

# The Dharma Breeze

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## Buddhism as a Teaching of Self-Examination

—The Similarity between Shakyamuni’s “Impermanent” and Shinran’s “Evil”—

Nobuo Haneda

### Introduction

In this essay I want to discuss the main similarity between Shakyamuni Buddha (ca. 460–380 BC), the founder of Buddhism, and Shinran (1173–1262), the founder of Shin Buddhism, which is that they devoted their lives to self-examination and attained deep spiritual awakening through it.

I have occasionally received the question, “Are Shakyamuni’s teaching and Shinran’s teaching the same or different?” This question is an important one, because there are some differences between them. First, they lived at very different times and places, approximately sixteen centuries and thousands of miles apart.

More importantly, the two teachers used very different terms in their teaching. For example, Shakyamuni often used terms such as “impermanence,” “selflessness” and “conditional arising.” But Shinran seldom used these words and instead used terms such as “Amida Buddha,” “Pure Land,” and “*nembutsu*.” The historical Shakyamuni never used these terms in his teaching, although Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, which were composed several centuries after his passing, attribute them to him. Because of these differences, some Buddhist scholars in Japan and the West claim that Shin Buddhism, the teaching of Shinran, is a historical deviation from the original teaching of Shakyamuni.

Then, what is my answer to the question, “Are Shakyamuni’s teaching and Shinran’s teaching the same or different?” I answer that although there are the differences I have just mentioned, their teachings are the same, and I see no difference at all between them concerning the essence of their teachings.

Buddhism teaches us that there is one ultimate Dharma (Truth) in this world. I believe that there is one authentic awakening, because awakening in Buddhism means awakening to the one ultimate Dharma. There cannot be two authentic awakenings. I believe Shakyamuni and Shinran attained the same awakening. Shakyamuni’s awakening is called *bodhi* and Shinran’s awakening is called *shinjin*. Although *bodhi* is a Sanskrit word and *shinjin* is a Japanese word, they both mean the same thing, “awakening.” I believe that they both refer to the same awakening. For this reason, I want to explain their similarities.

Scholars often talk about the differences between various types of religions, for example, between Buddhism and Christianity, or between Zen Buddhism and Shin Buddhism. It is of course not meaningless to study the differences. But I believe it more meaningful to talk about similarities. All human beings are basically the same; we share the same human sufferings and the same desire for liberation from them. We also share the same aspiration for understanding the truth about our lives and the world. It seems to me more meaningful to learn from various religions their universal message about liberation from suffering than to learn about the differences between those religions. If we are desperately seeking liberation from our suffering, how can we afford to engage in a comparative study of various teachings? We should immediately seek a message that liberates us.

This essay consists of three chapters. In chapter one I will discuss what I consider the most important overall similarity between Shakyamuni and Shinran: the fact that they both

focused on self-examination. In chapter two I will discuss the contents of Shakyamuni's awakening. I will pay special attention to the fact that his awakening had twofold aspect. In chapter three I will discuss Shinran's awakening, also focusing on the twofold aspect of his awakening.

## **Chapter One: The Most Important Overall Similarity between Shakyamuni and Shinran: A Focus on Self-Examination**

Here I want to discuss what I consider the most outstanding overall similarity between Shakyamuni and Shinran: the fact that they considered self-examination the most important issue in their lives.

The Zen master Dogen (1200–1253, the founder of Japanese Soto Zen) defined Buddhism as self-examination: “Studying the Buddha-Dharma (Buddhism) means studying the self.” Buddhism is nothing but self-examination. We cannot define it in any other way. Our Buddhist teachers, such as Shakyamuni and Shinran, devoted their entire lives to asking the question, “What am I?” We can say that their teachings are their answers to that question, or that they are insights gained through a process of self-examination.

Shakyamuni and Shinran did not create any religious establishments like temples. No record indicates that they ever performed religious ceremonies or rituals. No scripture tells us they engaged in so-called social action. Without identifying themselves even as teachers, they devoted their entire lives to the examination of the self and, in doing so, experienced deep spiritual awakening: they understood the self and the Dharma.

Here I want to emphasize one point we must bear in mind when we examine the self. The “self” that is in the term “self-examination” should refer to *our own specific self*. It should not be the abstract self that we discuss within a theoretical and academic context. It is often pointed out that there is a tremendous difference between generally knowing that “man is mortal” and specifically knowing that “I am going to die.” In the former general knowledge of death, we do not have a sense of crisis and urgency; but in the latter specific knowledge of our own death, we do. The same difference exists between knowing about the self as a concept and knowing about *our own specific self*. In the former knowledge of the self, we do not have a sense of crisis and urgency; but in the latter knowledge of the self, we do.

Both Shakyamuni and Shinran desperately sought the way to transcend the difficult predicaments of human life. In this process they could not afford to engage in a general, theoretical, or academic speculation on life. They sought the liberation of “myself alone” (i.e., an expression Shinran uses in the *Tannisho*). This, however, did not mean that they were self-centered or selfish. They knew that the search for the liberation of *their own specific selves* also meant the search for the liberation of all human beings. Only their self-focused way, not any self-centered way, could open up the universal path of liberation for all human beings.

## **Chapter Two: The Twofold Aspect of Shakyamuni's Awakening**

Now let me discuss the process by which Shakyamuni examined the self and experienced deep spiritual awakening that had a twofold aspect.

According to the legend, when Shakyamuni recognized the inevitability of sufferings such as aging, sickness, and death, he became depressed and felt his life was totally meaningless. But not long after that, he fortunately encountered a mendicant whose face was shining because of his wisdom. Shakyamuni was deeply moved by him; he awakened his aspiration to become a person like him. The mendicant offered him a glimmer of hope of transcending the difficult predicaments of human life.

Thus, when Shakyamuni was twenty-nine, he left his householder's life to seek the way. For the following six years, he studied and practiced Brahmanism, the traditional religion of his time, and non-Brahmanic religions such as asceticism. He was desperately searching for *Brahma*, the universal god, and the *Atman* (a permanent spiritual entity, or soul, that was supposed to dwell in the human mind) that could make him overcome his fear of impermanence—aging, sickness, and death. But after having spent six years in performing various practices, he realized that those efforts were in vain; he renounced them.

Then, Shakyamuni sat under a tree and meditated. This meditation was nothing but self-examination. Shakyamuni's meditation, or Buddhist meditation, is different from other

forms of meditation, such as yoga and transcendental meditation, that teach a method of enjoying samadhi (trance) or peace of mind. Shakyamuni intensely examined the self. He was asking, “What am I? Do I have something permanent in myself?”

Since the “I” or self consists of the body and the mind, Shakyamuni first examined his body—all the things that formed his body such as skin, muscles, bones, and blood. He saw that they were constantly moving, changing, and flowing. He realized that there was nothing permanent in his body. He then examined his mind—all the things that formed his mind such as sensation, conception, impulse, and consciousness. He saw that they were also moving, changing, and flowing. He realized that there was nothing permanent in his mind. In this way he could not find anything permanent in his body or mind.

One morning, Shakyamuni was sitting under a tree. He was then thirty-five years old. When he looked at the morning star, he attained a great awakening; he became a Buddha, an awakened one. When he clearly understood that the Dharma, impermanence, was the absolute and ultimate reality, he became a Buddha. His insight into the truth of impermanence was the content of his awakening. He understood that there was no *Brahma* or *Atman*, no permanent entity, outside or inside himself. He understood that it was a mistake to think that there was *Brahma* or the *Atman*.

In the *Sutra of Impermanence*, one of the earliest *Agama Sutras*, Shakyamuni describes the contents of his awakening as follows:

Form (i.e., the body) is impermanent. Likewise, perception, conception, impulse, and consciousness (i.e., the mind or the four mental components) are impermanent. This view [of the body and mind] is called the right view.

My disciples, those who have the right view will cease to be attached to form, perception, conception, impulse, and consciousness. Since they cease to be attached to them, they will cease to have craving. Since they cease to have craving, they will attain liberation. Since they attain liberation, true wisdom will arise in them. They will say, “My life is already spent. The universal working is already established. What has to be done is already done. [Since I have transcended samsara, the meaningless cycle of births-and-deaths,] I will no longer have any future existence.”

(Tr. by Nobuo Haneda)

Here Shakyamuni says, “My life is already spent” and “The universal working is already established.” These two sentences summarize his awakening. They express the two—negative and positive—aspects of his awakening. The first sentence, “My life is already spent,” talks about the negative aspect; the second sentence, “The universal working is already established,” talks about the positive aspect. In other words, these two sentences talk about Shakyamuni’s experience of his spiritual death and spiritual rebirth—the death of his old self and the birth of his new self.

These two aspects are as follows:

1. The negative aspect—spiritual death: “My life is already spent.”
2. The positive aspect—spiritual rebirth: “The universal working is already established.”

Buddhist teachers often teach us that Buddhist liberation consists of these two aspects that are two sides of the same coin. They say that Buddhist liberation can be described in paradoxical expressions such as “Dying is simultaneously being born” or “Absolute negation is simultaneously absolute affirmation.” Now let me first discuss the negative aspect of Shakyamuni’s awakening.

## I. The Negative Aspect of Shakyamuni’s Awakening

The core of Shakyamuni’s awakening is recognition of the truth of impermanence. Then, where did he recognize it? He recognized it *within the context of his own mind*. Buddhism tells us the importance of discovering the truth *within the context of our own minds*.

Knowing the truth of impermanence outside our own minds is not difficult. We can easily see that things outside ourselves, such as people, animals, trees, rivers, are constantly moving, changing, and flowing. However, it is difficult to see the truth *within the context of our own minds*. If a Buddhist is a person who sees the truth objectively in things outside him, then scientists can be called Buddhists because they see the truth objectively. But if a Buddhist is a person who sees the truth *within the context of his own mind*, we cannot call scientists Buddhists. Although scientists see the truth objectively in things outside themselves, they do not necessarily know it *within the context of their own minds*. Scientists are one thing and Buddhists are quite another.

Here let me discuss Shakyamuni's words in the *Sutra of Impermanence* that I quoted above. He said, "Form is impermanent. Sensation, conception, impulse, and consciousness are impermanent." Here the word "form" should be understood as referring specifically to Shakyamuni's own body; and the four words, "sensation, conception, impulse, and consciousness," should be understood as referring to his own mind. If we understand this, he is saying, "I (my body and mind) am impermanent." These words of his are his answer to the question, "What am I?" He is describing the understanding of the self that he reached after intense self-examination. It is crucially important to note here that the subject of both the question ("What am I?") and the answer ("I am impermanent") is the first person singular. The subject of both sentences must be the first person singular because Shakyamuni saw the truth of impermanence within the context of *his specific self*.

When Shakyamuni saw the truth of impermanence *within the context of his own mind*, it was seen as a negative truth. It made him recognize the emptiness of the substantial self. It shattered his pride as a religious or spiritual person; he could no longer claim that he had something consistently pure and good in himself. It made him recognize the futility of being attached to things such as ideas, thoughts, viewpoints, and perspectives.

This way, when the truth of impermanence was seen *within the context of his own mind*, he was humbled by it. It made him see that he was an ignorant and deluded person. We can say that his words "I am impermanent" were his confession of being an ignorant and deluded person. They are indeed describing his "spiritual death."

It is quite important to know this negative aspect of Shakyamuni's awakening. But throughout Buddhist history many Buddhists identified Shakyamuni as a sage, a genius, or a superhuman being. They placed him on the highest pedestal and worshipped and praised him. They talked mainly about his positive and wonderful spiritual qualities. They paid little attention to the negative aspects of his awakening. They did not talk about *his subjective view of himself*—how he viewed himself.

Many Buddhists saw Shakyamuni only objectively, from the outside. Seen objectively from the outside, he is described with expressions such as "He is a sage. He is the wisest man and the greatest teacher." It's all right for people to talk about him this way. But these expressions are not so important as far as the true essence of his awakening is concerned. The crucial thing we must know about his awakening is *his subjective view of himself*.

The important questions we must ask here are "What did Shakyamuni say about himself when he attained awakening? What was *his subjective view of himself*?" At the moment of his awakening, did he say that he became a sage? Did he say that he became the wisest man? Did he say that he became the greatest teacher?" Suppose Shakyamuni had answered, "Yes, I became a sage. Yes, I became the wisest person and the greatest teacher." If he had answered that way, would we consider him a truly awakened person? No. We cannot respect a person who says that he is the wisest man and the greatest teacher. Instead, if Shakyamuni had answered, "Although you say I am a sage, I am not. I am not the wisest man and the greatest teacher. I am an ignorant and deluded person," we would consider him an awakened person and could not help respecting him. This way, we must know that there was a tremendous difference between people's objective view of Shakyamuni and Shakyamuni's *subjective view of himself*—a tremendous difference between how people saw Shakyamuni and how Shakyamuni saw himself. We must not confuse these two.

In order to emphasize the negative aspect of Shakyamuni's awakening that many Buddhists had neglected to pay attention to, Rev. Haya Akegarasu (1877–1954, a Japanese Shin thinker) said the following:

For a long time, I wanted to know Shakyamuni's exact thought at the moment of his awakening. But I could not understand it. Initially I thought that Shakyamuni awakened to his Buddha-nature. This was probably so, but I could hardly understand that within the context of my own life.

This year I have come to understand that Shakyamuni's exact thought at the moment of his awakening was expressed in his shout "Oh, ignorance!" "Oh, ignorance!" means "Oh, darkness!" When Shakyamuni said this, the devil that he saw face-to-face was not actually a devil in front of him, but was his own self. Thus his conquering the devil meant his becoming the devil. In this sense, *Shakyamuni's exact thought at the moment of his awakening was his realization that "I am the devil."* When he had this great awakening, a tremendous sphere of oneness—in which he became completely one with all things—opened up for him.

(Shuichi Maida, *Heard by Me: Essays on My Buddhist Teacher*, pp.202–203. Tr. by N. Haneda)

## II. The Positive Aspect of Shakyamuni's Awakening

I have discussed the negative aspect of Shakyamuni's awakening that is expressed in his words, "My life is already spent." Now let me discuss the positive aspect of his awakening that is expressed in his words, "The universal working is already established." When he said this, he was talking about the truth of impermanence as something positive and wonderful.

Although the truth of impermanence was a negative truth, the destroyer of the substantial self that Shakyamuni thought he had, he now saw it turning into a positive truth. He saw it as the universal flow of life—as the dynamic and creative flow of life. His self that was emptied by the truth of impermanence became permeated and filled by the same truth that now became a dynamic and creative force. He realized that not only all animate things but also all inanimate things were manifesting the newness and freshness of life. They were all fellow participants in the universal flow of life: they were all its fellow components. He now came to see the whole world as a creative world and himself as one creative component of the creative world.

### A. Continuous Learning (*Virya*)

Shakyamuni's becoming one with the truth of impermanence that is the new, fresh, and creative flow of life, or his discovery that his entire being was nothing but the truth, means that he became a true student, a constant seeker. He realized that the dynamically flowing self, the constantly seeking self, was the true self, the Dharma self. Having the true self realized within him, he started to live his life as a true student, as a constant seeker.

Shakyamuni realized that the Dharma, impermanence, was a dynamic and constant process. The Dharma exists only here and now; it exists only in the movements that are expressed in verbs in the present participle, such as seeing, hearing, learning, and seeking. There is no greater goal in human life than appreciating the depths and richness contained in this process, in the present flow of life.

Shakyamuni was no longer attached to anything fixed. He saw the futility of attaining answers and conclusions. If he were to gain some answer or conclusion, his seeking spirit would lose its vitality and he would become complacent and stagnant. He realized that questioning is itself the answer—the process is the goal. The dynamically seeking spirit is itself the greatest goal in life; there is no goal to be attained in the future. Appreciating the richness in the present moments, in the dynamic flow of life, is the ultimate goal in Buddhism.

This way, after Shakyamuni attained awakening, he lived a very dynamic and creative life as a constant seeker. Thus, he emphasized the importance of *virya* (constant seeking). In the *Sutra of the Teaching That Was Bequeathed by the Buddha*, Shakyamuni's final message before his passing was "Disciples, constantly seek (*virya*)!"

In his commentary on the *Sutta-Nipata*, one of the earliest Buddhist sutras, Shuichi Maida (1906–1967, a Japanese Buddhist thinker) talks about Shakyamuni's dynamic life as a constant seeker. Verse one of the *Sutta-Nipata* and Maida's commentary are as follows:

As if quelling with healing herbs the spreading snake venom from his  
body,  
The practitioner leaves behind arising anger.  
He discards both this world and the other world as a snake sheds its old,  
dried-up skin.

...In the expression "he discards both" I sense that the practitioner leaves himself to impermanence itself. His life that is totally fresh and creative is the only thing there. Shakyamuni likens this to a snake's shedding its old, dried-up skin. He tells us that impermanence and creativity are synonyms. He also tells us that freedom and the creative life are synonyms. "Dried-up skin" means all forms of fixation. It symbolizes our grasp of the world on the basis of objective logic.

Zeami [1364–1443, a master of Noh theater] said, "Don't forget the beginner's mind. Don't forget the beginner's mind in your old age. Don't forget the beginner's mind of each day."

These words mean that we should live the life of the present moments that, being new and fresh, do not allow any fixation; and that we should eliminate all our prejudices and preconceived notions.

Impermanence means the absolutely changing now in which this world is dashing into an unknown future, and which we cannot grasp with our past knowledge and experience... When Shinran stated, "If certain conditions arise, I could do anything," this was a brilliant subjective grasp of impermanence. Ungraspable indeed are human beings, human life! The present appearance of

the totally naked, fresh, new, and flexible life is likened to “shedding its old, dried-up skin.”

What, then, is the practicer? We can define him as a person with the beginner’s mind. This verse defines the practicer as a person like a newborn baby. (Did Jesus not say, “Except ye become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven”? He also said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” This poverty precisely refers to the beginner’s mind that does not have any preconceived notions.)

(Shuichi Maida, *Maida Shuichi Zenshu*, Vol. I, p. 240. Tr. by N. Haneda)

## **B. Negation of Teachership and No Temple**

Here I want to further explain the fact that Shakyamuni lived the life of a very humble and dynamic student. Shakyamuni was nothing but a student. Although people usually regard him as a teacher, he did not view himself as a teacher. The following words in the *Pari-nirvana-sutra* show us that Shakyamuni never considered himself a teacher:

In the *Pari-nirvana-sutra* Shakyamuni says,  
“Ananda, if a person thinks that he can guide seekers or that seekers are dependent on him, he will certainly teach something to them. But, Ananda, as far as I, a Tathagata, am concerned, I do not think that I can guide seekers or that seekers are dependent on me. Ananda, so what will I teach them?”

(Ichijo Ogawa, *Shinran*, p. 86. Tr. by N. Haneda)

Here I also want to talk about a couple of remarkable points that differentiate Shakyamuni from other spiritual leaders.

First, he never had any establishments such as a temple or fixed place for learning. Only during the monsoon season, for a period of two or three months, did Shakyamuni and his disciples gather in one place because the rain prevented them from traveling. After the monsoon, they again scattered and travelled in various parts of India. Shakyamuni taught his disciples, “Walk alone like a rhinoceros’s horn.”

Second, Shakyamuni did not perform any rituals and ceremonies. Although he was born in the religious climate of Brahmanism in which people performed all kinds of rituals and ceremonies, he was totally indifferent to any one of them. Brahmins often performed rituals in which animals were sacrificed. Shakyamuni considered those sacrificial rituals totally meaningless. No record indicates that he used any statue, image, or picture in his teaching.

## **C. The Fulfillment of Human Life—Attaining *Parinirvana***

Shakyamuni taught people that the goal of Buddhism was attaining *parinirvana* (complete extinction), which means the perfect combustion of human life or the fulfillment of human life. Our physical death should be like a full stop, a complete end; it should not be a comma, an incomplete end. We should live our lives in such a manner that we have a deep sense of contentment, or a deep sense of fulfillment. We should not live our lives in such a manner that we feel the need to have another life, another future existence, after our physical death.

Shakyamuni was liberated from attachment to the *Atman* that was supposed to transmigrate from one life to another. When he understood the truth of impermanence, he realized that the *Atman* did not exist. He taught people that belief in the existence in the *Atman* was a delusion. Thus he also taught them that the idea of samsara—transmigration from one life to another—was a delusion. He said that the person who experienced awakening and lived his life in a dynamic and creative manner would end his life with *parinirvana*; he would put an end to the deluded idea of samsara—he would have no need of seeking another life after his physical death. In one of the verses (no. 152) in the *Sutta-Nipata* Shakyamuni says that he had transcended the wrong notion of samsara:

If a person abandons all one-sided ideas,  
Has spiritual stability, has deep insight into the reality behind all things,  
And is not bound up by desires,  
He will never go back to his mother’s womb.

(Shuichi Maida, *Maida Shuichi Zenshu*, Vol. I, p. 384. Tr. by N. Haneda)

Here Shakyamuni says, “He [who has experienced awakening] will never go back to his mother’s womb.” It means that such a person will no longer go back to his mother’s womb, wander around, and transmigrate from one life to another. It means that this person, having become one with the Dharma, has lived his life as a dynamic seeker and truly fulfilled his life. He does not need another future existence. This way, Shakyamuni tells us that we must gain insight into the Dharma, live our lives as constant seekers, and fulfill our human lives.

## Chapter Three: Shinran's Twofold Awakening

Shinran's biographers tell us that when Shinran was nine, he went to Mt. Hiei to study Buddhism. While there he performed various traditional practices for twenty years. But he could not attain his goal of Buddhahood. Over time he started to doubt the validity of those practices and came to the conclusion that they could not lead him to liberation. Thus, just like Shakyamuni, he renounced them.

At the age of twenty-nine, Shinran met his teacher Honen. This meeting was the crucial turning point in his life. When he encountered the Dharma (or the Innermost Aspiration) in meeting his teacher, he experienced awakening that he called *shinjin*. Just like Shakyamuni, he experienced the awakening not long after renouncing traditional practices. He gained insight into the emptiness of the self and into the reality of the Dharma.

We can say that Shinran's *shinjin* awakening had the same two aspects that Shakyamuni's awakening had. Shakyamuni's first sentence, "My life is already spent," described the negative (or spiritual death) aspect of awakening; his second sentence, "The universal working is already established," described the positive (or spiritual birth) aspect of awakening. Shinran described the twofold aspect of *shinjin* awakening by citing the definition of *shinjin* awakening by Shan-tao (613–681, a Chinese Pure Land master whom Shinran called the fifth Shin patriarch). Shinran called the negative aspect of *shinjin* awakening "deep understanding of the self" and the positive aspect of *shinjin* awakening "deep understanding of the Dharma."

Here let me pose the question, "What are the two sentences of Shinran which are the equivalent of Shakyamuni's two sentences that describe the twofold aspect of awakening or spiritual death and birth?" I believe that those two sentences are: "I am evil" and "Amida embraces me." The former expresses the negative aspect of awakening and the latter expresses its positive aspect.

Here a discussion of Shinran's view of the Dharma is in order. Shinran believed that concepts such as Amida Buddha, the Innermost Aspiration, or the Power beyond the Self symbolized the Dharma, the truth of impermanence.

When Shinran encountered the Dharma, it made him recognize his ignorance and deludedness, he said, "I am evil." At the same time, he saw himself being encompassed into the Dharma; he said, "Amida embraces me."

The original Sanskrit word for Amida is *Amitayus*, which means "Limitless Life." It is synonymous with the universal flow of life that I mentioned in discussing the positive aspect of Shakyamuni's awakening. Thus Shinran's expression, "Amida embraces me," means that Shinran saw himself being encompassed into the universal flow of life. It also means that he started to be part of this dynamic flow and live his life as a constant seeker.

Now let me further discuss the twofold aspect of Shinran's awakening.

### I. The Negative Aspect of Shinran's Awakening

Here let me explain the similarity between Shakyamuni's words, "I am impermanent," and Shinran's words, "I am evil."

How can we say that Shakyamuni's "impermanent" and Shinran's "evil" are the same? On the surface, "impermanent" and "evil" may appear to be totally different. But when we understand these two adjectives as being related to self-examination, or to spiritual awakening, we see that they share the same meaning.

As I have stated earlier, Buddhism is nothing but self-examination. The only important question we must ask in Buddhism is "What am I?" When Shakyamuni said, "I am impermanent," it was his answer to the question. When Shinran said, "I am evil," it was his answer to the question. These two teachers came up with these answers, having thoroughly examined the self.

I said earlier that the subject of "impermanent" should be "I"—the first person singular. We can say the same thing about the word "evil." In Buddhism our specific self must be examined. True Buddhism has nothing to do with the examination of an abstract or theoretical self. We must personally say, "I am impermanent" or "I am evil."

If we closely examine our own minds, we realize that they are impermanent—that they consist of constantly changing ideas. There is nothing fixed or settled in them. They are constantly changing according to the conditions to which it is exposed.

When we realize that the mind is a chain of constantly changing ideas, we cannot help saying, "How changeable, unpredictable, and whimsical my mind is! How deluded my mind is!" All these words, "changeable," "unpredictable," "whimsical," and "deluded" are the contents of the word "evil." Thus Shinran's words "I am evil" are his confession

that he cannot maintain any consistent values in his mind. “Evil” means that there are no consistent “good” qualities in his mind.

In order to be able to say, “I am good,” there must be some consistent “good” qualities in my mind. But how can we claim to have such qualities, if the truth of impermanence is the basic nature of the mind? This truth is assuming a form that is called “mind.”

To be able to say, “I am good,” there must be consistency in my mind. For example, when we say that 68 degrees is a “good” and comfortable temperature, nobody can refute it. But that does not mean that it is always 68 degrees. Temperature constantly changes and never stays the same. We cannot say that it is always good, always 68 degrees.

We can say the same thing about our minds. We sometimes feel compassion for others, but it does not mean that we feel it all the time. That we sometimes have a tender feeling with others does not make us “good” persons. If we view ourselves as good persons, there are some wishful and unreal elements in that view. A wishful view of ourselves is one thing, but the reality of ourselves is quite another. What we think we are is one thing, but what we actually are is quite another. If we think that we are sometimes good and sometimes evil, or that we cannot be good all the time, that is an accurate way of seeing the self.

Shinran said, “If certain conditions arise, I could do anything.” Here he is saying that since the truth of conditional arising, or the truth of impermanence, is at the basis of his existence, he is unpredictable—he can be good or evil depending on conditions. Thus when he says that he is an evil person, it means that he is unpredictable and cannot be good all the time.

Here, let me further explain the fact that the truth of impermanence is the basic nature of our minds. Suppose you are watching a news program on television. After a certain segment of news, there are a series of very short commercials. Each commercial lasts five or ten seconds. First, you see a commercial for a nice car. It makes you think about your car that is getting old. You think, “Well, that’s a nice car.” You may think of buying it. Then, a beautiful woman appears on television and advertises a new perfume. You think, “Wow, she is pretty.” You think, “She looks like a girl I used to date when I was in high school.” Then, another commercial for a dog food begins. You watch some dogs devouring the dog food. You think about your own dog. You think that you must buy some more dog food. Then, a major league baseball player appears on television and starts to advertise sporting goods. You think about your favorite baseball team. You think about how the team is doing this year.

In this way, within one minute or so, your mind moves very quickly from one topic to another every five or ten seconds. Your mind transmigrates from a car to a beautiful woman, from a beautiful woman to a dog food, and from a dog food to a baseball team.

Do you think that your mind is firm and well settled, or stable and consistent? Do you think that you are in full control of your mind? Don’t you think that your mind is not firm and well settled? Don’t you think that your mind is totally controlled by conditions, by what you see and hear? Don’t you think that your mind is moving in a haphazard and whimsical manner?

If we look honestly into our minds, we must admit that they do not have any firm and consistent basis. They are moving around according to what we see and hear. We cannot help saying, “How changeable and whimsical my mind is!” This insight into the changing nature of our minds is the most important part of self-examination. The whimsically changing nature of the mind is called “evil.” The changeability or unpredictability of the mind—the fact that our minds are created by conditions—is called “evil.” The fact that our minds do not have any firm, stable, and consistent basis is called “evil.”

Now I have said that Shakyamuni’s “impermanent” and Shinran’s “evil” are the same. When Shakyamuni discovered the truth of impermanence, changeability, and unpredictability to be the basic nature of his mind, he was humbled. The truth challenged and negated his faith in his good and pure self. He could no longer maintain any pride about his mind. Similarly, when Shinran discovered the truth controlling his mind, he was humbled. This truth did not allow him to call himself a good person. Thus he called himself an evil person.

Here I want to quote the words of three Buddhist teachers, which express the same insight into the basic nature of the mind.

Deluded ideas are the basic nature of a [foolish] ordinary person [like me]. Aside from deluded ideas, there is nothing that can be called the mind.

—Genshin (942–1017, the sixth Shin patriarch) (Cf. *Heard By Me*, p. 164)

I have 84,000 deluded ideas in one day.

—Honen (1133–1212, the seventh Shin patriarch)

Perception of color or recognition of fragrance is not initiated by the power of the color or the fragrance itself. These events would not occur were it not for the initiative of the one great, inconceivable power. In addition to colors and fragrances, can't we say the same thing about the self? It is not for us to determine where the self came from and where it is going. *We are powerless not only with regard to things before our birth and after our death, but also with regard to the arising and perishing of our thoughts in this very moment. We are absolutely within the hands of Power beyond the Self.*"

—Manshi Kiyozawa (1863–1903, a Japanese Shin thinker) (*December Fan*, p.26)

These three teachers say the same thing—that they are not controlling their own minds. They indicate that the truth of impermanence, or the truth of conditional arising, which Kiyozawa calls the Power beyond the Self, is controlling their minds. They say that there is no autonomy or consistency in them. When they saw the truth in their minds, they experienced the negation of their pride as good persons. Thus these words are their confessions: “My mind is nothing but a chain of deluded ideas. I am an evil person.”

## II. The Positive Aspect of Shinran's Awakening

I have discussed the negative aspect of Shinran's awakening—deep understanding of the self. Now let me discuss the positive aspect of his awakening—deep understanding of the Dharma.

Shakyamuni experienced spiritual death when he learned the impermanent nature of his mind. At the same time, he experienced spiritual birth when he started to participate in the dynamic flow of life and became a constant seeker. We can see the same experience in Shinran. He experienced spiritual death when he learned that the truth of impermanence took the form of changeability, unpredictability, and deludedness in his mind. Recognizing the negative aspects of his mind, he saw himself as an evil person. At the same time he experienced spiritual birth when he saw himself being embraced by Amida, or Limitless Life. He was born in the world of Limitless Life. Now he discovered that he was part of Limitless Life, the dynamic flow of life. He started to live his life as a constant seeker.

Here I cannot help saying that Shakyamuni's words “universal working” and Shinran's words “Limitless Life (or Amida)” mean the same thing: they both refer to the truth of impermanence as the universal flow of life. Both Shakyamuni and Shinran were born in the dynamic and creative world of the Dharma.

Here I want to talk about what I consider the most important concept in Shinran's teaching. It is the concept of the Innermost Aspiration (*Hongan*, whose alternative translation is “Primal Vow”) that is synonymous with the truth of impermanence. In the story told in the *Larger Sutra*, a fictional character by the name of Dharmakara, a bodhisattva who eventually becomes Amida Buddha, symbolizes the truth of impermanence. Thus Dharmakara or Amida Buddha is a personification (or symbol) of the truth of impermanence or the Innermost Aspiration.

The Innermost Aspiration means a desire to seek limitless wisdom and limitless oneness with all forms of life (i.e., limitless compassion). The *Larger Sutra* tells us that Dharmakara, through long practice, becomes a Buddha by the name of Limitless Light (*Amitabha*) and Limitless Life (*Amitayus*). The meanings of these two names are as follows: Limitless Light means that Dharmakara becomes a person who can seek *wisdom* from a *limitless* number of Buddhas (i.e., teachers); Limitless Life means that he becomes a person who can seek oneness with a *limitless* number of *living* beings.

The sutra tells us that Dharmakara perfects and fulfills his Innermost Aspiration (or Primal Vow) and becomes a Buddha. That Dharmakara's Aspiration (or Vow) becomes perfected and fulfilled, however, does not mean that his Aspiration to seek is completed or finished. Instead, it means that his Aspiration to seek becomes a perfect and fulfilled Aspiration to seek—that he becomes a person who can eternally seek. As I explained above, “limitless seeking” is expressed in Dharmakara's two names as a Buddha, Limitless Light and Limitless Life.

The Innermost Aspiration that Dharmakara or Amida stands for is a concrete symbol of the truth of impermanence that the *Larger Sutra* uses to teach us what it means to be liberated or to become one with the truth. Thus in Shin Buddhism our liberation is realized when we encounter a historical individual who embodies the Innermost Aspiration. This individual is a true student and constant seeker. He has a tremendous power to move us.

When Shinran met Honen, he was deeply moved by him. Honen embodied the Innermost Aspiration; he was a true student and constant seeker. He devoted his life to learning from his teacher Shan-tao, a Chinese Pure Land master. Shan-tao also embodied

the Innermost Aspiration. Honen experienced spiritual death and spiritual birth in meeting his teacher; he became a humble and dynamic student.

Having seen perfect studentship in Honen, Shinran was moved by it. The teacher's Innermost Aspiration shook Shinran and awakened the same Aspiration in him. The humble and dynamic spirit of Dharmakara shattered all of Shinran's preconceived notions and made him become a seeker who was not attached to any fixed ideas and concepts. Shinran also became a humble and dynamic student.

Shinran teaches us that all human beings possess the Innermost Aspiration, but they cannot awaken it by themselves, nor can they recognize it in their minds, because a thick cover of past karmic evil is hiding it. But that does not mean that the Innermost Aspiration cannot be realized in them. Shinran tells us that if we meet with an individual who embodies it and have spiritual communion with him, it can be awakened in us. He also tells us that without such help from our teachers, it will never become realized in us.

At the age of twenty-nine Shinran met with his teacher Honen, who embodied the Innermost Aspiration. After that until he passed away at age eighty-nine, he lived his life in a very powerful and creative way.

### **A. Continuous Learning (*Virya*)**

I pointed out that Shakyamuni emphasized the importance of “continuous learning (*virya*).” We can see the same emphasis in Shinran. Shinran talked about the importance of attaining the stage of nonretrogression. The concept of “nonretrogression” and “continuous learning (*virya*)” are synonyms. The textual basis of Shinran's view of the stage of nonretrogression is the passage called “The Passage Describing the Fulfillment of the Three Most Important Vows [i.e., the 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> Vows].” Shinran considered this passage the most important text in all Buddhist literature. The part of the passage that talks about the fulfillment of the 18<sup>th</sup> Vow is as follows:

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name, realize even one thought-moment of shinjin and joy, which is directed to them from Amida's sincere mind, and aspiring to be born in that land, they then attain birth and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression.

*(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 80)*

The three things that this text mentions—shinjin, birth in the Pure Land, and dwelling in the stage of nonretrogression—are all synonymous. When we “hear the Name,” we experience these three things. Shinran says the Name (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu*) is a command (or a calling voice) saying, “Take refuge in Amida, the Innermost Aspiration!” When we meet individuals who embody the Innermost Aspiration and hear from them the Name or the command, we experience shinjin awakening. Shinjin awakening is twofold: we recognize the depth of our karmic evil and at the same time we experience the birth of the Innermost Aspiration in our minds. Shinjin awakening also involves birth in the Pure Land (i.e., in the world of the Innermost Aspiration) and dwelling in the stage of nonretrogression.

When we attain birth in the world of the Innermost Aspiration and the stage of nonretrogression, we are permeated by the power of the Innermost Aspiration. We are filled with the joy of constantly listening to the Dharma. We also have deep gratitude towards our teachers. Our joy and gratitude make us continuously seek the Dharma.

Another reason we attain the stage of nonretrogression on being born in the world of the Innermost Aspiration is that we receive the Buddha's wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive. When we receive it, our seeking is no longer hindered by negative situations. Since the Buddha's wisdom transforms all negative situations into something positive, nothing hinders us from constantly seeking the Dharma. But before we receive the Buddha's wisdom, our spiritual basis is our dualistic human wisdom. Since human wisdom loves only positive values and hates negative values, we can keep progressing when we are in positive situations, but we cannot help retrogressing when we are in adverse situations. It is only when we have the Buddha's wisdom that we can have nonretrogression, or continuous advancement, in either good or bad situations.

### **B. Negation of Teachership and No Temple**

When Shinran was thirty-five, the government persecuted Honen's sangha, four disciples of Honen were executed and eight people, including Honen and Shinran, were exiled from Kyoto to remote places. Shinran was defrocked and exiled to Echigo. After having lived in Echigo for five years, he was pardoned and if he had wanted to, he could have regained his status as a monk. But he did not do so and refused to identify himself as a monk. He

described himself as “neither a monk nor a secular person.” (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 289) Not only did Shinran refuse to call himself a monk, he refused to call himself a teacher.

In one of his letters, Rennyō (1415–1499, the eighth Shin abbot) quotes Shinran’s words in which Shinran says that he is not a teacher and regarded the people who gathered around him as “companions and fellow practitioners”:

The late master [i.e., Shinran] said,

[I], Shinran, do not have even a single disciple. The reason for this is that when I expound the Tathagata’s dharma to sentient beings in the ten directions, I am only speaking as the Tathagata’s representative. [I]...do not propagate any new dharma at all; I entrust myself to the Tathagata’s dharma and simply teach that to others. Besides that, what do I teach that I would speak of having disciples?

(Minor L. Rogers. *Rennyō*, p. 142)

We can see similarities between Shakyamuni and Shinran concerning the fact that they did not have any establishments, rituals and ceremonies, or images and statues. Just like Shakyamuni who did not have any establishments such as a temple or a fixed place for learning, Shinran did not have any. Then, how did Shinran share his Buddhist views with his Dharma friends? He had various scrolls in which the Name (that consisted of six, nine, or ten Chinese characters) was written. Any place, be it a house, field, or forest, where the scroll was hung became a learning center called a *dojo* (learning place). It was a kind of “moving classroom.” Shinran probably could not even dream that his descendants would build temples. Although he said, “Throw my ashes into the Kamogawa River so that fish can eat them,” his descendants enshrined his ashes in a mausoleum, which later became the headquarters of Shin Buddhism.

In Shinran’s writings and letters, we do not see any reference to rituals or ceremonies. Since he considered himself “neither a monk nor a secular person,” and did not have a temple, it was natural he did not talk about any rituals and ceremonies. It was Rennyō who formulated most of the rituals and chanting practices that are being performed in present-day Shin Buddhist temples.

Shinran did not use Buddha statues. Instead he used the various forms of the Name that I mentioned above. Those Names are called *honzon* (“the honorable one”). In all other Buddhist traditions the word *honzon* means an image or statue of a Buddha. But Shinran never used an image or statue of a Buddha. He called the Name “*myōgo honzon* (the Name that is honorable).”

### C. The Fulfillment of Human Life—Attaining *Parinirvana*

Earlier I said that Shakyamuni taught the importance of putting an end to the idea of samsara, the endless cycle of births-and-deaths, considering it a delusion. He also taught the importance of attaining *parinirvana*—the fulfillment of human life. He said, “I will never go back to my mother’s womb.”

We can see the same teaching in Shinran. Shinran considered three things—shinjin awakening, birth in the Pure Land, and attaining the stage of nonretrogression (or the truly settled)—synonymous. They all mark the true beginning of human life; they mean putting an end to samsara and starting the dynamic life of a constant seeker. Shinran says that the shinjin person who attains the true beginning is absolutely assured of attaining the true ending—perfect Buddhahood or *parinirvana*. Living his life in a rich, meaningful, and fulfilling way, he will have a complete end, a full stop, at the end of his life.

In the following two passages Shinran says that the shinjin person attains *parinirvana* at the end of this life:

Because sentient beings of the nembutsu have perfectly realized the diamondlike mind of crosswise transcendence, they transcend and *realize great, complete nirvana on the eve of the moment of death.*

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 123)

Bodhisattva Maitreya must pass 5,670,000,000 years  
Before attaining Buddhahood,  
But the person who realizes true shinjin  
Will attain enlightenment at the end of this life.

(*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 405, with modification by N. Haneda)

Here Shinran says that the person who attains shinjin (of which “the diamondlike mind” is a synonym) transcends samsara at the moment of shinjin awakening and will realize Buddhahood (or *parinirvana*) at the end of his life. He says that the shinjin person attains the ultimate goal in Buddhism much more quickly, at the end of this life, than Maitreya, a

symbol of the highest bodhisattva, who has to wait more than five billion years to become a Buddha.

## Conclusion

At the outset of my talk I posed a question, “Are Shakyamuni’s teaching and Shinran’s teaching the same or different?” My answer to the question was that they are the same. I firmly believe that there is only one authentic awakening experience and that Shakyamuni and Shinran both experienced it and taught it.

In discussing their similarities, I first discussed their focus on self-examination as the most outstanding overall similarity between them. Then I discussed their similarity concerning their twofold awakening. Although some scholars say that Shinran’s teaching is a deviation from the original teaching of Shakyamuni, I believe that Shinran’s concept of “the evil person” beautifully captures the essence of Shakyamuni’s awakening, his subjective insight into the truth of impermanence.

Shinran was not so much a founder of a new tradition as a reinterpreter or exponent of Shakyamuni’s teaching.

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## Notes:

We held the Maida Center summer retreat, July 28–30, 2017, at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. Forty-two people attended it. We held the Japanese fall retreat, November 17–19, 2017, at the Maida Center. Twenty-four people attended it.

We will hold **the 2018 Maida Center summer retreat, July 27 (Fri.)–29 (Sun.), 2018**, at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley. For information, see [www.maida-center.org](http://www.maida-center.org)

We want to express our deepest gratitude to the following individuals:

Mr. and Mrs. John Veen for reformatting and reprinting *The Evil Person: Essays on Shin Buddhism* by **Shuichi Maida** (tr. by Nobuo Haneda). This book is now available as a paperback and e-book on [www.Amazon.com](http://www.Amazon.com)

Ms. Miyuki Friedman, Mrs. Mariko Harumi, Mrs. Kimie Hoshi, and Mrs. Manami Wegner, the members of the Japanese study group, for preparing food for the party at the summer retreat and for transferring lectures in audio tapes to SD cards.

Mr. Steve Kaufman and Mrs. Diane Ames for valuable suggestions concerning the article in this newsletter.

We now have a new website ([www.maida-center.org](http://www.maida-center.org)). It contains articles by Dr. Haneda and back issues of this newsletter.

We have a weekly study class (in English) on Saturday (2–5 pm) and a bi-monthly study class (in Japanese) on Saturday (9: 30-noon) at our center. Everyone is welcome to attend. We hope you welcome a wonderful new year in good health. (T.H.)

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