

# Dharma Essays

by

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## 1. The Central Concept of Buddhism: The Teaching of Interdependence

In this essay we focus on the central concept of Buddhism, generally termed the principle of Dependent Co-arising or Dependent Origination. While Buddhism is generally thought of as a religion, it also has a highly developed tradition of philosophical thought based in the principle of cause and effect (inga) and expressed in the principle of Dependent Co-arising.

This teaching came to mind when I read a dialogue between the Dalai Lama and the Abbot of the Nishi Hongwanji, Koshin Ohtani in a recent issue of the Bungei Shunju (1-2008). In the dialogue, the issue of Emptiness, also a very important concept in Mahayana Buddhism, came up. The Dalai Lama explained that Emptiness is based in the principle of Dependent Co-arising. The Abbot presented the East Asian view of Emptiness as an experiential awareness, achieved through the practice of meditation in Zen or other tradition. It is essentially the experience of non-duality. Perhaps we may distinguish the views as logical in contrast to mystical. I reflected in myself that while many people may not easily experience non-duality, they can understand the logical basis of Emptiness and through reflection become aware of its contemporary meaning and importance for our lives.

The Emptiness of things referred to by the Dalai Lama is based on the principle of interdependence or Dependent Co-arising in Buddhism. It has both religious and philosophical significance. The religious significance highlights the doctrine of karma which explains the reality of suffering in human existence and the world. In Mahayana Buddhism, interdependence underlies the teaching of transfer of merit and each person can share the benefit of good deeds with others. The doctrine of karma which means deed or act explains our situation in the world, while interdependence motivates people to do good deeds in order to acquire merit for better lives for themselves and others in the future in the process of transmigration.

Consequently, as Ven. Thich Nhat Hanh has written: “All teachings of Buddhism are based on Interdependent Co-arising. If a teaching is not in accord with Interdependent Co-arising, it is not a teaching of the Buddha.”

The teaching of Dependent Co-arising is also called the twelve link chain of causation because it analyses the existence of human or sentient beings as the result of a process of 12 aspects which describe the formation of a life or can view a life through three births.

The links are: 1) Ignorance is a fundamental blindness to one's true self and life condition. It is a lack of understanding which we call today “denial.” 2) Volitional action includes our impulses and motivations which arise from our Ignorance in the form of hatred, greed, prejudice etc. 3) Consciousness which includes also the unconscious or the totality of the awareness of things. Through the many influences or seeds stored there we develop good or bad tendencies. 4) Name and Form are the mental and physical aspects of our being. That is, the physical body and personality or identity The six sense faculties: the five physical senses and the mind. 6) Contact by the senses with objects. 7) Feeling or the awareness and experience of things. 8) Craving is the desire, rooted in our feelings, for repeated experience just as we cannot eat just one potato chip. 9) Clinging or grasping and attachment. We cannot let go. 10) Becoming. It is the deep desire for life, reflected in our efforts at self-preservation. 11) Birth or rebirth. 12) Old Age (Decay) and Death, the process begins at birth and becomes more evident as time –impermanence- proceeds.

According to this process, we are influenced by the fundamental Ignorance and Delusions that blind us to true reality or seeing things as they truly are. As a result, we develop deep feelings of hatred, greed and prejudice, essentially our basic egoism. Through our underlying consciousness and the activities of our minds and the senses, we carry out actions in the world, creating suffering or good. We cling to those things which we think benefit our egos or preserve them. Consequently we give rise to a deep desire to continue our lives. The karma generated through this process leads to rebirth and the cycle of birth-old age and death and future cycles of life.

From The heart of the Buddha's teaching - The Two Truths  
by Thich Nhat Hanh

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All teachings of Buddhism are based on Interdependent Co-arising. If a teaching is not in accord with Interdependent Co-Arising, it is not a teaching of the Buddha. when you have grasped Interdependent Co-Arising, you bring that insight to shine on the three

baskets (*tripitaka*) of the teaching. Interdependent Co-Arising allows you to see the Buddha, and the Two Truths allow you to hear the Buddha. When you are able to see and hear the Buddha, you will not lose your way as you traverse the ocean of his teachings.

The Buddha said that there are twelve links (*nidanas*) in the "chain" of Interdependent Co-Arising. The first is ignorance (*avidya*). *Vidya* means seeing, understanding, or light. *Avidya* means the lack of light, the lack of understanding, or blindness. Although ignorance is usually listed as the first link, it does not mean that ignorance is a first cause. It is also possible to begin the list with old age and death.

The second link is volitional action (*samskara*), also translated as formations, impulses, motivating energy, karma formations, or the will to cling to being. When we have a lack of understanding, anger, irritation, or hatred can arise.

The third link is consciousness (*vijnana*). Consciousness here means the whole of consciousness -- individual and collective, mind consciousness and store consciousness, subject and object. And consciousness here is filled with unwholesome and erroneous tendencies connected with ignorance that are of the nature to bring about suffering.

The fourth link is mind/body, or name and form (*nama rupa*). "Name" (*nama*) means the mental element and "form" (*rupa*) means the physical element of our being. Both mind and body are objects of our consciousness. When we look at our hand, it is an object of our consciousness. When we touch our anger, sadness, or happiness, these are also objects of our consciousness.

The sixth link is the contact (*sparsha*) between sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness. When eyes and form, ears and sound, nose and smell, tongue and taste, body and touch, and mind and object of mind come into contact, sense consciousness is born. Contact is a basis for feelings. It is a universal mental formation, present in every mental formation.

The seventh link is feelings (*vedana*), which can be pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. When a feeling is pleasant, we become attached (the ninth link).

The eighth link is craving (*trishna*), or desire. Craving is followed by grasping.

The ninth link is grasping or attachment (*upadana*). It means we are caught in the thralls of the object.

The tenth link is "coming to be" (*bhava*), being, or becoming. Because we desire something, it comes to be. We have to look deeply to know what we really want.

The eleventh link is birth (*jati*).

The twelfth link is old age (or decay) and death (*jaramarana*).

Ignorance conditions volitional actions. Volitional actions condition consciousness. Consciousness conditions mind/body. And so on. As soon as ignorance is present, all the other links -- volitional actions, consciousness, mind/body, and so on -- are *already* there. Each link contains all the other links. Because there is ignorance, there are volitional actions. Because there are volitional actions, there is consciousness. Because there is consciousness there is mind/body, and so on.

In the Five Aggregates, there is nothing that we can call a self. Ignorance is the inability to see this truth. Consciousness, mind/body, the six senses and their objects, contact, and feeling are the effect of ignorance and volitional actions. Because of craving, grasping, and coming to be, there will be birth and death, which means the continuation of this wheel, or chain, again and again.

When artists illustrate the twelve links of Interdependent Co-Arising, they often draw a blind woman to represent ignorance; a man gathering fruit in the jungle or a potter at work to illustrate volitional actions; a restless monkey grasping this and that for consciousness; a boat to represent mind/body; a house with many windows for the six senses and their objects; a man and a woman close to each other to represent contact; a man pierced by an arrow for feeling; and man drinking wine for craving or thirst; a man and a woman in sexual union or a man picking fruit from a tree to represent attachment or grasping; a pregnant woman for coming to be; a woman giving birth for birth; an old woman leaning on a stick or a man carrying a corpse on his back or his shoulder for old age and death.

Another way that artists sometimes depict the twelve links is to draw an embryo in the womb for consciousness; the child just before birth for mind/body; the child from one to two years old, when his or her life is dominated by touching, for the six senses and their objects; the same child from three to five years old for contact; and an adult for desire or attachment.

There do not have to be exactly twelve links. In the Abhidharma texts of the Sarvastivada School, it says that you can teach one, two, three, four, or five, up to twelve links. The one link belongs to the unconditioned realm (asamskrita). The two links are cause and effect. The three links are past, present, and future. The four links are ignorance, volitional actions, birth, and old age and death. The five links are craving, grasping, coming to be, birth, and old age and death. The six links are past cause, present cause, future causes, past result, present result, and future result. Because ignorance and volitional actions exist in consciousness, and the six ayatanas exist in name and form, in the Mahanidana Sutta the Buddha lists only nine links. At other times Buddha taught ten links, omitting ignorance and volitional actions.

Sometimes when the Buddha taught Interdependent Co-Arising, he began with old age and death and the suffering that accompanies them. In the sutras that do not include ignorance and volitional actions as links, the Buddha ends by saying that mind/body is conditioned by consciousness, and consciousness is conditioned by mind/body. The Buddha never wanted us to understand the twelve links in a linear way -- that there is a line going from ignorance to old age and death or that there are exactly and only twelve links. Not only does ignorance give rise to volitional actions, but volitional actions also give rise to ignorance. Each link in the chain or Interdependent Co-Arising is both a cause and an effect of all the other links in the chain. The twelve links inter-are.

In the tendency to see the teachings of the Buddha as an explanation of how things are rather than as a support and guide to the practice, the twelve links have been

misunderstood in many ways. One way has been to see them as a way to explain why there is birth and death. The Buddha usually began the twelve links with old age and death to help us get in touch with suffering and find its roots. This is closely linked to the teachings and practice of the Four Noble Truths. It was after the lifetime of the Buddha that teachers more often than not began with ignorance, to help prove why there is birth and death. Ignorance became a kind of first cause, even though the Buddha always taught that no first cause can be found. If ignorance exists, it is because there are causes that give rise to and deepen ignorance. The Buddha was not a philosopher trying to explain the universe. He was a spiritual guide who wanted to help us put an end to our suffering.

Two other theories based on the Twelve Links evolved after the lifetime of the Buddha. One was called the Three Times and the other the Two Levels of Cause and Effect. According to these theories, ignorance and volitional actions belong to the past; birth and old age and death belong to the future; and all the other links from consciousness to coming to be belong to the present. It is true that ignorance and volitional actions existed before we were born, but they also exist in the present. They are contained within all the other links, which include the so-called links of the present and future.

Regarding the Two Levels of Cause and Effect, at the first level, ignorance and volitional actions are said to be causes, and consciousness, mind/body, the six *ayatana*s, and contact are effects. At the second level, feelings, craving, grasping, and coming to be in this life lead to birth and old age and death in a future life. Theories like these are not entirely inaccurate, but we have to be able to go beyond them. All commentaries and theories contain some misunderstanding, but we can still feel gratitude to these commentators and theorists for taking the teachings in a new direction to help people transform, while basically conforming to teachings of the Buddha.

When we hear from commentators that some links are causes (namely ignorance and volitional actions) and others are effects (namely birth and old age and death), we know that this is not consistent with the Buddha's teaching that everything is both a cause and an effect. To think that ignorance gives rise to consciousness, which then gives rise to mind/body would be a dangerous oversimplification. When the Buddha said, "Ignorance conditions volitional actions," he meant that there is a relationship of cause and effect between ignorance and volitional actions. Ignorance nourishes volitional actions, but volitional actions also nourish ignorance. Ignorance activates consciousness by producing feelings of discomfort, craving, boredom, intention, and aspiration, so these feelings are called volitional actions. Once these feelings are active in consciousness, they make ignorance stronger. The tree gives rise to and nourishes its leaves, but the leaves also nourish the tree. Leaves are not just the children of the tree. They are also the mother of the tree. Because of the leaves the tree is able to grow. Every leaf is a factory synthesizing sunshine to nourish the tree. The interbeing of leaf and tree is parallel to the interbeing of the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising. We say that ignorance conditions volitional actions, but

ignorance also conditions consciousness, both through volitional actions and directly. Ignorance conditions mind/body as well. If there were no ignorance in mind/body, mind/body would be different. Our six organs and the six objects of these organs also contain ignorance. My perception of the flower is based on my eyes and on the form of the flower. As soon as my perception becomes caught in the sign "flower," ignorance is there. Therefore, ignorance is present in contact, and it is also present in feelings, craving, grasping, coming to be, birth, and old age and death. Ignorance is not just in the past. It is present now, in each of our cells, and each of our mental formations. If there were no ignorance, we would not become attached to things. If there were not ignorance, we would not grasp the objects of our attachment. If there were no ignorance, the suffering that is manifesting right now would not be there. Our practice is to identify ignorance when it is present. Grasping is in volitional actions, feelings, coming to be, birth, old age and death. Our infatuations, our running away from this or toward that, and our intentions can be seen in all the other links. Every link conditions every other link and is conditioned by them.

With this understanding, we can abandon the idea of a sequential chain of causation and enter deeply the practice of the Twelve Links of Interdependent Co-Arising. Although it says in the sutra that consciousness brings about mind/body, that mind/body brings about the six *ayatanas*, and so on, we must understand this as a way of speaking and nothing more. We have to see the Twelve Links in a broad, open way.

Consider, for example, craving as the fruit of feeling. Sometimes a feeling does not lead to craving, but to aversion. Sometimes the feeling is not accompanied by ignorance, but by understanding, lucidity, or loving kindness, and the outcome will not be craving or aversion. To say that feeling brings about craving is not precise enough. Feeling with attachment and ignorance brings about craving. We must link each of the Twelve Links with all the other links. This is what the *Heart Sutra* means when it tells us, "No Interdependent Co-Arising." The Twelve Links are "empty," because each of them would not exist without all the others. Feeling cannot be without craving, grasping, coming to be, birth, old age and death, ignorance, volitional actions, and so on. In each of the twelve links, we see the presence of the other eleven. Feeling can lead to craving, non-craving, or equanimity.

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### **The twelve factors of dependent arising — the law of causality in effect**

The Buddha did not teach dependent arising merely as a theory. Rather it is central to the aim of Dhamma, deliverance from suffering.

The first point to the round of becoming, *samsara*, cannot be discovered. No matter how far we go back in time, we always find a possibility of going back further. However, though *samsara* does not have a distinct beginning in time, it does have a distinct causal structure. It is sustained, kept in motion, by a precise set of conditions.

These conditions — the **twelve factors** — make up the practical side of the Buddha's teaching on dependent arising. These twelve factors are:

ignorance  
volitional formations  
consciousness  
mentality/materiality,  
six sense faculties  
contact,  
feeling  
craving  
clinging  
existence  
birth  
ageing and death.

**With the arising of this, that arises**

The Buddha sets forth these twelve factors of dependent arising as a series of statements — "With A as condition, B arises:"

Dependent on ignorance, volitional formations arise.

Dependent on volitional formations, consciousness arises.

Dependent on consciousness, mentality-materiality arises.

Dependent on mentality-materiality, the six sense faculties arise.

Dependent on the six sense faculties, faculties contact arises.

Dependent on contact, feeling arises.

Dependent on feeling, craving arises.

Dependent on craving, clinging arises.

Dependent on clinging, existence arises.

Dependent on existence, birth arises.

Dependent on existence, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair arise. These conditions are the twelve links the chain of causation. That is, they are the most prominent factors in the series of causes and results that make up our experience in samsara. To use another metaphor, they might also be called the twelve spokes in the wheel of existence, a wheel that turns from birth to death and from death back to new birth.

We'll now explore each of the twelve factors and their conditional relationships.

**Ignorance**

The Buddha starts the sequence of factors with ignorance, *avijja*. What is ignorance?

**Ignorance is not seeing  
the Four Noble Truths.**

Ignorance, the Buddha says, is not knowing. Not ignorance in the sense of not knowing anything, but rather not seeing the Four Noble Truths — the truth of suffering, its origin, its cessation and the way to its cessation. Ignorance does not mean the mere lack

of conceptual understanding of these, but spiritual blindness, not understanding the Four Noble Truths in their full depth and range.

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The doctrine of **pratītyasamutpāda** (Sanskrit; [HYPERLINK](#)

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pali_language)" \o "Pali language" [Pali](#):

**paticcasamuppāda**; [HYPERLINK](#)

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetan\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetan_language)" \o "Tibetan language" [Tibetan](#):

[rten.cing.'brel.bar.'byung.ba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tibetan_language); [HYPERLINK](#)

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese\\_language](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_language)" \o "Chinese language" [Chinese](#): 緣起),

often translated as "**dependent arising**," is an important part of [HYPERLINK](#)

"<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddhist>" \o "Buddhist" [Buddhist](#) [HYPERLINK](#)

"<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metaphysics>" \o "Metaphysics" [metaphysics](#). Common to

all [HYPERLINK](#) "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schools\\_of\\_Buddhism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Schools_of_Buddhism)" \o "Schools of

Buddhism" [schools of Buddhism](#), it states that phenomena arise together in a mutually

interdependent web of cause and effect. It is variously rendered into English as

"dependent origination", "conditioned genesis", "dependent co-arising", "interdependent arising", or "contingency".

When this is, that is.

From the arising of this comes the arising of that.

When this isn't, that isn't.

From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that. [HYPERLINK](#)

"<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prat%C4%ABtyasamutp%C4%81da>" \l

"cite\_note-1#cite\_note-1" \o "" [\[2\]](#)

Thanissaro Bhikkhu (2005). *Assutava Sutta: Uninstructed* ( [HYPERLINK](#)

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samyutta\\_Nikaya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samyutta_Nikaya)" \o "Samyutta Nikaya" [SN](#) 12.61).

Twelve Nidanas

*Main article:* [HYPERLINK](#)

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve\\_Nid%C4%81nas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Twelve_Nid%C4%81nas)" \o "Twelve Nidānas"

[Twelve Nidānas](#)

The application of pratītyasamutpāda to the process of rebirth is known as the Twelve Nidanas or the Twelve Links of Conditioned Existence. Here each link is conditioned by the preceding one, and itself conditions the succeeding one. These cover three lives:

### **Former Life**

ignorance

volitional formations (activities which produce karma)

### **Current Life**

consciousness

mind and body (personality or identity)

the six sense bases (five physical senses and the mind)

contact (between objects and the senses)



feeling (registering the contact)  
craving (for continued contact)  
clinging  
becoming (similar to volitional formations)

### **Future Life**

birth  
old age and death

With respect to the destinies of human beings and animals, dependent origination has a more specific meaning, as it describes the process by which such [Sentient beings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentient_beings_(Buddhism)) (Buddhism) [sentient beings](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sentient_beings_(Buddhism)) incarnate into any given realm and pursue their various worldly projects and activities with all concomitant suffering. Among these sufferings are aging and death. Aging and death are experienced by us because birth and youth have been experienced. Without birth there is no death. One conditions the other in a mutually dependent relationship. Our becoming in the world, the process of what we call "life", is conditioned by the attachment and clinging to ideas and projects. This attachment and clinging in turn cannot exist without [Tanha](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanha)

as its condition. The Buddha understood that craving comes into being because there is [Sensation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sensation)

in the body which we experience as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. When we crave something, it is the sensation induced by contact with the desired object that we crave rather than the object itself. Sensation is caused by contact with such objects of the senses. The contact or impression made upon the senses (manifesting as sensation) is itself dependent upon the six sense organs which themselves are dependent upon the psychophysical entity that a human being is. The whole process is summarized by the Buddha as follows:

English Terms	Sanskrit Terms
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With [Avidya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avidya_(Buddhism)) (Buddhism) [Ignorance](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avidya_(Buddhism)) as condition, [Sankhara](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankhara)

[Mental Formations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankhara) ariseWith [Avidya](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avidya_(Buddhism)) (Buddhism) [Avidyā](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avidya_(Buddhism)) as condition, [Sankhara](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankhara)

[Saṃskāra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankhara) arises

With Mental Formations as condition, [Vijnana](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijnana)

[Consciousness](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijnana) arisesWith

[Saṃskāra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sankhara) as condition, [Vijñāna](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijnana) arises

With Consciousness as condition, [Namarupa](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namarupa)

[Name and Form](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namarupa) ariseWith [Vijñāna](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vijnana) as condition,

HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namarupa>" \o "Namarupa" [Nāmarūpa](#) arises

With Name & Form as condition, HYPERLINK

"<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadayatana>" \o "Sadayatana" [Sense Gates](#) ariseWith HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namarupa>" \o "Namarupa" [Nāmarūpa](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadayatana>" \o "Sadayatana" [Ṣaḍāyatana](#) arises

With Sense Gates as condition, HYPERLINK

"<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spar%C5%9Ba>" \o "Sparśa" [Contact](#) arisesWith HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sadayatana>" \o "Sadayatana" [Ṣaḍāyatana](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spar%C5%9Ba>" \o "Sparśa" [Sparśa](#) arises

With Contact as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedana>" \o "Vedana" [Feeling](#) arisesWith HYPERLINK

"<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spar%C5%9Ba>" \o "Sparśa" [Sparśa](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedana>" \o "Vedana" [Vedanā](#) arises

With Feeling as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanha>" \o "Tanha" [Craving](#) arisesWith HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vedana>" \o "Vedana" [Vedanā](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanha>" \o "Tanha" [Trṣṇā](#) arises

With Craving as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upadana>" \o "Upadana" [Clinging](#) arisesWith HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tanha>" \o "Tanha" [Trṣṇā](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upadana>" \o "Upadana" [Upādāna](#) arises

With Clinging as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhava>" \o "Bhava" [Becoming](#) arisesWith HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upadana>" \o "Upadana" [Upādāna](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhava>" \o "Bhava" [Bhava](#) arises

With Becoming as a condition, HYPERLINK

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jati\\_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jati_(Buddhism))" \o "Jati (Buddhism)" [Birth](#) arisesWith HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhava>" \o "Bhava" [Bhava](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jati\\_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jati_(Buddhism))" \o "Jati (Buddhism)" [Jāti](#) arises

With Birth as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaramarana>" \o "Jaramarana" [Aging and Dying](#) ariseWith HYPERLINK

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jati\\_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jati_(Buddhism))" \o "Jati (Buddhism)" [Jāti](#) as condition, HYPERLINK "<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jaramarana>" \o "Jaramarana" [Jarāmarāṇa](#) arises

The thrust of the formula is such that when certain conditions are present, they give rise to subsequent conditions, which in turn give rise to other conditions and the cyclical nature of life in Samsara can be seen. This is graphically illustrated in the HYPERLINK

"<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhavacakra>" \o "Bhavacakra" [Bhavacakra](#) (wheel of life). There appears to be widespread misunderstanding of the formula in relation to time scales. Many references made to pratītyasamutpāda are expressed over lifetimes. While this is true in the wider sense, more practically, this is to be seen as a daily cycle occurring from moment to moment throughout each day.

It is necessary to refer to the above in order to fully understand and make use of the concept of pratītyasamutpāda.

For example, in the case of avidyā, the first condition, it is necessary to refer to the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_marks\\_of\\_existence"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_marks_of_existence) \o "Three marks of existence" [three marks of existence](#) for a full understanding of its relation to pratītyasamutpāda. It is also necessary to understand the [HYPERLINK](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_fires_(Buddhism))

"[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three\\_fires\\_\(Buddhism\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_fires_(Buddhism))" \o "Three fires (Buddhism)" [Three Fires](#) and how they fit into the scheme. The Three Fires sit at the very center of the schemata in the [HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhavacakra"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bhavacakra) \o "Bhavacakra" [Bhavacakra](#), and drive the whole edifice.

[HYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana"](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nirvana) \o "Nirvana" [Nirvana](#) is often conceived of as stopping this cycle. By removing the causes for craving, craving ceases. So, with the ceasing of birth, death ceases. With the ceasing of becoming, birth ceases, and so on, until with the ceasing of ignorance no karma is produced, and the whole process of death and rebirth ceases.

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This is one of the fundamental doctrines (main principle teachings) of the Buddha. The *Pāli* term for the Dependent Origination is *Patīccasamuppāda*. *Patīcca* means dependent upon, and *samuppāda*, means arising or origination. *Pāli* is the language of the Buddha, and there are several English equivalents to convey the meaning of the *Pāli* term, *Patīccasamuppāda*. Some of them are the 'Dependent Origination', 'Dependent arising', 'Causal dependencies', 'Causality', 'Causal genesis', 'Conditioned genesis' and the 'Law of cause and effect'.

### **Cause and Effect**

As we are well aware, all animate and inanimate things have the nature of transience. Whatever has the nature of transience has the nature of suffering or dissatisfactoriness. According to the teaching of the Buddha this suffering does not arise automatically, involuntarily, without any reason. The Buddha very clearly says that there are causes and effects. But in Buddhism there is no First Cause. The Buddha emphatically stated that the first beginning of existence is something inconceivable and such a notion, mere speculation; a pernicious view of a beginning of a being may lead to mental derangement and degradation. Without believing or accepting mere speculative views, we Buddhists always see the relationship between the cause and effect. But one has to understand very clearly that we Buddhists do not talk only of one particular cause, but a cluster of causes and a cluster of effects

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## 2.

### Honen's Religious and Social Significance in Pure Land Tradition.

Pure Land Buddhism has become more widely recognized as a significant stream of Buddhist teaching, one which may hold the destiny of Buddhism in the modern world. It is designed for the ordinary person, providing spiritual support for all dimensions of life. It coincides with the trend in contemporary religion to reject elites and offer equal access to spiritual reality whether laity, clergy, male or female etc.

A central figure in the history of Pure Land Buddhism in Japan was Honen (Genku 1133-1212), the founder of the Jodo-shu denomination, which is commemorating the 800th anniversary of his death. Honen pioneered the opening of the independent path of recitation of Amitabha Buddha's name, jap. Amida Buddha (Nembutsu) at the beginning of the epochal Kamakura period in Japanese political history (1185-1332). His pivotal work, "The Treatise on the Nembutsu of the Select Primal Vow", justified the primacy of the Nembutsu among all Buddhist practices, and was the founding manifesto of the Jodo-shu denomination.

The life of Honen offers an illustration of the conditions of the age to which his Pure Land teaching spoke eloquently. His father was a constable in charge of keeping the peace in the province of Mimasaka in Okayama province. He was assassinated, because of a local dispute. As he lay dying, he requested his son not to seek revenge. Hate achieves nothing. Honen then entered the Tendai monastery on Mount Hiei where he studied under various teachers.

While reading Buddhist scriptures, he encountered a passage in a text of Shan-*tao*, a major Chinese Pure Land teacher. Honen understood him to advocate the single-minded recitation of the name of Amida as a means for birth in the Pure Land and Enlightenment. Eventually Honen left Mount Hiei and established a center at Yoshimizu in Kyoto, now the area of Maruyama Park and the Jodo-shu Chion'in temple.

Many students came to study with him. Perhaps most famous is Shinran. Honen is particularly noted for establishing the popular, independent movement of Pure Land teaching. He emphasized the practice of reciting the Name as the only way to salvation

for all people, clergy and lay, in this age of spiritual decadence (mappo). He attracted hosts of people to his cause who experienced inner turmoil in response to the political and social upheavals of the time. As a consequence, his teaching spread widely among all classes in Japanese society.

To put Honen's work in perspective we must note that the practice of reciting Amida's name was current in Japan before Honen. However, the standard of spiritual practice was the monastic vocation. Nembutsu was a secondary or sub-teaching of all the major traditions. It was considered an inferior teaching, designed for people who are incapable of the more rigorous monastic practices.

On one hand, the popular impact of Honen's teaching and the claim to be the only way in faith infuriated Nichiren (1222-1289) who complained of its spread throughout society. He declared that the practice of Nembutsu would condemn a person to uninterrupted hell.

Another critic was Myoe (1173-1232, Koben), who worked to revitalize Buddhism in that period. He denounced Honen's teaching as a betrayal of Buddhism. For him the exclusive practice of Nembutsu taught by Honen was an erroneous interpretation, because it replaced the central Buddhist principle and discipline accompanying the aspiration to become Buddha (bodhi-mind) with the practice of recitation and birth into the Pure Land.

On the other hand, Honen's teaching also culminated in the formation of the Jodo-Shin sect initiated by Shinran (1173-1263) and his 8th successor Rennyo (1415-1499) who revitalized the sect. They carried forward basic themes of Honen's teaching, giving theoretical and experiential foundations to the teaching which made that tradition religiously and socially powerful in later medieval Japan.

Shinran Shonin's thought and Rennyo's preaching and letters inspired the peasants and farmers of the Muromachi period to free themselves, through peasant revolts, from the domination of the warlords and masters of the great estates. The peasants were inspired by their active faith in the Nembutsu. They also rejected the magical folk religion that added spiritual oppression to the political.

The elevation of Amitabha (Amida) Buddha, as the supreme Buddha and only true and real spiritual reality, undermined the religious establishment of that age, rejecting the religious sanction of political institutions. In some instances local people refused to pay the exactions of the warlords who saw themselves as the representatives of the gods to protect their lands. In that age Nature and society were considered sacred.

With trust in Amida's Vow, indicated in the recitation of His Name, traditional religious institutions lost their relevance for hosts of ordinary people. There was no need to sponsor costly services or make pilgrimages. Recitation of the Name assured one of birth in Amida's Pure Land. It could be done in the home or in the fields. The Nembutsu was not secondary, but the primary means to salvation in Honen's teaching and his successors. All Amida required was simple recitation of his Name in faith. He was followed later by Shinran who declared that no social, religious, intellectual, gender or moral discriminations are relevant to the reception of true entrusting or faith through the activity of Amida's compassion.

We can summarize Honen's contributions to the development of Pure Land teaching in the following points:

1. Honen made clear the place of Pure Land teaching among the various Mahayana sects in Japan by showing the lineage and principles that are the basis of the teaching. This process is called "a critical classification of doctrine." The formation of such a classification of teaching was essential to establish an independent sect within the diversity of Mahayana Buddhism.

Numerous terms were used by Pure Land teachers to distinguish the teaching from others. These include "the path of easy practice", "difficult practice", "self-power and Other-Power", "the Pure Gate" (teaching), and "the Saintly Path teaching", and the distinction of "sole devotion to Amida" versus "the supportive mixed or miscellaneous practices". Through these distinctions, the recitation of the Name of Amida Buddha was claimed to be the basis for Pure Land faith and practice as the only vehicle for salvation in the last age (mappo) for all people, whether common people or elite monks. It was within the capacity of any person, while all other practices required some special ability, physical or mental or even financial.

Standing on the shoulders of the cumulative, pervasive, but until then, unorganized, tradition of Pure Land teaching, Honen gave it definition as a distinctive sect among the traditionally accepted Buddhist institutions of Japan. His disciples carried on their teacher's perspective, each developing his own style of teaching and practice.

2. A second significant aspect related to the issue of critical classification of doctrine is the concept of choice (senchaku). This concept describes the process of selection and rejection that Honen observed in the Sutra story of Bodhisattva Dharmakara. The Bodhisattva surveyed all Buddha Lands in order to construct his own ideal world where all beings could achieve enlightenment. Honen's interpretation of Dharmakara implies that one's personal choice of a religious path is an essential element in spiritual life. Religious faith always involves choosing. It is the choice of the most universal, and

deepest understanding of, or approach to, reality. It also expresses the exclusivism or centrality of commitment that lays the basis for a strong religious personality. This can be seen in Honen himself, as well as his disciples, some of whom were executed, while others suffered exile and persecution.

Pure Land teaching is often associated with weak personality because of the stress on Other-Power, when it is understood as an exterior power. However, confidence in Other-Power can be the basis for firm dedication and devotion, when one is aware that Amida Buddha is the reality that enfolds all our lives.

3. The social implication of Honen's thought is eloquently expressed in the passage that describes the real intent of Amida Buddha's Vows. Honen has stated it clearly in his own words in the Treatise on the Nembutsu of the Select Primal Vow to which we can add little:

"In the next place, if we look at it from the standpoint of difficulty and ease, the Nembutsu is easily practiced, while it is very hard to practice all the other disciplines. For the above reasons thus briefly stated, we may say that the Nembutsu being so easily practiced, is of universal application... If the Original Vow required the making of images and the building of pagodas, then the poor and destitute could have no hope of attaining it. But the fact is that the wealthy and noble are few in number, whereas the number of the poor and ignoble is extremely large. If the Original Vow required wisdom and great talents, there would be no hope of that birth for the foolish and ignorant at all; but the wise are few in number, while the foolish are very many... We conclude, therefore, that Amida Nyorai, when He was a priest by the name of Hozo (Dharmakara) ages ago, in His compassion for all sentient beings alike, and in His effort for the salvation of all, did not vow to require the making of images or the building of pagodas conditions for birth into the Pure Land, but only the one act of calling upon His sacred name.

Here Honen offers a social critique of the elites of his time and makes it abundantly clear there is no discrimination in Amida's Vow based on the accidents of

birth, abilities or social standing. This aspect of his teaching most threatened the established Buddhist Orders, leading to the prohibition of his movement and exile. He was accused of starting a new sect without government permission, subverting society by rejecting the gods, and abandoning all good deeds and practices other than Nembutsu

4. Another implication of his teaching is emancipation of Pure Land followers from the garden of magic. Honen makes no mention of worldly benefits in his writing nor of the role of the gods in support of his teaching. The outcome of this teaching emancipated the people on the land from spiritual oppression, based on the fear of batchi or divine retribution. If they did not heed the demands of their overlords, the shrines and temples which owned the land, they would receive divine punishment at the hand of the warlords. Freedom from such fears gave rise to the peasant revolts noted above. The opponents of Pure Land recognized the transformative power of the teaching.

In our present day, it is important to rekindle the spirit that motivated Honen and his critical insight and attitude to society, if the ordinary person is to find meaning and hope in the desolate wasteland of modern secular **society. It is not only Honen's** message of hope in the afterlife that modern people need, but a direction for their everyday lives, embraced in the awareness of Amida Buddha's compassionate Vow, made concrete in the Nembutsu whose

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recitation focuses our minds and hearts on the very foundation of our lives.

## 1. Understanding Buddhist Diversity



Have you ever wondered: Why are there so many Buddhist denominations or sects? In ancient times in China this question arose in response to the diverse and contradictory Buddhist teachings that flowed into China from India and Central Asia. If the Buddha (6th century BCE) had one enlightenment, why did his reported teachings and practice differ? What was the truth of Buddhism?

Theravada Buddhism, the Way of the Elders, became the major religious tradition in South and Southeast Asia. The Elders refers to the teachers who received the teachings directly from the Buddha, transmitting them to later disciples. In the period prior to the famous Buddhist King Asoka (3rd.c. BCE.) there were as many as eighteen to twenty groups located in various regions of India, from which the Theravada stream is a major survivor. Another important group was the Mahasanghikas or Great Sangha (Congregation). They are considered the basis for the later development of the Mahayana tradition which is now largely in North and East Asia, and Tibet. The first stage in the development of the distinctions used to categorize and interpret differences among Buddhists were the terms Hinayana and Mahayana. Hinayana was used by Mahayanists to criticize and denigrate earlier expressions of Buddhism. It means small, narrow vehicle, referring to the fact that they practiced for their own, personal enlightenment, following the Buddha's example of pursuing enlightenment and freedom from the stream of births and deaths. Mahayana meant the large, spacious vehicle designed to carry all beings to enlightenment. It had a more inclusive perspective whereby the Bodhisattva, Buddha-to-be, works to save all beings deferring his own enlightenment. The contrast is between the Arhat, the worthy one who has done all to save himself, and the Bodhisattva, one destined for Buddhahood who pledges to saves all others, including himself.

In later times, in the countries where Theravada Buddhism is dominant, the style and meaning of Buddhism has changed little over the centuries. In each region there are differences resulting from history and culture, but the practice and doctrine are the same. With Mahayana Buddhism, differences in style and teachings developed into a great diversity. As Buddhism adapted to various cultures and changing environments from about the second century, BCE new insights and interpretations emerged, influenced by a resurgent Hinduism and Indian philosophy.

Early on it was said that Buddha taught 84,000 teachings, reflecting the emerging wide diversity. The numerous teachings were gradually transmitted and translated into Chinese in various Sutras, purported to be the words of Buddha. Presently the complete, modern collection of texts comprises eighty-five volumes with 5320 writings of various types, sutras, commentaries and indexes from China and Japan. It is a massive body of literature.

Chinese Buddhists attempted to unify the Buddhist teachings found in the Sutras which, as far as they knew at the time, were the true words of the Buddha and compiled by his disciples. Therefore, they all must have a place and meaning within the totality of

his teaching. Their understanding was also supported by the Mahayana educational concept of Upaya or tactful device.

Mahayanists maintained that Buddha's teaching ranged from elementary to complex, and taught according to the level of understanding of the listener. Scholars tried to sort out the superficial or elementary teaching from the more essential and profound. In a sense, they engaged in a search for truth in Buddhist teaching. It was an intellectual as well as spiritual effort. The volume by the late Bruno Petzold: *The Classification of Buddhism* presents the most detailed survey of the modes of classifying and organizing Buddhist teaching in China and Japan (published in 1995 by Otto Harrassowitz Verlag [Publisher].)

Making category distinctions arose very early as we see with the terms Hinayana and Mahayana. The initial interest was in clarifying the path to enlightenment, and employing the principal of Upaya in order to clarify the progress towards enlightenment, correlated to the disciple's level of spiritual development. Consequently, say, Bodhisattvas and spiritually developed monks were close to realizing the highest truth through rigorous discipline and visualization practice or meditation, while ordinary lay people were encouraged in their devotion through Upaya, tactful devices which gave hope and drew people to strive for higher levels in future lives.

While the distinction of transcendental truth and conventional truth indicated two aspects of reality, eventually the distinctions were elaborated into True, Provisional, False and Sudden and Gradual. Also the purpose of the classification changed from charting the path to enlightenment to proving the superiority of one's sect. The True corresponds to the absolute dimension, while also indicating the highest truth of the particular sect and the Buddhist texts representing it. The Provisional dimension is the conventional and temporary stage within Buddhism on the way to truth. This term refers to all other Buddhist teachings and texts, placing them on an inferior level. The false refers to teachings apart or outside Buddhism.

In addition the terms complete, sudden and gradual became important in describing the nature or virtue of the highest teaching and subsidiary teachings. The realm of the absolute was experienced suddenly and totally. Wisdom cannot be divided. Hence gradual teaching, where one proceeds to enlightenment incrementally and by stages, marks a lower, inferior path to enlightenment. Each sect of Mahayana Buddhism had to justify itself by constructing a system of classification of doctrines. Thereby, they established their position in Buddhism, and unified it by accounting for the different modes of teaching which the Buddha taught during his life.

In time the issue of the correct path to enlightenment transformed to the question which school or sect represented the highest truth and was most appropriate for the people. The terms and principles used in sectarian rivalry became more intensified in Japan due to cultural, social and political conditions.

Among the major forms of critical classification of teaching, the Kegon (Avatamsaka)

school, the Tendai sect, and Honen's (1133-1212) Pure Land sect, as well as a version set forth by Shinran (1173-1263) are most exemplary. The Kegon taught there were five divisions in Buddhism. Their interpretation begins with the fact that the Avatamsaka Sutra (Kegon) was first proclaimed by the Buddha, but it was so profound, no one understood it. Consequently, Buddha arranged his teachings to accommodate their understanding. Initially, there was Hinayana teaching aimed at dispelling the misunderstanding on the nature of the self. Early Buddhism taught there was no permanent, underlying self or the doctrine of non-soul with Nirvana being total extinction. The second, early Mahayana, taught relative emptiness of the self/phenomena and the elements making up the world. This level distinguishes emptiness and things as though one might strip away the phenomena and leave emptiness. The third level is True Mahayana which represents the identity of phenomena-things and the principle of emptiness. Things as they are, are empty, having no self-existence. The fourth level is Sudden teaching which is experience of truth directly, beyond language. The fifth level is the Complete teaching or the total mutual interrelationship of all phenomena where every individual rock or grass contains and represents the whole. It gave rise to the phrase: The one is All and the All is One. It is a vast vision of the ultimate spirituality of the cosmos and self, expressing One Reality. When contemporary Buddhists talk of Oneness, this is the underlying ideal. The Tendai tradition initiated by Chih-I (538-597) in China classified teachings in a system of five periods and eight teachings. Though this teaching was known in the Nara period (710-794), it was later also transmitted to Japan by Saicho (767-822) and established on Mount Hiei where it became a powerful and influential institution in medieval Japan.

According to Tendai, Gautama Buddha's life is divided into five periods. Like the Kegon school, Tendai also taught that the Avatamsaka Sutra was given first, but the disciples were uncomprehending. Hence, the Buddha taught the Hinayana teaching. As students progressed, in understanding, he then gave early Mahayana teaching and later the teaching of emptiness in the Perfection of Wisdom Suttas. In the fifth and final stage, Buddha taught the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra. The various Suttas and teachings in Mahayana Buddhism are ranked by putting them in chronological order, leading to the superiority of the Lotus Sutra. In addition, teachings were arranged by method and nature of teaching with the Sudden and Complete teachings as superior. With the development of the popular Pure Land teaching, a variety of distinctions emerged which justified the method of salvation through recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, or Nembutsu, which meant originally thinking on the Buddha. Initially the teacher Nagarjuna described the easy and difficult paths in Buddhism. With T'an-luan in China there appeared the concept of self- and Other-power. Tao-ch'ao made the fundamental distinction Pure Land gate and Saintly or Holy path. Shan-tao proposed True practice (practices focused on Amida Buddha) and Diverse practices. Amida Buddha was the chief object of practice, excluding other Buddhas. He also

distinguished the Correct practice from Subsidiary or Supporting practices. Recitation of Nembutsu (Amida Buddha's Name) was elevated over other practices such as worship, offerings, chanting scriptures.

The Pure Land gate was justified by the theory of history called Mappo (Age of Disappearance of the Teaching). According to this theory, the first 500 years after the Buddha was the period of True Teaching where devotees followed the teaching, practiced and attained realization. The second period of 500-1000 years is Semblance Teaching where there was teaching and practice, but no realization. In the final period, purportedly beginning in 1052 in Japan and lasting ten thousand years, there is only teaching and no practice or realization. This is the age of Honen, Shinran and Ippen who established major Pure Land movements.

Honen established his justification for an independent sect of Pure Land by connecting the terms from the tradition and focusing on the three Pure Land Sutras as central. In this way he showed that in the last age, only the Pure Land path assured enlightenment. Finally Shinran followed Mahayana and Honen in employing terms True and Provisional, Sudden and Complete. However, he stressed absolute Other-Power, creating his own distinctive classification of teachings, known as Two Pairs and Four Levels. The terms are Sudden, Crosswise (Other-Power), Vertical (self-power) and Gradual. Combined in pairs, they represent various styles of Buddhist teaching. The absolute Other-power teaching combines Sudden-Transcendence which is Shin Buddhism; Sudden-Gradual is The Pure Land Sects; Vertical-Transcendence is Zen, Shingon and Tendai, all self-power in Shinran's view; and Vertical-Gradual represents the Theravada path.

These examples of efforts to organize and evaluate the diverse body of Buddhist teachings testify to the intellectual, as well as spiritual, abilities of the ancient teachers. Their keenness of mind should inspire modern followers to clarify their faith, not only in a diverse Buddhist world, but our complex interfaith world.

4.

Brochure Description:

The lecture will offer a perspective on Buddhism in society, surveying the history of

Buddhist Activism anecdotally, as the Buddhist Order lived under various forms of despotism in Asian history and authoritarian governments in more recent times. We will suggest that though lacking the modern concept of society or social theories, Buddhist monks individually performed acts of social service, expressing Buddhist compassion. In more recent times in America conditions have limited Buddhist action in society. Nevertheless institutional and individual efforts have been made to confront contemporary issues. The aim of the presentation is to offer an alternative view to current perceptions of Buddhism and society.

## **Understanding Buddhist Activism**

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Confronting the many issues of the New Year 2011, it is most important that Buddhists reassess their role in the community and society. We are moved by the fact that recent discussions of Buddhist activism have highlighted the fact that Buddhists, in Hawaii and abroad, have been generally passive in response to many social issues in the community. It is true that traditional Buddhist communities as a whole have not spoken out against war, whether earlier in Vietnam or presently in Iraq and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, in 2007 youths of the Honpa Hongwanji's Young Buddhist Association successfully advocated for an annual Peace Day observance in Hawaii at the legislature. Also the Honpa Hongwanji Mission legislative body has announced publicly its support for HB 444 on Civil Unions in the Hawaii legislature. In this talk we will survey historically Buddhist social activism. Unfortunately this survey is sketchy and limited, only scratching the surface of activities carried on by Buddhists around the world. However, I hope that it will, in some degree, counter and correct the view that Buddhists are not socially aware by the nature of the teaching.

We should note some distinctions. There are levels or dimensions of social activism. On the personal level, there is Philanthropy. There is the dimension of Social Service which, in modern times, has been done by groups meeting a need in society. Then there is Social Welfare which also in modern times has been carried out by government, often with advocacy and support of religious and social groups. Then there is social activism as a political force striving for the improvement of society as a whole in the interests of freedom, equality and justice.

It is the perspective of this presentation that Buddhists have largely engaged

society through history in Philanthropy and Social Service where possible. These activities occurred largely in the context of despotism, filling in where political leaders neglected. They have not historically been as strong in political activism because conditions did not permit it. With democratic societies, it is now possible for Buddhists and Buddhist communities to engage in advocacy and work for the reform of society generally.

In early Buddhist tradition such texts as the Dhammapada, Footsteps of the Teaching (Dhamma, Dharma), we can observe a general ethical perspective. An ancient Buddhist belief held that Maitreya Bodhisattva would descend from Tusita heaven as the next Buddha to right the wrongs in the world. This belief later inspired revolutionary secret societies in South Asia.

The Three Stage teaching of Hsin-hsing (540-594) in China challenged traditional Buddhism as corrupt. They believed that all people possess the Buddha nature and all attain Buddhahood equally. They revered with gassho (palms together) everyone they met. The sect also established the Inexhaustible Treasury, emphasizing Dana (selfless giving) for the poor and sick. It was later suppressed by the government.

*...According to the Nirvana Sutra, the entire set of good deeds provides the causes for rebirth in the pure land...The second cause is the cultivation of generosity, which calls for one to widen roads, dig wells, plant orchards, provide medical care and medicine for the sick, build monks' quarters, make offerings to those who observe the precepts and preach the Dharma, cast images, build stupas or make various kinds of offerings. Such people [who cultivate this generosity] will gain rebirth....*

*(Kenneth K. Tanaka. The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine. p. 176.)*

In ancient Japan there are notable examples of monks engaged in social uplift, following the Nirvana Sutra, which the government did not do. Dosho (629-700) is famous for building bridges, digging wells, setting up ferries and opening almshouses for the poor. He is said to have introduced cremation to Japan. Gyogi (670-749) was so beloved by the people that he was given the honorific title: Bosatsu (Bodhisattva, Buddha-to-be). He also built bridges and dikes, irrigation canals, ferries and harbors, planting fruit trees, and setting up hostels for travelers. Saicho (767-822), the founder of the Japanese Tendai sect exhorted followers to live so that they would be National Treasures, serving society. Kukai (774-835), who introduced the Shingon sect, built dams, and started a school where people from all classes were accepted. Kuya, the monk of the market place, sang and danced the nembutsu recitation of Amida Buddha's name while also engaging in social service projects.

Later in the Kamakura era (1185-1332) the Zen monk Eisai (1141-1215) gave copper metal donated for an image to use to feed the poor, disregarding criticism of his disciples. The Pure Land teacher Shinran (1173-1263) criticized the Japanese government for persecuting Pure Land teaching. He also noted the prevalent inequality

of justice in society, quoting a poem of Prince Shotoku. The Prince declared that when a rich man goes to court, it is like throwing a stone into water, easy, while, when a poor man seeks justice, it is like throwing water into a stone, impossible. The Shin sect teaching inspired numerous peasant revolts in the later Muromachi period (1392-1573) called Ikko Ikki. Ikko means “single minded” “one direction” “one way” and refers to Shin Buddhism. “Revolts of the One Way people.” Nichiren (1222-1282) inveighed against what he saw as false Buddhist teachings which threatened the existence of Japan. He was deeply concerned for the nation.

In modern Japan after the restoration of Meiji Emperor in 1868, there were several Buddhist efforts to reform society. The Shin Bukkyo Doshikai (New Fellowship of Buddhists) rejected superstition and was anti-clerical. It opposed government interference in religion and promoted learning and morality.

Movements with Shinshu Buddhist background are Muga no Ai or selfless love. Others were Shinbukkyo Undo (Neo-Buddhist Movement) and reformist Seishinshugi (spirituality) of Kiyozawa Manshi and the Hanseikai (Self-Reflection) in Nishi Hongwanji. Muga no Ai was initiated by Ito Shoshin (1876-1963). He experienced selfless love and began to publish a magazine Selfless Love in 1905, teaching that selfless love is not something we believe in because we are Buddhist, Christian or Confucian. Rather, it is because it is the absolute truth. It is the true nature of the universe which acts with selfless love.

The Neo-Buddhist movement held five major points:

- (1) The basic principle was to have sound Buddhist faith.
- (2) (Buddhists) must work to propagate sound belief and for the reform of society.
- (3) They advocated free investigation of Buddhism and other religions.
- (4) They did not regard the preservation of the old religious system and its rituals as necessary.
- (5) They completely rejected political protection and interference in religion.

They also collected money to help people injured in mines and were pro-labor. They criticized police persecution and violation of human rights. They took stands on public issues and advocated the abolition of prostitution, as well as opposing drinking and smoking.

Notable individuals were Takagi Kemmyo 1864-1914), a Higashi Hongwanji minister, who died in prison, accused of taking part in a plot against the government and of being a socialist. Kujo Takeko (1887-1928), daughter of Abbott Myonyo of the Hongwanji, damaged her own health working on behalf of the injured in the Tokyo earthquake of 1923. She also established the Asoka hospital in Tokyo.

With the spread of communism after World War I, the Japanese Government became more restrictive. The Kempeitai secret police became famous. Any form of

opposition to government policy or activism became dangerous for one's health. There was no true freedom of religion till after 1945 and the defeat of Japanese fascism in World War II.

Since the end of World War II, there have been many Buddhist peace movements in opposition to war and nuclear armaments. They also promote clean environment, while some work to overcome discrimination against burakumin or outcaste people. In addition, there have been efforts for reform in Buddhism itself in various sects. Some researchers focused on the collaboration of Buddhist sects and the militaristic government and others have been critical of certain teachings such as Primordial Enlightenment which encouraged complacency, and easy acceptance of things as they are dictated by government.

In the Hongwanji there have been several notable developments. On the background of Japanese experience in the war and social problems, we can observe strenuous Hongwanji opposition to Japanese rearmament and nuclear weapons. Among scholars there has been study of what is called Senji Kyogaku or Wartime Doctrine with which sweet teachers collaborated with the Government in supporting the war. It led to Hongwanji apologizing for its collusion with the government. They have opposed the revision of the anti-war clause in the constitution.

An aspect of the collusion of the sect and the government was the interpretation of the meaning of selflessness. We hear much to day that selflessness is a key insight of Buddhism. However, it can have various meanings. In the wartime selflessness was interpreted to mean sacrificing and dying for the Emperor. There is a well-known, traditional phrase *Messhi hoko*, Abolish the self and serve the Public.

Hongwanji has also opposed strongly the re-establishment of government support for Yasukuni shrine, the symbol of militarism and Shinto in Yasukuni as the place of repose for all deceased soldiers in the war. The Abbot some years ago was also the titular head of an organization to remove discrimination of the outcaste Burakumin, termed *Dowa Mondai*. In recent years there has been broad concern for ecology and environment issues. Also there is a strong hospice movement or *Vihara* movement activity. In various interviews and roundtable discussions, the Abbot is clear that Shin followers must be involved in society and that the principles of Buddhism have social implications. Hongwanji continues the struggle against discrimination.

Connected to the Higashi Hongwanji denomination, there has been the *Kaiho Shinshu Kyokai*. This movement is devoted to the liberation of the discriminated Burakumin. They have been vigilant in scrutinizing Buddhist teaching for any support for discrimination. They are very sensitive to the idea of karma. When karma is interpreted abstractly, it becomes fate and used to explain any limitation and condition. Being Burakumin is seen to be a result of past action in another life and confirms the discrimination. This discrimination began in Buddhism with impure tasks such as butchers, tanners, those who handled the dead etc. If you saw the Japanese film *Departures*, the plot revolved around the attitudes toward people who deal with the



dead. (I am not aware that Buddhist teaching supported similar discrimination in China as it has in Japan. There does not seem to be an outcaste group in China.)

We should note also that perhaps Nichiren was the clearest Buddhist activist. Leaving aside doctrinal and polemical considerations, Nichiren believed that the nation was in dire peril as a result of internal conflict and potential foreign invasion by Mongols, believed to have been predicted by the Buddha for those nations which did not follow true Buddhism. Nichiren confronted the government, chastising it for not following the teaching of the Lotus sutra alone. He was the most persecuted but most intrepid of Buddhist teachers because of his concern with the well-being of society.

In our modern situation, most peace movements in Japan have roots in the Nichiren tradition and most outstanding has been the Nipponzan Myohoji sect which is noted for its walking, and drum beating all over the world in behalf of peace.

Soka Gakkai also began with an effort to reform society. Its founder Makiguchi Saburo, a geography teacher, began a movement similar to the Moral Rearmament movement in the West. It was named the Scholarly Society for the Cultivation of Values. He linked up with Nichiren Shoshu as a religious basis. Makiguchi was imprisoned during the war because he opposed the war. He died in prison. Part of the success of his movement after the war and through reconstruction was based on the fact that it was the only group not to cooperate with the government as other sects had. In the movement as we know it later, the emphasis on receiving worldly benefits for reciting the title of the Lotus Sutra received more notoriety, as well as its rapid spread in Japan and in the US and other countries. In Japan it established a political party Clean Government Party-Komeito. Ecology and Peace are presently their main themes.

Outside of Japan we should take note of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's (1891-1956) work as a participant in developing India's Independence Constitution. He also converted thousands to Buddhism to liberate the Untouchables. We also recall the valiant Vietnamese monks who immolated themselves in opposition to the war.

Inspired by opposition to the Vietnam war, the Buddhist Peace Fellowship was initiated in Hawaii by the late Robert Aitken Roshi, a Zen teacher. It has now become a national effort influenced by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk-activist Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama who struggles for human rights in Tibet and the world. The Engaged Buddhism movement in the West has been also inspired by Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa of Thailand and Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne of Sri Lanka. Dr. Ariyaratne has developed a social service agency Sarvodaya which helps people through village organizations for relief and development, during times of disaster as well as in peaceful times through farming and education. The name means the awakening of all through shared labor.

We may also note the Buddhist background of Ms. Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma (Myanmar) who has been long persecuted by the government for her determined support of democracy. Dr. Ken Tanaka calls attention to a modern Pure Land movement in Taiwan with more active social engagement: "Building an Earthly Pure Land." (Pure Land Buddhism, p. 15.)

There is also the Tzu Chi Buddhist Compassionate Relief Society which holds medical clinics and performs social service throughout the world. Tzu Chi Foundation originated in Taiwan in 1966 by Master Cheng-yen. It engages in medical care, education and spreading Buddhism around the world. Beginning with 30 members, housewives who saved two cents from their grocery money each day to help the poor, the foundation now has volunteers in 47 countries and 372 offices worldwide.

While these examples of historical and contemporary Buddhist activism show that Buddhism has a record of social activism in support of human welfare and human rights and justice, the immigrant Buddhist communities in Hawaii and the mainland, particularly the Japanese, appear lagging in such efforts. However, this situation must also be understood historically.

Buddhism came to Hawaii initially as a spiritual support for Japanese laboring families on the sugar plantations. Directly imported from the homeland, Buddhism reflected the conditions prevailing in Japan, which had been shaped in the context of despotism over centuries. Throughout its history Japanese authorities restricted access to, and teaching of, the masses, particularly during the Tokugawa period (1800-1898) of self-imposed isolation. The main function of temples was the care of the ancestors and maintaining social order.

In addition, as the religion of a laboring class, segregated on the plantations, without citizenship or political or social recognition, the immigrant members turned inward to the temples where they received spiritual support and resources for personal validation. Temples were built and largely functioned as social and community organizations, maintaining language schools and cultural activities, as well as being ritual centers for the faith.

The second Bishop of the Hongwanji supported the sugar strikes in the 1920's, invoking considerable criticism from the dominant community. He wrote essays on the compatibility of Buddhism and democracy, while calling attention to American hypocrisy, while claiming to be a democracy, there were efforts to suppress and violate the rights of the Japanese. Attempts were made to close Japanese language schools, while Christian evangelism stressed that one could only be a good American, if one were Christian. World War II brought suspicion and denial of rights for Buddhist clergy and institutions. While the Japanese community in Hawaii avoided incarceration for the most part, unlike that on the mainland, Buddhists could hardly be "activistic" as we presently understand activism.

With restoration after 1945, temples and congregations regained self-confidence in their traditions and rebuilt their institutions, here and on the mainland. In my own experience coming to Hawaii in 1970, I perceived that people were still under pressure. It was easier to get jobs in society if one were Christian. Students of Buddhist background would not easily admit they were Buddhists. Gradually under the leadership of Bishop Kanmo Imamura, son of the second Bishop, the establishment of the Buddhist Study Center and Buddhist studies programs in the departments of philosophy and

religion at the University of Hawaii contributed to the growing recognition of Buddhism as a major and influential faith among the world's cultures. Of course there were significant developments on the mainland where departments of Religion sprang up to teach world religions and numerous Buddhist programs were initiated with interest in Zen and other forms of Buddhism. . Hence, throughout the country from the 60's on there was growing interest in Buddhism with an increase of scholarship, courses and publications and increase in small centers with a teacher and followers such as Diamond Sangha in Hawaii. There are now Mindfulness Meditation and Vipassana Meditation groups as well as representation of the Tibetan tradition.

As a result of the changing environment and positive recognition of the diversity of spiritual paths in American society, Buddhists have begun to develop their own voice and approaches to contemporary problems. It has moved from passivity fostered by cultural background and history and lack of self-confidence as a minority faith to a faith with a message which needs to be heard in our polarized society. In Hawaii, the Hawaii Association of International Buddhist was initiated as an educational group and has made public statements on same gender marriage and the war in Iraq.

The message of Buddhism calls us to recognize that our many problems are caused by the clash of egos, individual; and corporate, and we need self-reflection. Our problems are not all created by external conditions or by others. Arguments are two-sided and democratic life requires a blending of competing interests and desires.

Buddhism also stresses our mutual interdependence which can counter the divisive and ultimately self-defeating competition which now dominates our culture. Rampant individualism where there can be only winners, disregarding the losers, is destructive of the social fabric that we all need to live meaningfully..

Buddhism would counter the marriage of nationalism, Christianity and economic capitalism that dominates our society and undermines the social responsibility of business and industry in the interest of material gain. Buddhism, by encouraging self-reflection and self-criticism, would promote a sense of mutual responsibility and the recognition that we cannot exist and prosper unless we also enable others to exist and prosper. Buddhism would place social responsibility uppermost and make clear that true freedom is indivisible.

Buddhism can add its voice and strengthen the principles of freedom and justice that are the hallmarks of American history and society. It can also make us humble in recognizing how often we have failed to live up to the highest ideals of our democracy. The present circumstance, where there are many seekers, provides Buddhism with an opportunity unprecedented in its history to bring its spiritual and moral insight to bear in contemporary society.

5.

## Draft- Buddhism, A Paradigm for Society

In a recent op-ed essay the noted commentator David Brooks, after viewing various forms of evidence, concluded that:

In short, there's abundant evidence to suggest that we have shifted a bit from a culture that emphasized self-effacement to a culture that emphasizes self-expansion.

He questioned whether this change in self-understanding may be related to many of the problems, social and political, that we are having presently in our nation. Particularly he sees this in the loss of awareness "of the virtues associated with citizenship." As he describes citizenship, he is really talking about our interdependence, a central principle for self-understanding in Buddhist teaching. As he explains, citizenship means we are involved in a "common enterprise" which gives meaning to our lives because of the "service we supply to the nation." Noting that there has been a shift in the culture with its attendant problems, Brooks suggests that there needs to be "a more comprehensive shift in values" in order to rebalance the "expansion of self" (read egoism) that has undermined our social net. (Star-Advertiser, (3-14-11), pp. A-8-9.)

The character of American politics and the malaise of American society indicates the necessity for a new paradigm or way of thinking by which to evaluate contemporary life. We have all advocated and promoted the so-called American Dream, which, as a dream or personal goal, has motivated the upward striving of American youth and immigrants for decades, while stirring the admiration of people around the world, encouraging them to stream to America.

However, in this process we have ignored the oppression of many segments of our society which enabled that dream. Our history of unjust treatment of native peoples, slavery, later racism and the terrorism of Jim Crow, the exploitation and discrimination of the Chinese and Japanese, the incarceration of the whole mainland Japanese community in wartime, as well as the opposition to other European immigrant groups who came to share the dream. The dream was also a nightmare for many. We often forget that the American dream is more than an economic success; it is a dream where each person has the right to fulfill their deepest potential, through realizing of all their human rights.

The effort to limit the American dream to a particular segment of society lead to the Civil War whose aftermath we are still experiencing in politics and society. The struggle for women's rights indicates another effort to limit the dream. Issues such as women's suffrage, i. e.. the right to vote, women's equality, equal pay for equal work, or the

freedom to make decisions concerning their own bodies, continue on as there are those who continually try 'to limit the dream.' The forces resisting women's rights or gay rights are strong, undermining the universality of the American dream in our own society.

American society has become so uncritically identified with laissez faire capitalism, unbridled competition, and a more subtle racism that we have been willing to compromise our cherished ideals of freedom and equality that have made us the envy of the world in order to gain an uncertain and fragile security in a violent world. We fail to distinguish Nationalism, which is basically tribal, from Patriotism. Nationalism claims we are exceptional, God-ordained, above history, and overlooks the contradictions of our history. Patriotism, however, is aware of the contradictions we have nurtured in our history. It does not shrink from self-criticism in order to widen the dream and perfect it. Nationalists see no evil, while patriots try to improve and maintain our ideals.

Underlying these developments and conditions is a pervasive individualism whose roots trace back deep into our traditional culture and religion, the frontier mentality of being a man who is self-made man or self-sufficient and independent. Capitalism, our fundamental ideology of individual competition, has roots in Neo-Darwinism with emphasis on competition and survival of the fittest.

The pervasiveness of this perspective and its hold on the American mind has resulted in the wedding of nationalism, social and economic theory and expressions of religious faith. The result of this combination has brought us to a social and cultural dead-end. We cannot solve our problems because any deep critique of any of these facets brings charges of lack of patriotism, socialism, or atheism and materialism. The term secular humanism is used widely to stigmatize any alternative mode of thought.

We are in great need of a new paradigm, new perspective, by which to view and understand our current problems. Buddhism offers us an important alternative. However, traditional Buddhism is often presented as a ritualistic or otherworldly faith, rooted in Asian cultures and largely irrelevant to western societies. An exception to this rule is the effort of the Dalai Lama to present Buddhism as a universal faith, harmonious with science and relevant to personal as well as social problems. It is important in this connection to see Buddhism as a way of thinking and understanding life and culture, as well as a religious faith for negotiating the uncertainties of life.

It is also important to recognize that Buddhism from its start was directed at the individual. It appeared at a time when the ancient Indian communalism was shifting and numerous teachers appeared, much on the order of Socrates in Greece, offering various philosophies to understand reality and the self. These teachers appear in the famous Upanishad texts. Teachers went out from the villages to teach disciples a spiritual path while gathered under the shade of trees.

Gautama (6th C. BCE) himself followed this pattern. He first studied with several teachers. Rejecting their paths, he set out to discover his own way independently. His teaching, following his enlightenment, was not in its origin a religion as we understand

religion today. Rather, it was a philosophy that cultivated a way of life and personal transformation which resulted in spiritual freedom.

Buddhism clearly appealed to the individual and described the monk as a “rhinoceros” alone in the field. The path to enlightenment had to be won by the individual. The discipline was the training of one’s own mind. Buddhism was criticized in India because it rejected responsibility to one’s family which was central to Indian society. However, despite the individual orientation of Buddha’s teaching it was not merely individualistic. He soon formed a community, a sangha, where all shared together and mutually supported each other.

It may be better in Buddhism to speak of the person rather than the individual. In our modern conception, the individual tends to stand alone, stressing independence. The person is the individual in the context of relationships, family or community. Hence, Buddhism set forth the principle of interdependence which became the core element of its philosophy. Nothing is totally independent or self-existing. Everything and all persons are configurations of many causes and conditions. While the individual has provisional existence and responsibility, it is not fully understood without taking into account the many relationships making up the person.

Viewed in this way, the person’s participation in a team is much more central and indicative, than focusing on individuality. The interconnection between the individual and the group gives the individual true strength. As in Aesop’s famous fable, one stick is easily broken, while bound together, they have strength. The individual gains his/her strength from participation and togetherness. Many athletes, winners in various fields, as well as leaders, note their indebtedness to others for achieving their success or fame, during occasions of recognition. While the individuals may hold such feelings, these statements, unfortunately, do not express the deepest sentiments of a society where winning is everything, and it is all about competition. Such remarks are more a formality rather than revealing a deep degree of humility which would be displayed in other areas of social life. If we were to take it more seriously as the central idea of the culture, we would more easily understand the need for more corporate and cooperative solutions to our problems and seek more equitable solutions for poverty, homelessness and various forms of discrimination.

Buddhism views reality and life as a great jeweled net in which each node in the net reflects all other nodes in the net. Ultimately we are all one. “The One is All and the All is One.” All exist in mutual interrelation within the totality of reality. This is not simply an abstraction or theoretical. Through self-reflection on the nature of our lives, we begin to see the concentric circle of relations in which we are nurtured in our families, educated by our societies, fed through the efforts of farmers, fishermen, and all sorts of tradesmen. Society cannot function without each person, in one way or another, providing some skill or effort. As we see in recent disasters, people must work together to overcome the tragedies.

An implication of the Buddhist perspective on the person is the fundamental

equality of each person. While Buddhism recognizes individual differences in capacities and roles that enable society to function, it also taught that all beings possess Buddha-nature, the potentiality to realize their true nature. We are all equal manifestations of the Buddha-mind. In Shin Buddhism, Shinran rejected the Teacher-Disciple relationship, asserting that we are all fellow travelers and companions on the Way. People might claim him as their teacher, but it is nothing that he claimed for himself. There is a spiritual basis for human dignity and rights.

Another aspect is the Buddhist perspective on education. In line with the essential equality of all beings, the Buddhist educational perspective focuses on enabling the student to realize his/her latent capacities and interests. In Mahayana Buddhism there is the principle of Upaya which means teaching people according to their abilities and taking into account their individual differences. It suggests a person-centered approach to education. Also the ideal of the Buddha-to-be, the Bodhisattva, expresses an ideal of service to others as the way to fulfill ourselves. It teaches that there is no given meaning to life except in bringing meaning into others' lives. The question we should be asking is not: what is the meaning of my life? But, rather: how am I meaningful to others? There is no meaning to my life that does not include others.

We might note in passing that Buddha de-sacralized the cosmos and rejected magic. He sought solutions based in the principle of cause and effect. He did not claim his path was the absolute truth, but it had to be tested in personal experience. Rather than judging things simply right or wrong by an abstract standard, we should observe whether our actions are fruitful or unfruitful for realizing our ideals.

We are not suggesting that adherence to Buddhism will magically solve all our problems. Nevertheless, in its history Buddhism has shown humaneness, less violence and compassionate efforts to improve life. In the context of our rampant individualistic and competitive life today, Buddhism can help us to better understand the corporate significance of life and our mutual responsibilities. It can provide a spiritual context for recommitting ourselves to the fundamental values that have undergirded the ideal of the American dream and give it a new reality in contemporary life.

## The Division between the Higashi (East) Hongwanji and the Nishi (West) Hongwanji

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Recently I have received several inquiries wanting to know the reason for the division between Higashi and Nishi Hongwanjis. Consequently, I thought that it would be useful to summarize the history behind that split. We should understand from the outset that it was not doctrinal but political. There is essentially no difference in teaching between Higashi Hongwanji (Ohtani-ha) and Nishi Hongwanji (also called Honpa Hongwani).

The name Ohtani derives from the area of Kyoto where the Hongwanji was first located. Honpa is short for Hongwanji branch (ha) which was the name for one of the ten branches of early Shin Buddhism. In both traditions, the Abbot's family name is Ohtani (Otani), originally taken from the area in Kyoto where Shinran resided and his shrine was later located. The caretakers, as descendants of Shinran, took that name. We cannot go into detail on these early divisions, except to say they derived mainly from major disciples of Shinran who separated from the third Abbot Kakunyo (1270-1351), because of disagreements on the leadership of the Shin movement. Hongwanji was led by the descendants of Shinran to the present day.

From among the group, the Takada branch and the Bukkoji branch (Temple of Buddha's Light) were early on the most active and flourishing sanghas. Takada-ha was originally in the Takada area, Tochigi prefecture in Kanto, where Shinran taught. After several fires, the temple was later moved to the Ise area in Mie prefecture. The Bukkoji was also originally located in Kanto-Eastern Japan but is now in Kyoto.

Later, through the dedicated efforts of Rennyo, the Eighth Abbot of the Hongwanji, many temples belonging to all the branches joined the Hongwanji, making it one of the largest and most powerful sects in Japan from the 15th century. Rennyo (1415-1499) transformed Hongwanji to a major religious and social power. Through his force of personality, eloquence and reaching out to people in evangelistic tours, he drew converts not only from branches of Shin Buddhism, but also from other sects of Buddhism. His clear and simple, as well as liberating interpretation of Shin Buddhism made it easy for people in all levels of society to grasp the teaching and follow it. As a result of the momentum Rennyo brought to Shin Buddhism, it became the largest and most powerful sect in Japan. Some scholars estimate that in its heyday Shin was about 30% of the population.

Traditional sects of Buddhism, such as the Tendai, particularly opposed Shin Buddhism and Rennyo was a hunted man. His teaching, as Honen's and Shinran's



before him, undermined the authority and importance of the traditional Buddhist establishment. Consequently, when he built a temple, such as at Yoshizaki, in Fukui-Echizen province, it was virtually a fortress. Ishiyama-dera in what is now Osaka castle was also fortified. Threatened by the Pure Land movement, persecutions flared up occasionally. Later Shin Buddhism was prohibited in Satsuma domain, giving rise to the Hidden Nembutsu movement (Kakure Nembutsu), up to the Meiji restoration in 1868..

According to Honen and his successors, salvation was assured through faith in Amida's Vow and reciting his Name. No other practices were required. There was also freedom from superstition and all forms of religious intimidation. Consequently, there were intermittent persecutions of Pure Land teaching until the time of Rennyo. Shin Buddhism attained recognition when the Ashikaga Shogun Yoshimasa's wife Hino Tomiko (1440-1496) visited the Hongwanji Yamashina temple near Kyoto. The temple also was designated a *Chokugansho*, a temple praying for the prosperity of the Imperial family. (Mark Blum. *Rennyo and the Roots of Modern Japanese Buddhism*. p. 33.)

Shin Buddhism was able to marshal great social strength because its root was in the hearts of people. The Shin Buddhist institution was not the owner of great landed estates from which they drew their resources. Rather, it depended on the donations and dedication of its members whose faith was rooted in the conviction that Amida embraced them, and nourished by participating in the fellowship, they gained peace of mind and strength for living.

The strength of the personal conviction of Shin members contrasted with the traditional association based on clan or family of establishment Buddhist orders such as the Tendai or Shingon. Ancestor reverence has been the binding force in traditional religion in Japan. The great monastic institutions such as Tendai on Mount Hiei gained their power from the donations of land by the warlords and receiving a share of the exactions of the produce of the land harvested by tenant farmers within their domain.

As a result of its root in people's hearts the Shin movement continued to grow from the time of Rennyo. The Omi merchants in Otsu, Shiga prefecture, by the Lake Biwa illustrate the type of supporters nurtured by Hongwanji teaching. Though Shin Buddhism appears to be an otherworldly sect, aimed mainly at birth in the Pure Land in the hereafter, it is really this-worldly, promoting the development of life in the here and now in the present world. Emancipated from magic and superstition, Shin merchants did not have to sponsor great services for ancestors or to avoid disaster. Rather, they could plow their resources into their businesses. They made considerable donations of funds and weapons to the Hongwanji during Nobunaga's siege of Ishiyama-dera.

During the period of Warring States (15th-17th c.) numerous warlords vied for power, aiming to unify Japan. Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) was one of the most powerful of these contenders. He had contact with Christians seeking entry for business and missions in Japan. Some believe that he was Christian himself. That is unclear. As a

result, he was the first warlord to acquire firearms to support his wars. Regarding the political power of Buddhism to be inimical to his goals, he first attacked Mount Hiei, the bastion of the Tendai sect. It is said that he burned 3,000 buildings, temples and residences. He also attacked the Hongwanji at Ishiyama because of its concentration of power and the strategic location of the temple.

The struggle for Ishiyama temple took 10 years. Strategically Ishiyama was in a strong position and could be better supplied by water than overland. Nobunaga did not possess ships. After the prolonged siege, finally the Emperor requested the Abbot Kenryo (1543-1592) to relinquish the temple to Oda. The Abbot concurred and departed from the temple. However, his eldest son Kyonyo (1558-1614) refused to surrender and fought until he had to leave. The Abbacy was transferred eventually to the second son Junryo (1577-1630), while Kyonyo was disowned and disinherited. Eventually the successor of Oda, Hideyoshi Toyotomi (1537-1598) settled the Hongwanji at the present site of the Nishi Hongwanji in Kyoto.

Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616) and his successors during the Tokugawa era (1600-1868) were important in setting the direction of Buddhism in Japanese society. All the previous Shoguns (Warlord Dictators) were interested in controlling Buddhism. Oda used intemperate violence. Hideyoshi was more suspicious of Christianity and sympathetic to Buddhism, donating his teahouse (Hiunkaku) to the Hongwanji where it remains today. The Tokugawa regime was more thorough and systematic in its control of Buddhism. Rather than opposing it, the Tokugawa used Buddhism to further their control of citizens and religion.

In the final battle of Sekigahara (1600), which established the supremacy of Tokugawa Ieyasu, Kyonyo who was his close friend visited him on the battlefield. This act of friendship during danger greatly impressed Ieyasu.

After the conclusion of the battle and establishment of the Tokugawa Shogunate, Ieyasu discussed the power of the Hongwanji with his advisors. They concluded that Ieyasu should divide the Hongwanji, thereby reducing its military and social power. Following this suggestion, Ieyasu set up the Higashi Hongwanji (Otani-ha) in Kyoto, near what is now Kyoto station, installing Kyonyo as the Abbot. Thereafter the Hongwanji temples decided which branch they would affiliate with. About evenly divided, the Higashi (East) temples were located more to the east, while the Nishi-Western branch was stronger in western Japan. They remain so today. The immigrants who later came to work in North America were largely from the western region and therefore, Nishi Hongwanji members. As a consequence, the largest sect in the West is Nishi Hongwanji.

As we have noted, the division of Hongwanji was the result of political interests and conditions in Japan. Following the division, the Tokugawa regime went on to extend its control over all Buddhism, by establishing the Head temple-Branch temple system and requiring that each family register in a temple and bury the ashes of the deceased members in the temple graveyard. This was called the parish system (*danka seido*).

The term *danka* is still used for members. Members had to report all births, deaths and pilgrimages to the priest, who represented the authorities and placing a barrier between the parishioner (*danka*) and the priest. The purpose of these requirements was to prevent the spread of Christianity and also Nichirenism.

The general significance of the division highlights the power of people. Shin Buddhism provided the impetus for peasant revolts against the warlords. As a result, Nobunaga decided he must control Mount Hiei and simply destroyed its center in one stroke. He struggled much longer against the Hongwanji.

The Hongwanji, though not being a lengthy tradition and well established with estates and wealth, was more formidable in being grounded in the convictions of ordinary people. While Nobunaga used violent means to curb the people, Tokugawa used more subtle and effective means to control all religious organizations. His method included all groups, but chiefly the Hongwanji which was becoming the largest religious body. Tokugawa was successful in his strategy so that the people's relation to a temple or a teaching became simply a formal, family relationship. This relationship has remained to this day, limiting the spiritual influence and meaning of Buddhism in modern society. The challenge today is to recapture the original spirit and convictions that provided the strength of Buddhism in earlier centuries.

At the beginning of the Meiji period in 1868, the Higashi Hongwanji, which had been allied with the deposed Tokugawa regime, lost influence. The Nishi Hongwanji, supporting the Choshu-Satsuma alliance to oust the Shogun, ascended in influence. Several of the envoys sent to the West to find suitable forms of political order, education, and military organization were members of Nishi Hongwanji. Nanjo Bunyu, a Buddhist scholar, assisted in the introduction of modern Buddhist studies in Japan.

Both traditions have independently developed significant educational and scholarly traditions which have explored the depth of the teaching. Despite differing styles and perspectives, scholars use studies across sectarian lines, and there have been teachers with wide influence in both sects. There is considerable cooperation between the branches of Shinshu in the United Shinshu Association. While the influence of the past remains, there are efforts in many areas to revitalize Shin Buddhism in modern society and regain the dynamic that made it the largest Buddhist tradition in Japan.

## The Beginnings of Hongwanji

By

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The beginnings of the institutionalization of the Hongwanji began with Shinran's daughter, Kakushin-ni. Altogether Shinran had six children by Eshin-ni, his wife. There are hints, legends and speculations about other wives. With Eshin-ni, known from her letters, there were three sons, Zenran, Shinrembo, and Masukata, and three daughters, Takano Zen-ni, Oguro nyobo, and Kakushin-ni, the youngest of the family. However, only one daughter, Kakushin-ni, was significant in the development of Shin Buddhism. Kakushin-ni and Masukata remained with Shinran, caring for him during his last years.

Kakushin-ni was born in 1224, in Hitachi (Ibaraki) province in Kanto before Shinran returned to Kyoto. This is the year mentioned in the *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran's major work, as the 673rd year since the onset of the last age (*mappo*). Some scholars believe this is the date when Shinran began to write the *Kyogyoshinsho*, though he does not date the work. It was perhaps the starting point for a long process of compiling passages to provide a basis for his thought. The date, however, signified for him that the world was deeply into the defiled age, highlighting the importance of Pure Land teaching and his mission.

Shinran returned to Kyoto about 1235, when Kakushin-ni would have been 11 or 12 years old. Early in her youth she served, or married, Hino Hirotsuna and gave birth to a son, Kakue (1239-1307). Hirotsuna died shortly after and Kakushin-ni returned to Shinran with her son. There is no record that she received any inheritance from Hirotsuna which suggests that she may not have been his only or chief wife. Her husband, a member of the Hino family, was probably a distant relative and considerably older.

Later Kakushin-ni married Ononomiya Zennen (d.1275). Yuizen was the son of this union, born in 1252. Yuizen himself studied esoteric Buddhism at the famed Ninnaji. Later he turned to Shin Buddhism, studying with Yuiembo, known as the compiler-author of the *Tannisho*. He received the name Yuizen.

Kakushin-ni is best known as the recipient of her mother Eshin-ni's letters which have been extremely valuable for scholars in establishing important historical developments in Shinran's life. These letters were discovered in the Hongwanji depository in 1921. Kakushin-ni must have preserved the letters which were then passed down the family.

In 1272, Kakushin-ni decided to erect a mausoleum-chapel to honor her father. According to Dr. James Dobbins, it was common in those times to revere important

people by building a hexagonal chapel with an image, ashes and altar. It was called a *mieido* where the image of Shinran could be viewed, corresponding to the present founder's hall at Hongwanji in Kyoto, though much smaller. Kakushin-ni received support for the project from disciples in Kanto and also from her husband, Zennen, who owned the land where it was located. Eventually when he passed away, he donated the land to Kakushin-ni. It should be noted that today each Hongwanji, East and West, has their own columbarium, purporting to be the location of Shinran's original mausoleum. Historically there are variant locations recorded in tradition.

Before Kakushin-ni died, in 1285, she willed the land to all the members of the Shin community. This arrangement was unusual, since the inheritance was not given to the eldest son of the family. She further specified that the caretakers of the shrine must be lineal descendants of Shinran, and, accordingly, named Kakue, her son by Hirotsuma, as the caretaker succeeding her.

These decisions later became the basis of a lawsuit by Yuizen (1252-1317) against Kakunyo, the heir designated by Kakue, as caretaker. Yuizen built a hermitage on purchased land adjoining the southern section of the chapel property, while Kakue occupied the northern section. Yuizen aspired himself to be the caretaker of Shinran's chapel. According to Yuizen, he was the rightful successor, because he was the eldest son of his father, Zennen, who had donated the land, while Kakue was only the eldest son of Hirotsuma who had no connection to the land or chapel. In 1309 the case was resolved by the authorities of Shorenin in favor of Kakunyo, the caretaker at the time. The Tendai headquarters had jurisdiction over the land. However, before the decision was handed down, Yuizen, knowing he lost, fled, destroying the chapel and taking with him the image and ashes of Shinran. He went to the Kamakura area where he set up a chapel. At a later time Yuizen was helpful to Shin Buddhism by appealing to the Shogunate to exempt Shin followers from a persecution of the followers of the Ikkoshu, people of single-minded faith. At the time Shin Buddhism was confused with the Ji sect of Ippen Shonin. Ippen's group wandered about the country in voluntary homelessness and with a teaching that had similar roots as Shinran's, declaring that salvation was through absolute Other-Power and the single recitation of faith, with or without belief, granted one birth into the Pure Land at death. This sect was noted for constant recitation and the use of dance and music. Yuizen pointed out that Shin followers were normal people who resided at home and carried on their work as ordinary citizens. The Shogunate responded, not including Shin Buddhism in their effort to prohibit Jishu.

To replace the image stolen by Yuizen, another image was made by Kenchi of the Takada branch of Shin Buddhism. Earlier he was allied with Kakushin-ni and had supported her building the chapel. He also opposed Yuizen as caretaker. However, some years later, the original image was recovered, though the whereabouts of Shinran's ashes remain a mystery.

Dr. Dobbins points to Kakushin-ni's independence in making these decisions which countered previous tradition. However, she established a common center as the

foundation for Shinran's followers which became the Hongwanji. Shinran himself had given no instructions for the future continuation of the teachings. However, he must have had some idea, because he wrote a variety of texts and made copies of them for disciples. Through those texts he must have expected in some way that the teaching and fellowship would continue. This was unlike Ippen who requested that all his writings be burned and destroyed. It is here that Kakushini-ni ultimately makes her contribution by creating a permanent monument to Shinran to perpetuate the memory of his life and teaching.

She went beyond tradition by naming her eldest son by her first marriage as the caretaker, setting aside the eldest son Yuizen, fathered by the original owner of the property. Yuizen would seem to have some rights in the arrangement. These were not considered.

The factors in Kakushin-ni's decision concerning the caretaker position are not known. It may be that because Kakue was older and perhaps more knowledgeable of the teaching that she chose him. He had studied esoteric Buddhism and, later entering Shin Buddhism, he studied with Nyoshin, Shinran's grandson, by Zenran, Shinran's eldest son, whom he had disinherited. Kakue administered the chapel together with his mother until 1280 when he became the caretaker.

Kakushin-ni's decisions, however, were in line with the position of women in Japanese society at the time. They were more independent and possessed more inheritance rights and freedom in disposing of property. She clearly had an independent mind, making decisions which showed foresight and universality in considering all members.

The significance of Kakushin-ni's efforts and decisions is far reaching. Firstly, as an independent spirited woman, she took the initiative to create a focal point to maintain the memory of Shinran and the continuation of the teaching. In effect, Hongwanji, Shin Buddhism, was actually founded by a woman. Later, her contribution and participation was obscured as the sect became more patriarchal. Hereditary leadership followed the principle of the primacy of the eldest son (primogeniture). Beginning with the third Abbot Kakunyo (1270-1351), who transformed the caretaker role to a priesthood, the lineage of the sect ignored her involvement. He devised the lineage to indicate that he was the third Abbot succeeding Shinran and Nyoshin, combining genetic and spiritual lineage.

However, Kakushin-ni appears to have caught the spirit of Shinran's ideal of the equality of all the faithful, *dobo-dogyo*, "fellow companions and practitioners on the path." Her decision transcended the family so far as control and ownership of the chapel was concerned, though she made provision for the family as caretakers. Nevertheless, the office was subject to the appointment of the members as a whole. While there is an aspect of ancestralism in establishing the chapel dedicated to her father Shinran, which marks Japanese religion, it was also important for unifying the widely spread fellowship, largely located in Eastern Japan.

Relevant to our contemporary situation is the fact that Shin Buddhism started as a people's faith. There is no suggestion of class, sex or religious and moral superiority in Shinran's teaching and certainly no primacy of family relations or lineage. In the Great Sea of Faith passage in the Kyogyoshinsho (III: 51), Shinran rejected any human, social, religious, moral distinction in the reception of true entrusting. The opening of the Tannisho also evidences this. That the early leaders accepted and supported Kakushin-ni's efforts with their presence and resources indicates that they also absorbed Shinran's principles and respected Kakushin-ni's initiative.

Unfortunately this all changed when Kakunyo, the third Abbot, transformed the memorial chapel to a temple and received his authority from the Shorenin, the Tendai overseer, to designate his own successor from among his sons. With this change, other branches of Shin Buddhism went their own way independently of the Hongwanji. Nevertheless, though we cannot see in the present Hongwanji the traces of Kakushin-ni's vision for Hongwanji, it has transmitted Shinran's writings, enabling us to retrace those steps today in order to revitalize the spirit of Shinran in our modern context.

9.

### **Shinran, A Man with Nothing to Hide**

**By**

**Alfred Bloom**

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The question before us is why should we be concerned about Shinran, a figure of 750 years ago? What does his teaching offer modern people? With the commemoration underway in mind, we will consider Shinran's spiritual importance and the heritage of the Pure Land teaching he left for us.

Shinran's context was the onset of the turbulent Kamakura period in Japanese history which extended from 1185 to 1332. Shinran was born 1173, just 12 years before the upheaval that marks this period began. It means little for us today that the aristocratic clans were overthrown and replaced by the warrior clans. There have always been political disturbances in Japan and over the world. However, for the establishment of Shin Buddhism, it was the background for the downfall of Shinran's family in 1181.

The family belonged to a lower level branch of the Fujiwara clan. Shinran entered

the monastery on mount Hiei together with his father and several brothers. The monasteries occasionally functioned as orphanages, poorhouses, or rehabilitation facilities, as well as religious practice centers etc.

Shinran was nine years old at the time and spent twenty years attempting to live up to the ideals of the Tendai teaching and practice. Finally at age 29, out of anxiety and desperation for his salvation, he sought another path, coming to Honen's Pure Land hermitage at Yoshimizu in Kyoto.

Honen was a prominent teacher who had a following among the nobility and was famous for his Pure Land teaching of the selected and exclusive practice of the nembutsu- the recitation of Amida's name- for rebirth in the Pure Land. When Shinran visited him, Honen gave him spiritual comfort and the assurance that, despite his passions and attachments, the nembutsu would save him. Shinran immediately became an ardent disciple of Honen and always claimed that he was only transmitting or sharing the teaching of Honen which had proven so personally meaningful and important for his life.

However, unfortunately, Shinran was later separated from his teacher because of persecution and exile. He never met Honen again, but he believed that his interpretation of Honen's teaching was the true interpretation. Shinran's writings, particularly the *Kyogyoshinsho*, attempt to demonstrate the truth of his interpretation, disputing other disciples of Honen.

Nevertheless, a comparison of Honen's writings with Shinran's will show the differences between them. While Shinran had a close relation to Honen, his personal experience of despair and incapacity, his deep defilement, and his separation from his master by exile and death, shaped the character of his teaching. Shinran's life story is crucial to understand his teaching.

Our topic ***Shinran, a Man with Nothing to Hide*** presents him as more open and confessional than any Buddhist teacher. His personal confessions highlight his spiritual limitations and his reliance on Amida Buddha, if there was any salvation possible at all for him or anyone. This feature of his writing has made him one of the most attractive religious figures in Japan, even when people are not interested in the Hongwanji or traditional Shin Buddhism. However, Shinran can speak for himself:

Although I take refuge in the true Pure Land way,  
It is hard to have a true and sincere mind.  
This self is false and insincere;  
I completely lack a pure mind.  
Each of us, in outward bearing,  
Makes a show of being wise, good, and dedicated;  
But so great are our greed, anger, perversity, and deceit,  
That we are filled with all forms of malice and cunning.

Extremely difficult is it to put an end to our evil nature;



The mind is like a venomous snake or scorpion.  
Our performance of good acts is also poisoned;  
Hence, it is called false and empty practice.  
Although I am without shame and self-reproach  
And lack a mind of truth and sincerity,  
Because the Name is directed by Amida,  
Its virtues fill the ten quarters.  
Lacking even small love and small compassion,  
I cannot hope to benefit sentient beings.  
Were it not for the ship of Amida's Vow,  
How could I cross the ocean of painful existence?  
With minds full of malice and cunning, like snakes and scorpions,  
We cannot accomplish good acts through self-power;  
And unless we entrust ourselves to Amida's directing of virtue,  
We will end without knowing shame or self-reproach.  
As a mark of increase in the five defilements,  
All monks and laypeople of this age  
Behave outwardly like followers of the Buddhist teaching,  
But in their inner thoughts, believe in nonbuddhist paths.  
(Shozomatsu wasan, 94-100.)

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I know truly how grievous it is that I, Gutoku Shinran, am sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments and am lost in vast mountains of fame and advantage, so that I rejoice not at all at entering the stage of the truly settled, and feel no happiness at coming nearer the realization of true enlightenment. How ugly it is! How wretched!

(Kyogyoshinsho, Faith vol, III:. #113)

This passage correlates with *Tannisho* chapter 9 where Yuiembo laments that he does not wish to go quickly to the Pure Land nor is he inspired to dance for joy at the prospect as the Sutra suggests. Shinran consoles him, noting that he had the same problem, because we are all bombu, passion ridden, foolish beings, fearful of the unknown that awaits us after death, even when it is offered as a glorious prospect.

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He declares in a verse:

I am such that I do not know right and wrong  
And cannot distinguish false and true;  
I lack even small love and small compassion,  
And yet, for fame and profit, enjoy teaching others.  
(Shozomatsu wasan 116)

This verse also has tremendous importance as Shinran, the teacher, steps down from the podium and places himself on the same level with the student.

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Many people criticize Shin Buddhism for being negative. However, in Buddhist context Negation is the opening to the Positive. Negation is not the end. The working of Amida's compassion awakens us to the depth of our evil. Shinran is not referring to occasional evil deeds that we might perform. Rather, he talks about the bent of our being –our human nature- to be egoistic, to be driven by passion and to be gripped by our attachments. For him even religious practice encourages such defilement because people become proud that they are religious and are better than those who are not so religious. The Negative is the prelude to the Positive.

If Shinran had only been negative, there would have been no Shin Buddhism.

What Shinran shows in these expressions of his own spiritual limitations is that religion is not about achieving; it is not about benefits. Many people ask: What do you get out of your religion? That is not the point. Rather, for him, shinjin-true entrusting is the awareness of what we have received from life, from others, all those who share life with us. Nembutsu is not calling to the Buddha for salvation, but the recognition of the salvation given, the unconditional compassion that sustains our lives.

True entrusting is about giving not getting. It is about releasing and liberating people, not about controlling people. Shinran liberated people from all forms of spiritual intimidation whether superstition, fears of the afterlife, or even the authoritarianism invested in teachers and leaders.

True entrusting motivates action from within as one becomes more deeply aware of what he/she has received from life and more aware of how we are all related through interdependence. Compassion means wanting the best for any person with whom we have relations.

Shinran is realistic however. He distinguishes self-power compassion and Other-Power compassion (*Tannisho* 4). With self-power we are very limited and can only do so much; with Other-Power we eventually can benefit all beings. Nevertheless, for Shinran compassion is the essence of what we call "true entrusting." He writes:

"Deep mind is deep entrusting. Deep entrusting is deep entrusting that is steadfast and firm. Deep entrusting that is steadfast and firm is decisive mind. Decisive mind is supreme mind. Supreme mind is true mind. True mind is enduring mind. Enduring mind is genuine mind. Genuine mind is mindfulness. Mindfulness is the true and real mind that is single. The true and real mind that is single is the mind of great joy. The mind of great joy is true and real shinjin. **True and real shinjin is the diamondlike mind.**

**The diamondlike mind is the mind that aspires for Buddhahood. The mind that aspires for Buddhahood is the mind to save sentient beings. The mind to save sentient beings is the mind to grasp sentient beings and bring them to birth in the Pure Land of peace. This mind is the mind aspiring for great enlightenment. This mind is the mind of great compassion. “**

Shinran started a spiritual movement which later became a religion like other religions with institutions, clergy and hierarchy, rituals, rules and doctrines etc. However Shinran's movement can be described as a religion of non-religion, in accord with his phrase: the working of non-working. He said he was neither a priest nor a lay person. He was not a priest concerned with rituals; nor a lay person simply pursuing worldly goals. His teaching transcends those limiting spheres. He offers spiritual insight that transcends such limitations and gives spiritual freedom to find meaning and truth within one's own life and human relations.

Kakunyo the third Abbot, and later Rennyo, recalls a statement of Shinran which is not in his writings, but must have been handed down in the tradition: “Even though we may be accused of being cattle thieves, we should not appear like the seekers of the afterlife.” Here Shinran is saying that even though we may be charged with being irreligious, we should not wear our religion on our shirtsleeves, as we say.

Shinran is important today because there is much display of religion and using religion in politics to demonstrate, or acquire, social power. It threatens our democracy and promotes discrimination and injustice in the name of religion and righteousness. Shin Buddhism can offer an alternative understanding of life and reality that can counter such empty religion. Shin Buddhism offers a vision of society where true freedom can thrive. Many religions establish a vertical society-top down. Shinran taught a horizontal society of mutuality and equality within Buddhist interdependence.

There are many dimensions to the importance of Shinran in our contemporary world even after 750 years. He was ahead of his time and so there was little impact in Japan which has been authoritarian over many centuries. He is also ahead of our time, advocating the removal of any form of discrimination or obstruction to the development of the human spirit in its deepest potentiality.

10.

**Shin Buddhism and Culture:  
The Story of Heitaro**

By  
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University of Hawaii

In this essay we focus on a very interesting story in the *Godensho*, the earliest biography of Shinran, a collection of stories, perhaps legends, gathered by Kakunyo, the third Abbot in order to exalt him as founder of the Shin Buddhism and the Hongwanji. The text provides a general outline of Shinran's life and illustrates features of his teaching.

Chapter 5 narrates the story of Heitaro who lived in the area of Hitachi in eastern Japan where Shinran had taught for many years. Heitaro was an ordinary person and a single-hearted follower of Shinran. As a village official, he was obligated to go to the very famous Kumano Shrine, where he was required to reverence the god of the shrine, even though he was a Shin Buddhist.

Before going, he came to Shinran to discuss his visit. Shinran reviewed with him the Pure Land teaching, stressing principles of true entrusting evident in singleness of heart and recognition of the oneness of all beings in Shin Buddhism.

Shinran advised Heitaro that it was perfectly proper for him to fulfill his duties at the shrine, since he single-heartedly trusted in Amida Buddha's Vow. Shinran counseled him: "This being so, it is not necessary to put on any outward form of wisdom or morality or purity, though we are holding within ourselves all manners of falsehood and unreality; only let the Vows of Amida, the original abode (essence), work themselves out. O, be thou ever reverent! Never think that this is slighting the dignity of a god, and there will be no divine wrath visited you yourself."

Listening to Shinran's advice, Heitaro went to the shrine, but he did not strictly follow the ceremonial rules of the shrine, though he constantly recalled the admonition of Shinran. Consequently, he was visited in a dream by a layperson who came out of the

shrine. This person asked Heitaro why he did not respect the deity and follow the shrine rules of purification? Just then Shinran appeared and vouched for Heitaro's faith and his recitation of the name of Amida. The layman silently bowed to Shinran whereupon Heitaro awoke from his dream. He later reported the dream to Shinran who commented: "This is what I meant when I taught you earlier."

Shinran's follower Heitaro experienced the problem of acculturation or the adaptation of religious faith to the surrounding society and culture. It is a problem that is still with us today. How do we understand the relation of our faith to western culture? We see in some traditions efforts to draw a line between one's faith and culture so as to keep the faith pure and not associate with other faiths. Or, perhaps some people give up their faith and surrender too easily to the dominant culture. Shinran offers another possibility, that of participating in the culture, while maintaining one's religious commitment.

An advantage of Shin Buddhism is that religious commitment is not defined by external requirements. Shinran, following the spirit of Buddhism, recognized that trust in Amida's Vows is a matter of one's mind and heart, not just following certain forms. In fact, he rejected external display as evidence of religious faith. Hence, in the story Shinran states that "it is not necessary to put on an outward form of wisdom or morality or purity."

Later in Shin history, Rennyo, the Eighth Abbot, also stressed not displaying one's piety before others, even to the point of not talking of one's faith with non-believers. In Rennyo's time Shin Buddhism was viewed as a radical cult, despised by outsiders and other Buddhist traditions, particularly Tendai. Shin Buddhism liberated people from superstition and belief in the traditional system of gods. As Rennyo noted, there are no taboos in Shin Buddhism. As a result, both Shinran and Rennyo had to caution their disciples against ridiculing the gods or other Buddhas. Shin Buddhism undermined the communalism of the society, bringing reproach on the teaching. He writes that just because we do not follow teachings of other traditions: "there must be no slandering of other teachings." With respect to the native religion: "we simply do not rely on them, we must not belittle them. The reason is that: "We must recognize that every one of the various gods is indeed included within the virtue of Amida, the one Buddha." Amida is inclusive reality. To understand this is to follow the guidance of Shin teaching.

All that is necessary for a Shin follower is to focus our attention on the awareness of our nature as passion-ridden foolish beings (bombyu) with the corresponding awareness of Amida's compassion and wisdom which embraces us as we are through true entrusting (shinjin). We realize this profound and deeply personal 'state of being' as Shinran did when he exclaimed that Amida had made his Vow solely for Shinran alone. We do not justify ourselves by denigrating others.

In view of the personal character of true entrusting in Shinran's teaching, the Shin understanding of practice is most subtle. Practice is not simply a matter of specific or

external actions. Rather, through true entrusting we are enabled to see all of our life as a field for deepening our awareness of spiritual reality. This results from reflection and participation in the demands of life with those with whom we share life. It also includes the hearing of the Dharma, not merely in sermons and lectures, but in the relationships that make up our lives.

Heitaro went to the shrine, mindful of Shinran's teaching. An aspect of Shinran's teaching in the *Kyogyoshinsho* is not to fear the gods or worship them. For instance he writes: "Do not worship gods, do not enshrine spirits, do not heed days considered lucky." Hence, when Heitaro went to the shrine, he did not conform to the practices of purification required by the shrine. He already knew that purification could not really take place simply by washing one's mouth with water. Heitaro was careless in his ritual behavior, so the deity of Kumano appeared to him in a dream as a lay person and charged him with disrespect. At that moment in the dream Shinran appeared and acknowledged Heitaro as his devoted follower, whereupon the god bowed to Shinran and Heitaro woke up.

In traditional Japanese religion, it was common for gods to communicate through dreams. The deity was distressed with Heitaro's carelessness. It might bring him *batchi* or divine retribution, because he offended the deity. However, Shinran appeared to support the follower and nothing unhappy resulted. When the god acknowledged Shinran, without imposing retribution, it implies the supremacy of Buddhism.

We might take away from this story Shinran's insight that true entrusting is entirely an issue of the mind and heart and not merely following specific forms of action. True entrusting should animate any activity we engage in.

Another point is that Heitaro should have respected the requirements of the shrine. But even though he did not, his true entrusting eliminated any fear of divine retribution. As Shinran has declared: those people who entrust to Amida are revered by the gods and do not experience karmic retribution. (Tannisho) Shin Buddhists are liberated from any and all religious fears and intimidation. Scholars have noted that Shin Buddhism is the least superstitious faith in Japan and perhaps the world. Already embraced by Amida, never to be abandoned, our spiritual destiny is secure through the Vow in the present and future. As Shinran said, there is no evil that can obstruct the nembutsu and no good superior to it.

Shinran's confidence in the truth of his teaching is expressed in his call for respect for other teachings and towards the gods of the land. He declares: "You should not disparage the teachings of other Buddhas or the people who perform good acts other than nembutsu." He also admonished his disciples: "To begin with, it should never happen under any circumstances that the Buddhas and bodhisattvas be thought of lightly or that the gods and deities be despised and neglected.....Those who deeply entrust themselves to the Buddha's teaching are protected by all the gods of the heavens and earth who accompany them just as shadows do things..."

The call for respect for the gods was supported in Japanese thought by the teaching

of Essence and Manifestation (honji-suijaku). Shinran mentions it in his advice to Heitaro as he was leaving for Kumano shrine.

The theory developed in Japan because of the peculiar status of the gods and the Imperial institution. The gods could not be displaced or merely subordinate to Buddha as the foundation of the state. Therefore, the theory emerged among Buddhists that the gods were really manifestations of the Buddhas and bodhisattvas in Japan, to be revered alongside Buddhas. Each god has a “Buddhist” essence which it represents. Therefore, the great Sun Buddha was the essence of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess and ancestor of the Emperor. The god of the Kumano shrine was the manifestation of Amida Buddha.

Buddhists developed this teaching to facilitate the spread and penetration of Buddhism into Japanese society and culture. It provided the basis for the mutual co-existence of Buddhism and Shinto, the native religion, for centuries until modern times. All major Buddhist temples came to have shrines of Shinto guardian deities in their compound. (It should be noted that in modern times with the restoration of the Emperor based on Shinto, there was governmental separation of the two traditions.)

The theory of essence and manifestation harmonized Buddhism and native religion, thereby reducing religious conflict in the nation. It also made Buddhism, as the basic spiritual source, a powerful influence in every area of culture.

We can learn from Shinran and Rennyo’s attitude to other religious beliefs and practices. To express true respect and understanding for other traditions requires knowledge of, and confidence in, one’s own faith. We need not ignore the positive contributions of Christianity, or even Judaism and Islam to the formation of western culture. Nevertheless, we are not obligated to practice religion in their way. Shinran’s teaching supports freedom of religion and principles such as separation of church and state. Honen, Shinran’s teacher, cautioned his disciples about aggressive proselytism and not to force the nembutsu on anyone or to rely on outside power to spread the faith. In Buddhism there are two approaches, shakubuku or forceful propagation and shoju, persuasive propagation. Shoju is the way of Honen and Shinran. We share teaching, respecting the personality and faith of our listeners.

Essentially Shinran teaches when in Rome, do as the Romans do. Heitaro was to follow the requirements of the shrine while on business. That is respect, though we know in our own hearts it is not our path. It is important to educate people about the social import of Shinran’s teaching and to resist the growing intolerance of politicized religion.

## 11.

### The Centrality of the Eighteenth Vow of Amida Buddha

By

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In this essay we discuss chapter 18 in the “Treatise on What Shinran Taught” (Kudensho) by the third Abbot Kakunyo. This text contains stories and teachings of Shinran, which he received from Shinran’s grandson, Nyoshin, in his effort to establish his spiritual lineage as the third head of the Shin sect.

Kakunyo discusses the significance of the eighteenth vow of Amida Buddha which lies at the heart of the universal message of Pure Land teaching. He declares that “The Tathagata's Primal Vow is for the sake of foolish beings and not for sages or saints.” This view corresponds to chapter 3 of the Tannisho and its famous statement that “If a good man can be saved, how much more so an evil man!” It was Honen and Shinran’s view that Amida's great effort and perseverance through five kalpas of pure practice of the six perfections, that is, the six virtues (paramitas) of giving, precepts, effort, patience, meditation, and wisdom, was for the sake of the emancipation of the bombu or foolish beings. It was not at all for the sake of sages or saints, though even they also need it in the Last Age of human corruption, despite being seemingly capable in their own right. However, the bombu is the true or primary object of Amida's compassion. They are born in the Pure Land by riding on the unconditional compassion of the Primal Vow.

According to Honen and Shinran, if it were truly difficult for the bombu to be born in the Pure Land, the Buddha's vow would be an empty teaching, and its power would be in



vain.

Nevertheless, Amida accomplished the great benefit for all beings universally. According to the

Sutra, it is now ten aeons of time, since Amida attained his enlightenment. The seventeenth vow

pledges that the witness of all the numberless Buddhas demonstrate that Amida's vows cannot be

empty and vain.

It has been generally accepted that the paradoxical assertion in Tannisho 3, emphasizing

that the evil person is the true object of Amida's compassion, originated with Shinran.

Nevertheless, in this present chapter, Nyoshin/Kakunyo indicate that it was actually first declared

by Honen. As evidence for this view, the phrase appears in an early biography of Honen written

by the disciple Seikanbo Genchi sometime before 1237, at least 50 years before the Tannisho.

The second witness is Nyoshin/Kakunyo's view in this chapter. A third point concerns the use of

the honorific term oosesourai which means "he said." In this context, we should read it naturally as a word of Shinran who appears to be quoting Honen. Prevailing modern scholarly

views have generally concluded, however, that the statement was Shinran's, aimed at refuting

the idea that the nembutsu recitation is a source of merit.

The historical question raised by Kakunyo's suggestion that the quote was Honen's draws

our attention to the relation of Shinran and Honen. Briefly, we know from the Kyogyoshinsho,

Shinran's major work, his letters, poetry and the Tannisho that he regarded himself in complete

harmony with Honen and deeply indebted to Honen for the assurance of his own liberation

through Amida's vow.

The interpretation of this passage has been influenced by rivalry between Shinshu and other Pure Land schools established by disciples of Honen. There are stories which attempt to

demonstrate that Shinran was the true representative of Honen's teaching, while

lamenting the deviation of Honen's disciples from his fundamental principle of Other-Power recitation of the Name.

It is clear that there were ambiguities in Honen's teachings which resulted in divergent interpretations by his successors. Some saw the nembutsu as a means of acquiring merit and

virtue, while others combined it with meditation practices. Still others saw that even one recitation of the Name assured eventual birth in the Pure Land. Shinran regarded all these

interpretations as attempts to assure their enlightenment by self-effort and not true reliance on

Amida's vow or absolute Other-Power.

For Kakunyo it was very important to establish the lineage of Shinshu from Honen, as the

various divisions of Pure Land teaching were becoming more firmly established. It was a question who was more true to Honen's spirit. Despite the ambiguities which appear in Honen's

writings, his spirit is expressed clearly in his great manifesto: "The Treatise on the Nembutsu of

the Select Primal Vow." In this text Honen gave an eloquent statement of the intention of

Amida's vow to save all those who lack virtue, ability, or even material resources, to secure their

salvation. This spirit clearly moved Shinran and gave him assurance of his own final emancipation. Honen's declared:

In the next place, if we look at it from the standpoint of difficulty and ease, The nembutsu is easily practiced, while it is very hard to practice all other disciplines. For the above reasons thus briefly stated, we may say that the nembutsu, being so easily practiced, is of universal application, while the others being hard to practice, do not suit all cases. And so Amida seemed to have made his Original Vow the rejection of the hard and choice of the easy way, in order to enable all sentient beings, without distinction, to attain birth into the Pure Land. If the Original Vow required the making of images and the building of pagodas, then the poor and destitute could have no hope of attaining it. But the fact is that the wealthy and noble are few in number, where as the number of the poor and ignoble is extremely large. If the Original Vow required wisdom and great talents, there would be no hope of

that birth for the foolish and ignorant at all; but the wise are few in number, while the foolish are very many. If the Original Vow required the hearing and seeing of a great many things, then the people who heard and saw little could have no hope of that birth; but few are they who have heard much, and very many are they who have heard little. If the Original Vow required obedience to the commandments and the Law, then there would be no hope of that birth for those who break the commandments and very many are they who break them. The same reasoning applies to all other cases. If, then, we make the Original Vow to consist in the practice of these many forms of discipline, it follows that those who attain birth into Paradise will be few, while the many will fail. We conclude therefore, that Amida Buddha, when he was a monk by the name of Dharmakara ages ago, in his compassion for all sentient beings alike, and in his effort for the salvation of all, did not vow to require the making of images or the building of pagodas conditions for birth into the Pure Land, but only the one act of calling upon His sacred name.<sup>1</sup>

We should notice that Honen's statement, besides indicating the profundity of Amida's compassion, is presenting a sharp criticism of the society of his time where the nobility believed

that they could gain great merit toward salvation through building great temples and making

offerings of all kinds to religious establishments. It was like buying one's way into paradise.

Religion in all cultures has frequently been the monopoly of the rich and the clever. What we

now view as great works of art and architecture has generally been built from the labor and sweat

of people who never had the opportunity to benefit from the blessings gained by those who

exploited that labor and amassed that wealth. Honen is really pointing to the class stratification

that permeates religion, though he did not have our modern terminology. He was a deeply

sensitive person and attempted to meet the spiritual need of his time.

Honen's rejection of any discrimination in the salvation process was echoed by Shinran in his passage on the great sea of faith in the Kyogyoshinsho:

As I contemplate the ocean-like Great Faith, I see that it does not choose between the noble and the mean, the priest and the layman, nor does it discriminate between man and woman, old and young. The amount of sin committed is not questioned, and the length of practice is not discussed. It is neither 'practice' nor 'good', neither 'abrupt' nor 'gradual', neither 'meditative' nor 'non-meditative', neither 'right meditation' nor 'wrong

meditation', neither 'contemplative' nor 'non-contemplative', neither 'while living' nor 'at the end of life', neither 'many utterances' nor 'one thought'. Faith is the inconceivable, indescribable, and ineffable Serene Faith. It is like the agada which destroys all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata's Vow destroys the poisons of wisdom and ignorance.<sup>2</sup>

According to Honen's word, Amida had particularly in view those ordinary people who could not possibly be saved if it were not for the unconditional compassion of Amida Buddha. In effect, as Shinran quotes, "If the good man can be saved, how much more so the evil man!" For Shinran the experience of faith which is Amida's work in fulfillment of his vow is not obstructed by, or dependent on, any social, religious, or moral distinction established by human dictate. It is for all beings equally.

This insight of Honen must have deeply impressed the young Shinran. He relates in the Kyogyoshinsho that in the year 1205 with Honen's permission, "I copied his Senjaku Shu".

What must have gone through his mind as he copied this incisive affirmation of Amida's compassion? From the nature of Shinran's writings it is clear he made the exposition of Amida's absolute compassion his life's work. Thus from Honen to Shinran and through the many successors and followers the stream of compassion has continued to flow to our present day.

While there is some historical importance in determining the origin of a particular statement, of

greater importance is the fact that Honen and Shinran were bound by the spirit of Amida's

compassion and they devoted their lives to clarifying and its meaning with others, thereby

making it possible for us today to experience its truth in our own lives.

The contemporary relevance of Honen and Shinran's thought concerning foolish beings lies in their deep respect and concern for the common person irrespective of social status.

Whatever form of religious faith we have, if it does not generate deep concern for the suffering

person and inspire respect for human dignity, it is empty and meaningless. It is only through vital

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religious faith as displayed by Honen and Shinran that we can confront the dehumanizing features of our modern secular and technological age, as well as the disruptions of economic collapse.

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Harper H. Coates and R. Ishizuka. Honen, The Buddhist Saint.

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**12.**

Banishing Fears of the Afterlife:  
Shinran and the Last Moment of Life.

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There are numerous creative and bold features in Shinran's interpretations of Buddhist and Pure Land tradition. In some cases he turned tradition on its head and liberated people from the fears and intimidation of religion. It has long been asserted by non-religious and anti-religious opponents that religion capitalizes on human fears

resulting from our limitations of knowledge and ability to influence our general and personal affairs.

However, Shinran counters that perspective by proclaiming that, despite our limitations, Reality-Amida Buddha, The Infinite, only seeks our welfare and has offered us a way of salvation and spiritual liberation that does not exploit our human weakness or depend on the vagaries of our own minds, feelings or lack of faith. Therefore, Shinran proclaimed that true entrusting is not self-generated but a gift enabled by Amida Buddha's vow. As a consequence, rather than fear of gods, he asserted that the gods bow down and reverence the person who treads the unobstructed path of true entrusting (Tannisho 7). This statement is illuminating since many religions encourage people to pray to or placate the gods and avoid retribution. People through the ages have believed that whatever ills or difficulties they encounter are the result of the action of a god or demon as punishment for some infraction and must be compensated. Much human resource is spent attempting to propitiate the gods. Shinran does not encourage such fears. Amida embraces us all in his compassion and frees us from those fears.

Further, he taught that there is no karmic retribution because every one is embraced by Amida's vows and destined for birth in the Pure Land. According to Shinran, we all have karmic histories, but that history ends with trust in Amida's vow. Again much human resource is expended to help us counter balance or counteract future karmic retribution. For Shinran, birth in the Pure Land is complete emancipation from transmigration in the ocean of births and deaths, driven by karma. In Shinran's vision, we immediately become Buddha and work for the emancipation of all beings from the bondage and anxieties of karma.

Also no demon or enemy of the teaching can thwart us, because there is nothing superior to the nembutsu and nothing can obstruct it. (Tannisho 7.) Shinran did not promise an easy life for followers in this world. He understood the opposition to Honen's teaching, because it consigned the established sects to irrelevancy by its emphasis on the applicability and ease of practice for all people. Elaborate ceremonies were not necessary.

The spiritual freedom that Shinran observed at the heart of Pure Land teaching had social implications. He valued all people as essentially equal, employing the term *dobo dogyo*, which means "equal companions" in the faith. Hierarchical societies view the suggestion of freedom and equality as dangerous. Later peasant revolts in Japan, many inspired by Shin teaching, support the view that spiritual equality can have social implications.

Unfortunately the reformation or new path Shinran set for Buddhism was not carried through. Shin Buddhism generally accommodated itself to the evolving feudal society which reached maturity in the totally repressive control system of the Tokugawa regime (1600-1868). Shin leadership became a facet of the aristocracy and ruling class, even priding itself on being related to the Imperial family.

Among the many important features of his teaching, there is one that particularly stands out. Shinran declares in the first letter in the collection “A Lamp for the Latter Ages:”

The idea of Amida's coming at the moment of death is for those who seek to gain birth in the Pure Land by doing various practices, for they are practitioners of self-power. The moment of death is of central concern to such people, for they have not yet attained true shinjin (true entrusting). We may also speak of Amida's coming at the moment of death in the case of those who, though they have committed the ten transgressions and the five grave offenses throughout their lives, encounter a teacher in the hour of death and are led at the very end to utter the nembutsu

The practitioner of true shinjin, however, abides in the stage of the truly settled, for he or she has already been grasped, never to be abandoned. There is no need to waiting in anticipation for the moment of death, no need to rely on Amida's coming. At the time shinjin becomes settled, birth too becomes settled; there is no need for deathbed rites that prepare for Amida's coming...(CWS. Lamp for the Latter Ages, 1. I, p. 523.)

Since the earliest times of the Upanishads, religious and philosophic texts that are the basis of the Indian spiritual tradition, there has been the belief in karma and transmigration. Death was the great transition point. It was, and is, widely believed that a person's last moment of life contains the foundation for their next life; all one's karma is concentrated in that moment.

It is a moment of anxiety, since we do not know what will be in our minds at that last crucial moment. Therefore, it is important to have good thoughts at that time. In order to do this, we are encouraged to chant the name of a deity or, in Pure Land Buddhism, the name of Amida Buddha. If people cannot do it themselves, they may have a friend do it. The merit of their recitation then accrues to the client.

An ancient story recounts how a Queen of an Indian principality was given a flower to gaze on when she was about to die. While she looked at the flower, she saw an insect and died with the insect in her last thought. She became an insect in her new birth. Her family found out about it and sponsored services to free her to achieve a higher birth. Through such tales ancient people were exhorted to devote themselves to one or other deity to secure their future afterlife. In Buddhism it became the practice to recite the name of a Buddha thousands of times a day, so that this thought would constantly be in mind, yielding a good birth. Since we do not know when the last moment will take place, various rituals developed to prepare for this moment.

In the Larger Pure Land Sutra, the nineteenth vow of Amida Buddha promises he will meet those who practice meditation or recite his name at their death and bring them to the Pure Land. In the tradition apart from Shinran there is a ritual where the patient holds various colored cords connected to the hand of the Buddha image, symbolizing his coming to meet the devotee as she passes on. It is all designed to arouse a positive

thought at the moment of death. There are also famous paintings which depict Amida Buddha descending from the Pure Land with his retinue to meet and guide the believer to the Pure Land. They are called Raigo pictures.

Shinran, through his interpretation of absolute Other-Power, discarded thousands of years of tradition that extended from ancient India, perhaps as far back as 800 B.C.E. to his own time in the 13th century C.E. in Japan. With the transmission of his teaching down through the ensuing centuries, it now comes to us, with his message of spiritual liberation.

It may be recalled that there are traditionally six levels of life in transmigration. These are hells, animals, hungry ghosts, angry spirits, human being and gods. The hell of hungry ghosts is highlighted in the Obon observance when the monk Mogallana rescued his mother by giving offerings to the monks. The most fearsome births are those in a hell, as an animal or a hungry ghost. Today it is common to interpret these categories of births as metaphors or psychological states of mind. However, in ancient times, as well for some people in our modern era, the images are taken literally, raising fears for oneself or one's beloved deceased or ancestors. These beliefs inspired services to bring merit to the deceased, resulting in a higher level of birth. The forty-nine day memorial services are also designed for this purpose to assist the dead as they pass through stages of judgment which determine his/her next transmigration.

When Shinran rejected the idea of the welcome of the

Buddha at death, he also was rejecting the elaborate ritual system that was designed to assure a good birth for one's deceased relative. For Shinran, it was not necessary, because Amida's vow pledges that he will save all beings or he will not become Buddha. The Sutra affirms that when he became Buddha after five aeons of sincere practice, he turned all his merit over to beings, enshrined in his name namu-amida-buddha. When a person entrusts to the vow and recites the name in gratitude, in that moment of faith, in that moment there is the meeting with the Buddha and the assurance of ultimate enlightenment. Transmigration is no longer to be feared, because one becomes Buddha immediately upon death. In one stroke Shinran abolished all the religious fears that have plagued ancient and modern people concerning their future destinies.

With his view of Other-Power and understanding that the devotee immediately becomes Buddha on death, Shinran undermined the ancestral emphasis in Japanese religion. He declared: "As for me Shinran, I have never said the nembutsu even once for the repose of my departed mother and father." He goes on to point out the oneness of humanity, that everyone in the course of their many lives has been mother, father, brother, and sister to each of us. When we become Buddha, we will then save all of them, and foremost those with "close karmic relations." (Tannisho 5.)

Shinran recognizes human relations and the closeness we have with our family members. Nevertheless, it is an inclusive relation and not an exclusive one that focuses on a particular family line. The relation is karmic and universal, not simply a matter of



blood lineage.

Shinran's interpretation of Buddhism and the Pure Land teaching, was not only instructive in demonstrating the depth and positive nature of his own religious experience but it was creative in the sense that it can inspire the search for deeper understanding and application of the teaching in our own age. The reformation or renewal of Buddhism that was diverted in succeeding years in Japan can now be resumed in a new age, new cultural context and new social conditions. What was not possible in Japan can become real in our time. Our age seeks a new spiritual alternative to replace lost spiritual and social meaning of faith as the result of decades of war, social discrimination and economic collapse.

### **13.**

Amida Buddha,  
The Central Symbol of Pure Land Teaching  
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The central symbol of Pure Land teaching, Amida Buddha, emerged in Mahayana Buddhism from among the multitude of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, or other Indian divine beings, to become the primary expression of Unconditional Compassion and Universal Wisdom, eclipsing all other figures. Amida's western Pure Land where he is said to reside has been described in detail in the Larger Pure Land Sutra and the Smaller Amida Sutra, attracting the devotion of the masses

through the centuries in East Asian societies. His Land was the most accessible, through the easy practice of reciting his name. Consequently, Amida Buddha became the object of worship-reverence, inspiring a host of teachers and followers in every stream of Mahayana tradition and permeating the whole of East Asia. More people probably have invoked the name of Amida than any savior figure in history. Wherever there is personal tragedy or disaster or hope for a better afterlife, the name of Amida will be intoned for the welfare of the people involved. But how should we understand Amida?

Over the years that I have been teaching, the question has been frequently raised by inquirers whether or not Amida Buddha is a God comparable to God in Christianity. The story

of Amida in the Sutra contributes to the question by recounting how Bodhisattva Dharmakara

became Amida Buddha, the universal, cosmic saviour of all beings. According to the Sutra

account, a king in an unnamed land and world renounced his throne to seek enlightenment and

open the path to an ideal world. All who were born there would be assured of gaining enlightenment and finally Buddhahood in a beneficial, supportive environment, in an ideal spiritual world.

Dharmakara practiced under the guidance of Lokeshvararaja, the fifty-third Buddha. The renunciant king made forty eight vows to establish his Pure Land. The Sutra story relates

vividly that the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, the religious name of the king-monk, attained the

status of Buddhahood replete with infinite virtue to share with all beings. He reached perfection,

transcending all limits of passion-ridden sentient beings. In effect, Dharmakara became god-like

as the source of salvation. In the story the king is a human being. However, as Buddha, he

appears as a transcendent glorified figure who is revealed in the Sutra through Sakyamuni

Buddha's meditation-visions in our space-time world.

Initially, the narratives were the object of contemplation for monks. They tried to

realize

visions of the Pure Land in their own minds by contemplating all its details, thereby confirming

their own eventual enlightenment and Buddhahood. Accompanying the meditations there were

ceremonies with worship, offerings, repentance, etc. to prepare for the practice of meditation-

contemplation. At a later time, since very few people could leave society to seek their enlightenment in the monastery, teachers promoted the practice of reciting his name for ordinary

people. It was taught that Amida completely invested his virtue in his name, making it spiritually

potent. Later popular belief stressed that his name was available as the means for birth in his

Land anytime and anywhere to believers of any ability or status who recite it in faith.

Many

narratives grew up describing the virtue of Amida and wondrous births into his Pure Land in

China and Japan. Consequently, the worship of Amida spread widely, exalting him as a primary

divine figure.

Western people, conditioned by centuries of Christian theology, emphasize the existence of a “theistic” self-subsistent, personal God and, therefore, generally view Amida as also a God.

Theism highlights the will and intentionality, as well as the power, of God. Christian followers

question whether Amida created the world, as well as provided a way of salvation.

Creation and

salvation are intimately connected in Christianity, and assumed to be so in other religions. Also

God stands alone in his transcendent, monotheistic solitude, separate from both nature and man.

The issue becomes blurred when Buddhists also speak of Amida in personalistic, “theistic”

terms comparable to “god-talk in Christianity. However, Buddhists have never attempted to

prove the existence of Amida nor claimed that he created the universe. There are no four

philosophical arguments (cosmological, contingency, moral, and teleological) for the existence

of Amida Buddha as there have been for the existence of God in the West. Despite similarities in

so-called “god-talk” in the two faiths, they are really different philosophically and “theologically.”

In order to understand the character of “god-talk” in Mahayana Buddhism, we can observe the concepts of Buddha represented in the theories of Two Bodies or Three Bodies of a

Buddha. In the case of two bodies there is the distinction between the realm of Absolute Spiritual Truth, i. e. the Body of Truth, which cannot be conceived or expressed by our ordinary

language or human thought, and Mundane or Conventional Truth, i.e. the Body of Compassionate Means, using our ordinary language and imagery.

Three Bodies of the Buddha consist of the Body of Truth, the Body of Reward-Enjoyment and the Body of Transformation or Manifestation. The Body of Truth is the Absolute.

The Body of Reward-Enjoyment and Body of Transformation are Mundane truth. The Reward

Body represents the result of the Bodhisattva fulfilling his vows to become Buddha, as related in

the story in the Sutra. According to the Sutra, it took Dharmakara five aeons to complete his

vows and it is ten aeons since that time. He will go into Nirvana after forty-two aeons.

Amida in

the Sutra is involved in time. The Transformation Body represents the historical time-space

dimension where Sakyamuni Buddha in our world is the manifestation of the Reward Body to

reveal the teaching and path to salvation depicted in the Sutra. The different dimensions relate to

the different forms of Buddha in the literature and tradition.

In any case, the distinctions within these two perspectives may be called the realm of Truth-as-it-is (Suchness) and the Truth-for-us. Whatever has form or is expressed in language is

the mundane dimension and thereby included in the world of delusory understanding.

Amida

with form, as presented in the Sutra, is the Body of Compassionate Means and, as

Shinran notes

in the Jinen honi sho text, the medium by which we know the formless, colorless, inconceivable

Body of Truth. It is real/true so far as it communicates or opens truth to us. However, it is empty

and without substance, because it is not a self-existing entity apart from our minds.

Amida

Buddha has no objective existence as most western Christians assume of God's existence in the universe.

As a consequence, "god-talk" in Buddhism does not represent the deepest or ultimate understanding of reality. It is a mode of speaking rooted in our unenlightened human nature. In

terms of salvation, we ultimately attain Buddhahood, becoming one with reality, though because

of our unenlightened nature, we speak of birth in the Pure Land and becoming Buddha.

From the

Absolute dimension, we attain the "birth of no-birth," beyond any conceivability, therefore

Nirvana, while on the popular level, people think of meeting their loved ones in the Pure Land.

When Buddhists speak of attaining Buddhahood, or the Bodhisattva's return to the world to save beings, they are referring to the compassionate meaning of Buddhism. The goal is for all

to become one with the saving power, symbolized by Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Light and

Eternal Life. The name Amida means Infinite; he is the ultimate context of our lives. The reality

of Buddha's compassion becomes observable whenever life is enhanced, fulfilled or conveyed to

us through the deeds and care of friends. We see Amida whenever we see the healing powers of

the body, or creativity and growth in our life and world. We experience it in the thrill of new life,

or the peculiar beauty in people and in nature. It is the interdependence, the totality of our

relations, that sustains life and enables our activities. Amida Buddha is the relation of all relations. It is the wonder that inspires us and awakens us to our own responsibility to life. The

power of Amida, a la interdependence, is realized when we take interdependence and mutuality

seriously in the affairs of life.

The symbolic or mythic story is like a window through which we view the vast reality that embraces our lives and stirs our reverence and trust. Amida is, therefore, not a God and the

reverence toward him expressed in our temples is really reverence for reality, an acknowledgement of the mystery of existence. As a result, there is no petitionary prayer,

requesting things from the Buddha or expectation of miracles. All is entrusted to the compassion

that we believe is at the heart of reality and evident in the life-giving and supporting life of

nature. Rather, there is acceptance and trust in the working of reality; it is not resignation but

inspiration as one perceives the power of Life enabling us to live positively with the limitations

that define our lives. It is not competitive or individualist, because it binds us together in mutual

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respect and support. It offers the basis of a broad community which Shinran calls Equal companions on the path (dobo-dogyo). Essentially, Buddhism has a reality concept (a picture/image of reality), rather than a god-concept or belief.

Shinran, the founder of Shin Buddhism, was born into the milieu of Mahayana Buddhism in Japan represented by the several schools of Nara Buddhism, Tendai Buddhism on

Mount Hiei and the esoteric Shingon school on Mount Koya and Nara. There was a multitude of

approaches to the Buddhist path to enlightenment. Anxious for his own salvation, he entered

Honen's community in Yoshimizu in Kyoto. Separated from Honen never to meet again, Shinran

forged a distinctive interpretation of the Pure Land teaching out of his varied experiences as a

monk, a student of Honen, and a defrocked monk propagating Buddhism in the distant provinces.

He was deeply influenced by Tendai thought. The diverse influences on Shinran combined to

provide the basis for his understanding of the dynamic working of Amida Buddha as the expression of reality itself, the Buddha nature in all things, reality beyond God. This working

becomes real in the experience of true entrusting that forms the essence of Shin personal religious experience and motivates the nembutsu of gratitude as a way of life. However Amida is understood, he will always be a spiritual refuge for hosts of people from the difficulties of life and hope for our deepest personal fulfillment. Beyond that, in our modern world, the interpretation of Amida must also provide a context for intellectual, scientific and social-cultural involvement. It must inspire participation on every level, Only the broadest and deepest understanding of Amida will suffice for participating in the contemporary religious culture. Shinran's thought offers significant potentiality to contribute to the modern search for meaningful spirituality.

#### 14.

Nembutsu: Transformations of Meaning  
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In past essays we have frequently referred to the nembutsu when discussing the nature and meaning of Amida Buddha. While Amida is the central symbol of Pure Land Buddhism, nembutsu is the central practice or means of confirming within oneself the truth of Amida. However, as with other facets of Buddhism, there is a long history with various phases of development.

The term nembutsu is Japanese for the meditative practice of thinking, contemplating or recalling Amida Buddha. Originally meditation on the Buddha was part of the practice of visualization in monastic discipline. In rigorous meditation practice, visualization within one's own mind affirmed the spiritual reality of the Buddha and the Pure Land, leading to one's own eventual Buddhahood. Such rigorous practice was initially available only to a small group of people who could leave home to dedicate themselves to this quest. They also had the capacity for long periods of concentration, while personally disciplining themselves physically and psychically. They were able to step out of customary family and social obligations to join the Order where they could devote themselves to practice. Ordinary people, through the acquisition of good karma

for their support of the Order, could be reborn in more optimum conditions to pursue the goal of Buddhahood in future lives. Birth into the Pure Land became the desired goal.

The emerging popular Pure Land movement in China, therefore, emphasized birth in the Pure Land, the Land of Supreme Bliss, which was established by Amida Buddha to provide a beneficial environment for practitioners to attain enlightenment without the limitations of this world. The Buddha would always be present. Birth in this land was particularly enabled through the meritorious recitation of the nembutsu. The merit acquired by many recitations could also be directed toward assisting the birth of loved one and friends or for oneself. The Contemplation Sutra teaches that each recitation purifies 80 billion aeons of impurities carried by the person and that according to the nineteenth vow of Amida, he will come to welcome devotees to the Pure Land. We also read stories of eminent monks who recited the name as many as 60 to 70 thousand times a day. They were models for lay people to continually recite the name.

As the teaching spread in China, Buddhist teachers gathered stories of wondrous births into the Pure Land through recitation of the name. Collections were also transmitted to Japan where they were used by preachers to attract believers and encourage faith. There were stories of people who slaughtered animals or committed sins, yet they were born in the Pure Land by reciting the name. A major work in Japan was the Record of Births into the Land of Bliss in Japan (Nihon Ojo Gokuraku Ki) with 42 biographies by Yasutane Yoshishige (931-1002). They included monks, noblemen, nuns and laypeople. Such texts had a wide influence on the spread of Amida Pure Land teaching as travelling monks used the stories in their preaching to prove the existence of the Pure Land. There was widespread belief in divine phenomena appearing at the death of a great person. The smell of incense, music and purple clouds would appear. Later Shinran described in his poems Honen's death in these terms. However, at his own death no such phenomena appeared, leading his daughter Kakushinni to question whether he had been born into the Pure Land. Her mother Eshinni responded to her question saying that no matter how he died, he went to the Pure Land.

The popular development of the nembutsu was also justified and supported by the spread of the belief in the last age in the decay and disappearance of Buddhism. Pure Land teachers claimed that this teaching was singled out as the practice of the eighteenth vow designated by the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, who became Amida Buddha, especially for people in this last age.

According to the theory, in the centuries immediately following the nirvana of the Buddha Sakyamuni, the influence of his spirit and teaching inspired people to practice the discipline and reach nirvana. However, after about 500 years of the initial True Dharma period, his influence waned. Thereafter, monks only followed the teaching and practiced the discipline, but there was no realization. The second period also lasted 500 to 1000 years and is known as the Semblance Dharma. The final period (mappo) extends for 10,000 years where there is only the teaching of Sakyamuni but no one truly practices or attains realization. Divisions and conflicts arise in the Order and



upheaval in the world. The truth is completely obscured.

However, Pure Land teachers proclaimed that Sakyamuni had taught in the Pure Land Sutras that the vows of Amida Buddha would enable the suffering people of the last age to be reborn in his Pure Land, through recitation of his name. Thereby they would be free from the anxieties and fears of transmigration and ultimately attain Buddhahood themselves, working in oneness with Amida for the salvation of all beings.

Pure Land meditation and recitation were both generally advocated for the last age. Monastic meditation and discipline were available for the more capable, while the recitation of the name was the easy practice for the less spiritually adept. Further, recitation of the name of Amida had two applications. On the one hand, intense recitation of the Buddha's name could produce a trance experience accompanied by visualization of the Pure Land. This was nembutsu samadhi or concentration. On the other hand, for ordinary people, the merit of recitation brought Buddhahood by birth in the Pure Land. The latter practice gathered up the aspirations of the ordinary people who strove through their devotion to reach that Land, where they would meet their ancestors and loved ones who preceded them in death. Services for the dead became a major function of Pure Land teaching, focusing on the funeral and succeeding memorial services to assure that the deceased had the appropriate merit to enter the Pure Land and practice toward attaining Buddhahood.

In Japan the belief in the Pure Land teaching combined also with native beliefs concerning the dead, shaping the Obon commemorations in July or August. In the agricultural context of Japan, it was believed that the dead return from the Pure Land to assist their families with fertility and rain for abundant crops. At the end of the period, the dead return to their abodes aided by lanterns hung out to guide them back to the Pure Land to await another year. Also by the ocean and riverbanks, lanterns would be set afloat to guide the spirits home. There is the belief that the ancestors constantly watch over their loved ones from their vantage point in the Pure Land.

A major step took place in the Kamakura period (1185-1332). There was a flowering of religious insight and creativity, with revival of traditional practices and adherence to precepts in Nara, the emergence of the Zen movement and Nichiren's devotion to the Lotus Sutra, as well as the rising prominence of Pure Land teaching. Evolving from a focus on monastic meditation-contemplation to the recitation of the name of Amida as the means to enlightenment for ordinary people, Pure Land teaching took a new turn with Honen (1133-1212) and his disciples.

Honen continued to emphasize the recitation of the name, but he strengthened its position by claiming that it is the only practice authorized or validated by the Buddha's vow for all people, including monks, in the last age. His nembutsu was called the "exclusive practice of nembutsu." As an independent sect, Honen's Pure Land teaching challenged the supremacy of the monastic Orders, resulting in persecution and exile. Honen's disciples varied in their views of his teaching. Some stressed many recitations, while others held that one recitation was sufficient to assure birth in the Pure Land. For

them birth is the working of the vow and not simply recitation.

With Shinran, another major turn took place in the development of Pure Land teaching. As a result of his personal anxiety and lack of assurance of his ultimate enlightenment, though he practiced 20 years in the Tendai monastery on Mount Hiei, Shinran left the monastery and gained spiritual release and peace through Honen's teaching. He always attributed his teaching to Honen. However, he completely re-interpreted the nembutsu recitation as an expression of gratitude for salvation already assured by Amida's unconditional compassion and trust endowed in us by the working of his vow. The "nen" in nembutsu is not merely thinking on the Buddha, but for Shinran it is trust in Buddha's vow. Shinran's nembutsu teaching transforms the egocentric and pragmatic, goal-oriented, use of nembutsu. It has no purpose other than to express one's trust in, and gratitude for, the emancipation assured by Amida's vow. This assurance is marked by the deep awareness of our passion-ridden nature and the arising of trust in Amida's vow. Shinran declares that true entrusting inspires nembutsu. Nembutsu recitation does not produce trust.

Shinran, in his interpretation, maintained that the nembutsu is the natural expression of one's trust in Amida's vow. The nembutsu for Shinran was no longer a means toward salvation or enlightenment acquired by piling up merit and achieving purification of the mind over many aeons of time. Rather, one recitation inspired by trust in Amida Buddha's vow was sufficient to assure birth in the Pure Land and enlightenment. The nembutsu was the sign that Amida's embrace was already effected and that continuous recitation of the name was an expression of gratitude. With awareness of Amida's compassion in our lives, nembutsu becomes an exclamation of joyful trust.

Shinran's interpretation opens the way to reconceive nembutsu beyond the recitation of a spiritually potent phrase. It focuses our understanding of reality. The nembutsu becomes our portable Buddha altar, accompanying us wherever we may be. The recitation evokes the truth of Amida in our minds. The name of Amida appears to be a mere name, like Sakyamuni or Kannon Bodhisattva. In actuality, it is a name that points away from itself to the all-embracing reality it represents. Amida means Infinite. Thinking on Amida, reciting the name, one immediately becomes aware of the great Infinite that embraces and sustains our lives. We do not think of a particular person, limited in time and space, but our minds transcend all barriers, boundaries, limitations and discriminations. Shinran noted in his *Jinen honi sho* text that Amida with form is not the ultimate truth. Rather, it is the medium by which we are able to know the inconceivable, formless and colorless truth that is the context of the unconditional, universal compassion and spiritual liberation which are the foundation of meaning in this life and beyond.

Understanding Human Nature:  
Christian and Buddhist

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One of the most important aspects of any “theology” or religious philosophy, particularly among the world religions which propose a universal salvation, is the understanding of human nature. Why is humanity in a predicament requiring salvation? Basically, Christianity, the dominant religion of this culture, regards human nature as deeply flawed and corrupted, while Buddhism has generally assumed that human nature is good.

The Christian understanding is based on the story of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis in the Bible. According to this story, Adam and Eve disobeyed God’s command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the forbidden fruit, traditionally interpreted as an apple. The result of eating the fruit was banishment from paradise, the garden of Eden. The knowledge they gained was essentially self-consciousness, expressed in awareness of their nakedness and hiding from God. As a result of this new knowledge, they experienced death for all and, for the woman, pain in childbirth.

The book of Genesis or “Beginnings” simply explained the reason for death and the trauma of child bearing in that ancient society. They did not have the science as we have now to overcome or reduce the pain. However, later Christian interpretation of the text presented it as the fruit of disobedience to God, later called Original Sin, whose predisposition is transmitted to all succeeding generations and peoples. It is a universal phenomenon and the basis for universal salvation advocated by Christianity. This teaching became Catholic dogma in the 5th century C.E. However, in the ensuing centuries, various interpretations have been advanced by Protestants. The more conservative Protestant wing still maintains the doctrine as the basis for evangelism and baptism.

The doctrine of Original Sin enabled Christians to explain the inherent features of human life beyond specific acts such as selfishness and lusts, while also explaining the ongoing history of violence, deceit and conflicts through history from Cain’s murder of his brother Abel to present day crime, resulting from envy, greed, and hatred. History is the record of humanity’s continuing rebellion against God, first expressed in the disobedience of Adam. The teaching justified the belief in the salvation provided by Jesus death and resurrection and the special practice of baptism to remove the stain of Original Sin.

In the case of Buddhism, there is no myth of creation and how things began. Buddhism begins with reflection on the suffering and problems people have in their actual lives. The path of discipline that Gautama established generally assumed that human nature is good, meaning that people have the potential to do good and what is right in the face of those problems, such as birth, illness, old age and death. His approach is based on free will, rejecting fatalism. However, he also taught the principle of cause and effect or karma. Karma creates the predisposition to do good deeds or evil deeds, in a habit-like manner. It does not determine a particular act, but when there is stimulus, such as temptation in some form, the act will take place in accord with that karma.

Buddhism appeals to seekers, maintaining that by engaging in discipline, moral and spiritual, people can transform their destiny, by creating good karmic potential over evil karma. A principle is "Purify the mind and do good." The widely known Eightfold Path is also based in this perspective. It essentially teaches that by having right views or understanding, we abolish ignorance. With ignorance removed, we are capable of right thinking, intention, speech and livelihood. Engaging in meditation, we can attain wisdom or become enlightened. There is no fundamental distortion or corruption in human nature itself that would prevent the practice of this path. In doing so, one is following the pioneer Gautama Buddha.

Nevertheless, it is also understood that in the course of undisciplined living, our ignorance continues to impede us, leading to delusive perceptions and understandings or the misinterpretation of reality such as believing in permanence, a permanent soul entity, which stimulate our greed and hatred, our defilements, attachments, or clinging. This ignorance is not merely ignorance of particular facts, but the unawareness of our true nature and the implications of our living. Egoism or our self-centered focus in life is more the problem than a supposed Original Sin.

The result of this ignorance and unawareness is suffering, individual or social and mental or physical. The Buddhist understanding explains the issues of personal and social life without resort to a theistic God or speculative theories of human nature. It focuses more on understanding the working of consciousness and its relation to the perceived world to which it reacts. One of the major delusions thwarting the attainment of enlightenment and Buddhahood was belief in permanence, i.e. a permanent self, say a soul. This belief leads us to form attachments and relations which we think will enhance and maintain that self. It gives rise also to the desire to continue that existence in death, giving rise to beliefs in the afterlife where personal individuality and earthly human relations continue.

As Buddhism continued to evolve Mahayana Buddhism appeared roughly between 100 B.C. E. and 100 C.E. in North India and Central Asia. Its beginnings are not clear but its teaching became clear with the translation of Sutras into Chinese. The more individualistic approach of the southern Buddhism expressed in the Arhat, who has done all that need be done to secure individual emancipation, broadened to a more cosmic, social understanding of reality and religious ideals. The Bodhisattva who aspires not

only to become enlightened himself also pledges to bring all other beings to enlightenment. Belief in the principle of Interdependence underlies the idea that we can share mutually the truth that we receive. We are not isolated fragments in the cosmos, but interrelated beings with a common destiny. Initially the discipline structured monastic life in China. However, eventually a system of discipline with 10 major and 48 minor Bodhisattva Precepts based on the Brahma Net Sutra took shape which was more consistent with the ideals of Mahayana. They replaced the more elaborate Theravadin 247 Pratimoksha rules. The concept that all beings possess Buddha nature pervaded Chinese Buddhism, supporting the Precepts of Brahma's Net Sutra which taught that layman and monks should follow the same rules.

In addition, there were several philosophical streams in Mahayana, the Middle Path school, taught by Nagarjuna (2nd c. C.E.), The Yogacara (Consciousness Only) school of Vasubandhu (4th c. C.E.) and the holistic, totalistic philosophy of the Hua-yen (Kegon), based in the Hua-yen Sutra. They all held the same assumption of the human potential to gain enlightenment through following the discipline and purifying the self.

Mahayana Buddhist discipline aimed at uncovering the kernel of Buddha nature that lay hidden in the shell of passion and delusion. It attempted to dispel the clouds of ignorance and delusion that shrouded the moon of enlightenment or Buddha nature. Later Chan (Zen) practice in China, Korea and Japan became the most well-known representative of this perspective in East Asian Buddhism.

Within these developments the appearance of the Pure Land teaching became a major feature of East Asian Buddhism. Initially Pure Land teachers interpreted the Sutras, such as the Contemplation Sutra, as a manual of visualization, requiring rigorous discipline and assuming the positive, spiritual capacity of the practitioner.

However, the development of the popular stream of Pure Land teaching offered salvation for ordinary people, incapable of the monastic routines. Teachers justified this transformation with the theory of the decline of Buddhism. With the Buddha receding into the dim past, his influence and spiritual inspiration on practitioners declined. The idea was formalized in the theory of the disappearance of Buddhism (mappo), passing through three stages of the period of true teaching, practice and realization (500-1000 years), the period of semblance/counterfeit Dharma where there is teaching, and practice, but no realization (500-1000). Finally, there was the age of the disappearance of Dharma where there is only teaching but no practice or realization (10,000 years). In China it was generally believed that the final period began in 552 C.E., while in Japan it was thought to be 1052.

The theory implied that the failure of practitioners to achieve birth in the Pure Land or enlightenment was the result of the decline in the spiritual environment where Buddhism became corrupted, falling away from its ideals. It was a time when the five defilements (ignorance, attachments, hatred, pride and jealousy) became rampant in the world, also corrupting practitioners. Still, the assumption was that through the simple practice of nembutsu, name-recitation, evils could be purified and birth in the Pure Land

achieved. This was the main perspective in all forms of Pure Land teaching until Shinran (1173-1263).

With Shinran, there appeared a decisive change in the meaning of practice in Pure Land teaching. According to him, the recitation of the name is neither a practice nor a good deed. It is an expression of gratitude for the compassion and wisdom of the Buddha, already assured. With the trust in Amida's vow, understood as his endowment or gift, trust/faith is not subject to the vagaries of the shifts of our minds. Amida embraces us, never to abandon.

The basis of Shinran's teaching rests on his teaching that our heart-minds are so corrupted by egoism and impurity, that any practice we might do, motivated by our desire to purify ourselves, is impossible. Shinran emphasized personal, spiritual corruption so strongly that modern seekers have interpreted him as extremely negative concerning human nature and too similar to the teaching of Original Sin to appeal to them. However, Shinran, as a result of his failure on Mount Hiei to attain a sense of spiritual security for his life, stressed total reliance on Amida and personal incapacity to achieve birth in the Pure Land by one's own efforts. He observed that all our actions, even religious, are self-serving, for self-benefit. While such efforts do not bring enlightenment, he does not claim that human nature is essentially corrupted as expressed in the idea of Original Sin.

According to Shinran, the awakening of trust in Amida's vow comes about through the Buddha nature which is our true reality. He clearly states that through trust we become aware of Buddha nature (Shin-Bussho) working in us. It reveals both how impure we are and the assurance of Amida's compassion, while transforming our evils to good as ice melts to become water or shards of broken pottery become gold.

There should be no confusion of the Christian belief in Original Sin and the teaching of saving grace and moral life and the Buddhist understanding that human nature, while essentially good as Buddha nature, is shrouded by the corruption which overlays it. Shin Buddhism is consistent with Mahayana principles and should be evaluated on its realistic understanding of human nature and the soundness of its psychological and social insights.

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Buddhist literature is voluminous. It is not, for the most part, something that you sit down and read just for pleasure and relaxation, Sutras (scriptures) we study them whether in the Theravada tradition or the Mahayana and Vajrayana (Esoteric) traditions. Some works like the *Lotus Sutra* and the Pure Land Sutras have become very influential literary classics. In addition to the Sutras, there are numerous commentaries on the Sutras and commentaries on commentaries, making a formidable body of literature for modern scholars to pore over. Some texts have inspired great teachers and significant movements down to our contemporary times. While the texts appear virtually impenetrable to the ordinary reader, there are passages, scattered through the writings, which are redolent with spiritual meaning. We can be grateful to those scholars who have translated these passages for our reflection.

There have been a variety of luminaries in the popular Pure Land tradition. Here we highlight Honen (1133-1212) who established the independent sect of Pure Land teaching in Japan in 1198. Among his several disciples, the most notable and influential in the West has been Shinran (1173-1263), the founder of the Jodo Shinshu sect, familiarly represented in the West by the Hongwanji or Honpa and the Otani or Higashi (East branch). (Readers can find more information on my webpage, [shindharmanet.com](http://shindharmanet.com).)

Honen's famous text *Senchaku-Hongan-Nembutsu-Shu* or *Treatise on the Nembutsu of the Select Original Vow (of Amida)* stresses the centrality of the eighteenth vow of Amida which authorizes the recitation of the name (nembutsu) as the practice established by Amida for all people, monk or lay, in the last age in the decline and demise of the Dharma (mappo). This teaching is based on the story of the Bodhisattva -Buddha to be- Dharmakara in the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*. According to the story, Amida Buddha, as the Bodhisattva Dharmakara, made 48 vows with the purpose of creating an ideal spiritual world where all people born there could easily attain enlightenment.

In his treatise, Honen argued that only the recitation of the Buddha's name (nembutsu) would enable people to be born in the Pure Land during this decadent age of the Dharma. No other practice would avail. His work has been regarded as the founding manifesto for the independent Pure Land movement (Jodo-shu) and was a watershed writing, composed at the request of the Prime minister, Kujo Kanezane, Honen's patron. Despite Honen's request that the book be buried under a wall, it soon became notorious because of its assertion of the exclusive practice of nembutsu, inspiring opposition and refutations such as Myoe's, a famous monk-teacher, in Nara. He wrote *Zaijarin (Tract for Destroying Heresy)*. As a result, the Pure Land sect stirred powerful opposition among the leading sects of the time, the Tendai on Mount Hiei and temples in Nara and eventually led to the execution of some disciples and exile for Honen and his major

disciples.

In this text as Honen lays out the truth of nembutsu and the vow, he declares: *In the next place, if we look at it from the standpoint of difficulty and ease, the Nembutsu is easily practiced, while it is very hard to practice all the other disciplines. For the above reasons thus briefly stated, we may say that the Nembutsu being so easily practiced, is of universal application, while the others being hard to practice, do not suit all cases. And so Amida seemed to have made his Original Vow the rejection of the hard and the choice of the easy way, in order to enable all sentient beings, without distinction, to attain birth into the Pure Land. If the Original Vow required the making of images and the building of pagodas, then the poor and destitute could have no hope of attaining it. But the fact is that the wealthy and noble are few in number, whereas the number of the poor and ignoble is extremely large. If the Original Vow required wisdom and great talents, there would be no hope of that birth for the foolish and ignorant at all; but the wise are few in number, while the foolish are very many. If the Original Vow required the hearing and seeing of a great many things, then people who heard and saw little could have no hope of that birth; but few are they who have heard much, and very many are they who have heard little. If the Original Vow required obedience to the commandments and the Law, then there would be no hope of that birth for those who break the commandments or have not received them; but few are they who keep the commandments and very many are they who break them. The same reasoning applies to all other cases. If, then, we make the Original Vow to consist in the practice of these many forms of discipline, it follows that those who attain birth into Paradise will be few, while the many will fail. We conclude, therefore, that Amida Buddha, when He was a priest by the name of Dharmakara ages ago, in His compassion for all sentient beings alike, and in His effort for the salvation of all, did not vow to require the making of images or the building of pagodas conditions for birth into the Pure Land, but only the one act of calling upon His sacred name. (Harper H. Coates and Ryugaku Ishizuka, *Honen The Buddhist Saint, II*, pp. 344-345.)*

In order to appreciate the significance of this passage, we should take note of the background of Buddhism in Honen's time, during the Heian (794-1185) age Buddhism catered largely to the elite aristocracy. The nobility lived off the labor of the peasants whose crops they took as tax. With that wealth, they built great temples, erected images or sponsored elaborate services dedicated to either the deceased or their own welfare after death through the merit they received from their support of Buddhism and its clergy. The aristocrats tried to maintain the status they held in this world in the next. They also created great works of art which remain today to be admired by hosts of tourists. These services and art were paid for by the sweat of serfs, while those serfs never had the opportunity to see what their labor produced.

This passage is remarkable for its rejection of any form of elitism in the pursuit of



salvation. Essentially, all people are equal, having available the simplest means to fulfill their faith and their hopes. The recitation of Amida Buddha's name, which was designated as the practice of the vow, could be done by anyone, anywhere, anytime, in any number.

Consequently, the passage rejects the need for great temples and images, because it requires considerable wealth to construct them. As an illustration of such aristocratic structures, we can point to the replica of the ancient Byodoin temple in Japan at the Valley of the Temples in Kaneohe, Hawaii which is used as a mortuary. Most people are poor and only few people would make it to the Pure Land, if it was necessary to erect such monumental structures. The poor always outnumber the rich, and would be unable to acquire the requisite merit.

Not only is wealth unnecessary, but great talents or deep wisdom and knowledge are not required. Unlike our time when public education is available for even the poorest person, in ancient times, worldwide, the upper classes become literate because they have the advantages of leisure and wealth. Knowledge is power and, therefore, the wealthy and educated are also able to acquire power and dominate society. People with leisure and resources can travel to important shrines on pilgrimage, presumably benefiting from their prayers and offerings. While there is broader access to the benefits of education and travel, even in our time, great disparities still remain in wealth and opportunity to improve one's lot in life.

Finally Honen rejects moral and spiritual elitism. His statement is significant: "If the Original Vow required obedience to the commandments and the Law, then there would be no hope of that birth for those who break the commandments or have not received them; but few are they who keep the commandments and very many are they who break them."

Honen was no stranger to broken precepts, being a precept master himself in the Tendai tradition. He had to respond to complaints by the authorities about infractions among his own disciples. He realized also that not everybody could become a monk and strive solely for enlightenment. What was an ordinary person to do to assure his enlightenment? We cannot go into detail here except to say that it would take aeons and aeons of time for the ordinary person to purify themselves sufficiently to qualify for enlightenment. The greater mass of people were in this fix.

However, according to Honen, Amida Buddha knew this situation and made it his goal in the eighteenth vow to provide a speedy and effective way for all people, high or low, monk or lay, sinner or saint, to gain birth in the Pure Land and Buddhahood or enlightenment. Honen's teaching marked a turning point in Pure Land teaching, giving it a status beyond the traditional Buddhist teaching, as the universal, singular teaching to attain Buddhahood. The implications of his interpretation of Buddhism aroused

vigorous opposition.

When we observe Pure Land Buddhism today with its otherworldly emphasis and stress on peace of mind in this world, we may wonder why the opposition? Hidden behind Honen's teaching is a sense of the all-inclusive spiritual equality of people which would be contradictory to the Confucian stratified class structure that accompanied Buddhism. Such equality implicitly recognizes the value of the person and the importance of choice in engaging in a practice. Amida Buddha's compassion embraces all beings without discrimination. The term Senchaku in the title of his writing suggests the importance of selection and choice, which also involves a rejection.

Also, important for the opposition whom he aroused, was the implication that the elaborate traditional system of temples, priesthoods, services were really unnecessary and irrelevant to Amida's vow. Perhaps this is the most egregious implication of Honen's teaching. He is suggesting that the entire establishment of Buddhism was not just wrong, but irrelevant and useless for the masses of people. This idea was dangerous because it also threatened the social and economic power of the system. Consequently, when opportunity arose, Honen's movement was prohibited.

Honen's importance in history has become generally limited to being the founder of Jodo-shu. However, we can see that he has a wider significance as an embodiment of Buddha's universal compassion and a voice for human liberation.

17.

Shinran's Non-discriminating Universal Faith

"In reflecting on the ocean of Great Shinjin, I realize that there is no discrimination between the noble and humble, or black robed monks and white clothed laity, no differentiation between between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern. It is a matter of neither practice nor good acts, neither sudden attainment nor gradual attainment, neither meditative practice nor non-meditative practice, neither right contemplation nor wrong contemplation, neither thought nor no thought, neither daily life nor the moment of death, neither many calling nor once-calling. It is simply shinjin that is inconceivable, inexplicable, and indescribable. It is like the medicine that eradicates all poisons. The medicine of the Tathagata's Vow

destroys the poisons of our wisdom and foolishness.” *Collected Works of Shinran*. p. 107  
#51 (*Kyôgyôshinshô*)

Reading this passage, we can observe that Great Shinjin (Great Trust) transcends all dichotomies and dualities based on the religious teachings current in Shinran’s time. He describes here a faith beyond labels, beyond criteria or definition. In our ordinary way of thinking, we distinguish one thing from another. We are essentially analytical in distinguishing all aspects of our world and relationships. Discrimination, polarities, contrasts or dualities are the source of prejudice as we opt for one side or another. Though it is natural for humans to make such distinctions, they have no relevance for the reality and experience of true entrusting or Great Shinjin. Shinran is telling us that Amida Buddha embraces all beings or relationships through true entrusting. There is equal access to Amida’s compassion and wisdom no matter what the position, label, designation or definition we bear in society. We might add here, in our modern times, nationality-ethnic identity, race-skin color or gender orientation (gay, straight, bi-sexual or transgendered), distinctions that Shinran had no knowledge of.

Shinran rejects natural or socially imposed distinctions as having any relevance for determining true entrusting. Moral virtue or achievements in religious practices are of no significance. While such distinctions are a part of our social and cultural lives, true entrusting and spiritual meaning transcend them. Great teachers in Pure Land history are revered their piety expressed in reciting the nembutsu as many as 60 or 70 thousand times a day. We do not know how many times Shinran chanted it. The number is not significant. Considerations of time, when or where, or the amount of practice have no place. Tradition maintains that the nembutsu should be constantly recited whether one is sitting, standing, walking or lying down. Shinran’s most radical statement in view of Buddhist teaching and history, declares that true entrusting is not defined by right or wrong Contemplation (Meditation). We may recall that Right Contemplation is one of the requirements to gain enlightenment in the Eightfold Noble Path set out by Sakyamuni Buddha.

A major implication of Shinran’s statement is that true entrusting is deeply personal and inward. Although he writes from within the context of Buddhism and Japanese society, the meaning and implication of his writing is universal, highlighting the reality of the person. Would it be too much to say that for the first time in Japanese history, Shinran discovered and experienced his reality as a person? His personal emphasis is striking in his various confessions of spiritual limitations, particularly since Japanese culture has been noted for its communal character where the individual is representative of the group, without independent status. Shinran declared that Amida’s vow of unconditional salvation was made for him alone (Tannisho Epilogue). He often stated his personal views, declaring “As for me Shinran...” He declared that even though you might be accused of being a cattle thief, do not put on airs like a seeker of the afterlife. We are not to be controlled by appearances. Rennyo, the Eighth Abbot,

later declared: "Hence, we know that outward appearance is uncalled-for; the One Mind is essential. People of the world say, "Even if the hair is shaven, the mind remains unshaven." (Rennyō goichidai kikigaki 25). True entrusting is not measured by externals, but by how deeply we are committed in our own minds. Shinran valued spirit over form.

Shinran's rejection of external criteria to judge a person's entrusting or faith implies that we should not seek reality outside or apart from ourselves. Religious traditions, however, objectify and externalize spiritual reality. Hence people find their spiritual security believing in systems of doctrine, performing rituals, and heeding hierarchies of control. Buddhism from its beginning has stressed the delusory nature of the external world. In the Zen tradition there is the challenge, if you meet the Buddha, kill him. That is, you must discard the thought of the Buddha as something outside yourself.

In popular Pure Land teaching there has been a tendency to think of the Pure Land as an actually existing world, for instance the Sutra describes it as inconceivably distant from this world to the west. Amida Buddha comes from there to meet believers and welcome them to the Pure Land. According to teachers, such descriptions are upāya, that is, they are compassionate means to encourage the spiritually undeveloped to progress in their understanding of the teaching.

Amida Buddha is not one Buddha among other Buddhas. Shinran understood Amida Buddha as the supreme reality which embraces all beings and is our true self with. According to Shinran, Amida is the upāya-compassionate means by which we know inconceivable, formless reality as it is. Shinran's rejection of external criteria measuring true entrusting correlates with Amida as our deepest inner reality which expresses itself in our aspiration for a higher life, for truth, for meaning. In traditional Buddhist terms, true entrusting is the expression of Buddha nature. Great Shinjin, true entrusting is the realization of Amida's true mind within our heart-mind.

The rejection of external criteria for measuring other people's faith means also to reject control over other people. With no external criteria, no institution can claim to judge who has or does not have it. No individual can judge another. We no longer have means to judge another person's spiritual status. Shin Buddhism offers spiritual liberation and advocates a spiritual brotherhood, a fellowship of equal companions in practicing the faith (dōbō-dōgyō). Hierarchy and elitism that marks religion generally is absent from Shinran's teaching and is clear when he declares that he has no disciples and refuses to excommunicate a follower (Tannishō). He refused to excommunicate an errant disciple, because, as he said, it is Amida Buddha who has given faith to both Shinran and the disciple. Therefore, it was not for Shinran to take back.

Shinran's statement in "the Ocean of Great Trust" is perhaps one of the most remarkable and radical in the history of Buddhism and religion. It is based on the principle of absolute Other-Power which is the foundation of Shinran's reinterpretation of Buddhism and Pure Land teaching. The Ocean of Great Trust (Shinjin) is the mind of

truth of Amida. This mind embraces all reality and is experienced in the power of growth, creativity, the urge to transcend in all life, the aspiration for truth and realization in the human spirit. We are always floating, swimming and living in this sea.

The Ocean of Great Trust is the foundation of life. We live by trust; there is no activity or life situation that does not involve trust. We trust the regularities of nature; all of our human relations are grounded in trust. Without trust we would be cowering in fear or avoiding encounters with others or hiding in shadows to be unobserved and inconspicuous. Fear would govern our lives. We cannot have stable relationships without trust; otherwise suspicion would reign.

Only the person who experiences the Ocean of Great Trust can know that he/she has been embraced by the Buddha. Religious faith is highly personal and inward. It presents a spiritual koan or paradox expressed as in the Zen question: What is the taste of a drink of cold water? How do we describe the deepest reality of our own lives?

The context of Shinran's statement is the discussion of the True Disciple in the volume on Faith-Trust in the *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran's major writing, outlining his understanding of Pure Land teaching. What constitutes a true disciple?

The true disciple is the person who discovers the reality of Amida's vow working in his/her own life.

## 18. Higan: The Festival of Virtue

During September when the Fall Equinox occurs we commemorate the Buddhist festival of *Higan* (彼岸) which means reaching the "Other Shore" in Buddhism, suggesting another world after death. As with many festivals in Japan it became associated with ancestors who have gone to the other shore of the Pure Land.

However, *Higan* in Buddhist teaching referred originally to the attainment of enlightenment or *Nirvana*. In the traditional image, we cross the stream or river of births and deaths using the raft of the *Dharma*. The Dharma represents the teachings, the disciplines and practices required to reach the goal. This shore on which we stand is *Shigan* (此岸)

The observance is held two times in the year, the Spring and Fall equinox, when time is divided evenly between light and dark and the seasons change. This equal division symbolizes the Buddhist middle path which instructs us to strike the balance

between two extremes such as hedonism (the quest of pleasure) and asceticism. Buddhism is a teaching of moderation. Also the equinox calls attention to the Buddhist principle of equality. The length of day and night is equal and suggests the perfection of the order of things.

In the Higan celebration there is an emphasis on virtue, particularly the six virtues which must be fulfilled to attain enlightenment. These are the six *paramitas*. *Paramita* is a Sanskrit term which is the basis for the term Higan in Sino-Japanese. *Param* is other side, while *ita* means *go*. It means to go to the other side or to reach perfection and Buddhahood. The six virtues are selfless giving (*dana*), discipline (*sila*), patient endurance (*ksanti*), effort-energy (*virya*), meditation (*dhyana*) and wisdom (*prajna*).

As an example, in the Pure Land Buddhist tradition, when the *Bodhisattvas Dharmakara* (法蔵) fulfilled these virtues perfectly, he became Amida Buddha. Through his virtue, he attained Buddhahood and established the Pure Land. The process is the same for all other Buddhas and Bodhisattvas (those destined to become Buddhas), in the *Mahayana* tradition.

We should note that some traditions add four more virtues to the six, making ten. In the process of becoming a Buddha, there are ten stages which a Bodhisattva passes through, while developing his spiritual ability. Each virtue corresponds to a stage in the progress to Buddhahood. The additional four are adaptability (*upaya*), vows/aspiration (*pranidhana*), strength of purpose (*bala*), and knowledge (*jnana*).

The initial six virtues focus on the cultivation of our own character, while the final four qualities indicate the abilities that are needed for Buddhist activity in the world. They are the inner and outer traits of a Bodhisattva and also for an effective *sangha* or community of aspiring Bodhisattvas.

While the various Buddhist traditions generally believe in self-perfectibility, achieving enlightenment through their own virtue, Shin Buddhism differs in regarding everyone as foolish being (*bombu* 凡夫) who have no virtue or capacity to attain enlightenment by their own power. Consequently, there is no talk of the cultivation of virtue in Shin Buddhism with the purpose of qualifying for birth in the Pure Land and Buddhahood.

Nevertheless, in reality there is an important place for the cultivation of virtue even in Shin Buddhism. When we look at the life of Shinran and the life of the modern Shin teacher Kiyozawa Manshi, we can see the importance of the cultivation of virtue. Shinran tried for twenty years to follow and live up to Buddhist spiritual ideals. We are told that though he seriously practiced meditation, he was not able to see the “moon of enlightenment.” His passions were overwhelming, despite his effort. It was only through his harsh discipline of life that he was able to realize the power of the Buddha’s compassion which embraces a passion-ridden being such as himself.

The function of cultivating virtue for Shinran was that it revealed to him the strength of his ego and the grip of his passions so that he sought his deliverance through

the compassion and wisdom of Amida Buddha. The serious pursuit of morality brings us face to face with our egoism in our motivations, as well as the quality of our acts.

In Shinran's teaching the rigorous, self-power disciplines and virtues of Buddhism lead us to the compassion of the Buddha and Other Power. Shinran came to understand that if there was a salvation, it could not come from his own abilities but from the power of the Buddha who vowed to save us. Thus he exclaimed in the *Tannisho*: "When I ponder on the compassionate Vow of Amida, established through five kalpas of profound thought, it was for myself, Shinran, alone. Because I am a being burdened so heavily with karma, I feel even more grateful to the Primal Vow which is made to decisively save me."

In our modern time the great Shin teacher and philosopher Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903) tried to fulfill the spirit of Buddhism through his own self-discipline and ability. He lived an ascetic life which he called "the minimum possible." In the end he ruined his health and eventually died of tuberculosis at the age of forty years. As a result of his experience, he came to understand the true Other Power of Amida Buddha who gave him life and sustained him in his time of suffering. He not only experienced bad health, but he lost his wife and two children, as well as the failure of his effort to reform the Higashi Hongwanji institutions. Nevertheless, he inspired many teachers in modern Buddhism even to this day. Efforts to make Buddhism more responsive to the changing conditions of modern life often find their roots in his efforts.

He wrote a text *Waga Shinnen*, (*My Faith*), written only a few days before his death. In it he declares of his total dependence on the compassion of the Buddha. With respect to ethical or moral values, he states:

"The Tathagata is infinite power, Tathagata, through my religious conviction, endows me with a great ability to live. We normally rely upon common sense in determining what action should be taken. But that no longer works when things get complicated. ...In this case we are talking about only the most basic ethical principles and we find it difficult to fulfill even these. Anyone who has earnestly tried to observe each and every one of his ethical principles will have to admit that the task is impossible."

The practice of morality or good deeds has an educative value in guiding us to understand Other Power, that there must be a power beyond us that transforms and encourages us to move forward. However, there is another function of the virtues of Buddhism. That is, we try to fulfill these virtues as a means of assisting the spread of the teaching of Buddhism. As a consequence of our experience of Other Power and attaining the conviction of this truth within in our hearts and minds, we do not simply spread Buddhist ideas, but we witness to the reality of Buddhism in living. In Mahayana Buddhism we make real the principle of *jiri-rita* (自利利他), that is, the benefit we have received, we share with others. In this context, particularly, the last four virtues

[adaptability, vows-aspiration, strength of purpose, and knowledge] are very important. They save Buddhism from being merely sentimentality and enable it to be a force in our lives and those around us.

We are adaptable in finding ways to offer the teaching to others; our vows/aspirations become our intention and motivation to share the dharma; strength of purpose becomes our will and deep desire to make the dharma known; and finally knowledge means that we try to learn as much as we can of the Dharma and the life of people so that we can apply it to our lives. Today there is a greater opportunity for Buddhism to reach people than has ever been true in its long history.

In the moral and political crisis of our times, Buddhism has much to say about the individual and national egoism that leads people into mutual conflict and destruction. Hatred and prejudice, ignorance and intolerance, aggression and violence cannot be the true means to solve human problems. From earliest times Buddhist teachers have repeatedly taught that hatred cannot do away with hatred.

In this Higan commemoration, let us once again recall the life principles and values enshrined in the paramitas, which give us insight into the foundation of true, spiritual peace. May the universal compassion and wisdom of Buddha inspire our minds to embrace all people in the spirit of equality and non-discrimination. May the truth of Higan become the foundation for peace within ourselves and in our world.

## **19. Seeking a Practical Religion**

We often hear people say that they are only interested in religion that relates to everyday life. They want a practical religion, not an otherworldly or abstract, philosophical teaching. They want a religion that "works." The term "practical" however, can have a wide application describing an object like a tool or some activity believed to be useful, effective and feasible. It may mean, for some people, a religion that offers blessings or benefits, ranging from health, happiness, peace of mind, prosperity, success or forms of good fortune. Prayer is considered a practical means to secure these benefits.

Still, other people see the practicality of religion as inspiring moral and ethical or altruistic activities in their day to day activities. People want a religion which is clear about what is right or wrong; setting out clear guidelines or rules for behavior. Thus people regard the ten commandments in the Bible or the five precepts for lay people in Buddhism as guidelines and the essence of religion. It generally means having good



human relations with family, friends and co-workers.

Many people believe that the benefits of religion, in this life or in the afterlife, depend on one's actions, based on the general principle of karma. The short recitation: "Amida Buddha's Golden Chain of Love" used in Hawaii Hongwanji temple services states: "I will try to think pure and beautiful thoughts, to say pure and beautiful words, and to do pure and beautiful deeds, knowing that on what I do now depends not only my happiness or unhappiness, but also those of others." Buddhism teaches: "Purify the mind and do Good." The eightfold path ( [Right view](#), [Right intention](#), [Right speech](#), [Right action](#), [Right livelihood](#), [Right effort](#), [Right mindfulness](#), [Right concentration](#)), and the six paramitas or virtues in Buddhism (selfless giving, discipline, patience, endeavor, meditation and wisdom) have often been interpreted as ethical ideals in Buddhism, aiming to promote peace and harmony in society or creating good citizens.

These illustrations of practical religion do not exhaust the possibilities. There are traditions in religion generally and Buddhism, however, that do not simply advocate adapting to, or conforming to, the authority of society and its rulers. Shinran's Buddhism has its roots also in an ancient tradition of non-conformity, which stresses equality of all beings, who are all endowed with Buddha-nature.

In his *Kyogyoshinsho*, Shinran quotes an ancient Sutra describing the Bodhisattva precepts. It states that a monk (for Shinran, a person with shinjin-true entrusting) does not pay homage to rulers, parents, blood relatives or worship spirits. (Collected Works of Shinran, #102, p. 274. (Hereafter CWS) Religious faith points beyond the partial, limited demands of the state. Hence, we have conscientious objection status in the U.S. as an alternative to military service. This status is grounded in the belief in a universal religious or philosophical obligation not to kill that transcends the demands of the state. This also practical religion.

This principle is also reflected in Shinran's declaration that he never said Nembutsu (Namu amida butsu) even once for the sake of his parents (Tannisho V. CWS, p. 281). Universal human relations, beyond the narrow confines of the biological family, were important for Shinran. We are connected to the whole human community. He stated in that passage that everyone has, at sometime in our successive lives, been our mother and father or brother and sister.

We see it also in his personal criticism of the Emperor and the court ministers of his time, who sent Honen and his disciples, including Shinran, into exile from Kyoto. (CWS #117, p. 289). Refusing to acknowledge the justice of their punishment, Shinran rejected the criminal name Fujii Yoshizane that the government imposed on him, creating his own name Gutoku (foolish/stubble-haired person) as a surname and later added Shinran. He defined himself as neither a monk nor lay person, placing himself outside political or social definitions. In *Tannisho* VII Shinran declares that the gods, rather than being placated and worshipped by us, bow down and worship followers of the Nembutsu. Practical religion for Shinran meant to live in society according to the principles of Amida Buddha's compassion and wisdom as expressed in the Nembutsu.

Taking our lead from Shinran, a practical religion applies the non-discriminating spirit of Amida Buddha to issues in society and human relations. It does not merely follow the prejudices of society. When we understand the history of the great religious faiths, we become more sensitive to issues of justice and fairness. The founders of many faiths, including Shinran, experienced unjust persecution for pursuing their spiritual ideals. A religious faith will not be persecuted if the rulers believe that that faith supports the status quo or social order. Even in our own society, many hold the belief that the central purpose of religion is to produce good citizens in what is widely called “civic religion.” A religion that works toward the transformation of society, seeking peace and justice, may sometimes be at odds with the state.

We cannot say that religious faith by itself can produce solutions to our many complex human problems. However, religious faith is practical in influencing the attitudes and commitments of people to seek just and fair solutions for all concerned. The world religions, including Buddhism, which embrace all people, offer ideals for bringing people together as one humanity beyond nation and race. Nationalistic religion, even when it garbs itself as a world religion, is still a tribal religion, with the survival of the group as its main interest.

Religious faith determines whether an individual pursues self-serving, self-benefiting interests and goals or whether people are motivated by their faith to enhance also the lives of others. Religious faith is not a means for self-satisfaction, but of self-giving. In Buddhism we have the Birth (Jataka) stories of the early lives of the Buddha before his enlightenment. They depict the many instances where the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) sacrificed his life for others. The Mahayana Bodhisattva ideal is built around the principle of sacrifice or deferring one’s own fulfillment or enlightenment for others.

We are now entering in a major political campaign season in our nation and community. We all have the responsibility to think of the welfare of the members our society as we consider our choices. We are creating the future of our country and community, depending on our vote or lack of voting. We should remember that not voting is also a vote, Votes count and we all hold the swing vote.

We each have our vision of our society's future. The question is: does our religious faith, its spirit, principles and ideals have any influence on how we think about issues or the solutions that are proposed by our leaders? Does the practicality of our faith sensitize us to issues and assist our decisions?

This question has become pertinent in recent times since the U. S. Supreme court decided that large corporations are persons, enabling them to donate unlimited sums of money to Superpacs for candidates supporting their interest. The ruling has undermined the significance and role of the individual small donor through the disparity of resources between a corporation and the individual.

Another issue in contemporary politics is the individual and community. On one side, there are those who recognize that we are all part of a community and our personal

achievements are made possible through the support of the community. No one is really self-made, but as we repeatedly hear in our community: “because of you I am what I am.” In 1996 Hillary Clinton wrote a well-received book: *It Takes a Village (To Raise a Child)*. None of us lives in isolation or unconnected in some way from influences which shape the way our lives develop.

On the other hand, there are now those who stress individual achievement, declaring: “I built it.” Advocates of this view exalt the individual and virtually dismiss the role of the community in personal formation. The underlying principle is “survival of the fittest in the competition of life.” A favorite image for individual effort is to pull yourself up by your bootstraps. Though the image is concrete and clear, in actual practice it is impossible. The effort opposes gravity and one’s own weight.

However, Buddhism, as well as the other world religions, observes the interdependent character of all life and reality in the process of cause and effect. Interdependence is a central category of Buddhism, while seeing life as a process of interacting causes and conditions, as a more holistic perspective. The Buddhist understanding of passion and ignorance can sensitize us to the power of our own passions and conduce to a more reasonable and dispassionate approach to problems. Buddhism displaces hatred and prejudice as determining influences in decision making. The recognition of our proneness to delusory perceptions, Buddhism encourages us not to be attached to views, but to strive to see things as they truly are by overcoming the ignorance and passions that distort our minds.

Religious views underly social attitudes and have practical importance. All Buddhists must consider the social implications of equality and non-discrimination stressed in Buddhist teaching. The passage on the Great Ocean of Faith in Shinran's *Kyogyoshinsho* (CWS . #51, p. 107.) makes clear that Amida Buddha does not discriminate in any form, while embracing all beings within his boundless compassion.

--In reflecting on the ocean of great shinjin, I realize that there is no discrimination between the noble and humble, or black robed monks and white clothed laity, no differentiation between man and woman, old and young. The amount of evil one has committed is not considered, the duration of any performance of religious practices is of no concern. It is a matter of neither practice nor good acts... It is simply shinjin that is inconceivable, inexplicable, and indescribable.... (CWS. p. 107 #51)--

All beings are equal before the Buddha and should also be in the eyes of the faithful. What could be more practical than to give flesh and blood to the Buddhist ideal of justice in deciding future directions of our society?

In conclusion, Buddhism is an eminently practical religion. It provides guidance and motivation for action in various areas of life, personal and social, spiritual, and ethical. As followers of Buddha, we must consider carefully the many controversial issues in our

society such as war, abortion, racism, education, poverty, prayer in school, censorship, capital punishment, and ecological questions. The consideration of what is best, not only ourselves personally but for all members of society, is a very practical religious concern.

## **20. Critical Thinking in Buddhism: The Kalama Sutta**

--"Reverend Gotama, who by yourself have understood clearly through direct knowledge, there are some monks and brahmins who visit Kesaputta. They expound, explain and glorify their own doctrines; the doctrines of others they deprecate, revile, show contempt for, and disparage. As a result we are in doubt about the teachings of all of them. Which spoke the truth and which falsehood?"

Buddha said, "Of course, under such circumstances it is only natural to be uncertain and in doubt, Kalamas. When there are reasons for doubt, uncertainty is born. This is how to live:

Do not go by reports (repeated hearing), by legends, by traditions, by rumours, by scriptures, by surmise, conjecture and axioms, by inference and analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by specious reasoning or bias toward a notion because it has been pondered over, by another's seeming ability, or by the thought, 'This monk (contemplative) is our teacher.'

However, Kalamas, when you yourselves know: "Such and such things are unskillful (bad); blameworthy; criticized by the wise; and if adopted and carried out lead to harm and ill and suffering," you need to abandon them.....

So what do you think, Kalamas? Are these things skillful or unskillful (good or bad)? Blameworthy or not? Criticized or praised by the wise? And if undertaken and observed, do these things lead to suffering, harm and ill or not?"...

Great proficiency in living leads to benefit and happiness - equanimity that is free of hate or malice, a hate-free, malice-free, and purified mind. Even in this world, here and now, you should keep yourself free from hatred, free from malice, safe, sound, and happy."... (Kalama Sutta)--

The Kalama Sutta (Sutra) is a famous text, popularly described as Buddha's "charter of free inquiry." It has been used "for advocating prudence by the use of [sound logical reasoning](#) arguments and the [dialectic principles](#) for inquiries in the practice that relates to the discipline of seeking truth, wisdom and knowledge whether it is religious or not. In short, the Kālāma Sutta is opposed to blind faith, dogmatism and belief spawned

from [specious reasoning](#).” (Kalama Sutta, Wikipedia) Here Gotama Buddha gives advice on how seekers should respond when they are confronted by diversity of views concerning the path to enlightenment and spiritual fulfillment, even Gotama's. He advocates a questioning, inquiring spirit, refusing to accept anything simply based on invoking an authority.

This aspect of Buddhism came to the fore at the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 at the Chicago Exposition. While not giving the details of Buddhist traditional beliefs, Buddhist exponents, such as Anagarika Dharmapala of Ceylon (presently Sri Lanka), promoted the harmony of Buddhism and science in contrast to Christianity which conflicted with science, particularly on the theory of evolution. Consequently:

“...the early missionaries of Buddhism to America purposely stripped Buddhism of any elements that might appear superstitious, mythological, even mystical. Dharmapala, Suzuki, and Vivekananda clearly ascertained that Americans measured truth in science, and science posed little theological threat to a Buddhist and Hindu worldview. After all, Buddhism had unique advantages for someone who rejected their faith (Christian) due to its authoritarianism and unscientific outlook. (Martin J. Verhoeven. “Buddhism and Science: Probing the Boundaries of Faith and Reason,” *Religion East and West*, (June 2001, issue 1, pp. 77-97;

<http://online.sfsu.edu/~rone/Buddhism/VerhoevenBuddhismScience.htm>)

According to Dharmapala:

“Buddhism may be called the Religion of Analysis. It analyses every phase of cosmic phenomenon, the constituents that go to make up a human being, and the differentiating states of mentality; it categorizes the differentiation of Good, Evil and Neutral; it rejects every phase of superstitious belief that is based on mere tradition, speculation, revelations, magic, analogy, logic, authority, and collected discourses, and appeals to the purified heart to distinguish the good from the bad, and to avoid doing anything that is correlated with covetousness, anger and lust. All that is pure and free from covetousness, anger and lust are productive of good, and therefore to be acted upon. Such was the doctrine that the Blessed One enunciated to the chiefs of the Kalama country...” (Anagarika Dharmapala, *Life and Teachings of the Buddha*.)

The story of Gotama's search for enlightenment illustrates this principle. During his quest, Gotama did not inquire with religious authorities, but, rather, studied with several teacher-philosophers, similar to Socrates in the West. However, dissatisfied with their teachings, he left them. Eventually he even departed from his five companions who focused on asceticism, which placed severe restraints on the body, in order to pursue an independent path to enlightenment.

Modern teachers of Buddhism often cite the Kalama Sutta to show that Buddhism is a rational and critical teaching for understanding the nature of life and spiritual liberation from the bondage of ego and suffering in its many forms. It aims at seeing

things as they truly are which is a basic principle of Buddhism and its goal. Also it is also fundamental not to be attached to views. According to Dharmapala: "The strongest emphasis has been put by Buddha on the supreme importance of having an unprejudiced mind before we start on the road of investigating the truth. Prejudice, passion, fear of expression of one's convictions and ignorance are the four biases that have to be sacrificed at the threshold." (The World's Debt to Buddhism, A paper read at the Chicago World Parliament of Religions, 1893)

Buddha's Four Noble Truths, which are the basis of his teaching, display a rational analysis where there is a problem, (suffering in life); a cause for that suffering (passions, lust, cravings); and, based on the principle of cause and effect, a solution to the problem, the eightfold noble path. His method is sometimes compared with medical diagnosis and treatment. What, however, began as a philosophical-life discipline approach, common in ancient times, East or West, was transformed over time to a religion replete with myths, legends, a complex symbol system and monastic discipline. Its monastic character, where followers revered monks, and rituals encouraged popular devotion. For many, Buddhism became a belief system rather than a way to understand and deal with life issues.

Gotama lists the various forms of information that should be questioned. [1.] Do not go upon what has been acquired by repeated hearing. False or incorrect information does not become true because it is repeated over and over. People often defend a point of view by repeatedly asserting it, usually with rising voices and tempers. [2.] He cautions against legends which are stories based on unproven facts. A legend or tradition appears factual but cannot be fully verified. Religion and history are full of legends and traditions which are suggestive stories aimed at exalting famous leaders or teachers, or to highlight the truth of a teaching. [3.] He questions rumor, that is, information from unknown and unverified sources usually circulated from one person to another. We also call it hearsay. Through modern media urban legends and rumors spread rapidly.

[4.] Even scriptures are to be questioned. Scriptures gain their authority through belief in their divine origin or that they record the words of a sage. In tradition they become unquestioned. In Gotama's day, the Indian Vedic scriptures were viewed as sacred revelations. In our day, the Bible is regarded by most Christians as the Word of God, though conceptions vary. The belief in the divine inspiration of the Bible is the basis for some of our highly polarized social issues, where people invoke the Bible as the authority for political or social views. Muslims regard the Qur'an as a revelation directly given to Mohammed and accept the principles he taught as God's (Allah) laws for governing society. Jewish tradition regarded the Torah, first five books of the Bible as a body of laws, similar to the later Qur'an. However, the Jewish Rabbis (teachers) relied on reason to interpret the meaning and application of those laws. A story is told that once in a dispute one rabbi insisted on his opinion as the truth in the dispute, and threatened to call down the voice of God back him up. However, the other rabbis replied that the voice of God is no substitute for a good reason and argument and they would not

accept the decision even if the voice of God supported it. Revelation cannot replace reason. In our modern time we are reminded by Porgy's comment that what's written in the Bible, ain't necessarily so. [5.] We are not to simply accept a surmise, something accepted as true while as yet unproven. We make surmises frequently, concluding that something is true, though we may not have all the facts or information. Such conclusions are easily shaped by prejudices and are to be questioned, even when recognized authorities assert them.

We are not to accept something because it is an axiom, axiomatic, that is, an unquestioned, apparently self evident, or assumed truth. To question an axiom seems to go against reason, but may be the highest reason. Many things once accepted in society as axioms, givens, such as the separation of races, male superiority, that the earth is flat, etc. have given way to questioning, resulting in the progress of society and culture. [7.] Specious reasoning asserts ideas which are plausible, seemingly correct or logical but with investigation are found to be erroneous or false. They can be what we regard as half truths. Political campaigns and religious debate often employ such assertions. [8.] We are to check our biases or prejudices that arise from long study of a teaching or subject matter. [9.] We should not be swayed to accept ideas simply because of the ability or expertise of the exponent. Having advanced academic degrees does not automatically make a person an authority in any field other than the field he/she has studied. [10.] The final consideration questions even one's teacher. According to Gotama, one should not accept a teaching simply because one's teacher advocates for it. In all traditions this is the most difficult. Lecterns and pulpits are the strongest barriers to questioning.

Running through these ways of acquiring information and achieving spiritual understanding and faith is the issue of authority. There is a contemporary motto: "Question authority." Ultimately, no matter what the character or the source of an idea, we each have to judge whether that idea is fruitful or unfruitful for our lives. As the Buddha charged his disciples at his death to be a refuge to themselves, a light for themselves, so here also the responsibility for determining the truth of your life is within yourself. Thus the Buddha concluded: "Kalamas, when you yourselves know: 'These things are good; these things are not blamable; these things are praised by the wise; undertaken and observed, these things lead to benefit and happiness,' enter on and abide in them."