

# Śākyamuni Within the Jōdo Shinshū Tradition

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## INTRODUCTION

This article will discuss Shinran Shōnin's view of the role of Śākyamuni in the Pure Land tradition. It will initially be descriptive in character, citing selected passages from the works of Shinran to establish his view, and this descriptive analysis will come to the conclusion that Śākyamuni is a specific actualization of the compassionate intent that is Amida Buddha. This actualization of Amida, for Shinran, centers on the fact that Śākyamuni spoke the words of the Pure Land sūtras. The importance of Śākyamuni to Shinran is that he taught us about Amida. From a historical-critical perspective, this view is untenable. This article continues by noting this modern, historical-critical conclusion, as well as the fact that for Shinran to anchor Amida in the historicity of Śākyamuni and others was important. Moreover, we discover in Shinran a sense of history, or remembering, in which the establishment of the vows by Amida and Śākyamuni's preaching of this establishment play central roles.

This article concludes by attempting to incorporate this historical sense, or remembering, of Shinran's into our views of Amida and Śākyamuni while remaining faithful at the same time to our modern, critical sense. Another possible title of this article could be, "The Historical Grounding of the Ahistorical Amida Myth," for as we more clearly define the proper way to view Śākyamuni, we will clarify the importance of anchoring the figure of Amida in history. For Shinran, the Amida story is historically true. We cannot see it in the same way, yet the sense of history and remembering is important to keep in mind; it makes historically concrete what is too often the

subjectively abstracted reality of Amida.

The context of this article is the Christian-Buddhist dialogue. It is a section of a larger work in which Amida is looked at and reworked in light of the dialogue. The present article makes no specific reference to Buddhist-Christian dialogue and can be viewed on its own apart from this context. Yet, it is the historical sense that is so very important to Christianity that has aided me to perceive a sense of history and remembering in Shinran's teaching and to develop and ground it through firmer historical-critical discussion. While inter-faith dialogue is not the only way to confront Shin Buddhism with the contemporary context, it is one of the more fruitful means of drawing Shin Buddhism out of traditional doctrine. Tradition must be honored, yet not to the extent that it inhibits Shin Buddhism from engaging in dialogue with the world around it.

Finally, a word about terminology is in order. The phrase *Dharma-for-us* will be found in the following discussion. It is, specifically, my translation of *upāya* (Jpn. *hōben*) and is used, in most cases, as short-hand for *upāya dharmakāya* (Jpn. *hōben hosshin*), that is, it is a synonym for Amida Buddha. The phrase attempts to illustrate the dynamic, saving activity of reality as it comes out of itself for our sake. It is this central insight into the character of reality that highlights Shinran's view of reality. *Dharmakāya*, reality, is the ever active, saving reality of *Dharma-for-us* in the view of Shinran.

Shinran centers his thoughts on Amida as this *Dharma-for-us*, ever concerned with the enlightenment of all existence. For Shinran, the *Dharma* is

nothing but *Dharma*-for-us. The *Dharma* negates and fulfills itself in the compassionate intent of Amida, and so, the identity with Amida is not a simple identity. In a *Yuishinshō Mon'i* passage, one sees Shinran centering on Amida (The *Dharma*-for-us) as this saving power.

This Tathāgata permeates the countless worlds; that is, it permeates the minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus, plants, trees, and lands will attain Buddhahood. Since it is the minds of all beings which rely upon the Vow of the *Dharma*-body for *Dharma*-for-us, the mind of faith is nothing but Buddha-nature. This Buddha-nature is nothing but *Dharma* itself, and this *Dharma* itself is nothing but *Dharma*-body. Therefore there are two types of *Dharma*-body in regard to the Buddha. One is the *Dharma*-body of *Dharma* itself and the other is the *Dharma*-body of *Dharma*-for-us. The *Dharma*-body of *Dharma* itself is without color and form; therefore, it is beyond conception and description.

From this thusness, form was actualized and called the *Dharma*-body of *Dharma*-for-us. Taking this form, it was called Bhikṣu Dharmākara and established the forty-eight great vows that surpass conceptuality. Among them are the Primal Vow of Immeasurable Light and the Universal Vow of Immeasurable Life. And, to the form actualizing these two vows, Bodhi-sattva Vasubandhu gave the title, "Tathāgata" has fulfilled the vows, which are the cause of his Buddhahood, and thus is called "Tathāgata of the fulfilled body." This is none other than Amida Tathāgata.

"Fulfilled" means that the cause of enlightenment has been fulfilled. From the Fulfilled Body, countless specific actualization bodies (transformed bodies) appear radiating the unimpeded light of wisdom throughout the innumerable worlds. Thus appearing in the form of light called "Tathāgata of unhindered light filling the ten quarters,"

it is without color and without form, that is, identical with the *Dharma*-body of *Dharma* itself, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and unimpeded by karmic evil. For this reason it is called "unimpeded light." Unimpeded means that it is not obstructed by the karmic evil and passion of beings. Know, therefore, that Amida Buddha is light, and that light is the form of wisdom.<sup>1</sup>

## HISTORICAL ACTUALIZATION AND AMIDA

Shinran rarely talks about the historical actualization of Amida. It is not absent, however. In the above *Yuishinshō Mon'i* passage, there is an explicit discussion of historically actualized bodies: "From this fulfilled body, countless specific actualization bodies (transformed bodies) appear radiating the unimpeded light of wisdom throughout the innumerable worlds."<sup>2</sup> In his *wasan*, Shinran identifies Śākyamuni and Hōnen, his teacher, as the actualizations of Amida.

Amida, primordially established,  
Feeling compassion for the foolish ones of  
the five defilements  
Actualized himself as Śākyamuni  
And appeared at the castle of Kapilavastu.<sup>3</sup>

The Tathāgata Amida, transformed,  
Actualized himself as master Genkū  
(Hōnen).  
Conditions expanded,  
He returns to the Pure Land.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, there is a sense of remembering in Shinran. In short, there is a sense of history in Shinran as he talks of Amida and Dharmākara in the causal state before becoming Amida. The opening lines of the *Shōshinge* are an illustration of this remembering by Shinran.<sup>5</sup> The story of Amida, and in particular the establishing of the vows, have a historicity for Shinran. It is an obvious error of contemporary interpreters of Shinran to bring their own contemporary mind-set into the interpreting process and make claims about his understanding of problems from that

viewpoint. However, it is equally erroneous to assume that a person of medieval Japan could not have thought in a sophisticated, contemporary manner. I state these two dangers in interpreting Shinran's attitude toward the Amida myth in an attempt to clarify the problems involved. Is it totally impossible that Shinran thought of the Amida myth and of Dharmākara raising the vows in the existentialist-like manner of the total collapsing of time in the now-moment of faith? I think not. There are suggestive passages in his writings that lend themselves to such an understanding.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, he talks about events as events in history which evoke a sense of remembering.

Is it not our contemporary prejudice against historical apprehension of a mythical event that prevents us from recognizing that Shinran literally believed the story and thought of the raising of the vows as somehow historical? We prefer to see him as looking at the story in this existentialist-like manner. But if he talked about the historical actualizations of Amida, and if he had this sense of remembering, this sense of history, then we cannot ignore it when considering the Amida myth.

This does not mean we must adopt the literal belief in the myth and negate recent critical research. It simply means we must acknowledge the place of history and the sense of remembering in Shinran. This remembering grounds his faith, and thus the subjective reality of faith is grounded in the objectivity of history. We cannot accept all the specific objects of remembering and history, but we can search for ones that are historically reliable from our critical, modern perspective.

The story of Amida with its mythic language of *kalpas* (eons) and *koṭis* (infinite distances) is obviously symbolic; and this, I believe, has been understood by the faithful in all ages. The mythic qualities of the Mahāyāna scriptures were accepted. This explains the lack of resistance toward the critical research that came to Asian countries at the turn of the century. This also explains why, to a large extent, the findings of

such research were really never confronted. But believers in general, and Shinran in particular, also took the story at face value and saw it as relating an event of the past, even if a premordial past. We cannot honestly share this attribution of some sort of historicity to the myth.

When the myth is viewed critically, the parallel with the life of Śākyamuni is obvious. The Amida myth can be seen as modeled after the life of Śākyamuni and amplifies themes of compassion in his life. The life of Śākyamuni is abstracted into the myth of Amida. This historical, critical interpretation is probably true. However, this is not the historicity that Shinran had in mind. But it is helpful in centering upon Śākyamuni, for this is the key to grounding the Amida myth in history.

#### ŚĀKYAMUNI IN SHIN BUDDHIST TRADITION

How is Śākyamuni understood in the Shin Buddhist tradition? Shinran sees him as the communicator of the story of Amida. Śākyamuni's prime function in the world, according to Shinran, was to talk of the vows of Amida. This is expressed in the *Shōshinge* wherein Shinran states: "The Tathāgata appeared in this world only in order to declare the reality of Amida's Primal Vow."<sup>7</sup> His position as the first teacher is evident in a famous *Tannishō* passage:

If the Vow of Amida is real, the teachings of Śākyamuni cannot be false. If the Buddha-teachings are true, the commentaries by Shan-tao cannot be false. If the commentaries of Shan-tao are true, how can the teachings of Hōnen be false? If the teachings of Hōnen are true, how can the heart of what I Shinran say be false and empty?<sup>8</sup>

The above passages explicitly center on Śākyamuni's teaching about the reality of Amida's Vow; this marks his importance to the Pure Land tradition. The earlier cited *wasans* relating Shinran's behalf that Śākyamuni and Hōnen were actualizations of Amida can be interpreted to mean that

Śākyamuni and Hōnen were relating the reality of the Vow. The actualization of Amida in history specifically focuses on the teachings of Śākyamuni and Hōnen and, by extension, the teachings of the other Pure Land masters. The fact that Hōnen talked of Amida's Vow cannot be denied. However, Śākyamuni historically said nothing of Amida, and his message states nothing explicitly of this grace-ful *Dharma-for-us*.

It is impossible to be certain as to the core of Śākyamuni's teachings, but it is clear that he did not speak of Amida and Dharmākara's raising of the vows. Identifying the actual words of Śākyamuni in the Mahāyāna sūtra is difficult, but Śākyamuni cannot be the author or teller of the Amida tale. Śākyamuni did not declare the reality of Amida's Vow. Shinran's view of Śākyamuni is based on the erroneous assumption, shared by all Buddhists of his time, that Śākyamuni was the author of all sūtras.

One cannot fault Shinran for being a person of his times, but one cannot accept this false assumption today. Thus, the position attributed to Śākyamuni in the Pure Land tradition centers on an erroneous premise. As the tradition is revised to accord with contemporary historical knowledge, it seems faithfulness to Shinran requires that we ground the reality of Amida's vows in the historicity of Śākyamuni.

### ŚĀKYAMUNI IN HISTORY

There is no question about the existence of Śākyamuni. Inscriptions commissioned by the Indian emperor Aśoka verify Śākyamuni's existence. A core of his teachings can be discerned with caution, and it includes no explicit discussion of the saving and compassionate reality of Amida. Indeed, his teachings tend to avoid any hint of the notion of grace. His death scene includes an exhortation to the disciples to secure their own salvation. There is a hint of grace or compassion in the stories of the acts of Śākyamuni; however, nothing conclusive can be said of their authentic link to him. Hence, it would be difficult to ground Amida's vow in what can be historically known

of particular sayings and deeds.

There is, nevertheless, the undeniable fact of Śākyamuni's speaking and teaching and gathering disciples. The traditional biography of Śākyamuni states that he gained enlightenment at the age of thirty-five and spent the rest of his life teaching: thus he spent thirty-five years searching for the *Dharma* and forty-five years teaching the *Dharma*. Whether this chronology is exactly accurate is unimportant. There can be little doubt that after some years of struggle, he came to see the truth and began to talk of his realization and influence people. This is an undeniable, historical fact.

Śākyamuni is said to have encountered many temptations and hindrances as he sat under the *bodhi* tree in his final attempt at fathoming the truth. This inner struggle is personified in the stories of Māra, the tempter, the trickster. The "last temptation" is that of remaining in the meditation of wisdom and fulfilling his goal of ultimate enlightenment (*parinirvāṇa*). Moreover, he is told by Māra that even if he were to teach his discovery, no one would understand. Śākyamuni denies himself the full satisfaction of ultimate enlightenment and disregards the probability of people not accepting or understanding his teachings. He gets up from the seat of enlightenment and goes forth to preach his first sermon at the Deer Park. It is in this act of going forth from the seat of enlightenment to teach that the *Dharma-for-us* is actualized in history: the Buddha Śākyamuni seated under the *bodhi* tree fully actualizes himself in the getting up from that spot of enlightenment and going forth. It is to this act that Shin Buddhism can turn to anchor the ahistorical Amida in the flow of history.

We cannot look back to Dharmākara establishing the vows nor can we look back to Śākyamuni telling the story of Amida. Neither are possible or desirable from our modern perspective. What we can look back to is the fact that Śākyamuni rejected full enlightenment for himself to tell others of this enlightenment experience and how they too could partake of it. It is in this rejection of enlightenment that, paradoxically, Śākyamuni

fulfills enlightenment and actualizes in history the compassion that is enlightenment. Amida is not actualized by the Amida myth nor by Śākyamuni getting up from meditation and going forth to teach.

The Amida myth is not the abstraction of Śākyamuni's compassionate act. As Shinran is recorded in the earlier cited *Tannishō* passage, the reality of Amida's Vow grounds the teaching of Śākyamuni. We would alter Shinran's perspective if we were to state that the reality of Amida's Vow abstracts the truth of Śākyamuni's going forth. It is important to maintain Shinran's perspective about the *Dharma-for-us* that is Amida being actualized by Śākyamuni. If this is not done, then the Amida myth merely becomes a fairy tale and not the myth that reveals a primordial reality.

The reality of Amida's Vow is actualized and made concrete by the act of Śākyamuni. Shinran viewed the reality of the *Dharma-for-us* as basic, and it is this that is actualized by Śākyamuni and Hōnen. In the case of Śākyamuni, it must be said that the actualization takes place in the act of going forth, not in his teachings. In the case of Hōnen, the actualization takes place in both the act and the content of his teaching.

### CONCLUSION

From the premise that it is important for Shinran to remember certain events to make concrete one's faith, we must look back at the tradition. We must ground the Amida myth in history, being fully aware of recent critical research. On the one hand, we will be truer to the attitude of Shinran and, on the other hand, we will make our faith more historically concrete. This does not deny the central place of the existential plumbing of the depths to realize the truth and reality of the vows of Amida. This ahistorical now-moment of faith that collapses all time into that moment, while being beyond time, must be recognized to be *in* time.

The grounding of faith in the concrete remembering of an event helps us to objectify this faith-moment and reminds us that indeed this timeless moment takes place in time. The flow of history does not merely become a passing backdrop for the timeless moment of faith. History and the events of history take on significance because the ahistorical can be anchored in the temporal.

There are two practical implications of this recognition of the actualization of Amida in history. On the level of popular worship, it is easier to talk of Amida or the *Dharma-for-us* in terms of a historical person and a historical act in that person's life. Secondly, once this is recognized, one can no longer ignore the historical/social context in which one lives. No longer can one say that the subjective faith state, or condition, is all that is important. Faith, while ever subjective, is grounded in history, and thus the flow of history in which one finds oneself cannot be ignored.

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### FOOTNOTES:

1. *Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho*, II, 630-631.
2. *Ibid.*, 631.
3. *Ibid.*, 496.
4. *Ibid.*, 514.
5. *Ibid.*, 43-46.
6. *Ibid.*, 71, "Pondering the mind of true faith, the mind of faith has one-moment. One moment expresses the moment of faith being the ultimate point of time."
7. *Ibid.*, 43-44.
8. *Ibid.*, 774-775.