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The Discovery of the “Treasure” That Already Exists —A Similarity between Shakyamuni and Shinran—

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Introduction

Shakyamuni’s life experiences and teachings and Shinran’s are similar in many ways. For example, they both lost their parent(s) when they were young. They unsuccessfully engaged in the traditional religious practices of their time. They had profound awakening experiences. They did not create any religious institutions like temples. No record indicates they ever performed religious ceremonies or rituals. Their teachings hardly contained any mystic or esoteric elements. Scriptures hardly mention that they engaged in so-called “social actions.” However, the most outstanding similarity between them is the fact that they both considered self-examination the most important thing in their lives. Without ever identifying themselves as teachers, they devoted their entire lives to examining the self—to asking the question, “What am I?” or “Do I have a right understanding of the self?” Through a difficult and challenging process of self-examination, they eventually found an answer to the question. We could say that their teachings were nothing but their answer to this question.

In this essay I want to discuss one specific way in which the two teachers were similar in regard to self-examination. It is the fact that they both searched for two types of goals, or two types of self. Earlier in their lives they attempted to attain their first goal, i.e., the ideal self, and they failed miserably. Then, they attempted to attain the second goal, i.e., their real self, and they succeeded.

Unlike typical treasure hunters, Shakyamuni and Shinran sought two different types of treasure. They sought one type of treasure and failed to find it; but later they sought another type and succeeded in finding it. The first treasure they sought was something they did not have. They thought that they could attain it in the future through practices, but they failed. The second treasure they sought and discovered was something that they already had and did not have to attain through practices.

This essay has four sections.

In the first section, I will discuss the process by which Shakyamuni examined the self and attained awakening. I will show how he failed to attain the first treasure and then succeeded in attaining the second one.

In the second section, I will discuss the issue that I discussed in the first section in terms of Shinran’s life.

In the third section, I will show that the two teachers’ self-examination and awakening experiences were almost identical by listing the similarities between them.

In the fourth section, as a summary of my discussion, I will tell a Russian folk story, which will show the differences between the two types of goals (or treasures) that Shakyamuni and Shinran sought in their lives.

I. The Two Treasures in Shakyamuni’s Life (ca. B.C. 460-380)

A. Shakyamuni’s Failure to Attain the First Treasure

Tradition tells us that Shakyamuni was born as Siddhartha, a prince in a small kingdom in North India. His mother died immediately after his birth. He grew up without knowing the

reality of human misery. But after growing up, he witnessed the reality of human sufferings such as aging, sickness, and death. Then, he became very depressed. He could not live his life like before. Then, one day he met a traveling monk by whom he was deeply moved. He awakened a desire to become like the monk. At age 29 he renounced his secular life and becomes a seeker of the path.

Then, Shakyamuni visited spiritual leaders of his time and studied under them. They taught him that he should seek and discover *atman*, the permanent soul (or the ideal self). *Atman* was the divine (i.e., permanent, independent, and autonomous) spiritual basis of Brahmanism, the religion of Shakyamuni's time. *Atman* was the first treasure that Shakyamuni sought. He thought that if he tried hard enough, he could find this treasure. So, he engaged in traditional practices, such as yogic meditation, and attained the highest level of *samadhi*. But, being dissatisfied with this attainment, he abandoned those traditional practices and took up ascetic practices, non-Brahmanic practices. He tortured his body by strict disciplines such as fasting. He thought that if he discovered *atman*, the permanent soul (or the ideal self), he could overcome the fear of aging, sickness, and death.

Then, after six years of difficult practices, he exhausted his energy and became emaciated. But he could not attain his goal. He came to have deep doubts about the validity of all traditional doctrines and all practices. Then, thinking that those doctrines and practices were totally useless and meaningless, he renounced all of them.

Then, Shakyamuni bathed in a river, received a pot of milk porridge from a maiden, and sat under a tree to meditate. When Shakyamuni quit the difficult practices and sat under a tree to meditate, his fellow ascetics laughed at him, saying, "Siddhartha is a failure. He has taken to an easy lifestyle." For them, sitting under the shade of a tree was no practice. The Indian climate was hot and humid, so sitting and meditating in the shade of a tree was one of the most comfortable and pleasant things to do. His fellow practitioners regarded his meditation as the act of a lazy person.

Later, after his awakening, he recollected his difficult practices he had taken up before his awakening and told his disciples about their meaninglessness as follows:

Seekers, even with these kinds of disciplines, practices, and ascetic practices, I was unable to gain the sage's wisdom that was far beyond the teachings of ordinary people. Why was it so? It was because I had not yet acquired the holy wisdom through the truth of dependent co-arising. If we gain this holy wisdom, it is our holy guide. The person who follows it will be guided to the extinction (nirvana) of suffering.

(Ichijo Ogawa. *Shinran*, pp. 49-50)

Shakyamuni says here that gaining wisdom (or the right view of the self) through the truth of dependent co-arising, not practices, was the most important thing. It is wisdom that liberated him. Without it, all the practices that he took up were useless and meaningless.

B. Shakyamuni's Success in Attaining the Second Treasure

Having recognized the meaninglessness of difficult practices, he sat under the tree to meditate. Here a question arises: "How is this meditation that Shakyamuni did under the tree different from the meditation practices that he undertook earlier?" Simply this: his meditation under the tree was nothing but self-examination. Shakyamuni was asking the question, "What am I? Do I have *atman*, the permanent self?" His meditation was nothing like other forms of meditation that were designed to seek *samadhi*, peace of mind, or union between *atman*, individual divinity, and Brahma, the universal divinity. It was different from meditation practices that were based on the idea of *atman*. In his meditation under the tree, Shakyamuni examined the validity of *atman* itself.

Shakyamuni thought that the only thing necessary was to thoroughly examine the self. Now let me discuss how he examined the self. He first examined his body—all the things that formed the body—things such as skin, muscles, bones, and blood. He realized that all those things were constantly moving, changing, and flowing. Then, he examined his mind—all the things that formed his mind—things such as sensation, conception, impulse and consciousness. Finally he realized that all those things were 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.

When Shakyamuni was still sitting under the tree, he was then 35 years old. One morning when he looked at the morning star, he attained awakening and became the Buddha, the Awakened One. When he clearly understood the Dharma, he became an Awakened One. The Dharma means "truth"; and the Dharma means the truth of impermanence (or dependent co-arising), or original suchness (*tathata*).

Shakyamuni clearly understood that the truth of impermanence was the only ultimate reality, that there was nothing permanent, independent, and autonomous outside himself or inside himself. He understood that it was a mistake to think that there was *atman*, a permanent soul. His insight into the truth of impermanence was the content of his awakening. When he understood the absoluteness of the Dharma (truth) of impermanence (or dependent co-arising), he was liberated by it. In this way, he attained the truth of impermanence, the second treasure that had already existed within him.

What, then, is the specific meaning of the truth of impermanence, the second treasure that already exists within us? Buddhism teaches us that it is life. Life is simply so close to us that we have not fully discovered and appreciated it. “Life” is such a common word, an ordinary word that we use all the time. It may not sound like a profound religious or Buddhist concept. But there is no greater or deeper religious concept.

When Shakyamuni attained Buddhahood, he simply discovered life. He discovered its inconceivable depths. He discovered that he was life—that he had always been life. He realized that his whole being had always been part of the Dharma and had not been separated from it for even a second.

Shakyamuni’s becoming a Buddha means that he became awakened to what he was, or what he had already been. Life was already there whether Shakyamuni was aware of it or not. Thus, he told his disciples that he did not create anything new; he told them that he discovered something that had been there all the time. He compared himself to a traveler who discovered an ancient castle that already existed.

Shakyamuni clearly recognized the real self as life itself. The real self as life itself existed only here and now. It existed as a very quick, temporary movement. The quick movement took place only once; it was a unique, unrepeatable one. It cannot be compared or contrasted with other moments.

When Shakyamuni recognized life as his ultimate goal, he realized that the idea that he had to engage in difficult practices to attain it was a mistake. The only thing necessary was immediate insight into it. When he stopped his endeavor to seek his goal and simply became passive, he was able to receive it. His active attempts to grab at it were a hindrance; they were totally useless.

C. The Death of the Old Self and the Birth of the New Self

Shakyamuni described the content of his awakening, saying, “My life is already spent. The Universal Working is already established.” I believe that these two sentences are very important. They describe the two—negative and positive—aspects of his awakening. The first sentence (“My life is already spent”) describes the negative aspect—his spiritual death; the second sentence (“The Universal Working is already established”) talks about the positive aspect of his awakening—his spiritual birth. This means that when he encountered the Dharma, he experienced the death of his old self and the birth of his new self, his real self.

Let me explain the negative aspect of Shakyamuni’s awakening experience. When he said, “My life is already spent,” he meant that there was no *atman*. Earlier I said that Shakyamuni recognized the emptiness of *atman* because of his insight into the truth of impermanence. Here let me further explain his negation of the reality of *atman* through his insight into the truth of dependent co-arising. He understood that his life activities (i.e., seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking) were enabled by the truth of dependent co-arising, or by the interdependence of the six sense organs (i.e., eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) and their six objects (i.e., form, sound, smell, taste, touch, and ideas). The six sense organs and the six objects functioned interdependently. The former could not exist without the latter, and the latter could not exist without the former. People usually identified the six sense organs as the independent self (or the subject) and the six objects as the independent environment (or the object), but Shakyamuni thought that such a view was wrong. The real self existed only as contact between the six sense organs and the six sense objects—as interdependent contacts (called seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking) between the six sense organs and the six sense objects. There could not be any type of truly existing self apart from these interdependent functions.

Thus Shakyamuni realized that conditions such as form and sound determined the seeing and hearing that he was experiencing. He had no independent self that could control the conditions such as form and sound; conditions were controlling him. He had no autonomous self that could initiate seeing and hearing. Thus he realized that he had to accept any idea that appeared in his mind—whether it was good or evil, pure or impure. The truth of dependent co-arising made those ideas appear and disappear. He had no choice but to let

them appear and disappear. He no longer had any attachment to any of those deluded ideas; he stopped seriously dealing with them. Having recognized the basic nature of his mind as such, he was humbled. He no longer had any infatuation with his mind. This realization made him recognize himself as an ordinary person. Thus he started to live his life as an ordinary person without having any infatuated ideas about himself. This is the meaning of the spiritual death for Shakyamuni.

Now let me talk about the positive aspect of his awakening. In his awakening experience, Shakyamuni understood that his entire being was nothing but the truth of impermanence, or the truth of dependent co-arising. Now he realized that the truth was actually a dynamic flow of life, a universal flow of life, a gigantic flow of life. Shakyamuni realized that the truth of all things being impermanent meant that all existing things, not only animate things but also inanimate things, were manifesting the newness and freshness of life. They were all fellow participants in (or fellow components of) the universal flow of life. He now came to see the whole world as a creative world and himself as one creative component of the creative world.

Having become one with the truth of impermanence, Shakyamuni was liberated from all fixed values, –isms, opinions, views, and perspectives. He started to live his life as a constant seeker, as one who appreciated the ever-freshness and ever-newness of life.

I have discussed how Shakyamuni sought two types of treasure in his life. Earlier he made a mistake by seeking a treasure, chasing after a dream, that did not exist. Then he discovered the Dharma, or the real self—the treasure—that he already had, that had been there all the time.

II. The Two Types of Treasure That Shinran (1173-1262) Sought

A. Shinran's Failure to Attain the First Treasure

In 1173, Shinran was born a son of Hino Arinori, a low-ranking aristocrat. When he was a small child, his parents died. At the age of nine, he became a novice monk on Mt. Hiei, where he studied and practiced Buddhism. His teachers on Mt. Hiei taught him that the goal of Buddhism was to attain Buddhahood (or sainthood), an ideal self. Thus he believed that he had to eliminate blind passions through various practices to attain Buddhahood. Envisioning such an ideal self in the future, he engaged in some of the most difficult traditional practices.

However, in his twenties Shinran started to have deep doubts about traditional teachings and practices. These doubts made him visit Honen (1133-1212, the founder of Japanese Jodo School), who was actively propagating a new teaching about the nembutsu outside traditional Buddhist institutions. Having met this teacher and been moved by his teaching, Shinran decided to leave Mt. Hiei. Thus he abandoned traditional Buddhist practices (that he called “sundry practices”) when he was twenty-nine. He said that his meeting with Honen was the most important event in his life. He described the meeting as follows:

I, Gutoku Shinran, a disciple of Shakyamuni, discarded sundry practices and took refuge in the Innermost Aspiration (or Vow) in 1201.

(Collected Works of Shinran [henceforth abbreviated as CWS], p. 290)

B. Shinran's Success in Attaining the Second Treasure

Having met his teacher Honen, he learned from him that the most important thing in Buddhism was not traditional “sundry practices,” but it was hearing and understanding the nembutsu (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu* [“Come to the Dharma!”]). Having heard the meaning of the nembutsu, Shinran experienced shinjin (awakening) and was liberated.

In order to explain the universal meanings that are contained in the Shin Buddhist concepts, such as the nembutsu (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu*), or shinjin, let me discuss the story that is told in the *Larger Sutra*, the textual basis of Shin Buddhism.

The *Larger Sutra* has a mythological story in which a bodhisattva by the name of Dharmakara became a Buddha by the name of Amida Buddha. Dharmakara initially made vows to become a Buddha and create a Buddha land. After a long period of practice, he became Amida Buddha and created a Buddha land called the Pure Land ten *kalpas*—a long, long time—ago.

Dharmakara (or Amida Buddha) desired not only the realization of his own Buddhahood and creation of his land but also for all human beings to be born in his land (i.e., reach spiritual liberation). He wished that if he realized his Buddhahood and created his land, all Buddhas in the ten quarters (i.e., all historical Buddhas or teachers) would praise him by

calling his name; their words of praise would resound throughout the universe. And all human beings who listened to the words of praise and desired to be born in his land would be born there immediately.

Thus the *Larger Sutra* says that ever since Amida created the Pure Land, he has been calling all human beings to be born there. This calling voice of Amida (which is called “the nembutsu” or “the Name”) reaches all human beings, assuming the form of the words of praise by all Buddhas in the ten quarters, our historical teachers.

This story of Amida’s creation of the Pure Land teaches us that something perfect, a perfect world, was already created a long time ago. It teaches us that the most important thing for human beings was *already perfected* a long time ago. Thus it shows us that the only important thing for us to do is not to create a perfect world, but to listen to the calling voice (i.e., the words of our historical teachers) coming from the perfect world. It is to discover the perfect world and return to it, to be born in it.

Then, what is the perfect world that concepts such as Amida Buddha and the Pure Land symbolize? Amida Buddha and the Pure Land symbolize life, the truth of impermanence, or the truth of original suchness (*tathata*). Amida (or *amitayus* in Sanskrit) means “limitless life”; and the Pure Land is a symbol of the world of “limitless life.” And we are inherently life, and part of limitless life. Amida, limitless life, is calling us to awaken to it through the words of our historical teachers. It is waiting to be heard and discovered.

Now I have briefly described the doctrinal basis of Shin Buddhism, Shinran’s Buddhism. It teaches us that becoming a Buddha means becoming awakened to life, or to the truth of impermanence, which already exists. The story of Amida’s creation of the land of limitless life ten *kalpas* ago means that we do not have to create a new reality or world. A perfect world already exists and we have only to be born into it. With this doctrinal background in mind, let us go back to the issue of Shinran’s success in attaining the second treasure.

As I have discussed above, Shinran attempted to become a Buddha through various practices on Mt. Hiei. He attempted to perfect himself and create his own new world. But he had a hard time attaining his goal. Then, being frustrated and depressed, he started to doubt the validity of the practices that he was performing. However, when Shinran met Honen, the teacher made him recognize the mistake in his approach. As I would put it, Honen challenged him, by saying, “Shinran, you do not have to perfect yourself. You do not have to create your own Buddhahood or your own new world. Amida (limitless life) already exists. Something perfect already exists. You are already being embraced by it. You are already part of it. The entirety of your being, including all your flaws and imperfections, is part of something perfect. Just listen to the voice that is coming from Amida. He is telling you, ‘Come immediately as you are!’ Just desire to be born in his land!”

Before Shinran met Honen, he thought that he had to perfect himself and create something perfect. But now he recognized his mistake. He did not have to create anything perfect. Something perfect was already there. It had been there all the time. Amida, limitless life, had been there all the time. Shinran realized that the only important thing for him to do was to listen to the calling voice that was coming from the perfect world, to awaken to it, and to be immediately born into it.

Shinran also realized that the perfect world was given equally to all people, the good and the evil, the wise and the foolish, and the young and the old. All people could be immediately born into this world without any practical, moral, or intellectual requirements and qualifications. Thus Shinran experienced immediate liberation (birth in the Pure Land) by listening to the calling voice that was coming from the perfect world. He discovered that he had already been embraced by this wonderful world from the time he was born. Then, he could be what he was—a foolish ordinary person. He was perfect as he was. He, with all his defects and shortcomings, was a perfect component of the perfect world.

Thus Shinran realized that immediate recognition of the Dharma or gaining wisdom (or the right view of the self), not practices, was the most important thing. The only thing necessary was immediate insight into the Dharma, just to understand the self as it was—a manifestation of the truth of impermanence.

When Shinran recognized life as the ultimate goal, he realized that the idea that he had to engage in difficult practices to attain a goal was a mistake. He realized that his belief that he could perfect himself and realize Buddhahood through his own effort was actually the greatest hindrance to the discovery of the Dharma, because it prevented him from listening to the calling voice. When he recognized the futility of reliance upon his own effort, he was able to clearly listen to the calling voice. When he stopped his endeavor to capture the treasure as an external object, when he became passive, he was able to receive it.

C. The Death of the Old Self and the Birth of the New Self

Borrowing an expression by Shan-tao (613-681, a Chinese Pure Land master whom Shinran called the fifth Shin patriarch), Shinran described the content of his awakening: “In the preceding moment, my life ends...In the next moment, I am immediately born.” (CWS, p. 594)

These two sentences describe the twofold—negative and positive—aspect of Shinran’s awakening. The first sentence (“In the preceding moment, my life ends”) describes the negative aspect of his awakening—his spiritual death; and the second sentence (“In the next moment, I am immediately born”) describes the positive aspect of his awakening—his spiritual birth. This means that when he encountered the Dharma, he experienced the death of the old self and the birth of a new self, or the real self. This twofold aspect of his awakening was repeated continuously throughout the rest of his life.

Let me explain the negative aspect of Shinran’s awakening experience. When he said, “In the preceding moment, my life ends,” he indicated that the self to which he had been attached ceased to exist as something substantial. Shinran called this self “self-power,” which he explained with a couple of other expressions, “the twofold mind” and “calculating mind.” This self was the basis of all his practices, such as keeping precepts, meditation, and chanting. He says that he recognized the unreality of this self because he received the Buddha’s non-dualistic wisdom, i.e., insight into the truth of impermanence or the truth of dependent co-arising.

Shinran talked about the unreality of the self, or self power, by discussing the truth of dependent co-arising as follows:

He [i.e., Shinran] continued, “By this you should realize if we could always act as we wished, then when I told you to kill a thousand people in order to attain birth, you should have immediately gone out to do so. But since you lack the karmic cause inducing you to kill even a single person, you do not kill. It is not that you do not kill because your heart is good. In the same way, a person may wish not to harm anyone and yet end up killing a hundred or a thousand people...If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act.” (CWS, p. 671)

Here Shinran indicates that he cannot have a self that is independent and autonomous because human existence is based on the truth of dependent co-arising, the truth that causes and conditions determine all human actions.

Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (1863-1903, a Japanese Shin thinker) expresses the same idea as follows:

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 Self.* (Italics by N. Haneda) (December Fan, p.26)

Shakyamuni, Shinran, and Rev. Kiyozawa teach us that since conditions determine our actions, we cannot claim that we have the independent and autonomous ability to fully control our actions. We have no control over conditions; conditions are controlling us.

On the basis of this insight into the truth of dependent co-arising, Shinran thought that he had to allow any idea that appeared in his mind—whether it was good or evil, pure or impure. The truth made those ideas appear and disappear. He has no choice but to let them appear and disappear. He no longer took his mind seriously. He was no longer attached to his deluded mind, his ever-changing ideas. When he recognized the basic nature of his mind as such, he was humbled. He no longer had any infatuation with his mind. This realization made him recognize that he was an ordinary person. He often said, “I am a foolish ordinary person who is replete with blind passions.” Thus he lived life as an ordinary person without having any infatuated ideas about himself. This is the meaning of the spiritual death of Shinran.

Now let me talk about the positive aspect of Shinran’s awakening experience. When Shinran met Honen and heard the calling voice of the teacher, he experienced awakening and became one with limitless life. He saw himself being embraced by Amida Buddha—by a dynamic flow of life, a universal flow of life, a gigantic flow of life. He saw himself as a participant in the dynamic universal flow of life. Thus he said, “The person who is born in the Pure Land (i.e., the world of limitless life) attains the stage of nonretrogression (i.e., the

stage in which he engages in endless seeking and learning).” Shinran started to live his life as a dynamic seeker and learner. This means that he started to embody the dynamic seeker’s spirit of Bodhisattva Dharmakara.

Having become one with the truth of impermanence, Shinran was liberated from all fixed values, –isms, opinions, views, and perspectives. He started to live his life as a person who appreciated the ever-freshness and ever-newness of life. He famously denied his being a teacher, saying, “I, Shinran, do not have even a single disciple.” (*CWS*, p. 664, with modification by N. Haneda)

Now I have discussed how Shinran sought two types of treasure in his life. Earlier he made a mistake by seeking a treasure that did not exist. He chased after an imaginary goal, an ideal self that did not exist. Now he attained the Dharma, the real self. He discovered the treasure that had been there all the time.

III. Ways in Which Shakyamuni’s Search for the Two Treasures and Shinran’s Were Similar

I have discussed the respective lives of Shakyamuni and Shinran. I have tried to show the similarities between them. Now I want to summarize my discussion by listing their similarities.

A. Their Failure to Attain the First Treasure

Concerning Shakyamuni’s and Shinran’s failure to attain the first treasure, I can point out the following two similarities.

First, they both sought an “imaginary” or “extraordinary” treasure that they did not have here and now. Shakyamuni sought *atman* (“a permanent soul”) that he did not have here and now. Shinran sought Buddhahood (“an ideal self”) that he did not have here and now. They both thought that they could get the treasure in the future.

Second, they thought that they could attain the treasure in the future through practices that improved or purified them. They attempted to suppress or eliminate their blind passions. In the case of Shakyamuni, those practices were yogic meditation and ascetic practices. In the case of Shinran, those practices were “sundry practices” on Mt. Hiei. In spite of their diligent efforts, they failed to attain the treasure.

B. Their Success in Attaining the Second Treasure

Concerning Shakyamuni’s and Shinran’s success in attaining the second treasure, I can discuss three similarities.

First, the two teachers attained the “real” and “ordinary” treasure that had already existed here and now. It was the real self that was one with the truth of impermanence (or dependent co-arising). It was something that they did not have to seek in the future.

Second, they attained the “real” and “ordinary” treasure through immediate insight into the Dharma, not through practices. The Dharma told them they were all right just as they were and that there was no need to improve or purify themselves. In the case of Shakyamuni, he heard the voice of the Dharma, the truth of impermanence, calling him to awaken to it. In the case of Shinran, he heard the nembutsu (i.e., “*Namu Amida Butsu!* [Come to limitless life!]”) Shakyamuni’s awakening is called *bodhi* (in Sanskrit) or *satori* (in Japanese), both of which mean “awakening.” Shinran’s awakening is called shinjin or “birth in the Pure Land.” I believe their awakenings are one and the same. Since there is only one ultimate truth in this world, there must be only one authentic awakening to the ultimate truth in this world.

Although many people consider Buddhism a practice-oriented religion, I believe that is a common misunderstanding. It is important to bear in mind that Shakyamuni and Shinran renounced the traditional practices of their time. Their religious contemporaries viewed them as religious failures because they renounced practices. The two teachers tell us that Buddhism is not a practice-based religion; it is an understanding-based religion, a wisdom-based religion. It was when they gained a flash-like insight (wisdom) or “the right view of the self” that they were liberated.

Third, their awakening had twofold (i.e., negative and positive) content. They both experienced their spiritual death and spiritual birth. Shakyamuni described the contents of his awakening by saying, “My life is already spent. The Universal Work is already established.” These words describe the death of Shakyamuni’s old self and the birth of his new self, his real self. Similarly, Shinran said, “In the preceding moment, my life ends... In the next moment, I am born.” These words describe the spiritual death of Shinran’s old self and the birth of his new self, his real self. In their spiritual deaths the two teachers were

humbled; they recognized that they were ordinary human beings whose minds were deluded. In their spiritual births, they turned into dynamic and constant seekers, becoming participants in the dynamic universal flow of life. They appreciated the deep meaning of life.

They both fully recognized the real self that had always been there from the time they were born. They started to live the life of “the real self”—a life as “an ordinary person” without any infatuation with the self.

IV. A Folk Story: “The Father and Three Sons”

When I think about Shakyamuni’s and Shinran’s search for the two types of treasure, I think of one of my favorite Russian folk stories.

Once upon a time, a father and his three sons lived in a village. The father became old and sick. The time of his death approached, and he called his sons to his deathbed. He said, “Oh, my boys, I am going to die now. So, I want to tell you something before I die. There is a tremendous treasure buried and hidden in our farmland. I want you to find it. If you keep searching for it, you will surely find it.” Having said this, he passed away.

After having buried their father, the three boys immediately went out to the farmland and started digging up the land with shovels and hoes. They thought that they could find things like gold coins and precious stones. Every day they dug and dug. But they could not find anything, not even one coin.

After digging up the land, they thought that it was wasteful to leave the land as it was. So, they sowed seeds of various fruits and vegetables and kept on digging and digging. But they could not find any treasure, not even one coin. Spring and summer passed. With the coming of fall, they had a tremendous amount of crops, since they had scattered seeds in the spring. They harvested all kinds of fruits and vegetables.

Finally the winter came. On one winter evening, the three sons gathered around a fireplace and talked about their father’s words. They wondered, “Did our father tell us a lie? He said that there was a tremendous treasure buried in our farmland. Although we have spent a whole year searching for it, we could not find it. We could not find even one coin.”

Then, the oldest son suddenly stood up and shouted, “No, our father did not tell us a lie. He knew what he meant. He told us on his deathbed that a tremendous treasure was hidden in our farmland, but we misunderstood him. He was telling us to find the treasure that we already had.” Then, the other two boys were surprised and asked him, “Brother, what are you saying? Do you mean to say that you have already found the treasure?”

Then, the oldest boy answered, “When our father told us there was a treasure buried in our land, we misunderstood him. We thought that some precious stones or gold coins were buried here. But the treasure that our father was talking about was nothing like gold coins or precious stones. He was actually talking about our labor, our work. He wanted to tell us that our labor itself was a tremendous treasure whose value he wanted us to discover. Although that was what he meant by the word ‘treasure,’ we misunderstood him. Although we already had the wonderful treasure, we thought we didn’t have it and kept on looking for it all year long. Our father knew what he meant. But we misunderstood him.”

The other two boys said, “Brother, you are right. That’s what our father meant.” From then on, they stopped searching for gold coins. They started to enjoy and appreciate working. That’s the end of the story.

Initially those boys dreamed about a treasure like gold coins and precious stones (something they did not have) and kept on searching for it. They dug and dug for the treasure. The digging, the labor, was initially designed to obtain treasure. It was a means to reach an end—a process for attaining a goal (in the future). But when they came to realize that there was no such treasure as they had dreamed of, they understood that the real treasure was digging itself, working itself. They understood that what they thought of as a means was actually the end, the goal.

Grammatically speaking, all these words—digging, laboring, working, and seeking—are in the present progressive form. They all have the same ending, -ing. This -ing is the most important thing in Buddhism. Buddhism teaches us to appreciate one hundred percent -ing. It teaches us to become one hundred percent -ing.

The Dharma (i.e., the truth of impermanence or the continuous flow of life) is the -ing. It exists here and now; it does not exist in the future, as our future goal. Our whole being is actually the -ing. Appreciation of the -ing, the dynamism of life, is Buddhism. The greatest happiness in human life is to discover the preciousness of the -ing and to fully appreciate it.

The three boys discovered the treasure that they already had in their ordinary lives. It was digging, working, and laboring. Shinran teaches us that the nembutsu is not a means to attain salvation, not a means to attain some kind of goal in the future. The nembutsu is itself liberation; the process is itself the goal. Appreciation of life here and now is the goal. Apart from appreciation of life here and now, there is no liberation. The nembutsu is a way of appreciating our life here and now. It is a way of appreciating our ordinary life. It is a way of appreciating a treasure that we already have. It is a way of appreciating –ing, seeing, hearing, breathing, learning, and hearing. It is a way of appreciating living.

I have said that both Shakyamuni and Shinran sought two different types of treasure. Like the three boys in the story, the two teachers initially sought a treasure that they did not have. They desperately attempted to attain it through difficult practices. But after having exhausted their energy in seeking the first treasure, they recognized their mistake. Then they discovered a treasure—something that they already had in their daily lives, that they did not have to seek through practices. They immediately found it within themselves when they carefully examined themselves. They attained it through their immediate insight alone.

Shakyamuni and Shinran teach us that that we, too, must discover the real treasure in ourselves, in our daily lives. The treasure is something ordinary that exists as close to us as it could possibly be. It exists here and now. It is something in our lives that we have been taking for granted. The treasure is calling us, challenging us to awaken to it.

(May 15, 2023)

(From Shuichi Maia's *Commentary on the Zen Master Dogen's Genjo Koan*)

Self-Examination

Shuichi Maia

When a person first seeks the Dharma, he is far away from the border of the Dharma. When the Dharma is truly transmitted to him, he is immediately what he originally is.

—The Chapter “*Genjo-koan*” in the *Shobo-genzo* by Dogen

I. “When a person first seeks the Dharma, he is far away from the border of the Dharma.”

Since people usually misunderstand the meaning of the difficult practices that Shakyamuni performed, they view him as belonging to the teaching of the Path of Sages. [Note: Tao-ch’o (562-645, a Chinese Pure Land master whom Shinran called the fourth Shin patriarch) divided Mahayana Buddhism into the Path of Sages that teaches the difficult practices and (ii) the Pure Land teaching that teaches the easy practice.] Shakyamuni renounced difficult practices. He renounced the teaching of the Path of Sage. He realized that he could not attain Buddhahood through the teaching of the Path of Sages. Then, how did he attain Buddhahood?

After having left the mountain where he had been practicing, Shakyamuni entered a village. He first took a bath in the River Nairanjana and washed away the filth of the six years of difficult practices. He, as it were, made ablutions of the defilements of the teaching of the Path of Sages. Thus, the River Nairanjana (or his bathing in it) was a clear demarcation between the forest of the difficult practices and Bodhgaya, where he was to attain Buddhahood. The river was a borderline between difficult practices and easy practice. [Note: Nagarjuna (2nd century, an Indian Mahayana teacher whom Shinran called the first Shin patriarch) talked about two Buddhist paths—the path of difficult practices and the path of easy practice.]

Shakyamuni who was totally exhausted and emaciated could hardly get out of the river; he could only get up to the shore by clinging to a branch of a tree. Then, he received a pot of milk porridge that a maiden offered him. The fact that there was an offering of milk porridge on the other shore of the river where easy practice began seems to me somewhat symbolic. Having recovered his strength, he climbed up a small mountain which was far from any village. Then he walked further toward Bodhgaya, a small town on flat land, into the midst of people. This movement of his toward people reminds me of Prince Shotoku (574-621, a prince regent) who threw himself into the midst of the political reality of his country.

Then, what did Shakyamuni do at Bodhgaya? Having taken nourishment, and taken a good rest and sleep, he sat and meditated under the Bodhi-tree. His lifestyle now became

natural and ordinary. There was no longer any contrivance on his part. He had a natural and ordinary life as a human being, an ordinary life, a life without any contrivance. It was in this life that he sought the path. This was the essence of the easy practice.

Honen Shonin (1133-1212, the founder of the Japanese Pure Land School, whom Shinran called the seventh Shin patriarch) explained easy practice by saying, “If you think that it’s easier for you to say the nembutsu while being married and eating meat, please get married and eat meat. If you think that it’s easier for you to say the nembutsu while not being married and not eating meat, please don’t get married or eat meat. Please have whatever lifestyle that better enables you to say the nembutsu.”

Issues, such as “Your lifestyle should be such-and-such” or “Your actions should be such-and-such,” are not crucial ones. If things, such as lifestyle and actions, are important requirements for spiritual liberation, what can we expect from sick and infirm people? Could there be any authentic Dharma that excludes sick and infirm people? The Dharma does not concern lifestyle or actions; it concerns *self-examination*. That’s why Shakyamuni meditated under the Bodhi-tree while having a natural and ordinary lifestyle. The Dharma concerns *recognition*. That is the core of easy practice. That’s why Shinran taught us that our spiritual liberation takes place in one flash-like moment of shin (or recognition).

Shakyamuni’s sitting meditation at Bodhgaya established the path of easy practice. If people say that Shakyamuni traveled the Path of Sages [or the path of difficult practices], it is an outrageous misunderstanding of him. I don’t think it right to enthrone Shakyamuni in a supreme rank of sainthood. I would rather want to welcome him into a village, into the midst of human society. Yes, indeed, he came into the midst of the Indian populace. That was the real essence of Shakyamuni who left the mountain, the forest of ascetic practices. The person who came into the midst of the populace could not possibly perform difficult or ascetic practices and make others perform them. After his attainment of Buddhahood, he never returned to the mountain. The following words of Dogen succinctly show the fact: “[After his attainment of Buddhahood] Shakyamuni was not alone for even one hour or one day.” (Chapter “*Gyoji*” in the *Shobo-genso*) The phrase, “Shakyamuni was not alone,” means that he was a regular person among the people of the regular world.

Difficult practice means leaving this world and going to a far away place. Easy practice means coming back to a natural and ordinary life as an ordinary human being of the world.

II. “When the Dharma is truly transmitted to him, he is immediately what he originally is.”

“What he originally is” refers to a natural and ordinary person, a person of easy practice, a human being who keeps on clearly examining the self while living an ordinary and regular life as a human being. The meditation under the Bodhi-tree at Bodhgaya made Shakyamuni realize that he was an ordinary person. It made him realize that he was nobody special at all and that there was no special path that he alone was going on in a special way. The difficult practices that he performed in the forest of ascetic practices were designed for those who seek a special path. Having finally known that there was no such path, he left the forest. Now, at Bodhgaya Shakyamuni settled down to an ordinary life as an ordinary person. A human being became a human being. He became a natural and ordinary person. This is precisely what the Zen term “ordinariness (*heijo-tei*)” means. It is recognition of the self as *an ordinary person (bompu)*.

Thus, I believe that the content of Shakyamuni’s awakening under the Bodhi-tree was precisely *his recognition of the self as an ordinary person*. In other words, it was “ordinariness (*heijo-tei*).” It was “nothing special.” This is the core of Buddhism. This is a natural conclusion we reach when we understand Shakyamuni’s life at Bodhgaya as the life of easy practice. In short, at Bodhgaya Shakyamuni, a natural and normal human being, became a natural and normal human being. The Shin Buddhist concept of “the ordinary person” comes from this historical fact. The concept of “the ordinary person (*bompu*)” that Prince Shotoku discussed in the tenth article of the *Seventeen-Article Constitution* captures the essence of Buddhism. With this concept the prince elucidated the core of Buddhism.

When we seek the Dharma outside the self, we fall into the trap of difficult practices. When we discover the Dharma within the self, we know that there is no special Dharma for a special person. We know that the path is something natural and ordinary. We know that the Dharma is nothing that we have to seek—that it already exists here and now.

An ancient Chinese poet went out to seek a sign of spring. Having spent all day walking all over the place in search of one, he was unable to find it in any place. Totally exhausted, he returned home. When he *quite effortlessly* sat on the veranda of his house and looked at his garden, he saw that “spring was fully manifested at the top of a branch.” He made a

poem, saying that a peach branch in his garden already had a bud that was about to open. Having abandoned difficult practices, the poet returned to easy practice. Having returned home, he quite effortlessly sat on a veranda. A special path refers to difficult practices. When we abandon the special path and return to an ordinary life as a natural human being, we discover the Dharma, the truth, being clearly manifested in ordinary life, in easy practice.

The phrase, “when the Dharma is truly transmitted to him,” means “when we return to easy practice, to ordinary human life.” It means “when we return to ordinary human life, having abandoned an infatuated idea that there is a special path for me—that I am an elite practitioner.” How, then, can we abandon the infatuated idea? We can do so when we perform difficult practices, exhaust our energy in performing them, and recognize the ineffectuality of our self-efforts. We can do so when we recognize the self as *a total failure*—when we realize that no matter how much effort we may make, we are still a total failure.

Concerning Shakyamuni’s six years of difficult practices, don’t people have another misunderstanding? When he renounced difficult practices, he recognized the ineffectuality of his self-efforts. He must have recognized himself as a total failure. The Dharma *made* him abandon his six years of difficult practices. We should not overestimate Shakyamuni’s abilities and think that he, *on his own accord*, abandoned those practices. With all his power exhausted, he was *made* to abandon them. After bathing in the River Nairanjana, he could have been pulled up to the shore by the maiden.

The ineffectuality of the self-efforts is synonymous with the Power Beyond the Self. Easy practice is synonymous with the Power Beyond the Self. The sentence, “When the Dharma is truly transmitted to us, we are immediately what we originally are,” means “When our self is negated in our recognition of the ineffectuality of our self-efforts and the absolute Power Beyond the Self manifests itself in our beings, we are immediately *ordinary persons*.” Here “immediately” means “already.” Thus “what we originally are” is nothing we become anew. “What we originally are” is something we simply discover. We, then, come to kneel in reverence before “what we really are.”

(Written April 23, 1955. *Complete Works of Shuichi Maida*, vol. iii, pp. 513-515. Tr. by Nobuo Haneda)

A Priceless Jewel

Shuichi Maida

There is a parable in the eighth chapter (entitled “Five Hundred Disciples’ Receiving of Prophecy”) of the *Lotus Sutra*. My modern Japanese translation of the parable is as follows:

Mr. A visited Mr. B, his close friend. Since they had not seen each other for a long time, they were happy and started to have a drink. Mr. A was in a happy mood, drank too much, and became totally intoxicated. He soon fell asleep in Mr. B’s house.

Then, a messenger from the government came with an order that Mr. B should immediately go out to take care of some business. Before leaving, Mr. B decided to give Mr. A one priceless jewel as a gift. He sewed it into the back of a sleeve of Mr. A, who was sleeping like a log. Then, Mr. B went out to take care of his business.

When Mr. A woke up the next morning, he was totally unaware of what Mr. B had done for him while he was sleeping. Then, Mr. A travelled to a foreign country. But, Mr. A, who did not have a job, quickly used up all his money. In order to survive, he had to work as a day laborer at different places. He could barely survive. With the little money he earned, he lived an extremely impoverished life. Having lived as a miserable vagrant for many years, he finally decided to return to his home country. On the way, he happened to meet Mr. B.

Mr. B said to Mr. A, “You look awful! How come you are leading such a poor and miserable life? The last time we drank together at my house, I left to take care of some business while you were still sleeping. But before I left, I sewed a priceless jewel into the back of your sleeve so that you might be able to live rich and comfortably. Even now I can remember the day, month, and year when I did that. There, look! Look at your sleeve! The jewel is still there. Not knowing about this treasure, you have been working so hard to earn your living. What a sad turn of events this is! Why don’t you immediately take the jewel out of your sleeve, sell it for cash, and buy everything you want and need? You will be able to live a wonderful life.”

Every one of us has this “priceless jewel.” Even so, none of us know we possess it. We are living our lives in a poor, stingy, shabby, and miserable manner. We are like the pathetic drunken man in the parable. What, then, is “the priceless jewel” that all of us already have

at the closest part of our beings? What is “the priceless jewel” because of our ignorance of which we are living our lives in such a shabby way? What is this “priceless jewel” that we have at the closest part of our being and yet we are totally unaware of its existence?

My readers, can you give an appropriate answer to this question? Please think carefully about the answer. What is the one most appropriate word that can accurately describe this “priceless jewel” that we have? Please ponder over what “the one word” might be.

Flaubert [1821-80, a French novelist] said, “There is only one word in the world that can accurately describes any one particular thing. The work of the novelist is to discover that word.” Likewise, there is only one word in this world, which can most adequately describe the “priceless jewel” at the heart of our beings.

My readers, please say the word. Please speak the word that everybody considers adequate here. Now I am purposefully delaying giving my answer to the question as much as possible and making you impatient. You may be thinking that I actually enjoy tantalizing you.

Now let me give my answer. Does it agree with your answer or not? I say that “the priceless jewel” is “freedom.”

Yes, we are all tremendously free. But even so, we convince ourselves that we are bound up and unfree. This is called upside-down-ness or delusion. We can do whatever we want to do. We are inherently endowed with perfect freedom. True religion is simply recognizing the fact that we are already free. Even a person like Shakyamuni would not be able to think of any word that could better describe “the priceless jewel” than the word “freedom [to be what we really are at this present moment].”

(Written 5/1/1958. *The Complete Works of Shuichi Maida*, vol. ix, pp. 835-836. Trans. by N. Haneda.)

Notes:

We will hold the 2023 Maida Center Summer Retreat July 28 (Fri.)–30 (Sun.) at the Jodo Shinshu Center. Dr. Haneda will speak on “The Similarities between Zen and Shin.”

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

Mr. David Belcheff for editing the manuscripts of Shuichi Maida’s book on Zen and Shin (tr. by Dr. Haneda).

Mr. Steve Kaufman for valuable suggestions concerning the articles in this newsletter.

Mr. John Veen for creating an Amazon version of *The Dharma Breeze* book; and creating videos of Dr. Haneda’s lectures, which you can find in the Maida Center website. (T.H.)

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Maida Center 2023 Summer Retreat

“The Similarities between Zen and Shin”

—Introduction to the *Kyogyoshinsho*—

Date: July 28 (Fri.) 6:00 p.m. – 30 (Sun.) noon, 2023

Place: The Jodo Shinshu Center, 2140 Durant Ave., Berkeley, CA 94704

Speaker: Dr. Nobuo Haneda, Director of the Maida Center of Buddhism

Text: *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol. I. Available at the retreat.

Donation: \$ 230.00 (which covers 4 meals [Saturday breakfast, lunch, supper, and Sunday breakfast] and other expenses). Please send the registration form to the Maida Center by **July 16, 2023**. Registrants will receive detailed information in mid-July.

If you wish to stay at the Jodo Shinshu Center, see the rates in the following registration form. Please send the registration form to the Maida Center by **July 8, 2023**. Rooms will be available on a first-reserved basis.

REGISTRATION FORM

(Deadline: July 16, 2023. If you wish to stay at the hotel, July 8, 2023)

Please print

Name: _____
 first last

Address: _____
 street city state zip

Phone: (____) _____ **E-mail:** _____

Dietary restrictions: _____

Lodging at the Jodo Shinshu Center: Rooms will be assigned on a first-reserved basis.

Hotel Style

For two nights: single occupancy \$ 200.00

For two nights: double occupancy/per person \$ 100.00

Dormitory (with a shared bathroom)

For two nights: single occupancy \$ 120.00

For two nights: double occupancy/per person \$ 70.00 (For double occupancy,
please find a co-lodger.) Co-lodger's name: _____

Donation: \$ 230.00

Lodging: \$ _____

Total amount enclosed: \$ _____

Please make a check payable to: Maida Center of Buddhism

Mail to: Maida Center of Buddhism, Attn: Tomoko, 2609 Regent Street, Berkeley, CA 94704