

PART FOUR

Shinran's View of the True Land: the Land of Immeasurable Light

I. Review of the Last Three Classes: Differences between Birth in the Provisional Lands and Birth in the True Land

A. Birth in the Provisional Lands

1. Birth as described in the 19th Vow and the 20th Vow: Practitioners attain birth in Provisional (or Transformed) Lands—"doubt castles" or "womb-palaces."
2. They attain birth in a world like a mother's womb where they are caught up in their types of Buddhist values.
3. They have to stay there for a long time. They cannot engage in the Samantabhadra practices (i.e., the practices of bodhisattvas who return to the world of samsara from the Pure Land), such as "giving offerings to" (or visiting) innumerable Buddhas and enlightening people.
4. There are two causes of their birth in Provisional Lands: "belief in good and evil (or dualistic thinking)" and "doubt of the Buddha's non-dualistic wisdom."
5. Birth in the Provisional Land is synonymous with attaining Hinayana Buddhahood (or nirvana).

B. Birth in the True Land

1. Birth as described in the Three Vow Fulfillment Passage: Bodhisattvas attain birth in the True (or Fulfilled) Land.
2. In the True Land, the bodhisattvas meet with Amida Buddha, who tells them to return to the world of samsara (human suffering).
3. The bodhisattvas go back to the world of samsara (human suffering) and engage in the Samantabhadra practices, such as "giving offerings to" (or visiting) innumerable Buddhas and enlightening people.
4. The bodhisattvas perfect the two types of wisdom—"the basic wisdom (*prajna*)" and "the subsequently acquired wisdom (*jnana*)" that is synonymous with compassion.
5. The bodhisattvas realize Mahayana Buddhahood or No-dwelling (or Homeless) Nirvana.

II. Shinran's View of the True Land

A. Shinran's Definition of the True Land as the "Land of Immeasurable Light"—the World without a Border That Keeps on Expanding

At the beginning of the fifth volume (entitled "The True Buddha and Land [*Shinbutsu-do*]") of his *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran defined the True Buddha and Land as follows:

Reverently contemplating the true Buddha and the true land, I find that the Buddha is the Tathagata of inconceivable light and that the land also is the land of immeasurable light. Because they have arisen through the fulfillment of Vows of great compassion, they are called true fulfilled Buddha and land. There are relevant Vows that were made: the Vows of light and of life (i.e., the 12th and 13th Vows). (*CWS*, p. 177. See also *CWS*, p. 203)

The darkness of ignorance is immediately broken through, and quickly reaching the land of immeasurable light, one realizes great nirvana and acts in accord with the virtue of Samantabhadra. Let this be known. (*CWS*, p. 56)

When foolish beings of delusion and defilement awaken shinjin,
They realize that birth-and-death is itself nirvana;
Without fail they reach the land of immeasurable light
And universally guide sentient beings to enlightenment.
(*CWS*, p. 72)

(N. Haneda's Notes)

In the above quotes Shinran uses the term "the land of immeasurable light" to refer to a place where one engages in Samantabhadra practice (i.e., visiting innumerable Buddhas and learning wisdom from them, and sharing the wisdom with all sentient beings).

Shinran emphasizes that "the land of immeasurable light" is not a place where a person enjoys individual happiness. It is remarkable that in defining the True Land, Shinran does not use terms such as *Gokuraku-koku* (the country of extreme happiness), *Anraku-koku* (the country of happiness), and *Muryoju-koku* (the country of Immeasurable Life), which traditional Pure Land masters of his time often used. Traditional Pure Land masters most commonly used the term *Gokuraku-koku* (the country of extreme happiness). The general public also loved this term. But Shinran seems to have intentionally refused to use it.

B. The Person Who Attains Birth the Land of Immeasurable Light Returns to the World of Samsara ("Human Suffering")

T'an-luan's words in his *Commentary on the Pure Land Treatise*

If a salve that prevents spoilage is applied to seeds, they will not rot though placed in water, not burn though placed in fire, and later, under proper conditions, they will sprout immediately. Why? Because of the salve's power. People once born in the Pure Land of happiness, later conceive in their hearts the wish to be born in the three realms [i.e., in samsara] to teach and guide sentient beings; they then abandon their life in the Pure Land and receive birth [in the world of

samsara] in accord with their aspiration. Though they are born into the flames of various births in the three realms, the seed of supreme enlightenment will not rot. Why? Because they are sustained by the good of Amida, the perfectly enlightened. (CWS, p. 155, with modification by N. Haneda)

Shinran’s words on the bodhisattvas who return to the world of samsara

The countless great bodhisattvas of the land of happiness
Have reached “succession to Buddhahood after one lifetime” [i.e., the stage that the shinjin person attains, according to Shinran];
Entering the compassionate activity of Samantabhadra,
They unfailingly work to save beings in defiled worlds.

(CWS, p. 329)

Those who reach the Pure Land of happiness
Return to this evil world of the five defilements,
Where, like the Buddha Shakyamuni,
They benefit sentient beings without limit.

(CWS, p. 329)

III. “The Story of Mr. A and Professor B”

(An Excerpt from the *Dharma Breeze* by N. Haneda [pp. 58-60])

Now let us see how “true birth” in the Pure Land is described in the “Verses about the Eastern Quarter (*Tobo-ge*)” in the second volume of the *Larger Sutra*. These verses describe innumerable bodhisattvas who are born in the Pure Land from the eastern direction.

When those bodhisattvas are born in the Pure Land, Amida tells them that they share the same Innermost Aspiration that he has. He tells them that they will unfailingly fulfill their Innermost Aspiration; they will become Buddhas and create their Pure Lands that are no different from his own Pure Land. Then in order to perfect the Innermost Aspiration, those bodhisattvas engage in the visitation practice, the same practice that Dharmakara performed to become a Buddha, and go out of the Pure Land to visit innumerable Buddhas. After having visited and studied under them, they return to Amida’s Pure Land. This way, they perfect their Buddhahood by traveling back and forth between Amida’s Pure Land and innumerable Buddhas.

Amida, whose essence is an ever-expanding spirit, does not allow bodhisattvas to make their comfortable dwelling place in the Pure Land. He encourages them to forget about their dualistic ideas, to go out of the Pure Land, and to learn from all sentient beings, regarding them as Buddhas. This way, the *Larger Sutra* talks about “true birth” as birth in Amida’s Innermost Aspiration—in the spirit that endlessly goes out of the Pure Land to seek oneness with all sentient beings...

In order to further explain the two types of birth, let me tell a story about Mr. A, a high school student who desires to enter a college. The college that Mr. A desires to enter is famous because of Professor B. Mr. A has heard of the professor’s reputation, and he desires to study under him. Mr. A believes that the college is a wonderful place where he can

perfect his knowledge. Then, Mr. A passes the entrance examination and enters the college.

Now the school begins and Mr. A goes to Professor B's class. Mr. A is thinking that Professor B's instruction in the class will perfect his knowledge. But, as soon as Professor B comes to the class, he tells his students, "The ultimate goal in learning does not exist here in this class, in this college. The most important thing that you students must learn about is the reality that exists outside the college. Here you must learn the importance of your fieldwork. You must go out of this college and appreciate the things and people in the real world. Although you may think that this college and the real world you have left behind are two different worlds, that's not so. If you truly understand my instruction, you will understand that the real world is part of this college—it is an extension of this college. The only important thing about your education here is that you can learn the importance of fieldwork. So you must travel back and forth between this classroom and your fieldwork."

These challenging words of the professor come to Mr. A as a surprise—as a shocking and challenging lesson, because Mr. A has been thinking that the college is the only place where he can perfect his knowledge and the world outside the college is not the place for learning. Now Mr. A must revise his view. According to the professor, the real world that he has left behind is actually the most important place for learning and it is to that world that Mr. A must return.

I have composed this story in order to explain the two types of birth. In this story, "provisional birth" means Mr. A's initial entrance into the college. Mr. A mistakenly thought that his goal was to be found in the college and his knowledge would be perfected there. "True Birth" means Mr. A's second entrance, his entrance into the mind of Professor B. It means Mr. A's appreciation of Professor B's view that the most important thing is fieldwork outside the college. Although Mr. A initially thought the goal was to be found in the college, he now realizes that it is to be found in fieldwork.

IV. "Verses about the Eastern Quarter (*Tobo-ge*)" in the Second Volume of the *Larger Sutra*: The Textual Basis of Returning Bodhisattvas

(Section 1: Bodhisattvas visit Amida and praise him.)

(1)

**The Buddha-lands in the eastern quarter
Are as numerous as the sands of the Ganges.
The bodhisattvas in those Buddha-lands
Go to pay reverence to the Infinitely Enlightened One.**

(2)

**The Buddha-lands in the southern, western, northern, and four intermediate
quarters,
As well as above and below, are also like this.
The bodhisattvas in those Buddha-lands
Go to pay reverence to the Infinitely Enlightened One.**

(3)
All those bodhisattvas,
Each bringing exquisite celestial flowers,
Precious incense, and priceless cloth,
Make offerings to the Infinitely Enlightened One.

(4)
Playing celestial music in concert
And producing harmonious, elegant sounds,
They praise the most excellent one with verses
And make offerings to the Infinitely Enlightened One.

(5)
“You have fully acquired supernatural powers and wisdom
Freely entered the gates of the profound Dharma,
And perfected the treasury of virtues;
Peerless indeed is your excellent wisdom.

(6)
Your wisdom like the sun illuminates the world
And disperses the clouds of birth-and-death.”
Walking around him three times in reverence,
They pay homage to the Supremely Honored One.

(7)
Having seen that land of glorious purity,
Most wondrous and beyond conception,
They thereby awaken the supreme mind
And wish their land to be like this.

(N. Haneda’s Comments)

- a. These bodhisattvas are the truly settled—those who have attained True Birth—that the Three Vow Fulfillment Passage mentioned. These twenty verses explain what they experience after they attain birth in the True Land.
- b. “Making offerings to the Buddha” means that one has discovered the Three Treasures that are more precious than material things. “Making offerings to the Buddha” expresses one’s desire to hear the Dharma.
- c. The focus of the bodhisattvas’ praise is on Amida Buddha’s wisdom.
- d. They perform worship and praise—the same practices that Bodhisattva Dharmakara performed.
- e. They awaken the same Innermost Aspiration (*Hongan*) that Bodhisattva Dharmakara awakened.

(Section 2: Amida smiles and gives instruction to bodhisattvas.)

(8)
Then the Immeasurably Honored One
Changes his expression and smiles with delight;
From his mouth are emitted countless rays of light,
Illuminating all the lands in the ten quarters.

(9)

**These rays of light circle around him
Three times and enter the crown of his head.
All devas and humans
Leap and dance with joy.**

(10)

**The Mahasattva Avalokitesvara,
Rearranging his robes and bowing his head,
Asks the Buddha, “For what reason are you smiling?
I humbly beseech you to explain your intention.”**

(11)

**Then his august voice resonates like thunder;
The eight kinds of exquisite tone resound, proclaiming,
“I am now going to give predictions to the bodhisattvas.
I will now explain. Listen closely!**

(12)

**The mahasattvas coming from the ten quarters,
Made vows of which I am fully aware.
They seek to establish lands adorned with purity;
Receiving my predictions, they will surely become Buddhas.**

(13)

**While realizing that all things are
Like dreams, illusions, or echoes,
They will fulfill their excellent vows
And without fail establish lands such as mine.**

(14)

**While knowing that things are like lightning flashes and mirages,
They pursue the bodhisattva path to the utmost.
Possessing all roots of virtue,
Just as I predict, they will surely become Buddhas.**

(15)

**Although they thoroughly know the true nature of all things,
That all is empty and has no substance,
They will solely seek such pure Buddha-lands
And without fail establish lands such as mine.”**

(N. Haneda’s Comments)

- a. “Rays of light illuminating all the worlds and returning to the crown of his head” symbolizes Amida’s aspiration to enlighten all people in the ten quarters.
- b. Amida smiles because he sees in the bodhisattvas the same Innermost Aspiration (or Vow) that he had when he was Bodhisattva Dharmakara.
- c. “Amida’s giving predictions to bodhisattva” means that the bodhisattvas will realize the same Buddhahood and Pure Land that Amida realized.
- d. The three verses from (13) to (15) say that the bodhisattvas have transcended “the danger of being immersed in emptiness” that is caused by attachment to “basic wisdom (i.e., *prajna*)” and the danger of becoming a Hinayana Buddha.

They have gained “the subsequently acquired wisdom (*jnana*)” that enables them to become a Mahayana Buddha.

(Section 3: Buddhas encourage bodhisattvas to go to the Pure Land and learn from Amida.)

(16)

The Buddhas tell the bodhisattvas

To go to pay homage to the Buddha of Peace and Sustenance:

“Listen to his teaching, joyfully accept it, and practice it

So that you may swiftly reach the realm of purity.

(17)

Upon reaching the land adorned with purity,

You will quickly acquire supernatural powers.

Without fail, from the Immeasurably Honored One

You will receive predictions and realize perfect enlightenment.”

(18)

The power of the Buddha’s Primal Vow is such that

Those who, hearing the name, aspire for birth,

All reach that land,

And their attainment of nonretrogression comes about of itself.

(19)

The bodhisattvas make their excellent vows,

Each wishing, “My land as well will not be different from this.”

They aspire to emancipate all beings everywhere

And have their names known throughout the ten quarters.

(20)

In order to serve the millions of Tathagatas,

They employ their miraculous powers to fly to all lands;

After paying homage to them with joy, they take their leave

And return to the Land of Peace.

(The Three Pure Land Sutras, The Shin Buddhist Translation Series, Volume II, pp. 54-58.)

(N. Haneda’s Comments)

- a. Thanks to the encouragement by Buddhas (i.e., the fulfillment of the 17th Vow), the bodhisattvas can transcend the danger of being immersed in emptiness and attain birth in True Land.
- b. Shinran views the verse (18) as a summary of the Three Vow Fulfillment Passage and quotes it several times in his writings. This verse is traditionally known as “a verse that destroys hell.”
- c. Having received the predictions and the power of the Innermost Aspiration from Amida Buddha, the bodhisattvas engage in the practices that Bodhisattva Dharmakara performed. They will attain the same Buddhahood Amida attained.
- d. Without having any fixed abode either in the world of nirvana or in the world of samsara, the bodhisattvas endlessly travel between the two worlds, perfecting “basic wisdom (i.e., *prajna*)” and “the subsequently acquired wisdom (i.e., *jnana*)” that is synonymous with compassion.