

The Dharma Breeze

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“We Are All Just Ordinary People”

—The Truth of Conditional Arising as the Basis of Humility and Compassion—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

The truth of “conditional arising (*pratitya-samutpada*)” is the core of Buddhism. It turned Siddhartha Gautama into Shakyamuni Buddha. Although we can discuss various aspects of this truth, I want, in this article, to talk about its aspect of the truth that it makes us become humble and compassionate. If we correctly understand this truth, we become humble and compassionate people.

Then, what is the truth of conditional arising? It means that all things arise because of causes and conditions—that all things are made to exist by myriads of unknown causes and conditions. Shakyamuni said, “Because this exists, that exists. Because this does not exist, that does not exist. Because this arises, that arises. Because this perishes, that perishes.” He said that everything exists because of interdependent relationships with other things. He said that there is nothing that is permanent, independent, or autonomous in this world.

When Shakyamuni understood this truth, he became the Buddha, the Awakened One. This truth is the most important thing in Buddhism. Shakyamuni said, “Those who see me in me do not see me. Those who see the truth of conditional arising in me see me.” Although Buddhism and other religions share many other same teachings, Buddhism is different from other religions because it teaches this truth. It is peculiar to Buddhism.

I. The Truth of Conditional Arising as the Basis of Humility

First, let me explain why I say that the truth of conditional arising makes us become humble. Although we like to think that our knowledge is extensive and profound, that is not the case. Our knowledge is very limited. If we know that all things exist because of myriads of unknown causes and conditions, we cannot help recognizing our ignorance. We are humbled. We realize that we are seeing only a surface manifestation of all things in this world.

As an example, we can talk about our hereditary background. Although many of us know the names of our parents and grandparents, few of us know the names of our great-grandparents or other earlier ancestors. The fact is that we have millions of unknown ancestors. But we are seeing only a tip of an iceberg; so much is hidden from our sight.

What I have just said can be said about everything I see in this world. I can say the same thing about a desk that is in front of me. Although I am seeing the present appearance of this desk, am I seeing its entirety? Am I seeing the past causes and condition that have made it exist before me? No, I am not. I am totally ignorant about its background. I don’t know where the materials in this desk came from, who designed it, who manufactured it, or who has transported it here.

When I recognize the truth of conditional arising, the truth that there are limitless unknown causes and conditions behind all existing things, I realize that I am seeing only a surface manifestation of this world. I cannot help becoming an ignorant person, a humble person.

II. The Truth of Conditional Arising as the Basis of Compassion

Next, I want to say that the truth of conditional arising makes us not only humble but also compassionate.

Let me talk about one episode that I experienced a couple of years ago during Covid. This episode taught me that knowing the truth of conditional arising, or knowing the existence of an unknown background behind people, makes us become compassionate people.

Two years ago when Covid was still spreading, I went to an oral surgeon's office to have a treatment.

When I sat in the oral surgeon's chair, he started to treat me. There was a dental assistant; she was in her twenties. The oral surgeon asked her, "Chart please." He repeated, "Chart please." Then he repeated, "Chart please," a third time. Then, she handed it to him. Then he said to her, "Syringe please." He repeated those words three times. Then she handed it to him. Then he asked for various things such as a mirror, a wedge, and a gauze pad. Each time he asked twice, three times, and even four times.

Having heard the oral surgeon repeating the same words over and over again, I gradually grew irritated. I wanted my treatment finished as soon as possible. As you know, a root canal treatment is not like attending a party, not like having a nice cup of savory sake. The procedure is often uncomfortable and painful. I was getting more and more irritated. I thought, "How come this oral surgeon has hired such a bad, incompetent assistant?" I was irritated and upset, but I was surprised because the oral surgeon was calm—he was not at all irritated or upset.

A little while later, the oral surgeon said to me, "Mr. Haneda, I'm sorry. I'm sorry about my assistant. You may have noticed that she has a hearing problem. You see, I've been repeating my words to her. Usually she has no problem understanding me because she can read my lips very well. But, as you know, we are now getting through the corona pandemic and we are all wearing masks. Since I am wearing a mask, she cannot read my lips. That's why she is having a hard time in understanding me. That's why I am repeating my words. Mr. Haneda, I'm really sorry."

When I heard the doctor explain the situation, I understood what was happening. I realized that I was seeing only the surface manifestation of reality—only the surface manifestation of his assistant; there was so much hidden in the background of that situation. I became ashamed of myself because I was judging the assistant as an incompetent person and was even feeling anger toward her.

Having gained insight into the hidden background, my anger toward her turned into compassion for her. I could not help feeling great admiration for her achievement, becoming a dental assistant in spite of her disability.

I have talked about my experience. In this experience I recognized my near-sightedness, or the narrowness of my perspective. Unless the oral surgeon told me about his assistant's background, there was no way I could know that there was such a background. I just had a feeling of anger toward her. But knowing her background turned my anger into empathy.

III. Shinran's View of the Truth of Conditional Arising as the Basis of Humility and Compassion

Now I want to discuss Shinran's view of the truth of conditional arising as the basis of humility and compassion. Before I discuss this issue, I would like to talk about a passage in Chapter 13 of the *Tannisho*, a text written by Shinran's disciple named Yuien. This passage shows us Shinran's view of the truth of conditional arising as the basis of humility and compassion. On the basis of this passage, I will discuss Shinran's view of this truth as the basis of humility and compassion.

In Chapter 13 of the *Tannisho*, Shinran twice asked Yuien-bo if he would do whatever Shinran told him to do. To this question Yuien answered twice that he would do whatever Shinran told him. Then, the teacher told him to kill one thousand people in order to attain birth. To this Yuien answered that he could not possibly do so. Then Shinran told him,

Then why did you say that you would do whatever I told you? By this you should realize that 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 done 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.

(Collected Works of Shinran, p. 671)

Now let me discuss Shinran's view of the truth of conditional arising as the basis of humility and compassion.

A. Shinran's View of the Truth of Conditional Arising as the Basis of Humility

Let me first discuss Shinran's view of the truth of conditional arising as the basis of humility.

Shinran's words in the above-cited passage mean that the truth of conditional arising, or past causes and conditions, is controlling human actions. They mean that a person cannot take a good action if he wants to if he does not have the conditions that enable him to do so. In this way, Shinran teaches us that the truth of conditional arising, past causes and conditions, is controlling us. When we recognize the absoluteness of the truth of conditional arising, we cannot help knowing our ignorance or the limits of our abilities. This truth humbles us.

Shinran's following words: "If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act," also indicate that since the truth of conditional arising is controlling our lives, we cannot have anything certain or guaranteed as far as our thinking and actions are concerned. We must recognize how changeable, fragile, whimsical, and unpredictable our mind is. This insight humbles us; it cannot make us say, "I am absolutely right" or "I have a firm conviction."

In the similar vein Rev. Manshi Kiyozawa (1863-1903, a famous Shin teacher) said,

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 birth, but also with regard to the arising and vanishing of our thoughts in this very moment. We are absolutely within the hands of Power beyond Self [i.e., the truth of conditional arising].

(December Fan, Higashi Honganji Shuppan-bu, tr. by Nobuo Haneda, p.26)

These words of Kiyozawa are his confession that he has no power to control his mind. He talks about the absoluteness of the truth of conditional arising before which he is totally powerless. He cannot say that he has a self that is permanent, independent, or autonomous. His words, "We are absolutely within the hands of Power beyond Self," mean that the truth of conditional arising is controlling his thinking. He cannot help being humbled by this truth.

Just like Shinran, Kiyozawa teaches us the importance of knowing our ignorance, the limits of our abilities. He teaches us that the truth humbles us; it makes us humble people.

B. Shinran's View of the Truth of Conditional Arising as the Basis of Compassion

In the passage cited above, Shinran implies that the truth of conditional arising makes us not only humble but also compassionate. This truth not only humbles us but also makes us have a feeling of oneness with all humanity.

According to Shinran, because the truth of conditional arising is at the basis of our existence, we cannot help being the same ordinary people. Because of different past causes and conditions, we have different occupations and take different actions. But those differences are superficial and as far as our basic existence is concerned, we are basically the same. Let me quote another passage in same chapter of the *Tannisho*:

For those who make their living drawing nets or fishing in the seas and rivers, and those who sustain their lives hunting beasts or taking fowl in the fields and mountains, and those who pass their lives conducting trade or cultivating fields and paddies, it is all the same. If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act. (*Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 671)

Here Shinran says that people take up different occupations, such as fishing, hunting, trading, and farming because of the differences in their past causes and conditions. He tells us that all these differences are superficial and all people are basically the same.

Shinran's words here about people such as hunters and fishermen reflect his life in Echigo. In 1207, when he was thirty-five, the government persecuted his teacher Honen's nembutsu movement and totally destroyed his sangha. Two disciples of Honen were executed and eight monks, including Honen and Shinran, were defrocked and exiled to remote lands. Shinran was exiled to Echigo. It was in Echigo that Shinran learned about the equality of all humanity. Shinran, who was an aristocrat and a Buddhist monk, was deprived of his status and privileges;

he was reduced to the status of a peasant, fisherman, or hunter. When he was deprived of all his clothing and decoration, i.e., his social status and privileges, he became a naked human being. It was then that he realized that all differences in social statuses were not important but were caused by different past conditions. At the naked level of their existence, all human beings were the same. They were all ordinary people. He said, “We are all stones and pebbles” and “We are all weeds.” He tells us that nobody is special and we are all a garden variety of people.

In this way, it was during his exile in Echigo that Shinran realized that all human beings are the same ordinary people. This realization made him have a fellow feeling, a feeling of oneness with all humanity. Here we can see his view of the truth of conditional arising as the basis of compassion.

Now I cannot help talking about Prince Shotoku (574-622, a prince regent). Shinran deeply respected him and regarded him as “the Shakyamuni of Japan” and “Avalokitesvara (Bodhisattva of Compassion).” Prince Shotoku believed that all human beings were the same ordinary people. In the tenth article of the *Seventeen-Article Constitution*, the first constitution of Japan that was based on Buddhist and Confucian ideals, Shotoku says,

All people have their minds. Their minds are attached to different things. If another person affirms something, I deny it. If I affirm something, another person denies it. I am not necessarily a sage. Another person is not necessarily a fool. We are all just ordinary people. Who could establish the criteria for good and evil? (*Shinshu Seiten*, Higashi Honganji, p. 965, tr. by N. Haneda)

These words of Shotoku about our being the same ordinary people are based on his insight into the truth of conditional arising. Because of different causes and conditions, our minds are attached to different ideas. Then, believing that we have a right view, we start to argue with others. Shotoku, however, tells us that we should not consider ourselves wise and others foolish because different causes and conditions make us have different ideas. He tells us that at our naked level of our existence, we are all the same ordinary people. We share the same humanity, the same suffering, such as aging, sickness, and death. We share the same flaws, shortcomings, and weaknesses. He teaches us that real peace is realized through our insight into the fact that nobody is special and we are all the same ordinary people because of the truth of conditional arising.

Conclusion

In this essay I have talked about the truth of conditional arising—about the truth that all things exist because of past causes and conditions. If we know that there are myriads of causes and conditions hidden behind all things and people, we cannot help knowing the limits of our knowledge. We cannot help being humbled in knowing our ignorance. This truth also makes us become compassionate people. It makes us have a better understanding of humanity—that we share the same human suffering, flaws, shortcomings, and weaknesses. It makes us have a feeling of oneness with all human beings. It makes us have compassion or empathy with them.

If we know this truth, we cannot so easily judge other people or criticize them. Although we like to think that our understanding is absolute, broad, profound, and certain, it is actually relative, narrow, shallow, and uncertain. It cannot help being such, because this world consists of limitless unknown causes and conditions. Let me end this essay with the words of Shinran that I cited above: “If the karmic cause so prompts us, we will commit any kind of act.”

The Two Ways of Seeing One World —An Outstanding Feature of Buddhism—

Nobuo Haneda

Introduction

In this essay I want to talk about one outstanding feature of Buddhism: that it talks about one world, this phenomenal world, alone. Buddhism never talks about two worlds, such as the phenomenal world and the noumenal world, or this world and the world after death. In other words, it talks about *two different ways of seeing one world*, not *the existence of two worlds*. This feature of Buddhism distinguishes Buddhism from other religions, such as

Christianity and Islam, which talk about two worlds, such as the world of flesh and the world of the spirit, or the earthly world and the heavenly world after death.

The *Vimala-kirti-nirdesa Sutra*, one of the most famous Mahayana sutras says, “As one’s mind grows purer, the Buddha-land grows purer.” This sentence means that if our mind is impure, we live in an impure world and if our mind becomes pure, the world that we saw as impure turns into a pure world.

In order to explain this unique feature of Buddhism, that it talks about *two different ways of seeing one world*, I will discuss the following three issues in this essay.

First, I will discuss the teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha, the founder of Buddhism. Shakyamuni taught us that he was exclusively concerned with the issue of human suffering in this world and the elimination of it. He thought it a waste of time to deal with metaphysical issues, such as the existence of God, the spirit, or any world after death. He teaches us that Buddhism is nothing but self-examination that is designed to receive the wisdom-eye. If we receive the wisdom-eye, the dark world we have been seeing will turn into a bright world. We do not have to depart from a world of darkness and migrate to another world of brightness.

Second, in order to further explain that Buddhism talks about two ways of seeing one world, I will give an illustration from my experience. I will talk about my recent cataract operation, in which I experienced a radical change in my view of this world; a blurred world that I was seeing before the operation turned into a clear world after my cataract operation.

Third, I will discuss Shinran’s teaching about two ways of seeing one world. Just like Shakyamuni, Shinran was concerned only with the issue of human suffering in this world and the elimination of it. He tells us that if we receive the wisdom-eye through examining the self, we can eliminate our suffering. The wisdom-eye will transform a dark world into a bright one. Then, being born in the bright world, we will be able to live our lives in a powerful and meaningful way. And we will eventually be able to complete and fulfill our lives. In order to show this teaching of Shinran, I will discuss his view of birth in the Pure Land. It will show that his main concern was resolving the issue of human suffering by receiving the wisdom-eye. The wisdom-eye turned a dark world into a bright one. This discussion of Shinran’s view of birth in the Pure Land will show that his goal in Buddhism was to live his life in a fulfilling manner and that concern or speculation about another world, or another life, after death, was totally unnecessary.

I. Shakyamuni’s Two Ways of Seeing One World

A. Shakyamuni’s Exclusive Concern with the Elimination of Suffering in This World

Shakyamuni said that he was exclusively concerned with the issue of human suffering in this world. He said, “I teach only two things: suffering and its elimination.” Shakyamuni often said, “I am only concerned with two things, sickness and cure. The Dharma teaching is like medicine for the sick. It is only necessary for the sick. The healthy do not need it.”

Let me quote here the famous parable of “A Man Who Was Shot by a Poisoned Arrow.”

One day one of Shakyamuni’s disciples, asked the teacher about some metaphysical issues, such as the existences of a soul, a world after death, and eternal life. Then, the Buddha answered the disciple that he was not concerned with those metaphysical issues and it was a waste of time to deal with them. Then, the teacher told his disciple a parable, “Suppose a man is wounded by a poisoned arrow, and his friends bring him a doctor. Suppose the man would say, ‘I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know who shot me—what his name is, whether he belongs to the warrior caste or the priestly caste. I will not let this arrow be taken out until I know the kind of bow with which I was shot, the kind of bowstring used, and the kind of poison put on the arrow.’ He keeps asking many questions like those. The man would soon die without knowing the answers to any of these questions. For the man the only important and urgent issue is elimination of the poisoned arrow from him. Likewise, I am concerned only with the existence of suffering and its elimination in this life. I am not concerned with any other questions.”

(Cf. Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, pp. 12-15)

This parable shows us that Shakyamuni was exclusively concerned with the issue of human suffering and the elimination of it. He teaches us that the only way to eliminate suffering is

examination of the self. He tells us that we are initially seeing a dark world because of our attachment to fixed values—because of our ignorance of the Dharma, of the truth of impermanence. He teaches us that we must receive the wisdom-eye by having the scales in our eyes, i.e., our attachment to fixed ideas, fall down. The wisdom-eye will transform an ignorant way of seeing this world into an awakened way of seeing it. The dark world we have been seeing will turn into a bright world.

Shakyamuni tells us that if we are liberated from suffering by the wisdom-eye, we can live our lives in a meaningful way and fulfill our lives. He teaches us that our lives should end with a full stop. He calls it *parinirvana* (complete extinction).

B. Shakyamuni's Awakening Experience: the Two Ways of Seeing One World

Let me explain the content of Shakyamuni's awakening, i.e., his insight into the Dharma, i.e., the truth of "impermanence [*anitya*]" (or "dependent origination [*pratitya-samutpada*]").

Having renounced traditional practices, Shakyamuni sat under a tree and started to meditate. In his meditation Shakyamuni examined whether he had a self (*atman*), something permanent, independent, and autonomous, that was the basis of Brahmanism (or Hinduism). In order to examine if he actually had a self, he examined his self, his body and mind. Then he realized that there was nothing permanent, independent, and autonomous in his body and mind. He realized that the self (*atman*) that he thought he had in him did not actually exist. Thus, the content of his awakening (or enlightenment) was his insight into the Dharma, the truth of impermanence or the truth of dependent origination.

Shakyamuni described the content of his awakening with the two sentences: "The self has already died. The Universal Working has already been established." These two sentences describe his spiritual death and rebirth. The first sentence, "The self has already died," describes the death of the old self that he had thought real. The second sentence, "the Universal Working has already been established," describes the birth of the new self that is one with the Dharma. Thus his awakening experience had a twofold, negative and positive, aspect. The Dharma of impermanence initially appeared to Shakyamuni as a negative truth that totally negated the substantial self. But, when the Dharma totally negated the substantial self, it turned into a positive, dynamic, and creative truth.

When Shakyamuni experienced this spiritual birth, he received the wisdom-eye that is one with the Dharma. Now his view of this world went through a radical transformation. A dark, confusing, and frustrating world of suffering that he had been seeing before his awakening turned into a bright, peaceful, and harmonious world. Before his awakening, this world was filled with conflicts, friction, and confrontations with things and people. After his awakening, the world turned into a world of oneness and peace. Shakyamuni described the new world of oneness by saying, "When I attained Buddhahood, all things—mountains, rivers, grasses, and trees—also attained Buddhahood."

The new world that Shakyamuni's new wisdom-eye saw was the world of the truth of impermanence, the universal flow of life. The world was constantly fresh and new, constantly dynamic and creative. All existing things, not only animate things but also inanimate things, were manifesting the newness and freshness of life. The new eye saw all existing things as fellow participants or components in the universal flow of life.

The fact that Shakyamuni realized a true self that was one with the Dharma, the dynamic and creative reality, means that he started to live his life as a perfect student, as a constant seeker and learner. Because all things were dynamically moving, constantly new and fresh, he was unable to be complacent about anything. He was liberated from all kinds of fixed ideas, viewpoints, and opinions. He now started to see the whole world as a creative world and himself as one creative component of the creative world.

Thus Shakyamuni's awakening does not mean that there were two worlds, the world of delusion and the world of enlightenment, and that he moved from the former world to the latter. The world that he originally saw as the world of delusion turned into a world of enlightenment.

C. Shakyamuni's Fulfillment of His Life (i.e., *Parinirvana*) at the End of Life: No Need for Another Life

Shakyamuni teaches us that the ultimate goal of Buddhism is the attainment of *parinirvana* (perfect extinction) at the end of our lives. This Sanskrit word refers to the completion or fulfillment of human life at the end of our lives. In other words, attainment of *parinirvana* at

the end of our lives refers to our physical death becoming a completion point—a full stop, not a comma. It means that we should live our lives in such a manner that we have a deep sense of contentment, or a deep sense of fulfillment, at the end of our lives. We should not live our lives in such a manner that we need another life after death.

Shakyamuni completed the most important business in his life; he was liberated from samsara—the life of suffering that is caused by attachment to the imagined self (*atman*) and fixed values. He said that he had put an end to the meaningless cycle of transmigration from one life to another. In one of the earliest sutras called *Sutta-Nipata*, he says, “I will never come back to my mother’s womb again.” These words mean that he did not need another life after death.

Here we can see that Shakyamuni teaches us that we have to live our lives in such a way that we do not seek another life after death. He teaches us that if we seek another life after death, it means that we have not fulfilled and completed our lives. Longing for another life after death is something a deluded person does. He taught us that we should not end our lives in such a way.

II. My Cataract Operation: Two Ways of Seeing One World

A. Two Ways of Seeing One World

I have discussed that Shakyamuni was concerned with the reality of human suffering in this world and the elimination of it. He considered it unimportant to talk about another world after death. He taught us that if we receive the wisdom-eye, it would transform a dark world into a bright world. Buddhism teaches us two ways of seeing one world, not the existence of two worlds.

If I say that that Buddhism talks about two ways of seeing one world, not the existence of two worlds, some of my readers may ask me the following question: “Mr. Haneda, you have said that Buddhism talks about one world and does not talk about two worlds. But, don’t we have Buddhist expressions about two worlds, such as ‘the impure land and the Pure Land’ or ‘this shore and the other shore’? Don’t those terms refer to the existence of two worlds?”

I answer this question: “Yes, those terms, such as ‘the impure land and the Pure Land’ seem to mean that there are two worlds. But, you should not confuse those terms with Christian or Western philosophical terms, such as ‘the world of flesh and the world of the spirit,’ ‘the earthly world and the heavenly world,’ or ‘the phenomenal world and the noumenal world’.”

Buddhist terms such as “the impure land and the Pure Land” are symbols of two ways of seeing one world, not the existence of two worlds. Buddhism talks about two (i.e., ignorant and awakened) ways of seeing this world. If this world is seen by ignorant eyes, it appears as a dark, blurred, and defiled one. The world is called “the impure land” or “this shore.” If the same world is seen by awakened eyes, it appears as a bright, clear, and pure one. The world is called “the Pure Land” or “the other shore.”

Shakyamuni taught us that Buddhism is a teaching of self-examination. Buddhism teaches us that all of us are initially seeing this world through our ignorant eyes. Seen by those eyes, this world is “the impure land.” Buddhism also teaches us that through hearing the words of our teachers, such as Shakyamuni and Shinran, we must acquire new eyes, awakened eyes. Seen by awakened eyes, this world is “the Pure Land.”

Thus, Buddhism teaches us two ways of seeing the same world. It teaches us that we have to move from a deluded way of seeing this world to an awakened way of seeing it.

B. My Cataract Operation: My Sick Eye and My Healthy Eye

I want to further discuss the same issue by referring to an experience I had one year ago. I underwent a cataract operation on both my eyes. A couple of months before the operation I was in Japan. While there, I noticed that both my eyes were in bad shape. In particular, my right eye could hardly recognize the people who were standing just in front of me.

While I was undergoing the operation, I was wondering what the results of the operation might be. When the operation was over, I was very much surprised because I could see things so clearly. Flowers and leaves looked so beautiful. I could see the trees on the Berkeley hills very clearly. Every morning, when I looked at a mirror, I could see my wrinkles so clearly. I could clearly see the scope of my baldness. I could clearly see that I am no longer a spring chicken, thanks to my clear eyes.

Now I want to compare this cataract operation experience to wearing two different pairs of glasses, a dark pair and a transparent pair. The dark glasses symbolize my cataract eyes,

my sick eyes. These also symbolize my ignorant eyes. These clear glasses symbolize my new eyes, my healthy eyes. These also symbolize my awakened eyes.

When I see this world through these dark glasses, cataract eyes, or ignorant eyes, this world appears to be a dark, blurred, defiled, and ugly world. I see all kinds of weird things, such as snakes and lizards. I see a whole army of ghosts and apparitions. Being intimidated by them, I attack them to eliminate them. But, when I see this world through these clear glasses, healthy eyes, or awakened eyes, this world appears to be a clear, bright, pure, and beautiful world. I do not see any snakes or lizards. I see only ropes, branches, and sticks. I do not see any ghosts or apparitions. I see only mists and clouds. There is nothing that I should be afraid of.

This transition from a dark and blurred world to a clear and bright world is called the transition from “this shore” to “the other shore”—from “the impure land” to “the Pure Land.” This transition takes place in a second. It takes place in moments of here and now. We could designate this spiritual transition with many expressions, such as “awakening,” “enlightenment,” “birth in the Pure Land,” and “shinjin.”

It is a transition from an old world to a new world. It means the death of the old self and the birth of the new self. The new self is one with true reality or the Dharma. It is the lively, powerful, and dynamic self.

III. Shinran’s View of “Birth in the Pure Land” as an Experience of Spiritual Death and Birth

A. Does Shinran’s “Birth in the Pure Land” Take Place in This World or in the World After Death?

Now I want to discuss Shinran’s view of birth in the Pure Land. Because this issue concerns the existence of another world after death, it has direct relevance to the issue of the two ways of seeing one world. Many Shin Buddhist followers are confused about whether “birth in the Pure Land” takes place in this world or in the world after death. People often ask, “Are we going to be born in the Pure Land in this world or after we die?”

Generally speaking, two major Japanese Shin Buddhist traditions, the Nishi (or Hōmpan) Hōnganji Sect (with which the BCA is associated) and the Higashi Hōnganji Sect, have two totally different answers to the question. The Nishi Hōnganji Sect says that people attain birth in the Pure Land after they die. (The Jōdo School that Hōnen founded talks about birth in the Pure Land after death; the Nishi Hōnganji view of birth is similar.) But, the Higashi Hōnganji Sect says that people attain birth in the Pure Land in this life.

About sixty years ago, the Iwanami Publishing Company, one of the major publishing houses in Japan, published a Buddhist dictionary. In this publication there was a big controversy concerning the definition of the term, “birth in the Pure Land.” The dictionary originally defined “birth in the Pure Land” as “attainment in this life.” Then, immediately after the publication, Nishi Hōnganji scholars were quite upset and vehemently criticized the definition. They claimed that the dictionary should define the term as “attainment of birth in the Pure Land after death.” The company had no choice but to accede to their demand. Thus, the final version of the dictionary said, “According to the Higashi Hōnganji Sect, birth in the Pure Land refers to attainment in this world and according to the Nishi Hōnganji Sect, it refers to attainment in the world after death.”

Since these two Shin sects include thousands of Buddhist ministers and scholars, I must say that what I discussed above is only generally the case; there are some notable exceptions. For example, some Nishi scholars, such as Prof. Takamaro Shigaraki and Prof. Gibun Uyeda, agree with the Higashi view of birth in the Pure Land and some Higashi scholars, such as Prof. Akira Hataya and Prof. Nobuchiyo Odani, agree with the Nishi view of birth in the Pure Land.

Then, what is my view of the birth in the Pure Land? I believe that the Higashi view is right. In my opinion, Shinran teaches us that we attain birth in the Pure Land in this world. I will discuss this below.

B. Shinran’s View of “Birth in the Pure Land” as an Experience of Spiritual Death and Birth That Takes Place Here and Now

After having spent over twenty years in intense traditional Buddhist practices on Mt Hiei, Shinran met his teacher Hōnen. This meeting led Shinran to read the *Larger Sutra* very seriously. Then, Shinran had an awakening experience called shinjin. Now let me discuss

his awakening experience. We can say that his awakening had the same twofold aspect that Shakyamuni's awakening had. Shakyamuni described the content of his awakening with the two sentences: "The self has already died. The Universal Working has already been established." I said earlier that these two sentences talked about his spiritual death and birth that took place here and now.

In the following words of Shinran, we can see his discussion of the same twofold aspect, spiritual death and birth—the death of the old self and the birth of the new self—that take place here and now. In his work entitled *Gutoku's Notes* Shinran says,

Concerning the entrusting of oneself to the Primal Vow, [to borrow the words of Shan-tao] "in the preceding moment, life ends..."...

Concerning immediately attaining birth, [to borrow the words of Shan-tao,] "in the next moment, one is immediately born."

This means that "one immediately enters the stage of the definitely settled" [Nagarjuna].

Further: "One is termed a definitely-settled bodhisattva."

(*Collected Works of Shinran* [hereinafter abbreviated as *CWS*], p. 594)

Here Shinran talks about spiritual death and birth by borrowing (or quoting) Shan-tao's two sentences—"In the preceding moment, my life ends and in the next moment, I am immediately born." When Shan-tao originally stated these two sentences in his writing, he talked about birth in the Pure Land *after physical death*. But when Shinran quotes the same sentences of Shan-tao here in his *Gutoku's Notes*, he understands them to refer to spiritual death and birth that take place *in this life*.

By the first sentence—"Concerning the entrusting of oneself to the Primal Vow, [to borrow the words of Shan-tao] 'in the preceding moment, life ends....'"—Shinran means spiritual death that takes place *in this life*. He indicates that when one entrusts oneself to the Innermost Aspiration (i.e., the Dharma, or the Other Power), when one receives the wisdom-eye, one's deluded life that is based on self-power (i.e., dualistic human thinking) ends.

By the second sentence—"Concerning immediately attaining birth, [to borrow the words of Shan-tao,] 'in the next moment, one is immediately born.'"—Shinran means spiritual birth that takes place *in this life*. He indicates that when one experiences spiritual death by entrusting oneself to the Innermost Aspiration, one is immediately born in the Pure Land, the world of the Buddha's nondualistic wisdom, or the world of the Dharma. In this way, Shinran talks about the death of the old self and birth of the new self that takes place *in this life*.

We can further know that Shinran is talking about spiritual death and birth that takes place here and now because he quotes Nagarjuna's words that follow the two sentences discussed above:

This means that "one immediately enters the stage of the definitely settled" [Nagarjuna].

Further: "One is termed a definitely-settled bodhisattva."

By the two terms, i.e., "the stage of the definitely settled" and "a definitely-settled bodhisattva," Nagarjuna mean the same status that a person attains in this life. Shinran says that a person attains this status when he experiences shinjin. In this way, it is clear that Shinran believed that birth in the Pure Land is an experience of spiritual death and birth that takes place here and now. Shinran also believed that birth in the Pure Land is synonymous with the shinjin awakening; both will be repeatedly experienced and deepened. So the eventual attainment of Buddhahood at the last moment of one's life is synonymous with the perfection or completion of birth in the Pure Land, or shinjin.

Let me further quote another passage by Shinran in which we can see his view of birth in the Pure Land as an experience of spiritual death and birth that takes place in this life. In Chapter 2 of the *Tannisho*, Shinran says:

I have no idea whether the nembutsu [i.e., the practice of saying *Namu Amida Butsu*] is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Honen and, saying the nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets. (*CWS*, p. 662)

The *Tannisho* records some of Shinran's answers to the questions raised by his guests from the Kanto Area. Probably these words of Shinran were his answer to a question raised by one of the guests: "Shinran, are we going to the Pure Land after death for saying the nembutsu as many Pure Land teachers tell us? Or, are we going to hell for saying the nembutsu as Nichiren Shonin (i.e., the founder of the Nichiren School) says?" Doubtlessly Shinran's guests must have expected Shinran to say, "Of course, we are going to the Pure Land after death for saying the nembutsu. You are absolutely assured of your birth after death. Don't worry about it." So, this answer by the teacher must have been quite unexpected and shocking to them.

These words of Shinran mean that he did not know if the nembutsu would make him go to the Pure Land or to hell. Why did he tell them so? For Shinran, the nembutsu was not a means or practice that was designed to realize birth in the Pure Land after death. The nembutsu (i.e., *Namu Amida Butsu*) was a challenging message (meaning "Come to the Buddha's nondualistic wisdom!") from his teachers that Shinran had to hear. It was not a practice of chanting that he had to do. Having heard and understood the meaning of the nembutsu, Shinran immediately experienced shinjin here and now—spiritual death and birth, or birth in the Pure Land.

Shinran's shinjin experience means that he received the wisdom-eye from the Buddha. The wisdom-eye immediately turned the impure world that he had been seeing into a pure world. Shinran talks about "the opening of the wisdom-eye" that he received in his shinjin experience. (CWS, p. 304) We can find the expression, "the opening of the wisdom-eye," in the *Jusei-ge* in the *Larger Sutra*. One verse in the *Jusei-ge* says, "I [i.e., the Buddha] will open their wisdom-eye and remove the darkness of their ignorance." (Cf. *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, the Numata Center, tr. Hisao Inagaki, p. 40) For Shinran, receiving the wisdom-eye is synonymous with the shinjin experience. Receiving this eye marks the beginning of the powerful and meaningful life in the world of the Buddha's wisdom.

Thus for Shinran, whether he would go to the Pure Land after death or not was not an issue. He had already been born in the world of the Buddha's wisdom where he started to live a fulfilling life as a perfect seeker; he did not need another life after death.

If I were to compare Shinran's shinjin awakening experience to my cataract operation, the nembutsu (or the challenging message from his teachers) that opened Shinran's wisdom-eye was like my ophthalmologist's operating knife that opened my new eye. When Shinran received the nembutsu, he was immediately liberated by it. When I received the eye treatment, my cataract was immediately removed; I received my new eye. The transition from a blurred world to a clear world took place in a second. Shinran tells us that birth in the Pure Land takes place in a flash of a moment.

C. Shinran's View of the Fulfillment of Human Life (i.e., *Parinirvana* [Complete Extinction])

Just like Shakyamuni, Shinran talked about the importance of fulfilling human life at the end of this life. He taught us that in order to fulfill human life, we must have the true beginning, shinjin, in our lives—the death of the deluded self and the birth of the true self. Only the true beginning can give us the true ending, the fulfillment of human life.

Shinran teaches us that the shinjin awakening is synonymous with "birth in the Pure Land," "attaining the stage of the truly settled [or that of nonretrogression]," and "attaining the stage of the definitely settled." He tells us that when we attain shinjin (or the stage of the truly settled), we receive the spirit of Bodhisattva Dharmakara that is permeated with the power of the Innermost Aspiration (*Hongan*). This spirit is the aspiration for seeking the Dharma continuously. When we receive it, we become a student who cannot help seeking the Dharma continuously. We are filled with the joy of listening to the Dharma and gratitude toward our teachers. Thus, Shinran says that the shinjin person lives his life as "a definitely settled bodhisattva" (i.e., an expression by Nagarjuna) who will definitely realize Buddhahood at the end of his life.

Shinran says that when we attain shinjin, we start to live a life that is assured of attaining supreme Buddhahood (or *parinirvana*), the completion and fulfillment of our lives, at the end of our lives. Shinran says,

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 [i.e., *parinirvana*] on the eve of the moment of death. (CWS, p. 123)

Here Shinran says that the shinjin person attains “perfect extinction” (or “perfect combustion”) of his lives. The shinjin person has finished the most important business in his life. He met someone he had to meet. He heard what he had to hear. He has no regret in his life. Because he has received the Buddha’s wisdom that turns the negative into the positive, he can appreciate not only all positive things but also all negative things in his life. His physical death is like a full stop, not a comma. Although many people *cannot die (or accept death) but must die*, he *can die*. Shinran teaches us that we should live our lives in such a manner that we have a deep sense of contentment or fulfillment. We should not live our lives in such a manner that we need another life, another world, at the end of our lives.

Conclusion

In contrast to many religions of the world that talk about two worlds, Shakyamuni talked about this world alone; he did not consider it important to talk about another world. Shakyamuni said that he was concerned only with the elimination of suffering in this world; he was not concerned with any other issues, such as the existence of God, or the existence of another world.

Shakyamuni taught us that when we see this world through our ignorant eyes, we see a dark and blurred world that is filled with all kinds of difficulties. But when we receive the wisdom-eye by hearing the Dharma, we can see this world as a clear and bright world. We can be liberated from suffering. If we experience this spiritual transformation, we will be able to live our lives in a meaningful way by becoming a constant seeker. We will be able to fulfill and complete our lives. We do not have to seek another life after death.

Just like Shakyamuni, Shinran talked about this world alone; he did not consider it important to talk about another world. Although many Shin followers believe that Shinran talked about birth in the Pure Land after death, I consider that view wrong. His only concern was attaining liberation in this world by taking care of human suffering; he did not need to seek happiness in another world. He talked about the importance of receiving the wisdom-eye that enabled him to see this world in a new way. Thanks to the wisdom-eye, the world that originally looked very dark and blurred turned into a world that was bright and clear. He identified the shinjin experience, the spiritual death and birth, with birth in the Pure Land. Once shinjin or birth in Pure Land begins, it is repeatedly re-experienced and continuously deepened. Perfected shinjin or perfected birth in the Pure Land is called the realization of Buddhahood that takes place at the last moment of our lives.

Just like Shakyamuni, Shinran teaches us that if we experience the shinjin awakening, we will be able to live powerful and meaningful lives and can fulfill and complete our lives without any need for another life after death.

Face to Face with Shakyamuni (An Excerpt)

Shuichi Maida

The *Sutra of a Snake* in the *Sutta-Nipata* says,

As one vainly searches for flowers in a fig-tree forest,
The practitioner knows that all things do not have entity.
He discards both this world and the other world,
As a snake sheds its old, dried-up skin. [5]

The Dharma of selflessness is the truth that appears when conceit, our subjective illusion, is destroyed. This Dharma means that there is no entity in all things. Our forcibly searching for something that is decisively and absolutely nonexistent is likened to searching for flowers in a fig-tree forest.” In explaining the concept “basic phenomenon (*Urphanomen*)” Goethe talks about a child who first looks at his face reflected on a mirror and then starts to peek into the back of the mirror considering there must be some secret there. Seeking entity in things is precisely like seeking something at the back of a mirror. All that is given to us is a reflection on a mirror. This “basic phenomenon” is all we have. Apart from that, there is no other reality. Goethe, who laughed at the folly of seeking entity behind phenomena, was thoroughly cognizant of the Dharma of impermanence that is taught in Buddhism. The Dharma of impermanence means that there are only reflected images, phenomena; apart

from them, there is no reality, no entity. (If truly existing substance is called entity for short, the absence of entity is precisely called impermanence.)

The Dharma of entitylessness is the Dharma of impermanence. Assuming an entity behind an existing thing is a subjective illusion. Fixing things on the basis of this assumption and not obediently following the truth of impermanence, which is the law of movement underlying all existing things, is called conceit. Conceit is fallacy and is the only cause for our suffering in which we grieve, “I cannot control things as I wish.”

The person who “has destroyed his conceit” is a person who is liberated from suffering; he is a person of freedom. The selfless person is a conceitless person and is, at the same time, the recognizer of the truth of impermanence. Know that no other expressions could more accurately describe impermanence than the expression, “things do not have entity.”

Thus the recognizer of impermanence does not have anything fixed or substantial. His life is “like a smooth flow of water on a shallow stream” [i.e., an expression by Rev. Haya Akegarasu (1877-1954, a Shin teacher)]. He lives with the impermanence of the world; he lives as the truth. The person who lives the truth is called the person of freedom. He leaves every success and failure of all things to the world’s law of impermanence itself.

(*The Complete Works of Shuichi Maida*, pp. 243-244, tr. by N. Haneda)

Notes:

We held the 2024 Maida Center Summer Retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center, July 26. (Fri.)–28 (Sun.). Twenty-five people attended the retreat. Dr. Haneda spoke on “The Two Types of Freedom in Buddhism.” We will hold the 2025 Maida Center Summer Retreat at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley, July 25 (Fri.)–27 (Sun.)

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

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