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## The Fulfillment of Human Life

-Shinran's View of the "Four Types of Buddhism"-

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#### Introduction

In this essay I want to talk about the fulfillment of human life. I want to talk about it because the fulfillment of human life is the most important issue for us. All of us desire to live our lives in a meaningful way. We desire to complete and fulfill our lives. None of us are happy with living in a lukewarm or meaningless way.

Rev. Rijin Yasuda (1900–1982, a famous Japanese Shin teacher) said that the only sin in Buddhism is expressed in the Buddhist term *kuka*. *Kuka* means "spending one's life in vain" or "wasting one's life." He said:

The only sin in Buddhism is *kuka*. We do not have to speak about various sins such as killing and stealing in Buddhism. Human existence is the only place where we can meet a Buddha and listen to him. Having such a wonderful existence, if we end our lives without meeting a Buddha and without listening to his teachings, that is the only sin, the greatest tragedy, for us. *Kuka* is the only sin in Buddhism.

I think that Rev. Yasuda is right. "Spending one's life in vain" or "wasting one's life" is the only sin in Buddhism. Then, an important question is "What enables us not to live our lives in vain?" or "What enables us to live our lives in a fulfilling way?" The answer to this question is that we must meet a vital teaching, a true teaching, which can give us the completion and fulfillment of our lives.

Many people say, "All religions are the same and at their core teach the same basic truth." In a superficial sense they are right. But in my opinion, only Shin Buddhism can give our lives the true fulfillment and completion. It is the one teaching that can liberate us from "spending our lives in vain."

# The Four Types of Buddhism

Shinran Shonin classified all Buddhist traditions into four types. I believe that he personally studied or practiced those four types of Buddhism and eventually came to the conclusion that only with the fourth type of teaching, Shin Buddhism, was it possible to find true life fulfillment and completion.

When we study these four types of Buddhism, we can clearly see the unique features of Shin Buddhism and how it differs from the other three. An examination of these four types of Buddhism is particularly important for us who are studying Shin Buddhism in this country. Here we have only a few good books on Shin Buddhism. Many people come up with their arbitrary understanding of Shin Buddhism and consequently misunderstand it. It is essential to examine the four types of Buddhism in order to understand this misunderstanding.

When we look at this schema, we may think that Shinran discussed these four types of Buddhism simply to criticize the first three. This schema may appear to be a negation and criticism of other Buddhist traditions, but it is important to always remember that this schema was not for Shinran a criticism of others but a deep and personal self-criticism. The

four types of Buddhism reflect the four stages of Buddhism Shinran himself went through to reach Shin Buddhism—the Buddhism that he considered the authentic Buddhism. This schema is a kind of personal testimony or confession—a kind of spiritual autobiography. It is a record of the places that he had to visit before he could meet the teacher that he could truly hear. The early stages are important, but like childhood they are only way stations on the way to full maturity. If we see this schema only as a criticism of other types of Buddhism and do not see it as Shinran's self-criticism, we do not correctly understand the meaning of this schema. The schema is as follows:

("Diagram for the four types of Buddhism" not found here)

Now let me explain these four types of Buddhism. Shinran calls the first two types of Buddhism the "Path of Sages" (or "Self Power" Buddhism). He calls the third and fourth types of Buddhism "Pure Land Buddhism" (or "Other Power" Buddhism).

When Shinran was nine, he went to Mt. Hiei and began his study of Buddhism. He stayed there for twenty years and immersed himself in the first two types of Buddhism. Shinran followed the third and fourth types of Buddhism after he met his teacher Honen at the age of twenty-nine. When Shinran became Honen's disciple, he initially followed the third type of Buddhism before a deep unsatisfied need pushed and pulled him forward to the fourth and final stage.

Let me explain what the letters, A, B, C, and D mean. The letter (A) means the point where a person is born. The letter (B) means the point where a person embarks on the Buddhist path. The letter (C) means the point where a person dies. The letter (D) means life after death. The repetition of D means the existence of many lives after this life.

Here in these charts we see xxx (crosses) and ooo (circles). Crosses mean "blind passions" or "impurities." "Blind passions" mean things such as anger and greed. Circles mean "absence of blind passions" or "purity." The arrow that stretches from left to right means practitioners' particular practice; and the word "Buddhahood" (or "arhathood") means the point where they attain Buddhahood (or "arhathood").

#### The First Two Types of Buddhism

Now let me explain the first two types of Buddhism—the two types of Paths of Sages. In these two teachings, practitioners believe that they can eliminate blind passions and realize Buddhahood (purity) through their own practices.

In the first type of Buddhism, although practitioners believe they can eliminate blind passions (impurities) through their practices, they do not think that they can become Buddhas in this lifetime. They believe that it requires many lives to completely eliminate blind passions and become Buddhas. Therefore their practice of eliminating blind passions does not end with death but must continue for many lives to come. This is symbolized in the chart by the repetition of D's. According to Shinran, Buddhist traditions such as Hinayana Buddhism and Hosso Buddhism belong to this category.

In the second type of Buddhism, practitioners believe they can totally eliminate blind passions through their practices and become Buddhas in this life. Shinran says that Buddhist traditions such as Zen, Shingon, Tendai, and Kegon Buddhism belong to this category. In this teaching they don't talk about life after death.

So, Shinran calls the first type of Buddhism a "gradual" Path of Sages; and he calls the second type of Buddhism an "immediate" Path of Sages. (Although Shinran performed Pure Land practices on Mt. Hiei, those Pure Land practices were part of the Path of Sages.)

## The Third Type of Buddhism

Now let me move to the third and fourth types of Buddhism, the two types of Pure Land Buddhism. Here I want to say that it is remarkable that Shinran talks about two types of Pure Land teaching. In this he differs from other Pure Land masters. Other masters (including his teacher Honen) talk about only one type of Pure Land teaching. Here we can say that the third type of Buddhism refers to Jodo-shu (the Pure Land school) and the fourth type of Buddhism refers to Shin Buddhism (Jodo Shinshu).

Before I discuss these two Pure Land teachings, let me say a few words about the fact that the followers of these two traditions use the same terms, such as Amida Buddha and the Pure Land. Since they use the same terms, many people think that the third and fourth traditions are not significantly different. But to think so is wrong. Although these two traditions use the same terms, the meanings of those terms are totally different.

Now, let me discuss the third type of Buddhism. When Shinran met Honen at the age of twenty-nine, he became his disciple. Many disciples of Honen understood Honen's teaching as the third type of teaching, and Shinran also believed that Honen was teaching the third type of teaching. Then what constitutes this third type? First, let me explain key concepts here, and discuss what salvation means in this teaching.

Here Amida is a personal savior. The Pure Land is a place where one goes after death.

In the first two types of Buddhism, the practitioners believe that they can eliminate some or all of their blind passions in this life through their own abilities, but the followers of the third type of Buddhism do not believe that. They have become total failures at the first two types of Buddhism; they consider that they cannot possibly eliminate even one of their blind passions. That's why we see only crosses in the present life here. (People in the fourth type of Buddhism also hold this view of blind passions.)

Salvation in the third teaching is explained as follows. At point B, at the outset of the Buddhist path, people meet a teacher. The teacher is saying the Nembutsu (or saying Namu Amida Butsu). He tells them, "Amida Buddha, a compassionate Buddha, felt sorry for people like us who are deeply immersed in blind passions. So he gave us the practice of saying Namu Amida Butsu as a last resort for our liberation. If we have faith in Amida and practice the Nembutsu, we will be born in the Pure Land after death."

Having heard the teacher's words, people practice the Nembutsu. They believe saying Namu Amida Butsu prepares them for their birth in the Pure Land after death. They chant Namu Amida Butsu thousands of times a day. And when the time of their death comes, Amida Buddha appears before them to welcome them to the Pure Land. So the dying moments are very important in this teaching. They must have calmness of mind, or right mindedness (*shonen*), at their deathbeds.

Having attained birth in the Pure Land after their deaths, they perform practices to eliminate blind passions in the Pure Land and eventually attain Buddhahood in the next life or in the life after that. That's an outline of the third teaching.

So, in this teaching, because people have passions, they *cannot* have a rich, powerful, and meaningful life in this world. It is only after they die that they can have the wonderful virtues of the Buddha. In this teaching, this life is like a preparation period for a wonderful future life. This third teaching is based on the *Contemplation Sutra*.

I think this third teaching is very much like Christian teaching. It talks about Amida as a personal savior, and the Pure Land as a kind of heaven after death. The Bible says, "For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son so that those who believe in him may not perish but have eternal life." I can rephrase this Christian sentence this way. "Amida Buddha so loved the world, he gave the Nembutsu practice so that those who believe in him may not go to hell and may be born in the Pure Land." This way, the Jodoshu teaching and the Christian message sound very much alike. Many people who have learned the Jodo-shu teaching in this country have the impression that it is not so much different from Christianity.

## The Fourth Type of Buddhism

Now let me move to the fourth type of teaching. First, let me discuss how Shinran moved from the third type of teaching to the fourth type. I have said that when Shinran became Honen's student at the age of twenty-nine, he initially followed the third type of teaching. But, after having spent some time studying under Honen, Shinran started to doubt that the third teaching (based on the *Contemplation Sutra*) was in fact the teaching of Honen.

Specifically, Shinran could not believe that Buddhism talked about salvation by a personal savior. One of the most unique aspects of Shakyamuni's teaching was that he denied the need for gods or divine saviors for liberation.

Shinran could not believe that the Pure Land existed after death. He had doubts about the Pure Land as an actual place.

Shinran also could not believe that the practice of mechanically chanting Namu Amida Butsu liberated people. If the *sound* of Namu Amida Butsu saves people, it does not have to be the *sound* of Namu Amida Butsu. Other sounds such as "Namu Myo Horenge-kyo" should also be good. If the *action* of saying Namu Amida Butsu saves people, it does not have to be the *action* of saying Namu Amida Butsu. The action of saying other words should also be equally effective.

Further, he could not believe that people attain birth in the Pure Land after death. He could not believe that this life is only a preparation period for a wonderful life after death.

Having doubts about the third teaching that is based on the *Contemplation Sutra*, Shinran began to read other sutras searching an answer to his questioning. Then he read a sutra entitled the *Larger Sutra* very carefully. Having read the sutra, he considered the *Larger Sutra* the most important Buddhist text. The sutra did not teach the third type of

teaching but the fourth type. Thus, although most of Honen's disciples believed that Honen taught the third type of teaching, Shinran believed that Honen taught the fourth type. Shinran proclaimed that the third teaching was a provisional teaching and the fourth teaching (that the *Larger Sutra* taught) was the authentic Buddhism.

Now let me talk about the fourth type of teaching. Shinran says that in the fourth type of teaching, Amida Buddha is a symbol of limitless wisdom (or the Buddha's wisdom). Shinran does not consider Amida to be a personal savior. He believes that wisdom is everything in Buddhism and wisdom liberates him. He believes that the personal symbol called Amida is a literary device that is used to show the importance of wisdom.

In the third type of Buddhism, the personhood of Amida is real; but in the fourth type of Buddhism, wisdom is real and the personhood of Amida is only symbolic—Amida is an expedient means (or a literary device) to show the importance of wisdom.

If you know how ancient Indians understood Amida Buddha, you will understand what I am saying here. In ancient India, when people heard the word Amitabha (that is the original word for Amida), they immediately understood its meaning because Amitabha was a word in their own native language. They understood that Amitabha meant "limitless light," a symbol of limitless wisdom. They knew that Buddhism was a teaching of wisdom, and in order to show the importance of wisdom the personal symbol called Amitabha was used. They must have said, "Yes, Amitabha, limitless light, limitless wisdom, liberates us. Yes, the Buddha's wisdom liberates us." When they heard the word Amitabha, they never thought that Amitabha was a personal savior—they never thought that Amitabha was a god or a divine savior.

But when the concept of Amitabha (or Amida) came to China or Japan, people did not understand its meaning, so they could not understand that it was a symbol and identified it as a personal savior.

So we can say that Shinran is trying to restore the original Indian meaning of Amitabha—Amida as a symbol of wisdom. I do not think Shinran ever used a personal image of Amida in his teaching activities; he always had characters, such as Namu Amida Butsu, on a lotus pedestal. Although other teachers usually had a personal image standing on a lotus pedestal, Shinran never had a personal image on it.

#### Meaning of Namu Amida Butsu—the Buddha's Wisdom

Shinran says that Namu Amida Butsu that consists of six characters is a sentence. Shinran says that it is an imperative sentence or a calling voice, saying, "Come to Limitless Light (Wisdom)!"

Shinran considers that hearing and understanding the wisdom contained in Namu Amida Butsu (in the calling voice "Come to Limitless Wisdom") liberates him. He believes that it is *not the sound* of Namu Amida Butsu that is important. It is *not the practice* (or *action*) of saying Namu Amida Butsu that is important. He considers that hearing *the meaning of the wisdom* contained in the calling voice liberates him. He considers that the wisdom contained in Namu Amida Butsu has power. The power of wisdom liberates him.

Then, what is the meaning of the wisdom that is contained in Namu Amida Butsu, the calling voice? The wisdom is called limitless wisdom. Limitless wisdom means the Buddha's wisdom. The Buddha's wisdom is diametrically opposed to human wisdom. Let me explain what the Buddha's wisdom means by first explaining what human wisdom means

Human wisdom is the wisdom that we cherish in our daily lives. It is dualistic wisdom. It is the wisdom that divides things into two—into the positive and the negative. We talk about health and sickness, life and death, wealth and poverty, happiness and suffering.

We love positive values (like health, life, wealth, and happiness) and hate negative values (like sickness, death, poverty, and suffering). We build our lives on positive values and desire that negative values not be part of our lives. But if we are attached only to positive values and do not see any meaning in negative ones, then only half of our lives has meaning. Only things such as health, life, wealth, and happiness have meaning; the negative things do not have any meaning whatsoever. If sickness and death are meaningless, our lives will end in meaninglessness because our lives will end with sickness and death.

But the Buddha's wisdom is different. The Buddha is not satisfied with fixed meanings and values. He is not complacent with loving only positive values and hating negative values. He is eager to discover meaning in everything he experiences in his life. He is eager to discover new positive meaning in negative things that human wisdom hates. He is eager to encompass all, appreciate all. His wisdom is called non-dualistic wisdom, or non-discriminative wisdom. It is also called all-encompassing wisdom or all-appreciating

wisdom. Thus his wisdom is called "the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive (tenjo no chie)."

This wisdom is expressed in the story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara that is told in the *Larger Sutra*. To become a Buddha named Amida Buddha, Bodhisattva Dharmakara is determined to find "positive" meaning in all negative things. In one of his verses in the *Tanbutsu-ge*, Dharmakara says, "Even if I were to stay in the midst of the most poignant suffering, I will endure and never regret it. I will seek the Dharma continuously." Dharmakara is saying here that he will transform hell into a learning place—something negative into something positive. That's why his wisdom is called the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive.

Now I have explained the wisdom that is contained in Namu Amida Butsu, the calling voice, saying, "Come to the Buddha's wisdom!" This wisdom teaches us that nothing in our lives is meaningless—that everything could become an indispensable condition for the fulfillment of our lives. Here let me talk about how Shinran explains the awakening experience in the fourth type of Buddhism.

In the fourth type of Buddhism, at point B, when we meet a teacher who embodies the Buddha's wisdom, we are deeply shaken by him. When we meet the teacher, hear him say Namu Amida Butsu ("Come to the Buddha's wisdom!"), and understand the meaning of the wisdom, we are deeply moved by it. The Buddha's wisdom shakes us and awakens the same wisdom within us. Shinran calls this experience the "shinjin experience." He says that the awakening of shinjin is the awakening of the Buddha's wisdom within us. He says that hearing the calling voice alone liberates us. He says that hearing the voice "Come to the Buddha's wisdom!" is the only important thing in our lives and nothing else is necessary for our liberation.

Shinran tells us that it is very difficult for us to hear the meaning of Namu Amida Butsu. But, he also tells us that if we keep on listening to it, we will be able to understand its meaning.

When we encounter the Buddha's wisdom, we recognize the pettiness of human wisdom, dualistic wisdom, in which we divide things into pluses and minuses and in which we see meaning only in pluses. When we encounter the Buddha's wisdom that is all encompassing and all appreciating, we recognize the narrowness and shallowness of human wisdom—we recognize the futility of judging the self and others on the basis of our dualistic criteria.

#### **Reality Becoming Ideal**

Now let me go back to the charts and discuss the differences between the first three types of Buddhism and Shin Buddhism. They are pivotal.

The first three types of Buddhism are based on human wisdom, dualistic wisdom. In the first three types of Buddhism, people, on the basis of dualistic wisdom, consider blind passions something negative and hate them. They are afraid of them. They believe that so long as they have blind passions, they cannot have meaningful lives—they cannot have true joy and happiness.

All of them are hoping to attain a better future condition where they don't have any blind passions. So in the first two types of Buddhism they attempt to eliminate blind passions through their practices. In the first type of Buddhism, practitioners try to eliminate blind passions and realize purity over many lives. In the second type of Buddhism, practitioners try to eliminate blind passions and realize purity in this life. The third type of Buddhism (Jodo-shu) is not essentially different—it merely postpones the difference rather than actually transcending it. The practitioners long for a world after death where they do not have any blind passions.

Thus in these three types of Buddhism, practitioners believe that so long as they still have passions, they cannot have liberation. They cannot have a powerful life that is filled with joy. They believe that it is only after they have eliminated blind passions can they begin to have a meaningful life that is filled with joy.

If I summarize the features of these three types of Buddhism, I can say this. All these three teachings are based on human wisdom, dualistic wisdom. As long as these practitioners believe in human wisdom, they consider blind passions something negative, something to be eliminated. They think that their present reality where they have passions is no good and their future ideal in which they don't have passions is good. So they wish to move from their reality to their ideal by performing various practices to eliminate blind passions. In short, they are unhappy with their present selves that have blind passions.

But Shin Buddhism, the fourth type of Buddhism, is totally different from these three types of Buddhism. Shinran says that the shinjin person lives a very rich, powerful and meaningful life every step of the way. The shinjin person does not have to seek happiness

in the future, or in a life after death. Shinran says the shinjin person, while possessing blind passions, is full of virtues and full of joy.

Why does Shinran say that the shinjin person can have such a rich, powerful, and meaningful life? He says so because the shinjin person's life is based on the Buddha's wisdom, not on human wisdom. As I said earlier, the Buddha's wisdom means the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive. It transforms all the things that human wisdom considers evil and meaningless into something good and meaningful. If we receive the Buddha's wisdom, there is nothing meaningless in this world. In short, the Buddha's wisdom transforms blind passions into virtues.

Here in the fourth type of Buddhism, the shinjin person is meeting a teacher who embodies the Buddha's wisdom. He is hearing from him the calling voice, "Come to the Buddha's wisdom!" He is receiving the Buddha's wisdom that transforms blind passions into virtues. Here it is important to note that all the crosses in the fourth picture are placed inside circles. This indicates that the Buddha's wisdom has transformed all blind passions into virtues.

Although the practitioners in the first three types of Buddhism consider their present reality no good and their future ideal good and try to reach their future ideal, the shinjin person in the fourth type of Buddhism considers his present reality "ideal." He does not have to go to an ideal in the future. His present reality where he has all kinds of blind passions is turned into an ideal learning place by the Buddha's wisdom.

The shinjin person finds deep meaning and contentment in every step of the way in the midst of his daily life. He does not have to become what he is not. He does not have to seek any religious identities or labels. He simply keeps deepening his appreciation of the present moment by receiving the Buddha's wisdom. Any present situation, be it fortunate or unfortunate, becomes his learning place—becomes a place where he can learn the wisdom of the Buddha.

## The Powerful Life of the Shinjin Person

Shinran says that the person who has experienced shinjin lives a rich, powerful, and meaningful life here and now. While possessing blind passions, he lives a powerful life. Shinran says that blind passions are no longer a problem. The Buddha's wisdom transforms them into virtues. Here let me read a couple of verses by Shinran. He says:

Through the benefit of the unhindered light, We realize shinjin of vast, majestic virtues, And the ice of our blind passions necessarily melts, Immediately becoming water of enlightenment.

Obstructions of karmic evil turn into virtues; It is like the relation of ice and water: The more the ice, the more the water; The more the obstructions, the more the virtues.

(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 371)

In the first line here, Shinran says, "Through the benefit of the unhindered light." This is a very important expression. By this phrase, Shinran means the Buddha's wisdom that is not hindered by any human evil or blind passions. He means the wisdom that transforms blind passions into virtues.

Then what does it mean that blind passions are turned into virtues? It means that Shinran's blind passions have now become his teachers. His blind passions (such as anger and greed) teach him how self-centered he is—what a foolish being he is. His blind passions also teach him that he shares the same blind passions with all people. They teach him that he shares the same humanity with all people. They teach him that he and all human beings are the same—the same foolish ordinary beings.

### Conclusion: Pari-nirvana

Shinran says that the shinjin person attains *pari-nirvana* (or Buddhahood) at the last moment of his life. The word *pari-nirvana* means "complete extinction" or "complete combustion." It means that one's life is completed and fulfilled. Thus the shinjin person's attaining *pari-nirvana* (or Buddhahood) means that his life is completed and fulfilled at the last moment of his life.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Shinran's teaching is that he does not talk about a life after death. Shinran says the person that experiences shinjin, a true beginning, will end his life with a true ending, a perfect ending, with a full stop. He says that this person

does not need another life, because he has already taken care of the most important business in his life. He has already met a Buddha and heard the Dharma. He has already fully lived.

Here I cannot help thinking about Shakyamuni Buddha. This teaching of Shinran is precisely what Shakyamuni taught. Shakyamuni did not say anything about a life after death. Shakyamuni said that desire for another life after death is a delusion (or samsara) to which one must put an end. Here I do not see any difference between Shakyamuni and Shinran.

Shinran teaches us that we do not have to make an effort to attain Buddhahood or to go to the Pure Land. After all, Amida Buddhahood is a symbol of the Buddha's wisdom. The Pure Land is a symbol of a sphere of the Buddha's wisdom. Wisdom liberates us. Wisdom is coming to us assuming the form of one calling voice, "Come to the Buddha's wisdom!"

This calling voice has been transmitted to us over many centuries—through many wonderful individuals who embodied the Buddha's wisdom. All our teachers' teachings are nothing but an explanation of this calling voice. The Buddha's wisdom assuming the form of our teachers' teachings is coming to us.

Shinran says if we *just hear* the calling voice and appreciate the Buddha's wisdom—the deep meaning contained in the calling voice, we are immediately liberated. If we become still and hear the calling voice, we are immediately born in the Pure Land, a wonderful realm of the Buddha's wisdom. We start to live the most dynamic, meaningful, and fulfilling life. It is rather our active grasping and striving based on human wisdom that is hindering us from receiving the Buddha's wisdom that is coming to us.

If we hear the calling voice and receive the Buddha's wisdom, all the things we have hated and wanted to eliminate from our lives, will become indispensable conditions for the fulfillment of our lives. Things such as our despair and disappointment, things such as our mistakes, failures, and shortcomings, will all start to shine. They will all become indispensable conditions for the fulfillment of our lives.

At the outset of this article I said that there was one teaching that can give our lives true fulfillment. I firmly believe Shin Buddhism is that teaching!

#### Notes:

On July 27-29, 2012, we held our summer retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. The two speakers, Dr. Nobuo Haneda and Rev. Patti H. Nakai, spoke on "Shinran's View of the Tathagata's *Eko* ('Directing of Virtues')." Forty-two people attended it. We want to express our gratitude to the following individuals:

Mr. Roy Nakahara for creating wonderful charts, "Shinran's View of the Four Types of Buddhism," that are found in this present newsletter.

Mr. Donald Bender, Mr. Steve Kaufman, and Mr. Paul Vielle for precious suggestions about the contents of the article in this newsletter.

DVD sets of the Maida Center summer retreat of the last several years (including this year) are now available. Each set is \$50 including handling/postage. CD sets of past retreats are also available. Each set is \$20 including handling/postage.

Every Saturday (2:00–5:00 pm) we hold a study class at the Maida Center. We are now studying the *Shoshin-ge* Verses in Shinran's *Kyogyoshinsho*. Everyone is welcome to attend. (T.H.)

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