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An Outline of Shinran's Teaching

—“Rely on the Dharma! Rely on the Self!”—

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Introduction

In this essay I will present an outline of the teaching of Shinran Shonin (1173–1262), the founder of Shin Buddhism (or the Jodo Shinshu). I want to show that Shinran's Buddhism is no different from the Buddhism of Shakyamuni (ca. BC 460–380). Shinran accurately captured the essence of Shakyamuni's teaching and taught it.

Both Shakyamuni and Shinran tell us that Buddhism is a teaching of the examination of the self. The examination of the self is not designed for improvement of the self but for total transformation of the self—conversion of the ego self to the true self. Both teachers teach us that the self that we usually take for granted must be critically examined; it must be replaced with a new self that is one with the Dharma (i.e., Truth).

During several centuries after the passing of Shakyamuni, Buddhism spread to various countries, such as Sri Lanka and China. It reached Japan in the middle of the sixth century. In thirteenth century Japan, Shinran systematized Shin Buddhism on the basis of the teachings of many Indian, Chinese, and Japanese masters. Since seventeen centuries separate Shinran from Shakyamuni, some modern Buddhist scholars say that Shinran's Buddhism is a historical deviation from that of Shakyamuni. I, however, believe that Shinran's Buddhism is no different from that of the Indian founder. In this essay I will identify the most important doctrinal basis of Shakyamuni's teaching and show that Shinran built his teaching on the same basis.

In Part One I will identify the doctrinal basis of Shakyamuni's teaching. I will discuss what is known as “the last message of Shakyamuni,” in which he taught his disciples that they should rely on the Dharma (i.e., Truth) and the self. I will explain the meanings of the two concepts, “Dharma” and “self,” that are in the message. The “Dharma” could refer to two things: (1) “dharmas” (teachings) and (2) “the Dharma” (the Ultimate Truth). The “self” could refer to two types of self: (1) the ego self and (2) the true self. I will say that the “Dharma” that Shakyamuni told his disciples to rely on was “the Dharma” (the Ultimate Truth) and that the “self” that he told them to rely on was “the true self.” Thus, Shakyamuni's last message meant that his disciples should rely on “the Dharma” (the Ultimate Truth) by hearing “dharmas” (teachings) and that they should rely on “the true self,” being liberated from “the ego self.”

In Part Two, I will discuss two worlds, the world of the ego self and the world of the Dharma in which the true self is born. Buddhism teaches us to leave the former world and be born in the latter world. I will explain the miserable predicaments of the people in the former world. I will also explain the wonderful spiritual qualities of the people in the latter world. This comparison of the two worlds is necessary for my discussion in Part Three.

In Part Three I will discuss an outline of Shinran's teaching that explains the spiritual transition from the world of the ego self to the world of the Dharma. Since Shinran's most important doctrinal basis is “the statement about the fulfillment of the three vows” (i.e., a section in the *Larger Sutra*, the most important sutra according to Shinran), I will present an outline of his teaching by explaining the statement. Shinran systematized his entire teaching on the basis of the statement. Throughout the discussion I will try to show that Shinran thus systematized his teaching on the basis of Shakyamuni's words: “Rely on the Dharma! Rely on the self!”

PART ONE

The Last Message of Shakyamuni

“Rely on the Dharma! Rely on the Self!”

I. The Last Message of Shakyamuni

When Shakyamuni was about to pass away, many disciples surrounded him. Many of them were weeping. In particular, Ananda, one of his closest disciples, was crying hard. He said, “What will happen to me if my teacher passes away today? I will be totally lost. I will have no refuge in my life.” When Shakyamuni heard the disciple say so, he told him,

Ananda, you should rely on the Dharma, not on any human being! You should rely on the self, not on other things! Make an effort to seek the Dharma!

The first sentence means that Ananda should consider the Dharma (or Truth) his ultimate refuge; he should not consider Shakyamuni, a human being, his ultimate refuge. The teacher is telling Ananda that the Dharma is the universal truth that exists at any time and in any place and that the Dharma liberated the teacher and the same Dharma will liberate the disciple.

The second sentence means that Ananda should discover the true self and rely on it. It means that he should not rely on external things, such as the mysterious powers of gods and the powers of human ideologies, -isms, and dogmas. This way, Shakyamuni taught his disciple that he should examine the self by hearing teachings, gain insight into the Dharma, and realize the true self.

II. The Two Meanings of the Word “Dharma”

Now in order to further understand Shakyamuni’s final message, let me explain the meanings of the two words, “Dharma” and “self,” that are in the final message. As to the word “Dharma,” if we consult a Sanskrit dictionary, we learn that the word has many meanings. But, as far as Buddhism is concerned, the following two meanings are relevant.

- (a) “The Dharma”—the Ultimate Truth that is beyond words or dualistic thinking. (Here Dharma has article “the” and it has the capital “D” and the word is in singular form.)
- (b) “dharma” —teachings (i.e., words): expedient means that are designed to guide us to the Dharma, the Ultimate Truth that is beyond words. (Here “dharma” has “d” in a lower case and the word is in plural form.)

First, “the Dharma” means the Ultimate Truth that is beyond words. It is the truth of impermanence, or conditional arising. It is the universal truth that exists at any time and in any place. It underlies all existing things. We human beings are in it and are part of it. Buddhism has many synonyms of the Dharma (the Ultimate Truth), such as *dharmakaya* (truth itself), *dharma-nature*, *tathata* (suchness), *nirvana*, and *naturalness*.

“The Dharma” also refers to original reality or reality as it is. It is life itself. Since we are in it and are part of it all the time, we cannot objectify it. Our dualistic thinking or conceptualization cannot capture it. Since the Dharma is so close to us, we are not aware of its existence and take it for granted. Buddhism teaches us that all of us have the aspiration to become one with the Dharma. But, since the aspiration is latent in our minds, we are not aware of having it.

Buddhism also teaches us to return to the Dharma, to regain our original reality. Although the Dharma is constantly calling to us, in an inaudible voice, to return to it, we cannot hear it. We are not interested in hearing its calling voice. Our returning to it or recovering it is the goal in Buddhism. Buddhism designates our return to it with terms such as *shinjin*, birth in the Pure Land, enlightenment, and realization of Buddhahood.

Second, “dharma” mean the teachings (or words) of our historical teachers, such as Shakyamuni and Nagarjuna (ca. 150–250, an Indian Mahayana teacher whom Shinran called the first Shin patriarch). “Dharma” (teachings) are expedient means that are designed to guide us to the Dharma, the Ultimate Truth that is beyond words.

Although we cannot hear the inaudible voice of the Dharma, we can understand the Dharma because we fortunately have many historical teachers who were awakened to the Dharma. They left the world of delusion and were born in the world of the Dharma. Having become one with the Dharma, they returned to the deluded world and spoke about their awakening experiences. Since we can hear their teachings (or words) that explain what it means to awaken to the Dharma, we can gain insight into the Dharma that is beyond words. We can be guided to

the Dharma. Traditionally “dharma” (teachings) are compared to a finger that is pointing at the moon (which symbolizes the Dharma), or to a ferryboat that carries us to the Other Shore (which symbolizes the Dharma).

Thus, our historical teachers are like midwives or guides. As one can take a horse to a river but cannot make it drink, a human teacher can guide us to a river but cannot make us drink. That’s why Shakyamuni said, “You should rely on the Dharma, not on me, a human being!” He meant that it was all right to see him or his teachings as a guide, but we should not see him or his teachings as our ultimate refuge.

In Shin Buddhism Shakyamuni represents “dharma” and Amida Buddha symbolizes “the Dharma.” Here I want to discuss the importance of knowing the difference between “dharma” (teachings) that Shakyamuni represents and “the Dharma” that Amida Buddha symbolizes. Although these two are closely related, there are crucial differences between them. Knowing about dharmas is one thing; it is quite another to actually experience the Dharma to which dharmas guide us. This difference is like the difference between knowing the recipe for a cake and actually eating the cake, or the difference between acquiring a good knowledge of life and actually living a dynamic and meaningful life.

I have met many Buddhists who cannot tell the differences between the two. They think that they are full-fledged Buddhists because they have read many Buddhist books. Just accumulating Buddhist knowledge and scholarship does not make an authentic Buddhist. Having Buddhist knowledge is one thing; living it is quite another.

In concluding my discussion on “Dharma,” let me say a few words about the considerable difference between Christianity and Buddhism concerning their literary traditions. Christianity does not allow people to alter the words of the Bible, which they believe to be divine revelations. Christians identify words (*logos*) with the divine, the ultimate, or the absolute. But Buddhists never identify dharmas with the Dharma that is beyond words. In Buddhism, there are no unalterable divine words. Buddhists view words as expedient means, as “a ferry boat” that people set up as a means to get to the Other Shore (i.e., the Dharma). Thus, any words that can serve the purpose of guiding people to the Dharma are authentic Buddhist teachings, whether they were coined in ancient times or modern times. Hence Mahayana Buddhists came up with new concepts, such as “Amida,” “Pure Land,” or “Innermost Aspiration (*hongan*)” to refer to the Dharma, or to express the universal spirit of the Buddha.

As Shakyamuni taught us, we should not make historical teachers or their words our ultimate refuge. Historical teachers and their words are expedient means that are designed to guide us to the Dharma that is beyond words. Shakyamuni does not allow us to be attached to historical teachers and their teachings. In Buddhism we have total freedom to create new words and concepts that enable us to get to the Dharma, the Ultimate Truth.

III. The Two Meanings of “Self”

To understand the word “self” that Shakyamuni mentioned in this final message, we must talk about the following two types of self that the word “self” implies:

- (a) The ego self: the self that we usually identify as our self.
- (b) The true self: the latent self that we are not aware of having. Buddhism (or “dharma”) is designed to realize this true self—the self belonging to “the Dharma.”

The first type of self is the self that we usually identify as our self. Since we do not know any other type of self, we usually think that it is the only self we have. Many of us believe that our self is good and decent. However, Shakyamuni views it as the ego self. We cannot easily accept this view of Shakyamuni.

The ego self relies on dualistic thinking, or human wisdom. By using dualistic thinking, i.e., by using “words” that are dualistically construed—something that belongs to the deluded human world, we divide all things into fixed dualistic values, such as good and evil, right and wrong, and pure and impure, and happy and unhappy. Being one-sidedly attached to plus values, the ego self tries to maintain them; it tries to evade and ignore minus values. This way, we create a world, a cocoon, on the basis of our attachment to plus values and live complacently in that world.

Here let me talk about the basic cause of suffering in our lives. It is not so much dualistic thinking as *attachment* to it that is the basic cause of suffering. In a sense, dualistic thinking is important and indispensable to our lives, but the problem about dualistic thinking is that as soon as we use it, it creates all kinds of fixed dualistic values, plus and minus values, and we become attached to them. This kind of attachment is the basic cause of all the difficulties in our lives and our deluded way of living.

In our deluded lives we cannot get out of the routine of life in which we either feel joy in attaining plus values or feel frustration and anger at losing them. When we attain a plus value,

we want to have more of it. Our greed gets deeper and deeper. When we lose a plus value or a minus event takes place, we feel frustration and anger. We are going back and forth between these two predicaments of greed and anger. Buddhism calls this going back and forth *samsara* (the endless cycle of transmigration). It teaches us to go beyond the world of *samsara* by destroying attachment to dualistic thinking, the basic cause of suffering.

Now let me talk about the second type of self, the true self. This is the self that Shakyamuni meant when he said, “Rely on the self!” He teaches us to rely on the true self as the ultimate refuge. The true self belongs to the Dharma, the Ultimate Truth. In a service celebrating Shakyamuni’s birthday, a Buddhist minister tells us that the baby Buddha took seven steps and declared, “Above the heavens and below the heavens, my self alone is most noble.” “The noble self” that the baby Buddha speaks about is the true self that we are discussing now.

The true self is synonymous with the Innermost Aspiration (*hongan*)—an aspiration to realize the dynamic life of a Dharma seeker. However, this self, or this aspiration, is latent in our minds; it is deeply hidden in our consciousness. Since it is totally covered up by various daily concerns of the ego self, we are not even aware of having it. Although we are not aware of having the true self, our teachers who have realized the true self can see it at the depths of our beings—can see that all of us have a desire to realize it. They can hear the voiceless voice of the true self that is coming from the depths of our minds. Thus they, out of compassion, cannot help guiding us to the realization of the true self.

I have discussed the two meanings of “Dharma” and “self.” Now we can define what Buddhism is all about. Buddhism teaches the examination of the self, in which we experience the total conversion of the basis of our lives from the ego self to the true self. Buddhism teaches us to move from the world of the ego self to that of the Dharma.

Initially all of us cherish the ego self and dwell in a cocoon made by it. And we are not aware that our self is the ego self and our life is based on it. But when we meet teachers who have realized the true self, we can hear their words, “dharma.” When we hear their words, we can recognize the mistake of being attached to the ego self, to dualistic thinking. When our teacher’s words challenge and destroy our cocoon, we experience the birth of the true self that is one with the Dharma.

The realization of the true self marks the beginning of our true life. The true self that is synonymous with the Innermost Aspiration starts to seek the limitless richness and dynamism of the Dharma. Our life becomes a path in which the true self, the true beginning, fulfills itself. We can live the life of a dynamic seeker of the Dharma and complete our lives when we physically die. Shakyamuni calls such a way of ending one’s life “complete extinction (or combustion)” (*parinirvana*). He teaches us that we should live our lives in such a way that we end them with a full stop without any regret, without any desire for another life after death.

PART TWO

The World of the Ego Self and the World of the Dharma

I want to explain the meaning of two worlds—the world of the ego self and the world of the Dharma. This discussion is necessary for my discussion in Part Three, where I discuss an outline of Shinran’s teaching. Shinran teaches us that we must move from the world of the ego self to the world of the Dharma.

I. The World of the Ego Self

A. Two Types of Obstacles

The Buddha teaches that all of us initially live in a world that the ego self has created on the basis of dualistic thinking. The ego self and dualistic thinking are synonymous. Here in order to further explain the meaning of the ego self, let me talk about the two types of obstacles that Buddhism teaches about. They are as follows:

- (a) “Discrimination obstacles (or view obstacles),” such as dualistic thinking. These obstacles are connected with the mind, or how we think.
- (b) “Passion obstacles (or inherent obstacles),” such as anger and greed. These obstacles are inherent in our physical existence and we are born with them.

Mahayana Buddhism views the first obstacles as the basic cause of human suffering and deals with them. On the other hand, Hinayana Buddhism views the second obstacles as the basic cause of human suffering and deals with them.

Mahayana Buddhism teaches us that if we solve the first problem of “discrimination obstacles,” the second problem of “passion obstacles” ceases to be a problem. It is because of our attachment to dualistic thinking that we have all kinds of difficulties in life. By using dualistic thinking, we apply fixed dualistic values and meanings to all things and people. And because of our attachment to these fixed values, we have to suffer. The Dharma, or reality, is nothing fixed. The Dharma, the truth of impermanence, means that everything is continuously moving, changing, and flowing, and the Dharma contradicts our desire to maintain fixed values. Thus, when we hear the dharmas and understand the Dharma, we can see the mistake of being attached to dualistic thinking and to fixed values that are created by it. This way, we can be liberated from suffering.

The basic cause of difficulties in our life is not so much the so-called negative things, such as poverty, sickness, and passions, as how we view or interpret them. It is dualistic thinking that is the basic cause of our difficulties in life. For example, if we view poverty as evil by using dualistic thinking, we are tortured by the view that the poverty is evil. Here the basic cause of suffering is not so much poverty itself as our fixed view of it as evil. Catholic monks who take the vow of poverty do not have any fixed dualistic view of poverty as evil. Thus they do not suffer from poverty; they rather enjoy their poor lifestyle. We can say the same thing about sickness. Those who view their sickness as evil must suffer from it because of their view of it as evil. I have met some Buddhists who were grateful for their sickness because their sickness made them become serious about their lives; it guided them to Buddhism. They did not suffer from their sickness like those who viewed their sickness as evil, because they did not have any fixed view of it as evil. If we, by using dualistic thinking, view passions, such as anger and greed, as evil and try to eliminate them, we have to suffer because of our fixed view of them as evil. Hence, the basic cause of suffering is not so much passions themselves as our view of them as evil.

These three examples show us that the basic cause of human suffering is not the so-called negative things; it is “discrimination obstacles,” how we view the so-called negative things. That is why Mahayana Buddhism teaches us that “discrimination obstacles” are the basic cause of human suffering. They criticize Hinayana Buddhism for trying to eliminate “passion-obstacles” as the basic cause of suffering, not realizing that the basic cause of suffering is “discrimination obstacles.”

When I say that the ego self, or the world created by the ego self, should be transcended, I mean that “discrimination obstacles,” or attachment to dualistic thinking should be transcended. The “ego” in “the ego self” refers to the “discrimination obstacles (or dualistic thinking),” not to “passion obstacles.”

B. T’an-luan’s Passage about the World of the Ego Self

Although the world of the ego self is extremely tiny seen from the eyes of Shakyamuni, we do not see it as small; we rather consider it a huge universe. Shakyamuni calls our deluded world the world of samsara (i.e., cyclic transmigration).

In order to explain the misery of life in the world of the ego self, I want to quote a passage from the *Commentary on Vasubandhu’s Pure Land Treatise*, a work by T’an-luan (476–542, the third Shin patriarch). T’an-luan talks about the misery of people in the world that they create on the basis of dualistic thinking:

The Buddha saw that the three worlds [i.e., the world of desire, the world of form, and the world of formlessness, which the Buddha calls the worlds of delusion] had the mark of emptiness and falsehood, the mark of samsara, and the mark of endless suffering. Sentient beings in the three worlds were like inchworms walking in a circle, or like silkworms spinning themselves into cocoons. Thus the Buddha said, “How miserable they are! They are trapped in the three worlds that are characterized by upside-downness and impurity. So I want to transfer them to a place that is not characterized by emptiness and falsehood, by cyclic transmigration, and by endless suffering.

(Taisho Daizokyo, 40–828a, tr. Nobuo Haneda. Cf. Commentary on Vasubandhu’s Discourse on the Pure Land, tr. Hisao Inagaki, pp. 137–138)

T’an-luan talks about the miserable life of a person who is in the three worlds, the world that is created by the ego self. By saying, “Sentient beings in the three worlds were like inchworms walking in a circle, or like silkworms spinning themselves into cocoons,” he talks about the two miserable aspects of life in the deluded world: “loneliness” and “the meaninglessness of life.” T’an-luan talks about loneliness by referring to “silkworms spinning themselves into cocoons.” He talks about “the meaninglessness of life” by referring to “inchworms walking in a circle [on the brim of a round barrel].” Let me explain these two miseries.

1. Loneliness

By comparing human beings to silkworms that are spinning silk to make cocoons, T'an-luan talks about lonely life in a cocoon. The silkworm is working hard and its hard work eventually ends up secluding it inside a cocoon, a lonely world. T'an-luan is sarcastic about human efforts to be rich and famous in this world. People make all kinds of efforts to be rich and famous. They initially hope that through their efforts to become men of importance, they can make many friends and realize a happy and wonderful life. But more often than not, their efforts end up secluding themselves in a tiny cocoon of self-love. It is often the case that the more rich and famous we become, the lonelier and more alienated we become.

T'an-luan says that because of the loneliness in the cocoon, Amida wanted to create the Pure Land where there are many wonderful friends. By making people attain birth in it, he wants to liberate them from the misery of loneliness.

2. The meaninglessness of life

Although the inchworm is walking diligently on top of a round barrel, believing that it is going on a straight path and making progress every step of the way, the only thing the insect attains is returning to the starting point. With this example, T'an-luan challenges us, "Is your life any different from this? Have you not been living your life in a cyclic way like this inchworm?"

To these questions I cannot help answering, "Yes, I am no different from the inchworm. Although I want to say that I have been making progress every step of the way on a straight path, I cannot say so. I admit that I am the inchworm. My life has been an endless rotation."

Here let me explain what samsara means. Samsara (cyclic transmigration) is also translated as "an endless cycle of births and deaths." I interpret it as "an endless cycle of the births and deaths of dreams." Samsara means a life in which we keep pursuing one dream after another. When one dream dies, then another dream is born. I call samsara "an endless cycle of births and deaths of our dreams."

Ever since we were kids, we have had all kinds of dreams. For example, we dreamed about a nice school. We studied hard and got into the school. Then the school as our dream disappeared. Then, another dream was born; we wished to be employed by a nice company. When a company employed us, that dream disappeared. Then, another new dream was born; we wished to have a nice marriage and a nice family. When we got married, that dream disappeared. Then, later in life, we dream about a wonderful retirement. When we retire, that dream disappears. Then, as the last dream in our lives, we dream about another life after death. Thus, we have had all kinds of dreams. When we realized a dream, it died away and another dream was born. This is called "an endless cycle of births and deaths of dreams." This, I believe, is the concrete meaning of samsara in Buddhism.

We pursued things like a good education, a good job, and a good family. But our teachers tell us that we cannot find ultimate happiness in them. They tell us that we must realize a life in which we powerfully travel on a straight path.

With the example of an inchworm, T'an-luan explains another reason Amida wanted to create the Pure Land. Amida wanted to create the Pure Land because he desired to liberate us from the meaninglessness of life by giving us a place where we become passionate seekers of the Dharma. All residents of the Pure Land are dynamic seekers—those who embody the Innermost Aspiration to seek the Dharma. By making us attain birth in such a place, Amida wanted to liberate us from the meaninglessness of life.

Thus T'an-luan explains the two reasons that Amida created the Pure Land. The Buddha wanted to liberate us from loneliness by giving us a place where we have many wonderful Dharma friends; he also wanted to liberate us from the meaninglessness of life by giving us a place where we live a meaningful life, becoming dynamic seekers of the Dharma.

II. The World of the Dharma (i.e., the Ultimate Truth)

The world of the Dharma is the world of original reality, or life itself. Our teachers, such as Honen and Shinran, call this world the Pure Land. It is the world in which we are liberated from the loneliness and meaninglessness in the world of the ego self.

Here I want to explain the nature of the world of the Dharma by referring to Shakyamuni's awakening experience. When he attained awakening under the Bodhi tree, he gained insight into the Dharma, the truth of impermanence. The Dharma liberated him. He realized that not only all things outside him but also all things in him, both the physical and mental components of his being, were constantly moving, changing, and flowing. The Dharma showed him that there was no fixed or permanent self, no ego self to which he had been attached. It negated the self by showing him its unreality and emptiness. He realized that the ego self was a delusion that he created on the basis of dualistic thinking. This way, the Dharma first came to him as a negative force. But when it totally negated his attachment to the ego self, it turned into a

positive and wonderful truth. It awakened the true self within him. Now he started to see the truth as the manifestation of the freshness of life, the newness of life. He started to see it as the powerful and creative flow of life. Having become one with the truth, he started to live a rich, full, and powerful life. He started to appreciate the oneness of life and the dynamism of life.

Here let me talk about the two (i.e., “oneness” and “dynamism”) aspects of the world of the Dharma.

A. The World of Oneness

When Shakyamuni experienced awakening, he realized that all existing things, not only animate things but also inanimate things, were manifesting the newness and freshness of life. All existing things were forming one universal flow of life; they were all fellow participants and components of the flow. He saw himself as a participant or component of the flow. The entire world was a creative one and he saw himself as a creative component of the creative world.

The world was a world of oneness. It was a world of nondualistic wisdom. Now that Shakyamuni was born there, he saw all things and people sharing the same life, shining with the same light. They were all interconnected and interdependent. They were praising and complementing each other. There was a perfect fellowship, peace, and harmony among them. The *Garland Sutra* explains the Dharma world with the example of a net called the net of Indra .

In the world of the Dharma, a huge net called the net of Indra is hanging from the sky. There are innumerable pearls at the innumerable joints of the net. Each pearl is reflecting all the other innumerable shining pearls on its surface. Since all of the pearls are reflecting each other and giving forth their light, the whole world is filled with tremendous brilliance.

The *Garland Sutra* explains the meaning of the net of Indra with a phrase, “One is many and many are one.” This phrase teaches us the oneness and interdependency among all existing things. All of us are interdependent on each other and we owe our existence to myriad things and people that exist outside us. All the things and people that exist outside us are actually in us, forming us. In the Dharma world, there is oneness among all existing things and people. The world of the Dharma is the Sangha where all beings are friends, fellow participants in the rich and harmonious flow of life.

I believe that the Shin Buddhist concept of “limitless life (*amitayus*)” refers to the limitless richness, harmony, and oneness of life.

B. The World of Dynamism

Now let me talk about the world of the Dharma as the world of the dynamism of life. When Shakyamuni recognized the truth of impermanence, the truth of constant change, he became one with it. Embodying the dynamic truth meant that he became a participant in the dynamic universal flow of life. It also meant that he became a continuous seeker of the Dharma.

Shakyamuni’s birth in the world of the Dharma means that he embodied nondualistic wisdom—the wisdom that transforms the negative into the positive. When a person receives this wisdom, he can see meaning not only in the positive but also in the negative. He can see meaning in all things he encounters in his life. Now he can see that all the dualistic value judgments he made on the basis of dualistic thinking were shallow.

Thus, if we are born in the world of nondualistic wisdom that challenges our dualistic ideas, such as “good and evil,” “pure and impure,” and “samsara and nirvana,” we can freely go back to the world of samsara that we have left behind. Now we can willingly return to the world that is full of human agony, suffering, and sorrow, considering the world an extension of the Dharma world. The Dharma world does not have a fixed border; its border is ever expanding. The person of nondualistic wisdom can embrace into himself those things that he once considered useless and meaningless, now considering them useful and meaningful.

Buddhism teaches us that birth in the Dharma world is important because it is there that we can learn the importance of returning to the world of samsara. We are not allowed to make a fixed abode in the Dharma world, considering it a nice place to stay. The Dharma world is a world that is full of the Buddha’s aspiration to limitlessly seek the Dharma. When we receive the aspiration, we go back to the world of samsara in order to transform the negative into the positive.

I believe that the Shin Buddhist concept of “limitless light (*amitabha*)” refers to the spirit of a student who limitlessly seeks nondualistic wisdom. Such a student desires to limitlessly deepen that wisdom by returning to the world of suffering, by turning the negative into the positive.

PART THREE

An Outline of Shinran's Teaching

—The Fulfillment of the Three Vows (i.e., the 17th, 18th, and 11th Vows) —

In Part One I discussed the final message of Shakyamuni and discussed the meanings of the two words, “Dharma” and “self” that were contained in the message. Shakyamuni teaches us that we should change the basis of our lives from the ego self to the true self. In Part Two I explained the differences between the two worlds—the world of the ego self and world of the Dharma. Buddhism teaches us to be born in the latter world. On the basis of this discussion, I now want to elucidate an outline of Shinran's teaching, our main topic.

As was the case with Shakyamuni, Shinran considered the conversion from the ego self to the true self the most important issue in Buddhism as well as in his own life. By hearing the words of his teachers, Shinran critically examined the self in a thoroughgoing way. Then he experienced the negation of the ego self and the realization of the true self (*shinjin*). I believe that Shinran's greatest contribution to Buddhism is that he meticulously explained the process by which the true self was realized in him. Now let me discuss an outline of his teaching, in which the realization of *shinjin* is the climax. According to him, *shinjin*, the true self, was realized in him when Amida's three vows were fulfilled in his life.

The *Larger Sutra*, a Mahayana text that Shinran considered the textual basis of his teaching, contains a fictional story in which a young seeker by the name of Dharmakara becomes Amida Buddha. Dharmakara is the hero of the story; he symbolizes the Innermost Aspiration (*hongan*) to liberate all humanity from their delusion. He also symbolizes the Innermost Aspiration to realize the true self, which all human beings have in the depths of their minds. This story of Dharmakara's becoming a Buddha describes the fundamental principle or rationale that underlies the process of human spiritual liberation. It also talks about the prerogatives, or necessary conditions, for the realization of spiritual liberation.

At the outset of the story Dharmakara awakens deep compassion for all human beings who are deluded, complacently living in their world without being aware of its misery. He desires to prepare a way for their liberation before they even become aware of their misery and start to seek the way out of it. Then, Dharmakara makes forty-eight vows, all of which are connected with the liberation of all human beings. In each vow, Dharmakara says, “If, when I attain Buddhahood, such-and-such a thing does not happen, may I not attain Buddhahood.” With the expression “if such-and-such a thing does not happen,” he spells out the conditions that are necessary for the liberation of all humanity. This means that he will definitely fulfill those conditions and realize the liberation of all beings. Then, the sutra tells us that after making those vows, he performs various practices and eventually attains Buddhahood by fulfilling them. This means that he fulfilled the vows, all necessary conditions for human liberation.

This way, the sutra says that Dharmakara has already prepared the necessary conditions for human liberation from time immemorial, and that many historical individuals, such as Shakyamuni, experienced the fulfillment of those vows in their lives and became Buddhas.

Out of the forty-eight vows, Shinran considered three vows (i.e., the 11th, 17th, and 18th vows) particularly important for human liberation; he called them “the three selected primal vows.” He considered them most important because they dealt with the three most important conditions for human liberation. The 17th vow dealt with “dharmas” (teachings) that guide people to the Dharma. The 18th vow dealt with the attainment of *shinjin* (the true self) by hearing “dharmas.” And the 11th vow dealt with a powerful life that is realized through attaining *shinjin*. We can compare the fulfillment of the 17th vow to the realization of medicine; the fulfillment of the 18th vow to the first sign of recovery from taking the medicine; and the fulfillment of the 11th vow to complete recovery of health.

At the outset of the second volume of the *Larger Sutra*, we have a section called “the statement about the fulfillment of the three vows.” Before Shinran, there was a traditional way of reading this statement; all Pure Land masters including his teacher Honen read the statement in the traditional way. (See *Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 474, footnote, for the traditional way of reading the statement) But Shinran ignored the traditional way of reading it and read the statement, particularly the section concerning the fulfillment of the 18th vow, in a totally different way. He thought the traditional way of reading it did not agree with what he considered the Buddha's Innermost Aspiration to liberate all people without requiring any practice. Shinran came up with a new reading that he thought expressed the Buddha's Innermost Aspiration. His reading of “the statement about the fulfillment of the three vows” is as follows:

[The Fulfillment of the 11th vow]

The sentient beings born in that land all dwell among the [truly] settled, for in that Buddha-land there is not one who is falsely settled or not settled.

[The Fulfillment of the 17th vow]

The Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are one in praising the majestic power and the virtues, inconceivably profound, of the Buddha of immeasurable life.

[The Fulfillment of the 18th vow]

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name [that is being said by all Buddha-tathagatas in the ten quarters], realize even one moment of *shinjin* and joy. Amida directs his virtues to them from his sincere mind. Aspiring to be born in that land, they then [i.e., immediately] attain birth [in the Pure Land] and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma. (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 154; p. 14; p. 80, with modification by N. Haneda)

In this statement Shakyamuni says that the three vows have already been fulfilled. He says that the “dharma” (i.e., historical teachers’ teachings) that Dharmakara desired to realize in his 17th vow are already fulfilled, that “*shinjin*” (i.e., the true self) that he desired to realize in his 18th vow is already fulfilled; and that “a powerful life of the true self” that he desired to realize in his 11th vow is already fulfilled.

In the *Larger Sutra* Shakyamuni also says that because of the fulfillment of the three vows, many people have already become Buddhas and many other people are now attaining Buddhahood. Shakyamuni says that he is one of many Buddhas that were liberated by the fulfillment of the three vows and were praising the virtues of Amida Buddha.

When Shinran read the statement, he thought that it fully explained the meaning of his meeting with his teacher Honen and subsequent liberation experience. Shinran believed that his liberation meant the fulfillment of the three vows in his own life. Thus, he regarded the statement as the most important text in all Buddhist literature. He viewed it as the basis of his teaching as well as his life.

Shinran believed that the statement described not only the way of his personal liberation but also the *universal* way by which all human beings are liberated. So he constructed his teaching on the basis of the statement, believing that all humanity could be liberated if those three vows were fulfilled within them. I believe that all of his writings are commentaries on the statement. His main work, the *Kyogyoshinsho* (Teaching, Practice, Shin, and Realization), is based on the statement. The first volume (i.e., the Teaching [*Kyo*] Volume) of his main work identifies the *Larger Sutra* as the textual basis of Shin Buddhism. Its second volume (i.e., the Practice [*Gyo*] Volume) talks about the fulfillment of the 17th vow. Its third volume (i.e., the *Shinjin* [*Shin*] Volume) talks about the fulfillment of the 18th vow. Its fourth volume (i.e., the Realization [*Sho*] Volume) talks about the fulfillment of the 11th vow.

Now let me discuss the fulfillment of the three vows. Although Shakyamuni talks about the fulfillment of the three vows in the sutra’s numerical order—from the 11th vow to the 17th, and from the 17th vow to the 18th vow, let me talk about them in the following order—from the 17th vow to the 18th vow, and from the 18th vow to the 11th vow, in which Shinran experienced the fulfillment of the three vows.

I. The Fulfillment of the 17th Vow—“the Vow That All the Buddhas Say the Name (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu*)”

The Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are one in praising the majestic power and the virtues, inconceivably profound, of the Buddha of immeasurable life. (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 14)

Before I discuss this passage about the fulfillment of the 17th vow, let me first talk about the 17th vow itself, which says, “If, when I attain Buddhahood, the countless Buddhas throughout the worlds in the ten quarters do not all praise and say my Name, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment.” (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 13)

When Dharmakara was making his vows, he thought that the existence of historical Buddhas and their teachings were indispensable conditions for the liberation of all humanity. Thus, in the 17th vow he desired that he would bring about the existence of historical Buddhas and their teachings when he attained supreme enlightenment. This is his desire to realize “dharma” (teachings)—expedient means that are designed to guide people to the Dharma, which I discussed in Part One. Now let me explain the contents of the passage about the fulfillment of the 17th vow.

A. “The Buddhas-Tathagatas”: Historical Teachers

According to Shinran, the expression, “the Buddhas-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters,” refers to his historical teachers such as, Shakyamuni and the seven patriarchs. (When the word

“Buddha[s]” is followed by the expressions such as “throughout the ten quarters” or “throughout the three time periods [i.e., past, present, and future],” it refers to historical Buddha[s].) Shinran says that his historical teachers are calling to him to come out of the cocoon of the ego self.

The following part of the passage says, “They [i.e., the Buddha-tathagatas] are one in praising the majestic power and the virtues, inconceivably profound, of the Buddha of immeasurable life [i.e., Amida Buddha].” This means that Shinran’s historical teachers, who are liberated by the fulfillment of the three vows, are praising the power of Amida’s Innermost Aspiration and his virtues, such as wisdom and compassion. The fact that the historical teachers speak words is the most important part of the fulfillment of the 17th vow. Their “words” are the realization of the “dharma”—expedient means that can guide us to the Dharma that is beyond words. Since we now hear “words”—audible voices of our historical teachers, we can understand the Dharma that is calling to us with an inaudible voice.

The expression, “...praise and say my Name,” in the 17th vow is rephrased in the fulfillment passage by the expression, “...are one in praising the majestic power and the virtues, inconceivably profound, of the Buddha of immeasurable life.” Although these two expressions may seem different, they actually mean the same thing. The Chinese character *sho* that is translated as “say” in the 17th vow has layers of meanings, such as “scale,” “measure,” “correspond to,” “praise,” and “say.” According to Shinran, “the Name” in the 17th vow refers to various virtues of Amida, such as wisdom and compassion. Although the fulfillment passage does not contain the two words, “say” and “the Name,” it is expressing the same thing. “Saying the Name” and “praising the virtues of Amida” mean exactly the same thing.

B. The Meaning of the Name (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu*)

The Name (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu*) literally means “Rely on Amida Buddha (i.e., Buddha of limitless light [*amitabha*] and limitless life [*amitayus*]!)” It is an imperative sentence or an order from our historical teachers. Amida Buddha is a symbol of the Dharma, the Ultimate Truth or the Innermost Aspiration, which is beyond words. “Limitless light (that symbolizes limitless wisdom) and limitless life (that symbolizes limitless compassion)” are spiritual qualities that the Dharma assumes in human existence. Thus *Namu Amida Butsu* can be translated in several different ways, such as “Rely on the Dharma (the Ultimate Truth!),” “Rely on the Buddha’s wisdom!,” and “Rely on the Innermost Aspiration!” As far as I am concerned, I like to translate *Namu Amida Butsu* into “Awaken to the Innermost Aspiration!” I believe this translation seems to best convey the meaning that Shinran saw in *Namu Amida Butsu*.

Through the Name, our historical teachers are constantly encouraging us to return to the Dharma, the Ultimate Truth. They are telling us to go back to the true self, to the original Dharma self. Since the Name comes from both the Innermost Aspiration of our historical teachers and the Innermost Aspiration that lies in the depths of our minds, Shinran calls it “an absolute command that comes from the Innermost Aspiration.”

II. The Fulfillment of the 18th Vow—the Vow of *Shinjin* (i.e., the True Self)

Now let me discuss the passage about the fulfillment of the 18th vow, which deals with the issue of our spiritual conversion from the ego self to the true self, the most important issue in our lives. Before I discuss the passage about the fulfillment of the 18th vow, let me first discuss the 18th vow itself, which says,

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting themselves, aspiring to be born in my land, and thinking of me perhaps even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma. (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 80, with modification by N. Haneda)

Shinran considered the mental or spiritual aspects of this vow—“with sincere mind,” “entrusting,” and “aspiring [to be born there]”—the most important part of the vow. He calls them “the threefold mind” and identifies them with *shinjin* or “the mind that is single” (i.e., a term referring to *shinjin* which Vasubandhu [ca. 350–450, the second Shin patriarch] used in his *Pure Land Treatise*.)

According to Shinran, Dharmakara (who symbolizes the Innermost Aspiration to liberate all humanity) thought that the realization, in human minds, of the threefold mind (or *shinjin*) is the most important cause of their liberation. Thus he desired, in the 18th vow, to give the threefold mind to all people by becoming the threefold mind, the latent spiritual basis, in their beings.

Another important part of the 18th vow for Shinran was the last sentence in the vow, “Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses (i.e., killing one’s father, killing one’s mother, killing a sage, shedding blood from the Buddha’s body, and causing disharmony in the

Sangha) and those who slander the right dharma.” Shinran believes that this sentence talks about how the *shinjin* person sees himself. The *shinjin* experience means the discovery of the total unsavability of the ego self. When Shinran identified himself as one of those evil ones who are excluded from Amida’s salvation and experienced the total negation of the ego self, he experienced the awakening (or birth) of *shinjin*, the true self. *Shinjin* was the appearance, in his consciousness, of the Innermost Aspiration or the threefold mind (of which Dharmakara is a symbol) that had been latent in Shinran’s mind for a long time.

Thus, Shinran viewed *shinjin*, the mental or spiritual aspect of the vow, as the core of the 18th vow. This view is quite different from the view that other Pure Land masters (that include Shan-tao and Honen) had about the 18th vow. Other Pure Land masters viewed the 18th vow only as the vow of practice—of the easy practice that Amida Buddha designed for the salvation of all people. They interpreted the expression, “thinking of me perhaps even ten times,” as “saying my Name perhaps even ten times.” They identified the expression as the most important part of the vow. When the Pure Land masters such as Shan-tao and Honen quoted the 18th vow in their writings, they quoted the vow in the following manner:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters say my Name as few as ten times and yet are not born, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment.

(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 290)

The Pure Land masters put exclusive focus on the easy practice and eliminated from the vow the two parts that Shinran considered most important, i.e., the parts concerning the threefold mind and concerning the most evil persons. Further, we can clearly see the difference between Shinran and other Pure Land masters concerning the 18th vow when we look at the names they respectively gave to the vow. Honen called the 18th vow “the vow of attaining birth by saying the *nembutsu*.” But Shinran called the vow “the vow of *shinjin*,” “the vow of sincere mind and entrusting,” or “the vow of the threefold mind.”

One of the greatest contributions that Shinran made to Buddhism is that he said that the 18th vow did not talk about the practice of the *nembutsu* (or saying the Name) but about *shinjin* alone. He thought that the 17th vow, not the 18th vow, was the vow of the *nembutsu*. The 17th vow talked about “Buddhas’ saying the Name.” Shinran believed that only the Buddhas could say the Name because the Name was a calling voice from sphere of the Dharma. Deluded human beings could not say the Name; the only thing that they were required to do was to hear the Name that was being said by the Buddhas. This way, Shinran clearly showed the difference between the *nembutsu* and *shinjin*. The *nembutsu* (i.e., “dharmas”) belonged to the Dharma’s side, while, *shinjin* (i.e., the true self) belonged to our human side—it was something to be realized within us. Through his teaching, Shinran attempted to eliminate the confusion that existed in the preceding Pure Land tradition. The Pure Land teachers before Shinran talked about the *nembutsu* as something belonging to the deluded human side. By saying that the 17th vow is the vow of the *nembutsu* and the 18th vow is the vow of *shinjin*, Shinran taught us that we should not bring the *nembutsu* to our deluded human side.

Now let me again cite the passage about the fulfillment of the 18th vow:

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name [that is being said by all Buddha-tathagatas in the ten quarters], realize even one moment of *shinjin* and joy. Amida directs his virtues to them from his sincere mind. Aspiring to be born in that land, they then [i.e., immediately] attain birth [in the Pure Land] and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression. Excluded are those who commit the five grave offenses and those who slander the right dharma.

(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 80, with modification by N. Haneda)

According to Shinran, the 18th vow talks about Dharmakara’s desire that all people awaken *shinjin* by hearing the Name that historical teachers say. This fulfillment passage talks about the fulfillment of the desire that Dharmakara expressed in the 18th vow. It says that since the 17th vow (i.e., the vow of the Name [i.e., “dharmas”]) has already been fulfilled, the 18th vow (i.e., the vow of *shinjin*) is also fulfilled. Let me explain the contents of the above passage.

A. Realization of *Shinjin* (or the True Self)

“All sentient beings” here refer to those who are ready to hear the Name (i.e., “dharmas”). They are those who view themselves as “the most evil.” Shinran identified himself as one of those people. Before he met his teacher, he did not think that he was the most evil person, or a totally unsavable person who lacked the ability to save himself. Shinran thought he could liberate himself by performing various practices. But now he reached the conclusion that the only thing way he could be liberated was through hearing the Name.

Honen was constantly calling to Shinran, “Awaken to the Dharma! Awaken to the Innermost Aspiration!” The teacher was telling him to discover the Dharma, the Innermost

Aspiration, in himself. When Shinran heard the calling voice from Honen, who embodied the power of the Innermost Aspiration, the power of the Buddha's wisdom and compassion, he was deeply shaken by it. The calling voice awakened *shinjin*, the true self, in him. *Shinjin* was the appearance in his consciousness of the Innermost Aspiration (that Dharmakara symbolizes) that had been latent in the deepest part of his being.

The expression "As they hear the Name, they realize even one moment of *shinjin* and joy" means that those who have been nurtured by the "dharma" finally come to experience a flash-like awakening. They receive tremendous joy at having the true self realized within them.

Shinjin, the true self, belongs to the Dharma, or the Innermost Aspiration. This self is one with the Dharma, the dynamic flow of life. The realization of this self means that we become dynamic Dharma seekers. We start to appreciate the richness, fullness, and dynamism of life.

By the words "Amida directs his virtues to them (i.e., sentient beings or people) from his sincere mind" Shinran means that all the things necessary for people's spiritual liberation, particularly "dharma" and *shinjin*, were fully prepared and given to them by the Buddha, or the Dharma. He says that Amida's directing of virtues to people (i.e., the Tathagata's *eko*), not people's own directing of virtues (i.e., the self power *eko*) liberated them.

But other Pure Land masters read the section (which Shinran read as "Amida directs his virtues to them from his sincere mind") in a totally different way. They read the section this way: "Sentient beings...sincerely direct their own virtues of saying the Name [toward the attainment of birth]." (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 474, footnote, with modification by N.H.)

Although Shinran believes that the fact that *shinjin* is realized by hearing the Name is Amida's directing of virtues to people, other Pure Land masters believe that their own directing of virtues, the fruits of the practice of saying the Name, liberates them. Here we can see the same difference that we saw earlier between Shinran and other Pure Land masters; the former emphasized the exclusive importance of *shinjin* and the latter the exclusive importance of the practice of saying the Name.

B. The Exclusive Importance of Hearing in Shin Buddhism

Shinran says that the only way deluded human beings can be liberated is through hearing the words of awakened teachers. He believed that the 18th vow talked about the exclusive importance of hearing the words of awakened teachers. (The 18th vow that I have earlier quoted on p. 10 does not have the word "hear" in it. This 18th vow is found in the third oldest Chinese translation of the *Larger Sutra*. There are five Chinese translations of the sutra. The first, second, and fourth translations have the word "hear" in their respective sections that correspond to the 18th vow in the third translation. [See *Collected Works of Shinran*, pp. 15, 80 for other translations of the vow] When Shinran discussed the 18th vow, he consulted the first four translations. He did not quote the fifth translation at all in his writing because he did not know of its existence.)

Shinran says that deep hearing and *shinjin* are synonymous. He talks about two important conditions for the realization of *shinjin* by quoting a passage from the *Nirvana Sutra*. (*Collected Works of Shinran*, pp. 99–100) Shinran indicates that the two conditions are (a) hearing teachings and examining the self on the basis of them and (b) meeting both the path (teachings) and a human being who is walking on the path.

As to the first condition, Shinran says that hearing does not mean just physically listening; it means hearing and understanding the meaning of the teachings, or the Name. We must hear teachings considering them a mirror that shows the reality of the self; we must hear them considering them designed specifically for our own personal liberation. As to the second condition, Shinran says that it is important to meet a Buddha, a historical teacher. Shinran could not understand the true meaning of concepts such as Amida or the Innermost Aspiration until he met his teacher, who embodied those concepts. Shinran teaches us that what or whom we meet, not what we achieve or accomplish, is the most important thing in our lives.

Now let me further discuss the meaning of hearing in Shin Buddhism. Hearing true teaching is not an easy thing to do. When we that are in the cocoon initially hear teachers' words, we misunderstand them. Although our teachers' words are based on nondualistic wisdom, we understand them using our dualistic human wisdom, which is based on our likes and dislikes. Thus all of us initially misunderstand Buddhism without knowing we are misunderstanding it.

For example, when we hear Shakyamuni say, "Rely on the self!", we mistake the self for the ego self. We think that the teacher is encouraging us to trust the judgment of the ego self. We do not understand that he is talking about the true self that is yet to be realized within us.

When Shakyamuni says that the Dharma-world is full of happiness, we immediately misunderstand his words and think that the Dharma-world is a place where we no longer suffer. We think that we have only plus values, such as pleasure and joy, in it. But the happiness of the Dharma-world that Shakyamuni talks about is not what we think. He talks about the happiness of being able to find meaning in both plus and minus values, in both happiness and suffering.

He teaches us not to run away from the reality of suffering, to accept it and learn from it. His happiness means being liberated from attachment to dualistic human wisdom and receiving nondualistic wisdom that sees meaning in both plus and minus values.

The ego self hates to hear true “dharma” that challenge and hurt it. We are so deluded that we try to hear teachings that are pleasant and comfortable to us. When teachings match our deluded expectations, we say that they are wonderful. When our teachers praise and compliment us, we consider them good teachers. If they challenge and criticize us, we consider them bad teachers, considering them too negative. Rev. Rijin Yasuda (1900–1982, a Japanese Shin teacher) said, “There are two things that we cannot control in our lives—the Dharma and actual reality; both challenge us. We cannot control them; our arbitrary thinking cannot do anything about them.” He also said, “Buddhist hearing does not mean hearing what we want to hear. It means hearing the Dharma and actual reality that we cannot control.”

Our teachers know that we initially misunderstand their words. Thus, they try to direct their words toward the true self that is latent in our consciousness. If we continue to hear “dharma,” they gradually permeate us without our knowing it. It is like the process of smoking a salmon. We are like salmon and the words of our teachers are like smoke. If we are being exposed to the words (the smoke), we will be inadvertently transformed into *shinjin* persons (smoked salmon). It is not so much the power of our understanding as the power of our teachers’ words that transforms us. Our teachers tell us to continuously expose ourselves to the words of the Buddha. They say that if we do not understand their teaching, it is perfectly all right because true teaching is something the ego self cannot easily understand. If we keep on hearing “dharma,” we will, in the fullness of time, become equally smoked and transformed by “dharma”; our thick cocoon of the ego self will be broken and our *shinjin* will be awakened.

The remaining part of the passage about the fulfillment of the 18th vow says, “Aspiring to be born in that land, they then [or immediately] attain birth [in the Pure Land] and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression.” I will discuss these words when I discuss the passage about the fulfillment of the 11th vow in the following section.

III. The Fulfillment of the 11th Vow—the Vow of Necessary Attainment of Nirvana

The fulfillment of the 11th vow is expressed this way:

The sentient beings born in that land all dwell among the truly settled, for in that Buddha-land there is not one who is falsely settled or not settled.

(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 154)

Shinran says that when the 17th vow (i.e., the vow of “dharma”) and the 18th vow (i.e., the vow of “the true self”) are fulfilled, the 11th vow is automatically fulfilled. Before I discuss the fulfillment of the 11th vow, I want to talk about the 11th vow itself, which says,

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the human beings and devas in my land do not dwell among the [truly] settled and necessarily attain nirvana, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment.

(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 153)

The 11th vow talks about the realization of two attainments:

- (a) The initial attainment, here and now, of the true beginning of one’s life: attainment of *shinjin*, the stage of the truly settled, or the stage of nonretrogression. This attainment is the same attainment that the fulfillment of the 18th vow talks about.
- (b) The final attainment of the true ending of one’s life. This is realized in the future, at the last moment of one’s life. It is the attainment of nirvana, *parinirvana*, or ultimate Buddhahood.

In teaching these two attainments, Shin Buddhism is different from other Buddhist traditions, such as Zen and Shingon. Other Buddhist traditions talk about one attainment of Buddhahood, which takes place here and now in this life. Shinran teaches us that we can attain *shinjin*, the initial attainment, here and now, but we cannot attain the final attainment of nirvana, *parinirvana*, or Buddhahood here and now; we experience it in the future, at the last moment of our lives. Let me explain these two attainments respectively.

A. The Initial Attainment That Is Realized Here and Now

Here I want to cite again the sentence about the fulfillment of the 11th vow:

The sentient beings born in that land all dwell among the truly settled, for in that Buddha-land there is not one who is falsely settled or not settled.

(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 154)

In this sentence Shakyamuni talks only about the initial attainment. The sentence, “The sentient beings born in that land all dwell among the truly settled,” means that the people who are born in the Pure Land all attain the stage of the truly settled, which is the initial attainment. Here Shakyamuni does not say anything about the final attainment, probably because the term “the truly settled” refers to people who are assured of the final attainment of *parinirvana*. “The stage of the truly settled” implies that those who attain the stage will necessarily attain the final attainment.

The last part of the passage about the fulfillment of the 18th vow says, “Aspiring to be born in that land, they then [i.e., immediately] attain birth [in the Pure Land] and dwell in the stage of nonretrogression.” This sentence talks not only about the fulfillment of the 18th vow but also about the fulfillment of the 11th vow. This sentence that talks about birth in the Pure Land is the textual basis of Shinran’s view that one attains birth in the Pure Land here and now in this life. By interpreting the word “then” as “immediately” or “simultaneously,” he says that “aspiring to be born in the Pure Land” is synonymous with “being born in the Pure Land.” He says so, because the Pure Land is a symbol of the world of the Innermost Aspiration (*hongan*) and “awakening aspiration (i.e., the Innermost Aspiration) for birth in the world of the Innermost Aspiration” means “being born in the sphere of the Innermost Aspiration.” Realization of *shinjin*, the self that is being permeated by the Dharma, or the Innermost Aspiration, means that we are being born in the world of the Dharma, the Innermost Aspiration. Shinran says that both “awakening *shinjin* (the true self)” and “birth in the Pure Land” mark the start of a true human life. Once *shinjin* or birth is realized within us, we start to re-experience it. The real content of the *shinjin* person’s life is nothing but the repetition, re-experiencing, or deepening of *shinjin* or birth, the true beginning, moment after moment.

Now I want to discuss the two wonderful aspects of the initial attainment: (a) liberation from loneliness and (b) liberation from the meaninglessness of life.

1. Liberation from Loneliness

The sentence about the fulfillment of the 11th vow says, “The sentient beings born in that land all dwell among the [truly] settled (i.e., those who are assured of becoming Buddhas).” This sentence indicates that as soon as people are born in the Pure Land, they join the truly settled, those who are assured of becoming Buddhas. Thus, the Pure Land is a place where we are liberated from our lonely lives in the cocoon of the ego self, because we meet many wonderful teachers and Dharma friends there. The Pure Land symbolizes the Sangha where all people are passionately seeking the Dharma. We become one of them.

In his “Parable of the Two Rivers and the White Path,” Shan-tao says, “When the traveler reaches the Pure Land, he meets good friends and his joy is boundless.” (Cf. *Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 90) Shan-tao defines the Pure Land only as a place where you meet good friends. He does not say anything else about the Pure Land.

The Pure Land is a harmonious world where we feel oneness with all things and people. We are not separate and isolated there, but are interdependent on each other and interconnected with each other. It is also a place where we feel the richness and fullness of life.

2. Liberation from the Meaninglessness of Life

Another wonderful aspect of the initial attainment, “birth in the Pure Land,” is that we are liberated from the meaninglessness of life. When we are born there, we join those who are passionately seeking the Dharma and we also become passionate seekers. Being influenced by their enthusiasm for Dharma seeking, we start to live our lives in a dynamic way. We are liberated from the meaningless lives that we had been experiencing in the cocoon.

Because we receive Dharma friends and strong encouragement from them in the Pure Land, we attain the stage of the truly settled, or the stage of nonretrogression. The most significant meaning of having the Dharma friends is that we are able to receive encouragement. Their dynamically seeking spirit cannot help making us become dynamic seekers, too.

In Part Two, I quoted a passage from T’an-luan’s main work. He said that Amida wanted to create the Pure Land for two reasons. The first reason was that Amida wanted to liberate deluded humans from loneliness or isolation. T’an-luan compared the misery of loneliness to a silkworm’s spinning silk, creating a cocoon, and eventually confining itself within the cocoon. Amida wanted to liberate deluded people by giving them a place where they have many wonderful teachers and Dharma-friends.

The second reason was that Amida wanted to liberate deluded people from the meaninglessness of life, from a cyclic life. T’an-luan compared the misery of the meaningless life to an inchworm’s endless walking on the brim of a round barrel. Amida wanted to liberate deluded people by giving them a place where they would become dynamic seekers by receiving encouragement from many Dharma friends.

If we become dynamic seekers, our lives as dynamic seekers inadvertently influence others and benefit them. When others see us passionately seeking the Dharma, they also awaken their aspiration to seek it. All human beings have the Innermost Aspiration to live a powerful and meaningful life. This is the way the Dharma has been transmitted from one person to another in history. In Buddhism there is no room for missionary work. Shinran said, “I, Shinran, do not have even a single disciple.” These words indicate that Shinran always identified himself as a student; he never identified himself as a teacher. He thought it a mistake to view oneself as a teacher. Buddhism teaches us that self-benefiting is simultaneously others-benefiting. Shinran believed that his devotion to seeking the Dharma alone could inadvertently influence others. Actually, his life as a student who concentrated on hearing the Dharma inadvertently exerted tremendous influence over many people of his time.

B. The Final Attainment That Is Realized in the Future

Shinran teaches us that unless we have the initial attainment (i.e., the true beginning of our lives) we cannot have the final attainment (i.e., the true ending of our lives). As soon as a person realizes the initial attainment (i.e., *shinjin* or “birth in the Pure Land”), he starts to receive a little bit of nirvana or Buddhahood. The initial attainment necessarily leads him to the final attainment. As the *shinjin* person re-experiences and deepens the initial attainment (i.e., *shinjin* or “birth in the Pure Land”), nirvana or Buddhahood gradually permeates him. At the moment of his physical death, he fully becomes one with nirvana or Buddhahood. This is called the final attainment.

Shinran says that the final attainment takes place in the future, at the last moment of our lives. He calls the final attainment by many terms, such as “attainment of nirvana” and “attainment of supreme Buddhahood.” The final attainment means the completion of *shinjin* or “birth in the Pure Land.” It means the completion of our lives at the last moment of our lives. It means that our Innermost Aspiration to become one with the Dharma is fulfilled. It also means that we have finished the most important business in our lives—the process of transcending the ego self and realizing the true self. It means that we can say thank you to all the things and people that we have encountered in our lives. It means that we have become one with the Dharma spirit that keeps on returning to the world of samsara.

Since the final attainment is realized at the last moment of our lives, it is said to take place in the future. The reason the final attainment is said to be in the future is as follows.

The teaching that attainment of nirvana, Buddhahood, or Pure Land takes place in the future does not mean that nirvana, Buddhahood, or Pure Land exists in the future. The Dharma [the Ultimate Truth] with which nirvana, Buddhahood, or Pure Land is synonymous always exists here and now. It does not exist in the future. But, attainment of nirvana, Buddhahood, or Pure Land is said to be in the future because those whose eyes are covered by blind passions cannot see the Dharma that always exists here and now. This means that what is reality here and now is not reality here and now for those whose eyes are covered by blind passions. When blind passions that cover the eyes of the deluded are removed from their eyes, they will fully see the Dharma that always exists here and now. That is the meaning of the final attainment being said to be in the future.

Suppose rain is constantly coming down from the sky. Some buckets are receiving rain, but some upside-down buckets are not receiving rain at all. Rain symbolizes the Dharma that exists all the time. It exists equally for all beings here and now. The buckets that are receiving rain symbolize those who are awakened to the Dharma; they are receiving the Dharma here and now. But the upside-down buckets symbolize the deluded whose eyes are covered by passions. For the latter, the Dharma exists as something to be attained and received in the future.

Shinran identified himself as one of the deluded persons. He says that when a deluded person awakens *shinjin*, he starts to see only a little bit of the Dharma light (i.e., nirvana, Buddhahood, or Pure Land) because blind passions thickly cover his eyes and he cannot see well. Shinran also says that by hearing the words of his teachers, he can gradually see the light more and more. And he will be able to see the light in its entirety in the future, at the last moment of his life, when his blind passions disappear. This is the meaning of Shinran’s teaching that the final attainment is in the future.

Many Shin followers misunderstand this teaching of Shinran about the future attainment; they think that Shinran is talking about birth in the Pure Land in the future, after their physical deaths. This is a serious misunderstanding of his teaching.

Conclusion

Some Buddhist scholars say that Shinran’s teaching deviates from the teaching of Shakyamuni. Since I believe his teaching is no different from Shakyamuni’s teaching, I have attempted to show that his teaching is built on the doctrinal basis of Shakyamuni’s teaching.

Shinran's entire teaching is based on the fulfillment of the three vows, i.e., the 17th, 18th, and 11th vows. The first two vows are particularly important. The 17th vow is the vow of the *nembutsu* ("dharmas") that guide us to the Dharma and the 18th vow is the vow of *shinjin* (the true self). The two most important concepts in Shinran's teaching are the *nembutsu* and *shinjin*. The *nembutsu* represents the liberator's side; *shinjin* represents the liberated side. The *nembutsu* guided Shinran to the Dharma.

The fact that the 17th vow and the 18th vow were fulfilled in Shinran's life was most important for him. The fulfillment of the 17th vow meant that Shinran met Honen and heard the Name, his teacher's words. The fulfillment of the 18th vow meant that when Shinran heard and understood the deep meanings contained in the Name, he experienced the awakening of *shinjin*, the true self. He started to be born in the Pure Land, the world of the Dharma, and started to live a powerful and meaningful life.

Since Shinran saw universal implications in his personal experience of meeting his teacher Honen, he could not help writing his main work *Kyogyoshinsho*. We can see in Shinran a meticulous elucidation of "Rely on the Dharma! Rely on the self!" the final message that Shakyamuni left immediately before his passing. We can see in Shinran an elaborate explanation of the process by which the Innermost Aspiration—aspire to realize the true self and live a powerful life—can be fulfilled in all of us.

Notes:

This year, we could not hold both our English summer retreat and Japanese fall retreat because of corona virus pandemic. This year we did not published the May issue of this newsletter.

We deeply apologize for that.

This year, Mr. Ed Oasa, our Dharma friend, passed away. We want to express our deepest sympathy to his family. We will greatly miss him.

We want to express our deepest gratitude to our two friends: to Mr. John Veen for creating videos of Dr. Haneda's lectures; and to Mr. Steve Kaufman for valuable suggestions concerning the essay contained in this issue. You can find the video lectures and essays by Dr. Haneda in our website: www.maida-center.org

The Evil Person: Essays on Shin Buddhism by Shuichi Maida (tr. by N. Haneda) is available as an e-book on www.Amazon.com. Please welcome a wonderful new year! (T.H.)