

**Jōdo Shinshū in the 21st Century:  
A Return to the Starting Point of Religion**

Akira Omine

Center for Contemporary  
Shin Buddhist Studies  
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Number Two



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A Return to the Starting Point of Religion

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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 Public lectures were 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



# Contents

THE SECULARIZATION OF RELIGION .....	1
WHAT IS THE TRUE ESSENCE OF THE PURE LAND WAY (JODO SHINSHU)? .....	7
SHINJIN IS THE ETERNAL NOW .....	14





Jōdo Shinshū in the 21st Century:  
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Akira Omine

The Secularization of Religion

I am the resident priest at a temple near Mt. Yoshino in Nara, Japan. Although I was born within a Shin Buddhist temple, my academic area of specialization has focused entirely upon modern Western philosophy, primarily religious philosophy. Since I was young, I have always been most interested in the topic of religion. Yet, in my youth, I was totally unable to entrust my life to the Buddha.

It is doubtful whether all persons who have been born and reside in Buddhist temples entrust themselves to the Buddha. They may put their faith in many things other than the Buddha, such as worldly affairs, money, status, reputation, or their own talents. I sometimes think that, when persons who do not reside in temples put their faith in such other things, well perhaps that cannot be helped. However, it is frightening to think that a person may live within a Buddhist temple and yet not entrust in the Buddha. I feel that it is as though a devil were

residing there. What does it mean when persons who reside in a Buddhist temple do not entrust themselves to the Buddha? I am often made to reflect upon this question, for in recent days, this is the sense I get when I go to Shin Buddhist temples. The members who go to the temple for services entrust in the Buddha and yet the persons who reside there do not. What could this mean?

I believe that this is proof of the extraordinary “secularization” of religious organizations. In this contemporary age, religion has become exceedingly “worldly,” or secularized. Just because people wear *okesa* or are referred to as temple priests it in no way means that all such persons possess religious minds. Not only that, there are very many cases in which people have the misunderstanding that, by working hard to take care of temple affairs, they are somehow being “religious.” It seems that there are many people who have a simplistic kind of confidence that they are being “religious” by doing things to support their lifestyle. Yet few people reflect on whether this belief is true or not. It is easy for those involved to fall into the trap of thinking that religion is an occupation. There are many cases when people have the mistaken impression that they are following the true essence of the Pure Land way (Jōdo Shinshū) simply by working hard on behalf of temple affairs.

For that reason, I believe that in the contemporary age it is not necessarily accurate to say that religion is “religious” simply because it exists in a “religious” form. There are many cases when it takes on a seemingly religious form, but, in actuality, it is engaged in secular, or worldly, operations. Some reflection on this matter is taking place within the Shin Buddhist

tradition, but in certain kinds of religions, such reflection is entirely absent. This point is frequently raised. For example, there are many priests who think that by working diligently to maintain the graves in the cemetery they are being “religious.” What is truly important, however, is that we return once more to the starting point of Buddhism instead, and looking after graves is totally unrelated to the original teachings of the Buddha. What we must seek in Buddhism or in Jōdo Shinshū is to understand the way of life and teachings of the founders.

For example, in the case of Christianity, what must be considered important is not what the Catholic Church may say, but what Jesus said or how Jesus lived. We can understand where the starting point of religion is by looking directly at the words of Jesus that are set forth in the Gospel According to St. John in the Bible. We will not find it in the theological or doctrinal pronouncements issued by the Catholic Church. In the case of Jesus, religion can be found in the discarding of one’s small self, or ego. For example, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whosoever believes in me will not perish even after death.”

This “me” in whom Jesus urges his followers to believe, is “I” who am ‘the life.’ He is saying “I am life itself, which transcends the individual self; therefore, believe in me.” This does not urge people to believe in Jesus the individual person, but to believe in great, divine life, which manifests itself as Jesus Christ. That is to say, the person who entrusts one’s small, individual self to the divine life will be able to live truly and thus will not die. Jesus taught people about the way, can allow them to live truly. Aside from that, he taught nothing at all. One believes in the great, divine life and discards one’s own small,

individual self, or ego. This is the same as love. In this way, the starting point for all religions is revealed in the words of Jesus. Viewed in this way, there are similarities with the words of the founders of all religions.

Although Śākyamuni Buddha and Jesus appear to have been entirely different kinds of religious individuals, I do not believe that they were that different. In the case of Śākyamuni as well, we must not get caught up in doctrinal details or artful wording, or make statements based on fixed concepts. What is important is that we reform our thinking by returning to the starting points of Buddhism or Christianity. This does not mean that we start from the teachings of any particular sect of Buddhism. Rather, it means that we return to the living source of the Buddhist teachings itself.

When Śākyamuni stated that he had abandoned the self—that he had become the enlightened one, free of delusions—he meant that he had discarded his own small self. From this standpoint he discovered that the Buddha-nature possessed by all beings was identical to his own, and that he was one with all beings. In declaring that he had become the enlightened one—the Buddha—he was saying that he had discovered the Buddha within even a single insect or a single flower. Within the abandonment of the self lies true freedom. Although he had previously been deluded and confused as to the questions of birth and death, his declaration that he had become the Buddha, free of delusions, meant that he had been able to awaken to boundless life itself. On this point, there is very little difference between Śākyamuni and Jesus.

Statements like “Return the origins of Jōdo Shinshū!” or

“Return to the spirit of Shinran!” are made often and in many venues. However, if we simply return to the spirit of Shinran, we will just end up talking about things from the perspective of Shin Buddhism. In this contemporary age, that kind of limited discussion would be too narrow. It is most important that we consider Shin Buddhism from the standpoint of our return not just to the starting point of Shinshū, but to the starting point of religion itself. By so doing, our thinking about Jōdo Shinshū would become flexible, supple, broad, free, and very much alive.

Shin Buddhist doctrine is the result of a very long tradition. We must not, however, get caught up with the mere superficial aspects of doctrinal language. This applies, for instance, even to the notion of “birth in the Pure Land.” Many have convinced themselves that this means that, after death, we go to a place called the Pure Land, which is a peaceful and happy world. Yet, Shinran Shōnin himself did not say that at all. Why, then, do so many people have that impression? Even Rennyo Shōnin stated that “The person who wishes to go the Land of Ultimate Bliss to attain happiness will not become a Buddha.” Anyone who thinks that the goal of Shin Buddhism is to be born into ultimate bliss needs to carefully consider these words of Rennyo Shōnin.

A person may wish to be born because he is suffering in this world and believes that, in the next life, he will go to be born in the Land of Ultimate Bliss and finally be able to live a happy life. But, such a person cannot become a Buddha. He will simply continue to transmigrate in samsara. This is the true essence of the Pure Land Way (Jōdo Shinshū) that was taught by Shinran Shōnin and Rennyo Shōnin. The mind that desires to be born for

such a reason is nothing more than a mind possessed of blind passions. Desiring happiness is one function of the mind of blind passions. The Pure Land in which one desires to be born in order to find pleasure actually represents one's wish to satisfy one's blind passions. The mind of blind passions wants to feel good while sitting atop a lotus blossom. This is a desire to reach a pleasant state, perhaps a little better than soaking in a hot bath. It has nothing to do with the Pure Land. It is a form of hedonism in that it seeks the satisfaction of one's blind passions on a broader scale in a world after death. What is the meaning of "birth?" And what did Shinran Shōnin mean when he spoke of "birth?" These are the points that we must return to with all seriousness.

Looking at various academic articles in the field of Shin Buddhist studies, we can recognize that they contain a great deal of knowledge. However, it seems to me that they do nothing more than engage simply in a conceptual analysis, and they fail to look sufficiently into the question of what exactly is being said by those words. Unless we try to read and understand the words of the scriptures with a fervor encompassing our entire being, then we will be left with a simple study of words.

I recall that a theologian from Harvard University once remarked that Shin Buddhist scholars engage in "reading without thinking." In other words, they simply read the scriptural texts without engaging in thought. Thinking, however, is important. Each of us must think for ourselves, for instance, about what "birth" really means. "Thinking," however, is not simply theoretical or logical argumentation. "Thinking" means that we come to understand the meaning of the word "birth" by returning to

the experience which lies at the very ground of that word. Without doing that, the word “birth” will never come alive. There are those who assert that religion is a matter of faith, and that it has nothing to do with “thinking.” That is not true at all, however. That kind of argument does not really result of their own entrusting minds (*shinjin*); rather, it represents their particular view regarding *shinjin*. Thus, an effort to consider the purity of “thinking” is not inconsistent with *shinjin* in the least. In fact, I believe that “thinking” is indispensable to true *shinjin*.

What is the true essence of the  
Pure Land Way (Jōdo Shinshū)?

The first portion of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* expounds the teaching of the Vows over which the Dharmākara Bodhisattva pondered during five kalpas of profound thought.

The Bodhisattva Dharmākara pondered for five kalpas until he discovered the means by which he could become a Buddha and save all sentient beings throughout the ten directions of the universe without fail.

Here “pondered” refers to “thinking.” The Sutra teaches that the Bodhisattva thoroughly considered this matter over limitless time. The primary source for the fulfillment of the Primal Vows of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara and Amida Buddha was the Buddha’s superlative “thinking”—this limitless “pondering.” The Buddha deeply pondered on sentient beings by abandoning, or, negating his own self.

What does it mean to “think about an object?” Kitaro Nishida, the founder of the famous Nishida school of philosophy, said that “One thinks about an object by becoming the object.” “One thinks by becoming the object; one acts by becoming the object.” This was his famous expression. Even though we may think that we are thinking in the sense that we might move our minds just a little, this is not what it means to think truly. We must abandon our ego and completely become the object itself before we will be able to say that we truly “think about an object.” Simply engaging in mental exercises with the intention of thinking does amount to “thinking” at all. True “pondering” occurs where one thoroughly negates one’s own self and completely becomes the object. This is what Kitaro Nishida has taught us.

When Dharmākara Bodhisattva thought about saving the sentient beings in the ten directions, he abandoned, or, negated himself. He thought about sentient beings by becoming them. He thought about the object by becoming the object. Here object refers to sentient beings. The Buddha did not merely engage in subjective thinking within his mind. If all he had done was to think about them in his mind, his Vow to save all sentient beings without fail would not have come to be fulfilled. He thought about sentient beings by negating himself and becoming sentient beings. In the same manner as Nishida’s philosophy sets forth, Dharmākara Bodhisattva thought about sentient beings by becoming the object of his thought. If he had thought only about becoming Buddha, and cut himself off from sentient beings, he could not have saved them. When he thought about sentient beings by lowering himself to their level and becoming the very beings so difficult to save, then for the first time he was able to



discover the means by which they could be saved without fail.

Thus, the primary foundation of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* is the Primal Vow of Amida Buddha. However, it is important that the Tathagata engaged in “pondering” in order to fulfill that Vow. He had to “think.” This was not an act of human thought, for it was pure and undefiled. We tend to believe that thinking requires the existence of a person who thinks. However, pure thinking does not refer to that trivial, subjective kind of thinking, but rather to a much more fundamental and vast manner of thought. Here there is no room for concerns about personal convenience or cost-benefit analysis. The ego is completely absent. Thinking involves total self-negation. As long as the self exists, one cannot truly think about an object. Truth in Jōdo Shinshū arises from this true thinking. This is the important point that I wish to make.

It must be made clear that the true essence of the Pure Land Way (Jōdo Shinshū) is the extensive, great, unbounded and true Name of the Tathagata’s Primal Vow. It is not a title on a placard for a particular sect of Buddhism. Shinran Shōnin most certainly did not use the word Jōdo Shinshū to indicate the title of a sect.

In the opening passage of his treatise *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, we find the phrase, “As I respectfully consider the true essence of the Pure Land Way (Jōdo Shinshū)...” These words would be quite strange if they were intended to refer to a sect which Shinran Shōnin had created. If he were stating that he was respectfully considering a thing that he himself had produced, then he would have been an odd person indeed. Therefore, it is clear that the word Jōdo

Shinshū in this passage is Shinran's reference to the Buddha's truth which appeared before him. It refers not to any doctrine which Shinran himself may have created, but rather to the teaching of Śākyamuni himself. Jōdo Shinshū is the Buddha's teaching and so he quietly considers it. Jōdo Shinshū is the Name of truth; it does not refer to the title of a sect.

Shinran Shōnin also wrote in his *Hymns on the Pure Land Masters* and in numerous other texts that it was Hōnen Shōnin who discovered the Pure Land Way. Shinran Shōnin's phrase, "Jōdo Shinshū" and Hōnen Shōnin's phrase, "Jodoshu" came to be used by people in subsequent years as sectarian titles. Shinran, however, never spoke of Jōdo Shinshū in that way. Shinran said that the first person to encounter and discover this true essence was Hōnen Shōnin. It is clear that the word Jōdo Shinshū itself does not refer to the title of a sect, but to the essential truth of the Pure Land Way.

During a past winter a study retreat for temple priests took place at the Hongwanji. The 50 students, who ranged in age from 20 to 25 years, came from across Japan to spend 90 days in study at the Hongwanji. For the final examination, I included the question, "How does Jōdo Shinshū resolve the problem of birth-and-death (samsaric existence)?" However, I then received a telephone call from the staff person in charge, who said, "Sensei. In your question, I think you wrote the wrong kanji. You used the character meaning, "to resolve (*toku*)." Shouldn't it have been the character for "to explain (also, *toku*)?" From this, I came to understand that this is the way in which certain kind of persons in the Shin Buddhist organization think. That is, all they think about is preaching. This person took the trouble to call me in

order to ask whether the correct question should be “How does Jōdo Shinshū teach the problem of birth-and-death?” He thought it strange to ask about “resolving” that problem. Thinking that it would be difficult to explain this over the telephone, I told him that “It is fine it is.” As I think about it, however, this is what happens when Jōdo Shinshū is taken to indicate the title of a sect. “This is the way we ‘explain’ it in our sect.” I do not believe that everyone in our religious organization thinks this way in this contemporary age, but, it is still a fact that the number of persons who hold to this idea has grown exceedingly large.

Religion, however, takes up the problem of one’s own self, which always precedes one’s preaching about it to other people. If the starting point of religion were in preaching to other people, then it would end up just like politics, social movements, or commercial business. If one resolves the problem of birth-and-death for oneself, then the path leading to realization of the solution for other people will emerge naturally. Some people act as though they know the solution as they try to explain it to others, even though they have not resolved the problem for themselves. This is not true religion. At the starting point of religion, there is no word that means, “to explain.”

The essence of religion is to live a true life. Religion means to live. Its true meaning is to entrust in the life which I have received from the Buddha and live in reliance upon the power of the Buddha. Explaining how to live to others is not what religion is about. That is the job of the philosopher. However, the great philosophers, like Kitaro Nishida, say that any philosophy that is not linked to the problem of true living is bad philosophy. Thus, if we Shin Buddhists expend all of our efforts to sell the drug

called the Nembutsu (Namuamidabutsu), we will not have any understanding of what we are doing. Doing business will end up being the purpose of religion.

In recent days, it is often said that we should learn from Rennyo Shōnin, who established this great religious order. I feel, however, that the source of his ability to build this great institution could be found in a spirit that was willing to break through the old one. There was no one who could smash apart the old religious order as bravely as Rennyo. There was no one less shackled by fixed ways of thinking or customs than him. As a result of this, form on a grand scale began to emerge. In order to build such a grand thing and allow it to emerge, it was necessary for him to have a free spirit, which not attached to form. The spirit that is able to build a truly grand thing is not bound by such things as form. Form on a grand scale emerges when one is unattached to form. Rennyo Shōnin knew that one must not forget this, and as a result, there was no one as free as he was. Rennyo's *Letters (Gobunshō)* are written in a manner that can be easily understood by the members and so they are arranged in a somewhat orderly form. In contrast, the *Records of Rennyo Shōnin's Sayings During His Lifetime*, clearly reveal his free spirit. An example can be seen his statement, which gets right to the point: "Priests must first teach themselves."

The *Records* relates that Rennyo once made the statement that, "Priests are persons of great evil." As a result, many priests were quite displeased. They had thought that Rennyo should be praising them, but instead they felt criticized by his words, "There is no one more evil than a priest." In response they complained that "He brings trouble to many persons." Finally,

Rennyō comes to praise them in a sense once again by saying that, because they are evil persons, they are ones who are saved by Amida Buddha.

The lesson here is that priests must teach themselves first of all. They must not just think about instructing others while forgetting to realize shinjin themselves. The foundation of all educational activities requires that one must teach oneself first of all. One must hear the teachings and realize shinjin oneself. This, Rennyō Shōnin always said, is the starting point for all propagational activities. This fundamental expression is the primary spirit, which could allow his Hongwanji institution to become a dynamic religious organization.

In the *Records*, he also says this: “With the Buddha-dharma, there is no tomorrow.” In regard to the Buddha-dharma, he says, there is no tomorrow. It ends today. This way of living is the true Buddha-dharma. The Buddha-dharma is found in the realization that today, here and now, is of greatest importance. One who thinks that he will probably be alive tomorrow will not truly live today. People who count on the future or place greater value in the past do not truly live. Rennyō Shōnin says that the foundation of life is always located in the here and now. “With the Buddha-dharma, there is no tomorrow.” The flame of life is ignited in the present. Whoever secures the now will truly live. These kinds of words cannot be derived from the specialized terminology of Shin Buddhism or any other sect. He also says this in the *Records*: “The Buddha-dharma is Non-self.” These are vital words which are linked directly to the spirit of Śākyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment. Great religious persons, I believe, hold these kinds of points in common.

## Shinjin is the Eternal Now

In the Jōdo Shinshū teachings, the notion of “birth in the Pure Land” (*ōjō Jōdo*) has long been set forth. Rephrasing this with modern terminology, “birth in the Pure Land” refers to the path along which human beings can truly live. The meaning of “birth,” therefore, is not that one goes to the Land of Ultimate Bliss after death and then lives over there. Some are prone to think that, by approaching the Chinese word for “birth” (*ōjō*) from the standpoint of the order of the characters, it must mean that one first “goes” (*ō, yuku*) and after that “lives” (*shō, ikiru*). However, how are we able to go to the Pure Land? That becomes a problem. The answer is that the person who truly lives in this world is able to go the Pure Land. That person is “born.” Therefore, it is not that one goes there and is able to live. If one does not truly live before that, that is, here and now, in this world, then that person will not realize enlightenment in the Pure Land. This is what Shinran Shōnin teaches us.

The doctrinal expression for this is that, without shinjin, one can never go to the Pure Land. Shinjin means to truly live. In the first Letter of Shinran’s *Collection of Letters* (*Mattōshō*), there is this famous phrase: “At the moment that shinjin is settled, one’s birth is settled.” With these splendid words, Shinran Shōnin expresses the foundation of Jōdo Shinshū. When is one’s birth settled? It is settled, not after death, but at the moment that one entrusts in the Buddha. In other words, when an ordinary being entrusts oneself to the great life of the Tathagata in this world, her birth is already settled. One does not go to the Land of Ultimate

Bliss and then live. The person who truly lives is able to go to Ultimate Bliss. Therefore, from the perspective of their meaning, the order of the characters (*ōjō*) is reversed. Instead of “to go and be born,” the true meaning is “to be born and go.” If we do not engage in ‘thinking,’ then Jōdo Shinshū will be wrongly understood. Shinran Shōnin says that “In the one thought-moment of shinjin, birth is settled.” In the instant of true entrusting, the eternal becomes manifested. In the one thought-moment of shinjin, the experience of encountering the eternal is referred to as the “settlement of shinjin” (*shinjin ketsujō*). One encounters the eternal now in the very midst of time.

Faith in Jōdo Shinshū is this experience of encountering the “eternal now.” The “eternal now” is a famous expression of Kitaro Nishida. The eternal now is not a temporal now. Rather, it is the now in which time has been broken through. In other words, it refers to time in which the eternal enters into time. There is no now, other than the now into which the eternal has entered. The now which is not connected to the eternal through shinjin will soon flow away. Within human life, there is no now. We may try to specify the now to the hour, minute, or second, but that now soon flows away; it does not halt for even an instant. The *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* describes this situation with the words, “It passes in vain.” Without shinjin, human life simply passes in vain.

If human life were only a matter of being within time, then it would be just like being without time. Up until today, I have lived a number of decades. But, while it seems to have been a long time, it also does not seem to have been long at all. Time always seems to be moving faster and faster. When I was a child,

it felt as though the days passed slowly until the New Year. But, these days, it comes around before I know it. When it comes to time then, no matter how long of a time period it may be, in the end it flows completely away, leaving nothing. Within time, we cannot catch hold of any now. The now that I speak of now is now in the past.

However, in *shinjin*, the now which one could not previously catch hold of can be attained. The person who entrusts in the Tathagata comes into contact with that which does not flow away and therefore the now can be secured. A person who does not rely upon the Tathagata is one who seeks to protect himself through his own self-power. Such a person can never attain the now. Shinran Shōnin was the first one to interpret “the ranks of the truly settled in the present life” as “at the moment *shinjin* is settled, one’s birth is settled.” He emphasizes that one is able to come into contact with eternal life, not in another world, but at this time and in this world in which one is living.

This was Shinran’s magnificent discovery. Up until then, people had thought that one would probably encounter eternity after going to that world. In this world, they believed, there is nothing eternal; everything is futile. However, this kind of Pure Land teaching was a woeful, unhappy one. There are people who still believe that the world of ordinary beings contains nothing eternal, and that, upon going to the Land of Ultimate Bliss, one may meet the great assembly of Buddhas there. But theirs is a very miserable Jōdo Shinshū. It is not the Jōdo Shinshū, which is the true essence of the Pure Land way as set forth by Shinran Shōnin. Their kind of Jōdo Shinshū is based on a wrong understanding.



The world of ordinary beings may be vain and futile, but the true essence of the Pure Land Way exists where beings who live in the midst of that futile world can hear the Word of Amida Buddha. That is to say, Shinran Shōnin's teaching is that any Buddha that cannot come to the world of ordinary beings is powerless. Any Tathagata that simply remains in the Pure Land waiting for us is powerless. An Amida Buddha or Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss that does not exercise any power in this present life is not the real Buddha or Land. This was Shinran Shōnin's magnificent discovery. His teaching that "at the moment that shinjin is settled, one's birth is settled," refers to the moment that the first ray of Light from the Pure Land reaches this world.

This point was not clear in the Pure Land teachings prior to Shinran Shōnin. It seems that it took a long time before this truth of Buddhism could be truly unearthed and could be recognized as true. The *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* was produced at around the beginning of the Common Era, but it took until the Kamakura Period in the 13th Century before its essence could be made clear. Perhaps that is how it had to be. Because it involves religious truth, it could not have been clearly understood from the very outset. When it comes to revealing religious truth to human beings, it seems as though history is necessary. We do not know why this truth was revealed during the Kamakura Period and not during the preceding Heian Period. Perhaps that was the result of some kind of chance occurrence or perhaps some kind of fate of the historical world. The primary essence of the truth set forth in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* was discovered by Shinran, a religious genius in 13th Century Japan. We must give some thought to this auspicious event. It is our

great joy that the genius known as Shinran was able to discover the very core of Śākyamuni Buddha's teaching.

According to Shinran Shōnin the eternal world is not a separate world of the after-life which is different from our temporal world. True, eternal power exists where the eternal enters into time. Therefore, a Pure Land that is not actively working in this world is not the true Pure Land. The Pure Land that comes into this world is the true Pure Land. I agree completely with Shinran. If the Pure Land does not come into this world, it makes no difference whether it exists or not. Shinran Shōnin expressed this idea simply by saying that there is a constant coming and going between the saha world and the Pure Land. If the saha world and the Pure Land were to stand in mutual opposition without any interchange, it would not be the true Pure Land. A Pure Land that cannot come and go is no good. Without any interchange, it is the same as hell. When two human beings remain silent toward each other, it is just like hell. In contrast, when there is dialogue between people, even though they may be far removed from each other, the world is alive and harmonious. No matter how close people may be to each other, if they do not converse with each other, it is as if they were separated by 1,000 miles.

In the Pure Land traditions prior to Shinran Shōnin, it was believed that beings had to go from here over to a realm called the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. "Birth" in that Land meant that a person would go there once and for all, and never return. It was believed, for example, that one would go there and be able to meet one's deceased father or child. Since, in this world, there are only ordinary beings in this world and no Buddha's at all, it was

thought that, by just going over there, something would work out. This is how people used to think.

Shinran Shōnin did not think in that way. His idea, in contrast, was that “directing of virtue” (*ekō*) possesses two aspects: the aspect of going (*ōsō ekō*) and the aspect of returning (*gensō ekō*). Stated simply, Jōdo Shinshū, as the true essence of the Pure Land way, signifies a mutual interchange of life between the saha world and the Pure Land. It is the great “circulating current” (*kanryū*) of the life of the Tathagata, which goes and returns. The true aspect of our human life is revealed, floating atop the great life of the Buddha which flows from this world to the Pure Land and from the Pure Land back to this world. Shinran Shōnin said that our human life rides atop the current of great life as it flows and circulates. The flow of life goes around and around; it goes and returns, returns and goes. The reason for this is that life never remains still. Anything that remains still remains in a dead world. If life does not move, then it is not life. There is a constant coming and going between this world and that world. This is the natural state of the world of life. That being the case, simply living for a long time in this world is not true living. That is the same as coming to a standstill. Therefore, we must quickly go to the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. Then, upon going there, we do not remain there, but must return to this world once again in order to save people who continue to wander in delusion.

Human life is not a straight line, in which a person is born at one time, does a variety of things for a while and then ends up buried in a graveyard. That human life would be dead. Human life in a straight line would be a dead and fragmentary human life. In contrast, life fundamentally takes the form of a great,

moving circle. To entrust in the Tathagata is to ride atop the flow of this “circulating current” of life. We tend to be under the impression that entrusting in the Buddha requires us to focus on something within our minds. However, Shinran Shōnin said that shinjin is to ride on and rely upon the Tathagata’s Vow power. Shinjin of Other Power means that we take part in this great current of life. In order to participate in it, we need to discard our egos. In shinjin it is not our delusions and blind passions that are discarded. Instead, as we are carried upon the great, moving current of the Vow, we leave behind our own calculation and conceit.

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English translation by Rev. David Matsumoto.