

2. What Is Hongan?

“Hongan” is a term that is familiar to Shin Buddhists. But being familiar does not mean that we have an accurate understanding of it. It is often the case that we have a shallow, if not wrong, understanding of it. Since a good understanding of this term is crucial to understanding Shin Buddhism, let me discuss it.

The Japanese term “Hongan” consists of two words, “*hon*” and “*gan*.” The meanings of these two words are as follows:

Hon (Skt. *purva*): “basic,” “original,” “primal,” “former,” and “ancient”

Gan (Skt. *pranidhana*): “desire” and “vow”

“Hongan” has two basic meanings: (1) “Basic Desire,” the literal meaning; (2) “Original Vow.” In the first meaning, which is broad and general, “Hongan” means a “desire” to become a Buddha. In the second meaning, which is narrow and specific, it means a “vow” that a bodhisattva makes to become a Buddha. Although these two meanings, “desire” and “vow,” are connected, they refer to two different aspects (or stages) in Buddhist experience: (1) when one meets a Buddha, he awakens a “desire” to become a Buddha; (2) when the desire becomes very strong, he makes a “vow” (or “resolution”) to become a Buddha.

I consider it unfortunate that most English translators of Shin texts have translated “[Hon]gan” only as “[Original] Vow.” When “[Hon]gan” is translated only as “[Original] Vow,” it sounds like a concept that belongs only to some specific individuals; it is difficult to see the universal implication that is contained in the concept. It is true that in some places in Shin texts we must translate “[Hon]gan” as “[Original] Vow.” But translating it as “[Original] Vow” all the time contributes to the mystification of Shin teachings.

However, when we translate “[Hon]gan” as “[Basic] Desire,” we can easily see its universal implication. What, then, is the “Basic Desire”? It is the most basic and fundamental human desire, the oldest and earliest human desire. It is the desire that differentiates human beings from other animals. It is the aspiration to be a Buddha (a real human being)—to live the most meaningful and fulfilling life as a human being. It is extremely important to know that “Hongan” in the sense of “Basic Desire” does not belong to some specific individuals; it belongs to all human beings.

Let me discuss “Basic Desire” within the context of the life of Shakyamuni, the founder of Buddhism.

Tradition says that when Shakyamuni was young, he did not know the reality of human suffering. But when he grew up, he left the palace and witnessed the reality of human suffering in the form of old age, sickness, and death. He became extremely depressed. Then one day Shakyamuni went out of the palace again and met a traveling monk whose face was brilliantly shining. Shakyamuni was deeply impressed by him. Having discovered an ideal human being in the traveling monk, he could not suppress his desire to become a person like him. It was because of this desire that he left his palace to seek Buddhahood.

I believe that Shakyamuni's encounter with a traveling monk was the most crucial event in his life. Meeting a person of "Basic Desire," Shakyamuni's "Basic Desire" was awakened. An aspiration to become a Buddha was awakened in him. It was because of this "Basic Desire" that he sought Buddhahood and eventually attained it.

Let me explain how the concept of "Amida" came into being. After the passing of Shakyamuni, Buddhism gradually became a highly monastic and academic tradition: the initial spirit of Shakyamuni was lost. Early Buddhists (the so-called Hinayana followers) had tremendous respect for Shakyamuni's teachings. And partly because of this respect for their teacher, they turned Shakyamuni's teachings into a fixed system of thought. They were mainly concerned with memorizing, preserving, and transmitting it. They treated his teachings as if they were "finished products."

But about three centuries after the passing of Shakyamuni, there appeared a movement called the Mahayana that challenged the Hinayana. Mahayana followers criticized Hinayana followers for creating a fixed system of thought. They were not satisfied with merely knowing Shakyamuni's teachings as "finished products"; they wanted to know the creative source of inspiration that produced Shakyamuni, i.e., the universal basis of his spirit. To use an expression by Rev. Ryojin Soga (1875-1971, a Shin scholar), they wanted to know not only the spiritual essence of Shakyamuni but also that of "the Buddhism before Shakyamuni."ⁱ They identified the universal basis of his spirit as "Basic Desire (Hongan)" and came up with the concept of "Amida" (or "Dharmakara") as a symbol for it.

To explain this universal basis of Shakyamuni's spirit, Mahayana followers composed texts such as the *Larger Sukhavativyuha-sutra* (henceforth the *Larger Sutra*). The *Larger Sutra* talks about how Dharmakara ("Storehouse of the Dharma"), an ideal seeker, becomes a Buddha by the name of "Amida." When Dharmakara meets his teacher, he is deeply impressed by him and awakens a "desire" to become a Buddha like his teacher. Then he makes "vows" to become a Buddha and engages in a passionate practice called "eternal practice." He eventually fulfills his "desire" (or "vows") and becomes a Buddha by the name of Amida.

The essential message of the text is that "Dharmakara" symbolizes the "Basic Desire" or "Innermost Aspiration." Rev. Ryojin Soga identifies "Dharmakara" with "latent consciousness (*alaya-vijnana*)" that is deeply hidden in all human hearts.ⁱⁱ When we meet a person who embodies "Dharmakara" (or "Basic Desire"), we are deeply moved by him and experience liberation.

"Amida" (or "Dharmakara") is not a god or divine savior. He is a symbol for the "Basic Desire" in the human heart. Although the meaning of Amida is such, Amida has often been mistaken for a divine savior like the Christian God. Although Buddhism does not talk about anything divine, mysterious, or superhuman, Amida has often been mistaken for a divine savior.

This misunderstanding of Amida is prevalent not only in the United States but also in Japan. In modern Japan, some Shin teachers attempted to rectify this misunderstanding of "Amida." Rev. Haya Akegarasu was one of those Shin teachers. After many years of struggle he reached what he considered the true meaning of Amida. Earlier in life, Akegarasu believed that Amida was a divine savior like the Christian God. But when he

experienced a spiritual crisis at age thirty-seven, his view of Amida went through a total transformation.

Akegarasu was born in a Shin Buddhist temple and was exposed to the traditional Shin doctrines that were systematized during the Edo period (1600-1867). According to him, traditional Shin doctrines made him view Amida as a divine savior who existed outside himself. Akegarasu believed that he was a totally helpless sinner; that Amida, therefore, made a vow to save him out of compassion; and that when he put his faith in Amida, Amida saved him.

An important event that contributed to Akegarasu's later reinterpretation of Amida took place when he was a high school student. It was his meeting with his teacher, the Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa. Kiyozawa challenged Akegarasu's traditional view of Amida. Kiyozawa wanted Akegarasu to be awakened to the deeper meaning of Amida. But while Kiyozawa was alive, Akegarasu's view of Amida did not change.

But in 1913, when Akegarasu was thirty-seven, his wife passed away; in the following years some tragic events took place. These years are called the period of Akegarasu's crisis. In this period Akegarasu thought about quitting the ministry, emigrating to a foreign country, or even committing suicide.

It was then that Akegarasu's Amida as a divine savior crumbled. His faith in the grace of Amida crumbled as well. He finally realized that it is a mistake to understand Amida as an external divine savior. In one of his works, Akegarasu talks about his spiritual crisis and the subsequent demise of the Amida in whom he had believed:

Once I believed that the Power Beyond the Self [*ta-riki*] meant the Buddha's power, and that we were going to be saved by the external power of Amida Buddha. But when my soul experienced a deep crisis, the Buddha who was standing before me disappeared and I became helpless, unable to rely on anything.ⁱⁱⁱ

In this way Akegarasu's faith in Amida collapsed. He could not find anything that he could depend on. He faced absolute emptiness. This was the time when he even thought about suicide. But in this agony, he heard a shout that came from the innermost part of his being. He realized that the deepest reality in his being was this shout. He says:

Then, out of my desperate desire that something be done there appeared the self. A Buddha did not appear. People did not appear. The self shouted powerfully, "O, myself! O, myself!" The self did not shout, "O, God!" The self shouted, "O, myself!" Its voice told me, "Don't shout 'O, God!' Don't shout 'O, Buddha!' Live your true life and shout, 'O, myself!'"^{iv}

Akegarasu's deepest shout was not "O, Buddha!" It was "O, myself!" It was a shout gushing out of his life itself. He says that this shout was the voice of Amida. He realized that Amida was actually his own "Basic Desire." It was by discovering Amida within himself, by feeling its power within himself, that he could experience liberation. This, he says, is the true meaning of what Shinran teaches as "liberation through the Power of the Basic Desire (or Innermost Aspiration)."

If we asked Rev. Akegarasu, "What is Amida for you?," I believe that he would answer that Amida took two forms in his life: first, Amida took the form of his teacher

Kiyozawa—an external voice that challenged Akegarasu; second, it took the form of the “Basic Desire”—Akegarasu’s own inner voice that gushed out of himself. In order to further explain these two forms that Amida takes, let me give a simple illustration here.

Suppose a chick is sound asleep inside an eggshell. Outside the eggshell there is a mother chicken. In an attempt to awaken the chick, she is desperately pecking the shell from outside and shouting, “Awaken, my baby! Come out, my baby!” Although she is pecking and shouting hard, the chick’s sleep is so deep that he does not know that she is shouting. But since her voice gets louder and louder, he gradually realizes that a voice is coming from outside the shell. Finally he clearly recognizes her voice, which awakens his desire for birth. Now he hears a voice from within himself, a voice saying, “Be born!” Being moved by the power of the internal voice, he starts to peck the shell from within. Through the cooperation of the mother and the chick, the shell gets broken and the chick is born.

Now we can talk about the two forms that Amida takes, i.e., Amida’s external voice and its internal voice.

First, Amida’s external voice is like the calling voice of the mother chicken that comes from outside the shell and urges the chick to be born. What, then, is Amida’s external voice in more specific terms? It is the voices of *our Buddhist teachers*. For Shakyamuni, it was the voice of the traveling mendicant. For Akegarasu, it was the voice of Rev. Kiyozawa. There is nothing mysterious or superhuman about this calling voice from outside. It is the voices of our *human* teachers, of the individuals who exist in historical contexts. It refers to their words and teachings.

Second, Amida’s internal voice is like the calling voice that comes from within the chick and urges him to seek birth. Just as the mother’s external voice awakens the chick’s desire from within himself, our teachers’ voices awaken the “Basic Desire” from within us.

The first (external) voice is absolutely necessary for the second (internal) voice—the “Basic Desire”—to arise. Because our “Basic Desire” is so deeply hidden within ourselves and we are not even aware of possessing it, we cannot awaken it by ourselves. We must have it awakened by the first voice, by our teachers.

Although the first voice is absolutely indispensable for our birth or liberation, we must know that it cannot be our ultimate refuge. The first voice is like a midwife who assists at our birth. Its role is to guide us to the second voice. The most important thing, the thing that eventually realizes our liberation, is the second voice—our own “Basic Desire” that is awakened within ourselves.

I would like to conclude this essay with a famous statement that is attributed to the Buddha. According to tradition, when the Buddha was born, he took seven steps and declared, “Above the heavens and below the heavens, I alone am most noble.” This statement succinctly summarizes the essence of Buddhism.

When Shakyamuni Buddha said “above the heavens and below the heavens” he was talking about the two types of gods in whom the people of his time believed. When he said “above the heavens” he was talking about heavenly gods. When he said “below the heavens” he was talking about earthly gods. Saying, “Above the heavens and below the

heavens,” he was indicating that he does not need any gods, any external divine saviors. When he said, “I alone am most noble,” he was talking about the “Basic Desire” in his being. He said that his “Basic Desire” was most noble. This is the tradition of Shakyamuni Buddha and Shinran. This is the tradition of “liberation through the power of the Basic Desire.”

ⁱ For Rev. Soga’s discussion on Shinran’s view of Buddhist history, see *An Anthology of Modern Shin Buddhist Writings* (Kyoto: Shin Buddhist Comprehensive Research Institute, Otani University, 2001), pp. 59-80.

ⁱⁱ For Rev. Soga’s discussion on Dharmakara as the *alaya-vijnana*, see Ryojin Soga, *Soga Ryojin Senshu* [Selected Works of Ryojin Soga] (Tokyo: Yayoi-shobo, 1972), pp. 106-42. See also *An Anthology of Modern Shin Buddhist Writings*, pp. 45-57.

ⁱⁱⁱ Haya Akegarasu, *Shinran Shonin no shinnen* [The Religious Conviction of Shinran Shonin] (Ishikawa: Kososha, 1925), p. 17-18.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 18.