

Lecture Series (March 13, 20, 27, April 3, 2024)
(Higashi Honganji Mission of Hawaii)

Outline & Materials

“Provisional Birth” and “True Birth” **—Two Types of Birth Described in the Second Volume** **of the *Larger Sutra*—**

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

A. Buddhism as a Teaching of Self-examination

B. Outline of the *Larger Sutra*

1. The first volume talks about the liberating side—the Buddha, the Pure Land, and the Name (i.e., the doctor, hospital, and medicine).
2. The second volume talks about the liberated side—the three types of practitioners to be liberated (i.e., the three types of patients).

C. Outline of My Lectures

1. Part One: Shinran’s Three Stage (or Three Vow) Transition
2. Part Two: Shinran’s View of Birth in the Provisional Land
3. Part Three: Shinran’s View of Birth in the True Land
4. Part Four: Shinran’s View of the True Land: the Land of Immeasurable Light

PART ONE

Shinran’s “Three Stage (or Three Vow) Transition”

I. Preface: About the Three Stage Transition

II. The Three Stage (or Three Vow) Transition

A. First Stage: The Stage of the Falsely Settled (or “Ethical Persons”) Described in the 19th Vow

(19th Vow)

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters—awakening the mind of enlightenment and performing meritorious acts—should aspire with sincere mind and desire to be born in my land,

and yet I should not appear before them at the moment of death surrounded by a host of sages, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. (*Collected Works of Shinran* [hereafter abbreviated as *CWS*], p. 208)

Shinran's view of the first stage

Shinran calls the 19th Vow “the Vow of performing meritorious acts”; “the Vow of Buddha’s appearance at death”; “the Vow of Buddha’s appearance and guidance to birth”; “the Vow of Buddha’s coming to receive us”; and “the Vow of sincere mind and aspiration.”

- 1. The essential gate (a provisional stage of expedient means)**
- 2. The stage of the falsely settled**
- 3. The import of the *Contemplation Sutra***
- 4. Sundry practices performed on the basis of self-power (*ji-riki*) or dualistic thinking (i.e., human wisdom)**

Shinran calls the “provisional” birth in this stage by the following terms:

- (a) “Birth as described in the 19th Vow”—Birth in the provisional (or transformed) land
- (b) “Birth in accordance with the *Contemplation Sutra*”—Birth attained after physical death
- (c) “Birth attained beneath the twin *sala* trees”
- (d) “Birth in the realm of indolence and pride”

(Cf. *CWS*, pp. 645-48)

B. Second Stage: The Stage of the Unsettled (or “Religious Persons”) Described in the 20th Vow

(20th Vow)

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, on hearing my Name, should place their thoughts on my land, cultivate the root of all virtues [i.e., say the Name], and direct their merits with sincere mind desiring to be born in my land, and yet not ultimately attain it, may I not attain the supreme enlightenment. (*CWS*, p. 229)

Shinran's view of the second stage

Shinran calls this Vow “the Vow of cultivating the root of virtue”; “the Vow of settlement of birth through placing thoughts [on the Pure Land]”; “the Vow stating ‘If those do not ultimately attain birth’”; and “the Vow of sincere mind and directing merit.”

- 1. The true gate (a provisional stage of expedient means)**
- 2. The stage of the unsettled**
- 3. The import of the *Amida Sutra***
- 4. Nembutsu practice performed on the basis of self-power or dualistic thinking (i.e., human wisdom)**

Shinran calls the “provisional” birth in this stage by the following terms:

- (a) “Birth as described in the 20th Vow”—Birth in the provisional (or transformed) land
- (b) “Birth in accordance with the *Smaller Sutra* (or *Amida Sutra*)”—Birth attained after physical death
- (c) “Birth that is noncomprehensible”
- (d) “Birth in the ‘city of doubt’ or ‘womb-palace’”

(Cf. *Collected Works of Shinran*, pp. 649-52)

C. Third Stage: The Stage of the Truly Settled (or “Ordinary [Shinjin] Persons”) Described in the 18th Vow

(18th Vow)

If, when I attain Buddhahood, the sentient beings of the ten quarters, with sincere mind entrusting, aspiring to be born in my land, and saying the Name 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. (*CWS*, p. 80)

Shinran’s view of this stage

Shinran calls the 18th Vow “the selected Primal Vow”; “the Vow of the threefold mind of the Primal Vow”; “the Vow of shinjin, which is Amida’s directing of virtue for our going forth”; and “the Vow of sincere mind and entrusting.”

- 1. The gate of the extensive Vow**
- 2. The stage of the truly settled**
- 3. The import of the *Larger Sutra***
- 4. Hearing (and understanding) the Name (i.e., the Buddha’s wisdom) alone**

Shinran calls the “true” birth in this stage by the following terms:

- (a) “Birth as described in the 18th Vow”—Birth here and now
- (b) “Birth in accordance with the *Larger Sutra*”
- (c) “Birth that is inconceivable”
- (d) “Birth in the True (or Fulfilled) Land”—“Transformative birth”

(Cf. *CWS*, pp. 639-44)

III. The Three Vow (i.e., 17th, 18th, and 11th) Fulfillment Passage: The Most Important Textual Basis of Shinran’s Thought, Which Describes the Contents of the Third Stage

The following nine line passage is the most important doctrinal basis of Shinran’s thought. This passage is found at the beginning of the second volume of the *Larger Sutra*. It talks about the fulfillment of the Three (i.e., the 17th, 18th, and 11th) Vows. Shinran read this passage in a unique way, ignoring its traditional reading. (For the traditional reading of this passage, see *CWS*, p. 474, footnote)

The Three Vow Fulfillment Passage

(Fulfillment of the 17th Vow)

The Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are one in praising [“saying the Name” is implied in this “praising”] the majestic power and the virtues, inconceivably profound, of the Buddha of immeasurable life.

(Fulfillment of the 18th and 11th Vows)

All sentient beings, as they hear the Name [that is being said by all Buddhas in the ten quarters], realize even one moment of shinjin and joy. Amida directs his virtues to them from his sincere mind. Being commanded to aspire to be born in that land, they immediately attain birth there. They dwell in the stage of nonretrogression.

(CWS, pp. 154, 474-6, with modification by N. Haneda)

Shinran’s View of the Three Vow (i.e., 17th, 18th, and 11th) Fulfillment Passage (Cf. CWS, p. 474)

1. “The Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters”: Shinran believes that these Buddha-tathagatas are historical teachers, such as Shakyamuni and the seven patriarchs. (This means “the curing party’s appearance in history.)
2. “Sentient beings”: Those who know themselves to be “the seriously sick”—those who are ready to hear the Name (or “ready to take medicine”)
3. “Hearing the Name”: Shinran says that only hearing or understanding the meaning of the Name (or “taking medicine”) is necessary for human liberation.
4. The Name (or *Namu Amida Butsu!*) means a voice saying, “Come to the Buddha’s [non-dualistic] wisdom!” Shinran says that “Amida Buddha” is a symbol of the Buddha’s (non-dualistic) wisdom. The Name is “the medicine.”
5. “Shinjin” means “hearing or understanding the meaning of the Name.” Shinran says, “The arising of shinjin within a person means the arising of the Buddha’s (non-dualistic) wisdom within the person.”
6. “Directing of virtues” (*eko*): Shinran interprets the *eko* here as Amida’s *eko*, not as our (or practitioners’) *eko*.
7. Birth in the Pure Land attained here and now: Shinran believes that when one awakens shinjin (or aspiration for birth), one is immediately born in the Pure Land (i.e., the world of the Buddha’s aspiration).
8. “The stage of nonretrogression” is synonymous with “the stage of the truly settled.” It means the start of a new life in which we are assured of attaining Buddhahood or Nirvana. (This is the assurance of total cure.)
9. Shinran understands “attaining Buddhahood” as the fulfillment or completion of human life.