

**Religion and Language:  
The Soteriological Significance of  
Religious Language**

Akira Omine

Center for Contemporary  
Shin Buddhist Studies  
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Number One



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## Editor's Preface

In August 1998, the Institute of Buddhist Studies and Buddhist Churches of America hosted a seminar and public lecture by Professor Akira Omine, a leading Japanese scholar in the field of religious philosophy.

Currently a professor at Ryukoku University, Professor Omine is also an emeritus professor of Osaka University, and a well-known haiku poet. He is the author of many texts, including *A Study of Fichte*, *Thoughts of Flower and Moon*, *Shinran's Cosmology*, *The Dynamism of Shinran*, and *Why Does the Name Save?* Professor Omine is also on the faculty of the Doctrinal Research Center of the Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha.

On August 11, 1998, Professor Omine conducted an IBS seminar on the topic of "Religion and Language: The Soteriological Significance of Religious Language." Professor Omine then presented two public lectures on the topic, "Jodo Shinshu in the 21st Century: A Return to the Starting Point of Religion." The lectures took place on August 14th at the Mountain View Buddhist Temple and August 16th at the Los Angeles Honpa Hongwanji Buddhist Temple. Both lectures were sponsored by the BCA Centennial Lecture Series, BCA Ministers Association, Yehan Numata Foundation, and IBS Center for Contemporary Shin Buddhist Studies.

Professor Omine's lecture at the IBS seminar was given in Japanese and an English translation is prepared by the Center for Contemporary Shin Buddhist Studies.

David Matsumoto  
Director, Center for Contemporary  
Shin Buddhist Studies



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## Religion and Language: The Soteriological Significance of Religious Language

Akira Omine

### What is Language?

Although it is possible to approach religion from various angles, here I would like to consider it from the perspective of the nature of language. That is to say, it is in the sphere of religion that the question "What is language?" becomes a fundamental issue. Ordinarily we think that language is treated carefully in areas such as literature or poetry. The language arts give expression to all things through words, giving them preference over colors or sounds. Yet, in the language arts, words do not reach the point of being able to lay bare the deepest foundations of language. This is because literature presupposes the existence of language.

In religion, by contrast, the source of language can be experienced for the first time when words become manifest in human life. In other words, religion is none other than that place where language is realized as the route of communication between human beings and that which transcends them, such as gods or buddhas.

This can be understood by looking at the various religious literature from the past. For example, in the opening passages of the Book of Genesis in the Old Testament of the Bible it is recorded that, "God said, 'Let there be Light,' and there was Light." In the Book of Exodus, Moses stands before the God (Yahweh) on Mount of Olive and asks, "What is your name?" The God answers him by saying, "I am that I am." Here also God is saying that there can be no existence of God without words or a name.

The Old Testament prophets took the place of God to speak the will of God to the people. They were none other than the "mouths of God." The most straightforward example of this can be seen in the opening passage of the Gospel According to St. John (1,12), in which he says, "In the beginning, there was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.' Also, "To one who receives and has faith in me, I will bestow the name 'child of God.'" Later, it is said that the divine Word became flesh and dwelled among human beings as the Christ.

In the Buddhist tradition as well, Buddha and language stand in close relation to each other. This can be seen in such expressions as "Buddha's exposition," "Buddha's words," "person of true words," "person of real words," and "one who speaks thusness."

However, even "Buddhism," meaning the teachings that Śākyamuni imparted through language, is just a term used in scholastic Buddhism. The traditions within the Path of the Sages, such as Tendai, Kegon, or Hossō, are paths in which one seeks to attain the realm of enlightenment through the reading and interpretation of Buddhist scriptural texts and through conceptual

language. However, just as Śākyamuni responded to provisional argumentation with silence, there also has existed, since the very beginnings of the Buddhist tradition, a criticism directed toward the standpoint of conceptual language

This criticism of language reappears clearly in the *Mūlamadhyamaka-kārikā-sāstra* of Nāgārjuna in his treatment of Hīnayāna metaphysics. Later, the Chan tradition in China developed standpoints of “no dependence upon scriptural words realizing enlightenment” (*furyū monji*) and “direct pointing to one’s mind and seeing one’s own nature” (*jikishin ninshin*). They emphasized that language does not constitute the route to the truth. According to this view, one’s encounter with the truth comes about when one breaks through and overcomes all language. Yet, as a result of the accomplishment of this kind of direct experience with reality in the Chan/Zen tradition, it has come to be expressed, contrarily, through a great variety of words. One might say that the Chan/Zen tradition possesses a volume of words surpassing loquacity. Such being the case, one can say that the fundamental purpose of Buddhism is not to negate language, but rather in its teaching of the correct attitude one should have in regard to language.

In Pure Land tradition, which is based upon the *Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, the role of language attains maximum scope. The fundamental notion in that Sutra is that of the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha, which saves sentient beings by becoming the Name (or, Word), “*Namuamidabutsu*.” The word “of” in the phrase “the Name of the Tathagata” does not indicate the genitive case in which two things are joined together. Rather, it describes a unique relationship whereby the Tathagata is the Name, and

the Name is the Tathagata. This means that no Tathagata exists apart from the Name that calls to sentient beings. In the case of the “Word of God” in the Judeo-Christian traditions, God and Word are apparently distinguished as two separate things. This is because God speaks of some matter to human beings. The Name “*Namuamidabutsu*” is not like that. The Name does not mean that the Tathagata speaks about it as if it were some other matter, but rather that the Tathagata speaks of itself, announcing itself and revealing itself as Name. When the Buddha completely becomes the Word and the Word fully becomes the Buddha, this is the Name of the Primal Vow.

The 18th Vow of Amida Buddha, which aspires to save the sentient beings of the ten directions through *Namuamidabutsu*, is a truly profound and magnificent idea that was discovered by human beings. The unknown geniuses in India who authored the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* at approximately the beginning of the Common Era must have perceived the true spirit of Śākyamuni here. They must have realized that the words being spoken by the universe—the universal language, or, that is, the language being spoken by the Tathagata—is the very life that supports us. This is the profound truth which the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* seeks to explain in its narrative account, for it can be stated in no way other than in a story. For this reason the Sutra in the form of a myth or vision-like account.

However, it has become very difficult for people living in the contemporary world to experience directly the unfathomable and inconceivable mystery of language. One understands this by observing the fact that, even at Dharma gatherings which people

come to hear the Shin Buddhist teachings, fewer and fewer voices can be heard reciting the Nembutsu. It is getting harder and harder to understand the truth that the only place where we may connect with the Tathagata is in the true Word. This situation probably exists for the reason that, in our view, words are nothing more than tools, which we devise and use. That is to say, the notion that words are nothing more than simple signs has gained extensive control over the thinking of modern-day people.

John Locke (1632–1707), an English 17th Century philosopher stated that humans are social animals, and that language is a tool which humans use to make their respective intentions known. With the advancement of science and technology, this view of language came to be seen as self-evident, and widespread acceptance came to be given to the view that language is nothing more than a means for the transfer of information by human beings. This way of thinking lies at the base of the consciousness of people in the contemporary world. Yet, as long as language is nothing more than a tool for people to use in their social lives, then religion, in which people are saved through the Word, cannot become established. This would cause the collapse of very foundation of Shin Buddhism, which holds that the Buddha is the Name and that people who entrust in the be saved. The problem, however, lies in the question of whether language is nothing than a human tool as Locke had posited.

I believe that Locke's view of language applies only to the language of everyday life, the purpose of which is practicality or utility. Certainly, words in our ordinary lives are always used as means to obtain some end. For example, if I go to a flower shop and say, "Please give me that rose," I use those words in order to

obtain a rose. Upon receiving the rose, those words are no longer of any use and I discard them. The realm of our everyday lives is such that, in the instant that words are born, they immediately die. There, the possibility that words could be born, become perfected, and continue forever does not arise. Words are never anything other than simple means and never become identical with the end itself. Thus, in our ordinary lives, we may seem to put our faith in language, but, in reality, we do not. We are not able to encounter true language in the sense that, upon saying or hearing that language, our salvation could be immediately realized. Shinran stated the world of ordinary beings, filled with blind passions, is entirely “empty and false” (*soragoto tawagoto*). I believe that he was describing the state of our everyday life, in which we cannot get beyond the sign-like words that we use within it.

### Poetic Language Holds Things within It

Such ordinary words of everyday life do not comprise all language. Within language, there is a deeper dimension, which Locke’s view of language cannot reach. For example, logos, or rational language and concepts, which constitute the means for academic cognition, are not the terminology of ordinary, everyday life. This is because, unlike everyday language that temporarily passes over the surface of a thing, conceptual language enters into the interior of the thing and gives expression to its essence. However, a still deeper dimension of language than that is the dimension of poetic language. Although it is generally

thought that the language of poetry is made up of subjective expressions that do not correspond to any real-life object, poetic language is, in actuality, exactly the opposite. As I stated previously, ordinary language is like a sign that seeks to refer to an actual thing from the outside. In contrast to that, poetic language holds within it the actual thing itself. The Swiss thinker, Max Picard (1888-1965) had this to say about the difference between ordinary and poetic language. "With ordinary language, human beings hear what they are saying about people and things. With poetry, humans hear what the thing is saying about itself."

The essential nature of poetic language, for example, is clearly expressed in these haiku by the poet Bashō.

The scattering petals of  
the wild butterbur.  
The sound of a waterfall.

Looking closely.  
The nazuna is  
flowering by the hedge.

For the reader of these poems, the yellow color of the butterbur flower, the sound of the waterfall, the white nazuna flower and the spring hedge all vividly come to mind. One who is moved by these verses finds herself being moved by the inconceivable mystery whereby language is able to hold things within it. How is it, we ask, that the words of the poet can embrace an actual thing? It is because they are words born naturally out of a selflessness realized when one has discarded the calculation of self-consciousness. Bashō constantly teaches us of the essential mind of selflessness that lies at the base of poetry.

Heidegger, who deeply considered the profound, essential nature of language, said much the same thing. According to him, poetic composition calls out (nennen) the name of the gods (or, things). This is not an arbitrary operation in which we affix a name, as if it were a label, to the surface of an already-known object, as we do in ordinary life. Rather, human beings respond to the sacred Word with which the mountains, rivers, grass and trees all call out to us. Heidegger says, "Being able to call the name of the gods becomes possible for the first time when the gods themselves call out to summons us. The words calling the name of the gods are always our response to their summoning call," Here the philosopher teaches us the truth that language transcends the relationship between human beings and brings human beings into conversation with that which transcends them.

He states that language is truly an inconceivable mystery. Although we may think that human beings speak language, in fact it is the language that is speaking. This abrupt assertion is probably difficult to understand, for we normally believe that humans possess words. For example, since I am now speaking here, most certainly a person ("myself") is speaking. This is not untrue. However, what makes it possible for this person to speak? This is the question that Heidegger raises. While it is a fact that human beings speak language, he draws our attention to the inconceivable mystery that allows humans, who are limited and bound to die, to speak language.

A Locke-like interpretation of language removes this inconceivability. We may feel, somehow, that we can understand the idea that human beings use language in order to exchange



intentions with each other. However, even though we may concede that point and allow that use of language as a tool, the question is why this is possible. How is that this tool is able to become identical with human thought? Heidegger states that it is because language itself helps humans to speak. "If language does not speak, then humans will not be able to speak."

"Language speaks" ("Die Sprach Spricht.") This simple German phrase contains Heidegger's fundamental view of language. Ordinarily, emphasis would be placed on the word "speak," leading to the conclusion that it is humans who speak. However, Heidegger places emphasis on "words." This leads to the question of "who" is doing the speaking, to which he answers, "The true subject which speaks words is language itself."

This is probably a little difficult to understand. Because it contains statements such as this, philosophy is often said to be difficult. However, as far as we are concerned, the -opinion that is difficult to understand is the one that determines that it is humans who speak. The reason that this opinion is hard to understand is that it alone cannot resolve the problem of language. When he says, "If languages does not speak first, then human beings will not be able to speak," Heidegger means that, prior to its being a tool that is used by humans, language is the foundation which supports human beings themselves. Thus, Heidegger was not satisfied with the understanding of language that regards only its everyday, ordinary usage. Instead, he tried to penetrate into the essential depths of language itself. Heidegger was able to come to this view, not through the standpoint of philosophical theory, but by listening to the words of the poets.

### The Tathagata becomes Language

Unlike Heidegger, however, I believe that poetic language is not the deepest dimension of language. The notion that things speak to human beings and humans respond to them remains an ideal from the standpoint of poetry, but it does not come to exist in a pure sense. Although it might be said that the basis of poetry lies in “no mind,” it still presumes some kind of self-power in the form of the poet’s gifts or talents. The poet responds to the call of the gods with words that he himself is able to discover. This means that humans are saved through human language and not through language itself. However, human existence is supported from the very base of the existence of language, which is not a human possession. Poetry is not a standpoint from which this ultimately profound human experience can be realized, because with poetry human beings still rely upon their own abilities and egos, and, as a result, the final form of language cannot be discerned.

The final dimension of language comes to be revealed when we fully are able to know the limitations of all human language, including poetic language.

For ordinary beings filled with blind passions, in this fleeting world which is a burning house, all things without exception are empty and false, completely without truth or sincerity. The Nembutsu alone is true and real.

This passage from *Notes in Lament of Divergence* (*Tannishō*, Postscript) teaches us that an encounter with the

Name, that is, the true Word, may be realized for the first time within our despair over human language. The description of a world of ordinary beings of extreme evil who are transmigrating in samsaric existence in which everything is completely empty and false refers not only to the futile falsity of all things, but also to “empty” language. “Empty” here means that things and the words that refer to them are not in conformity. Because other people and we ourselves speak “empty” words, we suffer in transmigration and are not able to escape from the world of words. Yet, however much suffering “empty” words may bring about, we cannot exist without language. Just as water is to a fish, language constitutes the basic ground level for human beings. Human beings are only able to be human in the midst of words.

That being the case, the salvation of human existence can only be through true language, that is, language which arose from Dharmākara Bodhisattva’s mind of non-self which negated itself in order to save sentient beings. “True and real” in the phrase, “The Nembutsu alone is true and real,” refers to the Name “*Namuamidabutsu*”, or that is, the Tathagata which becomes true language in the very midst of the deluge of “empty” language. The empty world of ordinary beings is supported by the single true and real Word, which is the Name.

In answer to the question of why the Primal Vow of the Tathagata selected the sole practice of recitation of the Name, the Master Shan-tao states in his *Hymns in Praise of Birth* that “it is because reciting the Name is easy.” Here “easy” means that it is not necessary for us to leave our world, that is, the world of language. What is important is simply that we discard our own calculation. In the true essence of the Pure Land Way, the salva-

tion of this self, just as I am, is actually none other than salvation through the Name.

What is the true essence of the Pure Land Way (Jōdo Shinshū)? I believe that it is the inconceivable awakening to the reality that the Tathagata is, in fact, a single, true Word, that is, true and real language. No matter how much we may look upon words as being tools which we are in possession of, language, in reality, is a gift to human beings which comes from a locus prior to humans. Original language, which is the Name of the Buddha, always exists prior to human existence. Human beings are enabled to live through the truth of language. In teaching us that the sentient beings of the ten directions are saved through the Name of the Buddha alone, the words of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* reveal to us the fundamental structure of human existence.

The Name, “*Namumidabutsu*,” is not a self-powered incantation to be recited by human beings. It is not a tool. The Name is the Word that comes from the Tathagata; it is the Tathagata, which has become language. It enables us to understand the unfathomable compassion of the Tathagata, which makes itself into the Name in order to save desperate ordinary beings like us, deluded by language, yet unable to escape from it.

This lecture was presented at the Institute of Buddhist Studies: August 11, 1998. English translation by Rev. David Matsumoto.

