the ego-self. But, just as the wind enhances a great fire, difficulties in our lives can nurture, grow, and strengthen us if we have the true self.

We have many unexpected events in our lives that seem very difficult to take. The strong wind symbolizes them. Those events, however, do not have any inherent meaning as something negative. We often consider them simply negative, but they are not necessarily so. If we have the ego-self, they are simply negative; they could easily overwhelm and even destroy us. But if we have the true self that Dharmakara symbolizes, we can discover something positive in them. We can be nurtured, grown, and strengthened by them. There is nothing in this world that is absolutely negative or meaningless. If we have the true self realized within us, everything can become a teacher.

How Can the True Self Be Realized in Our Lives?

Now I have discussed the meaning of the true self and the importance of having it realized in our lives. Here let me discuss another important question: "How can the true self be realized in our lives?" Shinran answers this question by saying that the true self is realized within us when we meet historical individuals, living or dead, who embody the true self—Dharmakara's spirit. It is only by meeting them and having deep spiritual resonance or communion with them that we can have the true self realized in us.

Although people may think that they can realize the true self by themselves, I do not think they can do so. The true self is so deeply hidden within us that we can in no way awaken it. We are not even aware we have it in us. Even if we try hard to eliminate the ego-self and realize the true self within us through our own efforts, we cannot do so because our egos are so deep-rooted. Even our efforts to eliminate our egos are often based on our egos.

During his twenty years on Mt. Hiei, Shinran tried hard to eliminate his ego through religious practices such as self-discipline and meditation. But he realized that he could not do so because his efforts to eliminate his ego were based upon his ego. Thus when Shinran met with Honen, who embodied the spirit of Dharmakara, he was deeply shaken by him. Then, the new self, the true self (or shinjin) was awakened from the depths of his being.

Shinran said that the true self was realized by the power coming from the Buddha; it was a gift from the Buddha. Although the true self came out of his being, he said that he could not take credit for its arising. All our predecessors encountered such individuals and received the true self from them. Shinran received it from his teacher Honen. Honen received it from his teacher Shan-tao. Shan-tao received it from his teacher Tao-ch'o.

Shinran also said that when a person embodied the true self, he embarked on a very powerful and meaningful life filled with joy and gratitude; and when he passed away, his life was completed and fulfilled. Shinran called this the realization of supreme Buddhahood (or Amida Buddhahood).

Conclusion

When Shinran said Amida Buddha liberated him, he meant that the true self, Dharmakara's dynamic spirit, liberated him. Amida's liberating him did not mean that he was saved by a divine savior, or by some kind of mysterious power. Buddhism is not a teaching of a dualistic faith, a faith between a superhuman savior and the saved.

Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination and self-realization. Buddhist liberation means the realization of the true self in us. It means that Dharmakara is born in us. Shinran teaches us that we can have the true self realized within us when we meet individuals, living or dead, who embody the true self. He says that since our ego consciousness cannot awaken the true self, it is a gift from the Buddha. He also teaches us that when a person embodies the true self, he embarks on a very powerful and meaningful life, filled with joy and gratitude; and when the person passes away, his life is completed and fulfilled.

We must personally have Dharmakara realized in our own beings. When Dharmakara is born in us, our life becomes very meaningful, powerful, and creative. We cannot help dynamically advancing, listening, and learning, without grabbing at any conclusions and answers. Our whole being becomes an endless seeking and learning process. We cannot help

tasting the deep, fresh taste of life that exists in the present moment. If we have the true self realized within us, all the things that have seemed meaningless in our lives, things such as mistakes, failures, sickness, accidents, frustration, and agony, start to have new meaning. We are liberated by the power of the true self (shinjin) that comes out of our beings.

“Revere This Shinjin Alone!”

—Shinran’s View of Shinjin as *Bodhicitta*—

Nobuo Haneda

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I. Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss Shinran’s view of shinjin. Shinran considers shinjin the most important spiritual awakening we should experience in our lives. When he met his teacher Honen, he experienced shinjin and his life went through a total transformation. He started to live a powerful and creative life being filled with joy and gratitude. Since he wished to share this shinjin experience with others, he engaged in teaching activities.

Shinjin, a Japanese term that is difficult to translate with one English word, means a spiritual awakening experience that is realized through hearing the teachings of Buddhas, our Buddhist teachers. What enlightenment (*satori*) is to Zen Buddhism, shinjin is to Shin Buddhism. While Zen enlightenment is the goal (or “fruit-stage”) of the Buddhist path, shinjin is the beginning (or “causal stage”) of the Buddhist path. Shinran identifies shinjin with Dharmakara, a seeker of Buddhahood described in the *Larger Sutra*, who symbolizes the true self. Or, more specifically, Dharmakara symbolizes an unsuppressible innermost human aspiration that is absolutely determined to attain Buddhahood.

Shinran says that attaining shinjin is everything in Buddhism. He believes that when a person experiences the birth of shinjin in him, he does not have to worry about the attainment of Buddhahood (or enlightenment) because he is absolutely assured of attaining it; shinjin contains in itself the attainment of Buddhahood. The shinjin person lives his life in a powerful and creative way being filled with wonderful spiritual qualities.

Shinran explains shinjin by identifying it with some Mahayana Buddhist concepts, such as “*bodhicitta* (aspiration for Buddhahood)” and “Buddha nature.” He also identifies it with some Pure Land concepts, such as “the threefold mind (i.e., sincere mind, *shingyo* [i.e., a synonym of shinjin], and aspiration for birth)” and “birth in the Pure Land.”

In this essay, to explain Shinran’s view of shinjin, I will discuss three issues. First, I will discuss a doctrinal controversy in which a Kegon monk by the name of Myoe criticized Honen’s view of *bodhicitta*. Second, I will discuss how Shinran responded to Myoe’s criticism of Honen. Third, I will discuss two issues concerning Shinran’s view of shinjin: (1) his view of shinjin as seen in his interpretation of the “Passage Describing Fulfillment” (in the *Larger Sutra*), the most important doctrinal basis of his teaching, and (2) his view of shinjin as a gift.

It is important that we have a clear understanding of the concept of shinjin. Without it we cannot be said to know Shin Buddhism.

II. Myoe’s Criticism of Honen’s View of *Bodhicitta*

In order to know Shinran’s view of shinjin, we must first discuss a doctrinal controversy that took place at the time of Shinran. This controversy centered on Honen’s view of *bodhicitta* (aspiration for Buddhahood).

Here I must first talk about Myoe (1173-1232), a famous Kegon scholar who was born in

the same year Shinran was born. Before Myoe read the *Senchaku-hongan-nembutsu-shu*, Honen's main work, he deeply respected Honen. But when he read it, he was surprised and infuriated by what Honen said in that work, particularly by his view of *bodhicitta*.

In his main work, Honen said, "*Bodhicitta* is not necessary for people to be born in the Pure Land." This view of Honen's was based on a passage in the *Contemplation Sutra* in which the people of the lowest level of the lowest grade attain birth in the Pure Land just by saying the Name of Amida Buddha—without awakening *bodhicitta*.

Honen believed that both the 18th Vow (that is found in the *Larger Sutra*) and the passage in the *Contemplation Sutra* described the process by which the most evil can be saved. Honen thought that the people of his time were extremely degraded and were no longer capable of performing any traditional Buddhist practices and attaining Buddhahood in this life. Thus, Amida Buddha, out of compassion, gave the practice of saying the Name (or the Nembutsu) specifically to the people of Honen's time. By only saying the Name, they would be born in the Pure Land after their deaths and eventually become Buddhas there. Thus, saying the Name was the only necessary condition for liberation, and the awakening of *bodhicitta* was not necessary.

When Myoe learned about Honen's view, he was appalled and infuriated. For Myoe, *bodhicitta* was the indispensable basis of Mahayana Buddhism. It was by awakening *bodhicitta* that a person became a bodhisattva (a seeker of Buddhahood) and embarked on the Mahayana path. Thus, denying *bodhicitta* was synonymous with denying Mahayana Buddhism. If Honen in fact denied *bodhicitta*, the inner cause of liberation, and regarded Amida's power, an external power, as the cause of liberation, Honen could not be considered a Buddhist. He must be an advocate of non-Buddhist teachings.

Thus, in order to refute Honen's view, Myoe wrote a text entitled *Zaijarin* (Crushing a Perverted Wheel). He harshly criticized what he considered doctrinal mistakes Honen was making. Not only Myoe but also many other Buddhist scholars of the time criticized Honen.

The criticism of Honen that culminated in Myoe's writing of his *Zaijarin* was partially responsible for the persecution of Honen and his disciples. Four of Honen's disciples were executed and eight individuals, including Honen and Shinran, were exiled. Even after Honen's death, his tomb and the woodblocks for his writing were destroyed. Because of this persecution, Honen's Sangha in Kyoto ceased to exist.

Thus, some of Honen's disciples wrote texts to defend their teacher. Shinran was one of them. Many Buddhist scholars say that Myoe's criticism of Honen was one of the reasons Shinran wrote the *Kyogyoshinsho*, his main work. Shinran deals with the issue of *bodhicitta* (or *shinjin*) in the Shin Volume of the *Kyogyoshinsho*, which appears to be his response to Myoe's criticism of Honen.

III. Shinran's Response to Myoe: Two Types of *Bodhicitta*

Now let me discuss Shinran's response to Myoe's criticism of Honen. Here, an important question is: "Did Honen really deny the need of *bodhicitta* for liberation?" Shinran answered this question by discussing two types of *bodhicitta*: self-power (or the Path of Sages) *bodhicitta* and Other Power (or Pure Land) *bodhicitta*. (Shinran coined the term "lengthwise *bodhicitta*" for the former and "crosswise *bodhicitta*" for the latter.)

Shinran explains the two types of *bodhicitta* as follows. Self-power *bodhicitta* means *bodhicitta* that a person generates within himself by relying upon his own abilities. Other Power *bodhicitta* means *bodhicitta* that a person experiences by receiving the power of Amida Buddha, by hearing the teachings of the Buddha's wisdom.

Shinran said that Honen denied the first type of *bodhicitta* (that Myoe was talking about) but did not deny the second type. He believed that the word "shinjin" that Honen used in his teachings was actually synonymous with Other Power *bodhicitta*. Since Honen considered *shinjin* indispensable for birth in the Pure Land and eventual attainment of Buddhahood, Shinran believed that the teacher's *shinjin* and Other Power *bodhicitta* were synonymous. Thus, Shinran claimed that Honen did not deny (Other Power) *bodhicitta*. Now let me discuss Shinran's view of these two types of *bodhicitta*.

A. Shinran's View of Self-Power (or the Path of Sages) *Bodhicitta*

Shinran thought that Honen was right in saying that self-power *bodhicitta* was not necessary for liberation because Shinran could not realize it in himself through his twenty years of practice on Mt. Hiei. Even if he thought he had awakened self-power *bodhicitta*, it disappeared immediately, being overwhelmed by his violent passions.

As a result of his practice on Mt. Hiei, Shinran became totally disappointed in himself; he could not believe that he had self-power *bodhicitta* within himself. Eventually, he said,

“Since I am incapable of all religious practices, hell is my only home.” In the following three verses, Shinran describes his despair at having failed to realize self-power *bodhicitta*:

I may think that these times belong to the right dharma-age,
But in me—the lowest of foolish beings—
There is no mind that is pure, true, or real;
How could I awaken *bodhicitta* (aspiration for enlightenment)?

Bodhicitta through self-power taught in the Path of Sages
Is beyond my mind and words;
I, a foolish being ever sinking in transmigration,
How could I awaken it?

Under the guidance of Buddhas who appeared in this world,
Three times the sands of the Ganges in number,
I awakened great *bodhicitta*,
But my self-power failed, and I continued to transmigrate.

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 402, with modification by N. Haneda)

These verses show that although Shinran awakened self-power *bodhicitta* many times, it disappeared, and he could not be liberated from suffering. He says that he became a total failure as far as self-power *bodhicitta* was concerned. For him, self-power *bodhicitta* could not be the basis of liberation. Here he heartily agrees with Honen that self-power *bodhicitta* is not necessary for liberation.

B. Shinran’s View of Shinjin as Other Power (or Pure Land) *Bodhicitta*

Now let me discuss Shinran’s view of shinjin as Other Power (or Pure Land) *bodhicitta*. Shinran thought that shinjin and Dharmakara (who symbolizes *bodhicitta* [aspiration for Buddhahood]) were synonymous. It is by having shinjin or Dharmakara (or *bodhicitta*) awakened in his mind that he is liberated. Shinran identified shinjin with *bodhicitta* as follows:

True and real shinjin is *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* is the aspiration to save all beings. The aspiration to save all beings is the mind that grasps sentient beings and brings them to birth in the Pure Land of happiness. This mind is the mind of ultimate equality. It is great compassion. This mind attains Buddhahood. This mind is Buddha.

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 314, with modification by N. Haneda)

This shinjin is the aspiration to bring all beings to the attainment of supreme nirvana. It is great *bodhicitta*. It is great compassion. This shinjin is Buddha-nature and Buddha-nature is Tathagata.

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 463, with modification by N. Haneda)

Then, why did Shinran think that Honen’s shinjin and *bodhicitta* were synonymous? Let me answer this question by referring to a couple of Honen’s teachings that imply that Honen himself considered shinjin synonymous with Other Power (or Pure Land) *bodhicitta*.

First, although Honen said in his main work that *bodhicitta* is not necessary for liberation, he said in another work entitled *Sanbukyo-shaku* (Commentary on the Three Sutras), “Different Buddhist schools define *bodhicitta* in different ways. In the Pure Land school [i.e., Honen’s own school] *bodhicitta* is defined as aspiration for birth in the Pure Land.” These words show that although Honen denied the self-power *bodhicitta* of other Buddhist schools, he did not deny the Pure Land *bodhicitta*.

Second, although Honen denied *bodhicitta* in his main work, he, in the same work, said that the threefold mind (i.e., sincere mind, deep mind, and aspiration for birth in the Pure Land) that he identified with shinjin was indispensable for birth in the Pure Land and eventual attainment of Buddhahood.

Thus we can see in Honen a view that shinjin (or the threefold mind) and the Pure Land *bodhicitta* are the same; both are the indispensable cause of birth in the Pure Land. Probably on the basis of this view of Honen’s, Shinran thought that the teacher’s shinjin and Other Power *bodhicitta* were synonymous.

Here I want to discuss Shinran’s statement in his *Kyogyoshinsho* in which he emphasizes that shinjin is the indispensable inner cause for birth in the Pure Land and the attainment of Buddhahood. By emphasizing this point, Shinran wished to say that since Honen considered shinjin (or Other Power *bodhicitta*) the indispensable inner cause of human liberation, Myoe’s criticism of Honen was not valid. In other words, Shinran wished to say that Myoe’s criticism that Honen advocated non-Buddhist teaching (i.e., teaching of salvation by an external savior) and denied *bodhicitta*, the basis of Mahayana Buddhism, was totally wrong. Shinran says,

... if shinjin, karmic-consciousness, is lacking, one will not reach the land of light. The karmic-consciousness of true and real shinjin is the inner cause. The Name and light—our father and mother—are the outer conditions. When the inner cause and outer conditions merge, one realizes the true body in the fulfilled land [i.e., Buddhahood].

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 54, with modification by N. Haneda)

Here Shinran talks about two things that are indispensable for the attainment of Buddhahood:

- (1) Outer conditions: (a) the Name (or the compassionate father), referring to the teachings of historical teachers, such as Shakyamuni and the seven patriarchs; (b) light (or the compassionate mother), referring to the Buddha's wisdom (of which Amida is a symbol) that underlies the teachings of historical teachers.
- (2) Inner cause: the karmic consciousness of true and real shinjin that lies behind regular (ego) consciousness.

Shinran believes that outer conditions consist of the teachings of historical teachers, such as Shakyamuni and the seven patriarchs, and the Buddha's wisdom (of which Amida is a symbol) that underlies these teachings. Although these outer conditions are important for spiritual liberation, they alone cannot realize Buddhahood. There must be the karmic consciousness of shinjin, the inner cause, in the human mind.

The relationship between the inner cause of shinjin and the outer conditions of teachings is precisely like the relationship between a seed and outer conditions such as air, moisture, heat, and soil. No matter how many wonderful outer conditions there may be, if the seed is dead, there will be no sprouting. The seed must be alive. Similarly, even if the seed is alive, if there are no outer conditions, nothing happens. If the seed is placed on a desk, it will never sprout. If a seed is alive and encounters good outer conditions, it will certainly sprout.

In the following verse, Shinran says that shinjin, or karmic consciousness, has existed in human beings from the immemorial past and has been waiting to be realized by the outer conditions of teachings (i.e., Shakyamuni) and the Buddha's wisdom (i.e., Amida):

Shakyamuni and Amida are our father and our mother,
Full of love and compassion for us;
Guiding us through various skillful means,
They bring us to awaken the supreme shinjin.

(Shinran's notes)

Shakyamuni is likened to our father, Amida to our mother.

Awaken (hotsu-ki): *hotsu* means to awaken what has existed from the past; *ki* means to give rise to something new, for the first time.

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 380)

Here Shinran analyses the word *hotsu-ki* that consists of two Chinese characters, *hotsu* (awaken) and *ki* (awaken). He says, "*Hotsu* (awaken) means to awaken what has existed from the past." He indicates here that the shinjin, the inner cause, has been waiting to be awakened in the human mind from the immemorial past and it is awakened by the outer conditions of the teachings of Shakyamuni and Amida.

This is how Shinran identified shinjin with Other Power *bodhicitta*. He believed that he learned this view of shinjin from Honen. He believed that since his teacher talked about shinjin (or Other Power *bodhicitta*) as the indispensable cause of spiritual liberation, Myoe's criticism that Honen denied *bodhicitta* was totally wrong.

IV. Shinran's View of Shinjin

A. Shinran's View of Shinjin As Seen in His Interpretation of the "Passage Describing Fulfillment" (in the *Larger Sutra*)

Now I want to discuss Shinran's view of shinjin concerning how shinjin (or Other Power *bodhicitta*) is realized in human beings, what its contents are, and what kind of life it realizes. Here let us examine the "Passage Describing Fulfillment" (in the *Larger Sutra*), a passage that talks about the fulfillment of the 17th and 18th Vows. Shinran considered this passage the most important text in all Buddhist literature and systematized his doctrine on the basis of it. It is not an exaggeration to say that all of Shinran's works were commentary on it. He believed that it described not only the process of his personal liberation, but also that of all human beings' liberation.

Shinran read the passage (that is in Classical Chinese) in a way that was totally different from the traditional way. I have given here an interpretive translation of the passage by inserting some words (that are not in the original text) to show the uniqueness of Shinran's reading:

All Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are praising the inconceivable and majestic spiritual qualities of the Buddha of immeasurable life. *When sentient beings [who have failed in all religious practices] hear the Name that is being said by all Buddha-tathagatas in the ten quarters, they experience even one-thought moment of shinjin and joy.* [The Name] is given to them by Amida's sincere mind. Receiving [Dharmakara's] aspiration to be born in the Pure Land, they immediately attain birth there and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression.

(Trans. by N. Haneda. Cf. *Collected Works of Shinran*, pp. 154, 474-6)

I have italicized the part that I consider the most important in this passage. Shinran interprets “all Buddhas-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters” as the Buddhas (teachers) in a historical context, such as Shakyamuni and the seven patriarchs. For Shinran, Honen, whom he met, represented all these Buddhas. When Shinran met Honen, the teacher was saying the Name, i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu*.

When Shinran heard the Name being said by Honen and understood its deep meaning, he experienced one-thought moment of (i.e., flash-like) *shinjin* that was accompanied by joy. The above-italicized part is the textual basis for Shinran's view that “*shinjin*” and “hearing and understanding the meaning of the Name” are synonymous and that all sentient beings can fully attain *shinjin* only by hearing and understanding the meaning of the Name.

Shinran says that the Name (*Namu Amida Butsu*) is the calling voice from ultimate reality—a verbalization of the voiceless voice of ultimate reality. He says that *Namu Amida Butsu* is an imperative sentence, or a command, meaning “Take refuge in the Buddha's wisdom of oneness [i.e., the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive]!” The Name urges us to forget dualistic human wisdom by which we divide all things into two, the positive and the negative, and love only the former and hate the latter. It urges us to appreciate the Buddha's wisdom of oneness.

Shinran says that the Buddha's wisdom, which is contained in the Name, awakens the same wisdom within human minds—that Buddhahood, which is expressed in the Name, awakens the same Buddhahood within human minds. When a person meets a Buddha, hears him explain the meaning of the Name, understands it, and is moved by it, he experiences oneness with the Buddha. There is no dualistic subject-object (or savior-saved) relationship between the Buddha and the person. *Shinjin* is an experience in which the Buddha's wisdom (Other Power) challenges and humbles human wisdom (self-power). It is an experience in which human beings start to participate in the dynamic working of the Buddha's wisdom.

Another important part of this passage that is relevant to our discussion is the sentence, “They immediately attain birth there and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression.” This means that the *shinjin* person immediately attains birth in the Pure Land in this life and dwells in the stage of non-retrogression (i.e., the stage in which one necessarily attains Buddhahood).

The phrase “they immediately attain birth” is the textual basis for Shinran's view that *shinjin* is synonymous with birth in the Pure Land in this life. This view of Shinran's is quite different from the view held by traditional Pure Land followers of his time that one attains birth in the Pure Land only after one's physical death.

Traditional Pure Land followers thought that they could not dwell in the stage of nonretrogression until they attained birth in the Pure Land after their physical deaths. They did not believe that they could have the wonderful spiritual qualities of the Buddha while they were alive. But Shinran thinks that the *shinjin* person can attain the stage of nonretrogression in this life, receive wonderful spiritual qualities, and embark on a life that is full of joy and gratitude. The *shinjin* person lives his life in the most powerful, creative, and meaningful manner. Thanks to the Buddha's wisdom that he receives not only from his teachers but also from within himself, he can appreciate all things in his life, not only the positive but also the negative.

B. Shinran's View of *Shinjin* as a Gift

Another important aspect of Shinran's view of *shinjin* is that he considered *shinjin* a gift from the Tathagata (or Buddha). Here a question arises. If Shinran says that *shinjin* is an inner cause and its arising within him is his liberation, why does he still say that *shinjin* is a gift from the Tathagata? If Shinran says that outer conditions (such as the “Name” and “light”) are gifts, we can understand it. But if he says that *shinjin* that arises from within him is a gift, it is difficult for us to understand.

Here we must read the section known as “Dharmakara's eternal practice” in the *Larger Sutra*. On the basis of this section Shinran probably considered *shinjin* a gift. It says,

Dharmakara taught innumerable sentient beings and guided them on the path of the supreme Buddhahood. He was reborn as a rich man, a layperson, a member of the highest caste or of a noble family, a king... He worshipped all Buddhas by making

the four kinds of offerings [i.e., clothing, food, bedding, and medicine] to them.

(Trans. by N. Haneda. Cf. Inagaki, Hisao. *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, p. 42)

This section tells us that Dharmakara became not only teachers, givers of the Dharma, but also all kinds of sentient beings, recipients of the Dharma. This means that innermost aspiration (of which Dharmakara is a symbol) assumed two forms: (1) outer conditions, i.e., teachers; and (2) the inner cause, i.e., shinjin, that is latent within sentient beings.

Shinran believes that since human beings had been sunk in samsara for a long time, they had become corrupted and no longer had any potential for spiritual liberation. Thus, Dharmakara (“pure shinjin”), out of compassion for the misery of human beings, entered into human minds in the immemorial past so that he could become the inner cause for liberation.

In the Shin Volume of the *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran says that the Tathagata gave “pure shinjin,” the mind of Dharmakara that transcends ego consciousness, to human beings:

The Tathagata, turning with compassion toward the ocean of living beings in pain and affliction, has given unhindered and vast pure shinjin to the ocean of sentient beings.

This is called the “true and real shinjin that is [Amida’s] benefiting of others.”

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 98)

Here Shinran says that the Tathagata gave “pure shinjin,” or Dharmakara, to human beings in the deepest part of their minds in the immemorial past and “pure shinjin” has been waiting to be awakened. When we have the good outer conditions of hearing the teachings of the Buddha’s wisdom and keep hearing them, “pure shinjin” will come out of us. We will experience its birth just as the shell of a seed gets broken and a sprout appears. Thus, Shinran believed that “pure shinjin” was given to him in the immemorial past.

This “pure shinjin” is the true self that is one with the Dharma. This true self is the dynamic self, the continuously seeking and learning self. Shinran thought that although the true self came out of him, it did not belong to him. Since it was foreign to his ego consciousness, his ego consciousness could not comprehend it nor generate it. Shinran could not take credit for it. He considered the true self a gift from the Tathagata. He could not help bowing his head before it.

In recent Japanese history, Rev. Ryojin Soga (1875-1971, a famous Shin scholar), said Dharmakara is *alaya-vijnana* (latent consciousness). *Alaya-vijnana* and the karmic-consciousness that we discussed earlier are synonymous. Rev. Soga indicates that Dharmakara, who became our latent consciousness, has been practicing within us and has been waiting for the time when he is realized in our lives.

Rev. Soga also says, “The Tathagata liberates me by becoming me,” or “Dharmakara has become me, but I am not Dharmakara.” These words indicate that since Dharmakara (or “pure shinjin”) entered his mind and became the inner cause of liberation in the immemorial past, Rev. Soga, or his defiled ego consciousness, cannot take credit for Dharmakara’s existence.

V. Conclusion

Let me summarize this essay. Myoe criticized Honen’s view that *bodhicitta* was not necessary for liberation. Shinran defended Honen by talking about two types of *bodhicitta*: self-power *bodhicitta* and Other Power *bodhicitta*. Shinran thought that although Honen denied the former, he did not deny the latter. Shinran believed that Honen identified shinjin with Other Power *bodhicitta*. He claimed that since Honen considered shinjin (or Other Power *bodhicitta*) the indispensable inner cause of human liberation, Myoe’s criticism of Honen was wrong.

We studied Shinran’s interpretation of the “Passage of Fulfillment,” the most important doctrinal basis of his teaching. Shinran teaches us that “hearing the meaning of the Name (i.e., the Buddha’s wisdom)” alone realizes shinjin, our spiritual liberation—that “hearing the meaning of the Name” is itself shinjin. He also teaches us that shinjin is immediate birth in the Pure Land—birth in the sphere of the Buddha’s wisdom.

When Dharmakara (shinjin) is born within us, the spirit that is determined to realize supreme Buddhahood is born within us. In the “Verses of Repeated Vows” (in the *Larger Sutra*), Dharmakara says, “I will necessarily attain supreme Buddhahood.” Thus Shinran says that the person who awakens Dharmakara within him attains “the stage of nonretrogression” where he is assured of attaining supreme Buddhahood, Amida Buddhahood. Shinran also says that the shinjin person lives a dynamic life as a constant seeker and learner, being filled with wonderful spiritual qualities.

Shinjin is the true self that is one with the Dharma. Shinran considered shinjin a gift because the Tathagata, out of compassion for the miserable conditions of human beings, gave it to them in the immemorial past. Although shinjin, the true self, came out of Shinran’s mind, it was beyond him and belonged to the Buddha. Shinran bowed his head before it. In

the preface of his *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran says, “Revere this shinjin alone!” The ultimate goal in Buddhism is the discovery of the true self, the noble self, which comes from within us. We revere something noble within us—something that is in us and beyond us.

“Thank You” for Your Generous Donation

(May–December, 2011)

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Notes:

July 29-31, 2011, we held our summer retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. The two speakers, Dr. Haneda and Rev. Nakai, spoke on “The Importance of ‘Listening’ in Shin Buddhism.” Fifty-three people attended the retreat. Now the DVD sets of “Summer Retreat” of the last four years are available. Each set is \$50 including handling/postage.

We held our Japanese Buddhist retreat December 2-4. Fifteen people attended it.

This year Rev. and Mrs. LaVerne Sasaki gave our center a wonderful *obutsu-dan* (a Buddhist altar). This *obutsu-dan* originally belonged to Mrs. Helen Sasaki’s parents. We want to express our deepest gratitude to Rev. and Mrs. Sasaki.

We want to express our gratitude to the following individuals:

Mrs. Kazuko Eidmann, Mrs. Mariko Harumi, Mrs. Kimie Hoshi, Mr. Mike Rimkus, and Mrs. Chieko Uchida for their help in preparation for our retreat; Mr. Steve Kaufman and Mr. Paul Vielle for editing the articles in this newsletter.

Every Saturday (from 2:00 to 5:00 pm) we hold a study class at the Maida Center. We have been studying Shinran’s *Kyogyoshinsho*. Everyone is welcome to attend.

We hope you welcome a wonderful new year. May your new year become a year of dynamic Dharma-hearing! (T.H.)

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