

Lecture Series (March 27, 2024)
(Higashi Honganji Mission of Hawaii)

PART THREE

Shinran's View of Birth in the True Land

(CWS, pp. 639-648)

I. Introduction: Shinran's Transition from the Second Stage to the Third Stage

A. Shinran's Doubt of Honen's Teaching as the Teaching of the Practice of Saying the Name (or the Nembutsu)

B. His Serious Reading of the *Larger Sutra*

C. His View of Two Honens: the Jodoshu Honen and the Jodo Shinshu Honen

1. The Honen of the second stage (i.e., the Jodoshu Honen): The teacher taught the teaching of saying the Name (or the nembutsu) that is based on the *Contemplation Sutra* (or the *Amida Sutra*).

2. The Honen of the third stage (i.e., the Jodo Shinshu Honen): He taught the teaching of shinjin, or hearing the Name, that is based on the *Larger Sutra*.

D. Shinran Experienced Birth in the True Land.

E. Shinran's Designations of Birth in the True Land (or Fulfilled Land)

- (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) "Transformative birth"

(Cf. CWS, pp. 639-44)

II. The Three Vow Fulfillment Passage, the Most Important Textual Basis of Shinran's Teaching

The following eight 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) Shinran believed that this passage fully explained his spiritual liberation—what happened to him when he met his teacher Honen.

In this passage, Shakyamuni says that all historical teachers are now calling the Name (or praising the virtues) of Amida Buddha. Having heard

the Name being praised by historical teachers, we, all sentient beings, can experience shinjin (deep spiritual awakening) and joy. All of this takes place because Amida Buddha (i.e., a symbol of the Ultimate Truth) has transferred his virtues (among which the Buddha's non-dualistic wisdom and compassion are the most important) to us. When we aspire to be born in the Pure Land, we are immediately (i.e., here and now) born there and attain the stage called "nonretrogression" (i.e., the stage that assures our eventual attainment of Mahayana Buddhahood or nirvana). The passage is as follows:

(Text)

[Fulfillment of the 17th Vow]

All Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are praising the inconceivable and majestic virtues of the Buddha of immeasurable life.

[Fulfillment of the 18th and 11th Vows]

When all sentient beings hear the Name [that is being said by all Buddhas in the ten quarters], they experience even one moment of shinjin and joy. Amida directs his virtues [or the Name] to all sentient beings from his sincere mind. Being commanded to aspire to be born in the Pure Land, they immediately attain birth there. They dwell in the stage of nonretrogression. (Tr. by N. Haneda. Cf. *CWS*, pp. 154, 474-6.)

A. The Fulfillment of the 17th Vow: Realization of Historical Buddhas or Teachers (i.e., "Doctors") and Their Calling Voice (i.e., "Medicine")

(Text)

All Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges, are praising the inconceivable and majestic virtues of the Buddha of immeasurable life... Amida directs his virtues [or the Name] to all sentient beings from his sincere mind.

1. **"All Buddha-tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, countless as the sands of the Ganges":** Shinran understands this as the appearance of countless historical teachers, such as Shakyamuni and the seven Shin patriarchs. The expression "throughout the ten quarters" means "historical." For Shinran, Honen was one of the Buddhas in the ten quarters.
2. **"... are praising the inconceivable and majestic virtues of the Buddha of immeasurable life":** Shinran understands this as the realization of the Name or *Namu Amida Butsu*—a calling voice from historical teachers (or Amida), saying, "Take refuge in limitless light (or the Buddha's non-dualistic wisdom)!"
3. **"Amida directs his virtues [or the Name] to all sentient beings from his sincere mind":** Shinran understands this as Amida's giving the Name (i.e., the Buddha's non-dualistic wisdom) to all of us for our liberation.
4. **The twofold content of the Name: the Buddha's wisdom and compassion**

B. The Fulfillment of the 18th Vow: The Realization of Meeting with Historical Teachers (i.e., “Doctors”), Hearing their Calling Voice (i.e., “Taking Medicine”), and Starting a 180-Degree Turn in Life (i.e., “Start of Recovery”).

(Text)

When all sentient beings hear the Name [that is being said by all Buddhas in the ten quarters], they experience even one moment of shinjin and joy.

1. **“All sentient beings”:** This refers to us, deluded (i.e., “seriously sick”) human beings. This expression also refers to those who are failures at traditional Buddhist practices. Shinran identified himself as one of them.
2. **Shinran says that meeting with a teacher is an indispensable condition for experiencing shinjin (awakening).** (*CWS*, pp. 79-80)
3. **“Hearing the Name”:** Shinran emphasizes the importance of hearing and understanding the Name (or our teachers’ words) that contains the Buddha’s non-dualistic wisdom. Shinran says that we attain shinjin by hearing the Name alone. (*CWS*, pp. 111-112)
4. **“...they experience even one moment of shinjin and joy”:**
 - (a) Shinran believes that shinjin (i.e., hearing and understanding the Name) is the most important thing in Buddhism.
 - (b) The shinjin experience means that having been challenged by the calling voice of our teachers, we awaken shinjin, the Buddha’s wisdom—the non-dualistic wisdom that we never thought we could have. It means that our spiritual basis changes from dualistic thinking to the Buddha’s non-dualistic wisdom.
 - (c) Shinjin (awakening) takes place in a moment: We immediately recognize the mistake of having been attached to dualistic thinking and make a 180-degree turn. This instantaneous attainment is different from that of the Buddhism of the 19th Vow or the 20th Vow, which we reach through our long practice.
 - (d) Shinran says that shinjin is accompanied by joy at eventual attainment of Buddhahood.
5. **Shinran’s view of the twofold content of shinjin (or *bodhicitta*): the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion**
 - (a) Shinran says that shinjin and *bodhicitta* are synonymous. Shinjin means not only aspiration to attain one’s Buddhahood (i.e., self-benefiting or wisdom) but also aspiration to save all sentient beings (i.e., others-benefiting or compassion).
 - (b) When a person hears the Name (that contains the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion) and awakens shinjin, he enters the path that leads to Mahayana nirvana. The Name awakens the Buddha’s wisdom and compassion in his mind. In the following verses, Shinran says that shinjin (or *bodhicitta*) contains both aspiration to attain one’s Buddhahood and aspiration to save all sentient beings.

The mind that aspires to attain Buddhahood
Is the mind to save all sentient beings;
The mind to save all sentient beings

Is true and real shinjin, which is Amida's benefiting of others.

Shinjin is the mind that is single;
The mind that is single is the diamondlike mind.
The diamondlike mind is the mind aspiring for enlightenment;
This mind is itself Other Power.

On reaching the Land of the Innermost Aspiration,
We immediately realize supreme nirvana,
And thereupon we awaken great compassion.
All this is called Amida's "directing of virtues."

Land of the Innermost Aspiration: the land of Amida's
Innermost Aspiration of compassion

(CWS, pp. 365-366, with modification by N. Haneda)

- (c) When Shinran says that shinjin is the cause of Buddhahood, he is saying that it is the cause of Mahayana Buddhahood, not that of Hinayana Buddhahood.

C. The Fulfillment of the 11th Vow: Realization of the True Beginning ("a Sign of Recovery") and the True Ending of Our Lives ("Complete Recovery")

(Text)

Being commanded to aspire to be born in the Pure Land, they immediately attain birth there. They dwell in the stage of nonretrogression [i.e., the stage that assures the attainment of Mahayana Buddhahood].

1. **"Being commanded to aspire to be born in the Pure Land":** Shinran says that the power of the Name (or the power of the teachers' aspiration) makes sentient beings aspire to be born in the Pure Land.
2. **"They immediately attain birth there":** Shinran interprets this as attaining birth in the Pure Land here and now at the moment of awakening shinjin. The moment we awaken shinjin, we are immediately born in the Pure Land, i.e., the sphere of the Buddha's non-dualistic wisdom.
3. **"They dwell in the stage of nonretrogression":** Shinran believes that attaining shinjin, attaining birth in the Pure Land, and attaining the stage of nonretrogression are all synonymous. They refer to the death of the old self and birth of the new (i.e., true) self. They all mark the true beginning of human life. They mean putting an end to a deluded way of living and starting a new life as a dynamic seeker.
 - (a) Birth in the Pure Land means becoming a participant in the true Sangha (or true Buddhist tradition) where we meet many wonderful teachers and Dharma friends.
 - (b) Because we meet many wonderful teachers and Dharma friends who are passionately seeking the Dharma in the Pure Land, the sphere of the Buddha's wisdom, we are deeply influenced by their dynamic spirit and cannot help becoming passionate seekers of the Dharma, which is what "attaining the stage of nonretrogression" means.

4. Because the shinjin person receives the Buddha's non-dualistic wisdom (that transforms the negative [i.e., the passions-obstacles] into the positive [i.e., virtues]), he lives his life in a meaningful way; all negative things become indispensable conditions for the fulfillment of his life.
5. The person who has attained shinjin, the true beginning, comes to the true ending upon his death. He lives a very powerful and meaningful life, being full of joy and gratitude, and fulfills his life when he dies. This ending is called "becoming a [Mahayana] Buddha," "attaining [Mahayana] Buddhahood," "attaining great *nirvana* (or *pari-nirvana*)," or "attaining Amida Buddhahood."

Because sentient beings of the nembutsu have perfectly realized the diamondlike mind [i.e., shinjin] of crosswise transcendence, they transcend and realize great, complete nirvana on the eve of the moment of death. (*CWS*, p. 123)

6. The twofold content of realization (or attainment): realization of both "going to the Pure Land" and "returning to the world of suffering (by leaving the Pure Land)"

III. According to Shinran, the Nirvana That the Shinjin Person Attains (As Described in the 11th Vow) Refers to Mahayana Nirvana, Not Hinayana Nirvana.

Preface

The *Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*, the third *Larger Sutra* that Sanghavarman translated into Chinese in the 4th century, was the main text that Sino-Japanese Pure Land masters used. At the outset of the volume of "Realization (*Sho*)," the fourth volume of the *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran quotes the following 11th Vow from this third text:

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

(*CWS*, p. 641)

There are two types of nirvana, Hinayana nirvana and Mahayana nirvana. It is not clear if the "nirvana" mentioned in the above quote means Hinayana nirvana or Mahayana nirvana. Since Shinran desires to make it clear that the "nirvana" mentioned in the above quote is Mahayana nirvana, not Hinayana nirvana, he further quotes the 11th Vow in the fourth translation of the *Larger Sutra*, which is entitled the *Sutra of the Tathagata of Immeasurable Life* (that was published in the Tang dynastic period). The 11th Vow in the fourth translation says,

If, when I become Buddha, the sentient beings in my land do not decidedly attain the equal of perfect enlightenment, so that they realize great nirvana, may I not attain enlightenment. (*CWS*, p. 641)

By quoting another text Shinran makes it clear that the "nirvana" that the shinjin person attains is Mahayana nirvana.

Before Shinran, the 11th Vow was called “the vow of the truly settled (*ju-joju no gan*).” But Shinran came up with his new name for it. At the beginning of the “Realization (*Sho*)” Volume, he says,

To reveal, with reverence, the true and real realization: It is the wondrous state attained through Amida’s perfect benefiting of others; it is the ultimate fruition of supreme nirvana. It arises from the Vow of necessary attainment of nirvana (i.e., the 11th Vow), also known as the Vow of realization of great nirvana. (CWS, p. 153)

Here Shinran uses the two terms “supreme nirvana (*mujo-nehana*)” and “great nirvana (*dai-nehana*),” both of which refer to Mahayana nirvana. He shows that the shinjin person attains Mahayana nirvana, not Hinayana nirvana. He also uses other terms, such as “supreme enlightenment (*mujo-bodai*)” and “*maha-pari-nirvana (daihatsu-nehana)*,” to refer to Mahayana nirvana.

Since the topic of the two types of nirvana is very important for our discussion of “True Birth” or “True Land” (in Part Four of this lecture series), let me explain the differences between the two types of nirvana in the following section.

A. Two Types of Buddhahood

1. The Static Buddha: Shakyamuni’s first Buddhahood

- (a) Leaving the world of samsara (i.e., human suffering) and going to the world of nirvana (i.e., individual happiness)
- (b) A loner Buddha (*pratyeka-buddha*) who is sitting in isolation—a Hinayana Buddha
- (c) This Buddha has gained “basic wisdom (*prajna*),” i.e., understanding “conditional arising” as “the truth of the emptiness of the self.” This wisdom benefits the self alone. When Shakyamuni attained this wisdom, he was happy, being immersed in the joy of selflessness. Here he was in danger of becoming a loner Buddha, a Hinayana Buddha.

2. The Dynamic Buddha: Shakyamuni’s second Buddhahood

- (a) Standing up, leaving the world of nirvana (i.e., individual happiness), and returning to the world of samsara (i.e., human suffering)
- (b) A Buddha as a perfect bodhisattva: a Mahayana Buddha. “Bodhisattva Dharmakara” is a symbol of this Buddhahood.
- (c) In addition to “basic wisdom (*prajna*)” this Buddha gains “the subsequently acquired wisdom (*jnana*),” i.e., understanding “conditional arising” as “the truth of the oneness between the self and others.” When Shakyamuni attained this second wisdom, he could not be immersed in the joy of selflessness, in individual happiness. Since he realized that the real contents of the emptied self were all things and people that existed outside the self, he could not help standing up and going back to the world of human suffering to perfect the second wisdom. This wisdom is synonymous with compassion.

B. Two Types of Nirvana

1. Hinayana (i.e., dualistic) Nirvana

- (a) Leaving the world of samsara (i.e., human suffering) and going to the world of nirvana (i.e., individual happiness)
- (b) The *prajna* wisdom (i.e., the sixth of the six *prajna-paramita* practices) means insight into emptiness. Those who attain the *prajna* wisdom and become attached to emptiness face “the danger of being immersed in emptiness.” They cannot get out of Hinayana nirvana and attain Mahayana nirvana.
- (c) Shinran identifies the attainment of Hinayana nirvana with “provisional birth.”

2. Mahayana (i.e., non-dualistic) Nirvana: “Non-dwelling (or Homeless) Nirvana”

- (a) In this nirvana the bodhisattva does not stay in samsara because of his wisdom and does not stay in nirvana because of his compassion (or “subsequently acquired wisdom”). He engages in the endless practice of perfecting both wisdom and compassion.
- (b) The bodhisattva engages in the Samantabhadra Practice: (i) giving offering to (or visiting) an uncountable number of Buddhas in the ten quarters and learning wisdom from them; and (ii) enlightening all sentient beings in the ten quarters by sharing wisdom with them.
- (c) Shinran identifies the attainment of Mahayana nirvana with “True Birth.” He calls this birth by various names, such as “great nirvana” and “unsurpassed nirvana.”