

# The Modern Relevance of Donran's Pure Land Buddhist Thought

by Shōji Matsumoto

Donran, the master whom Shinran revered as the crucial and most powerful link in his own *nembutsu* faith, was the major figure in medieval Pure Land Buddhism in China. The Chinese rendering of his name is T'an-luan, which has great import even today as it expresses the timeless character of his insight into the true nature of the world, and the true nature of human beings. Likewise, the meaning of his name expresses clearly the true nature of the *nembutsu* as the dynamic that continues to illuminate this world and our own lives with the boundless compassion and wisdom of Amida Buddha.

Although a brief biographical sketch cannot begin to supply contemporary men and women with answers to questions about Donran's great influence, it can help acquaint us with this remarkable Buddhist monk who was born in 476. Thus, I begin some twenty years before Donran's birth, when the Emperor Wen-ch'êng had begun a revival of Buddhism, initiating the carving of Buddhist images in the caves of Yün-kang, which were located between the capital and the large town of Yen-mên. In the 477 census there were listed over 7,000 Buddhist temples and some 77,258 Buddhist monks and nuns in the Celestial Kingdom. Such was the world into which Donran was born.

His birthplace was Yen-mên. This is near Mt. Wu-t'ai, which had been worshipped as a sacred mountain since ancient times. When the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* was translated into Chinese by Buddhahadra in 420 A.D., the spirit of this mountain had been identified as Mañjuśrī Bodhisattva, the symbol of *prajñā*. From then on, Mt. Wu-t'ai was a place of Buddhist pilgrimages. The symbolic nature of this mountain, with the

sun rising from behind it, was as if *prajñā* were lighting the world, and it deeply affected Donran. At fourteen, he became a Buddhist monk.

Donran's family were peasants, and therefore no record of his family name exists. Furthermore, when an individual becomes a monk, he receives a new Buddhist name from his teacher, signifying that he has given his life to the Buddha. And, whether it is a family name or a Buddhist name, in China the name of a person is very important, for the person is thought to be what he or she is named. "T'an" is an abbreviation of "T'an-mo," which is the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit term "dharma" (teaching). "Luan" means "phoenix," the mystical bird which is the symbol of eternity. Thus, T'an-luan means "Eternal *Dharma*"—a name that carries a continuing significance for us all.

It is said that Donran eagerly devoured scripture after scripture, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist, as though engraving them permanently on his mind, and devoted himself wholeheartedly to the study of the *Four Treatises* and the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*. By the time he was thirty years old, he was well versed in these scriptures and commenced lecturing on them. He was so impressed by the abstruseness and profundity of the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* that he decided to write a commentary on it. The more Donran became aware that he was on the right path to the stage of non-retrogression (*avinivartanīya*), the more he labored to accumulate Buddhist virtue, for he had realized that attaining the stage of non-retrogression enables one to eventually achieve Buddhahood.

Donran was half finished with his commentary on the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* when he was struck by a painful respiratory illness. This illness continued for five years, making it impossible for him to write, chant sūtras, or study. The local herb doctor could not cure him, so Donran decided to go to Lo-yang, the capital, for special treatment. On the way, he stopped at the ruins of an old castle in the province of Fen-chou. As he entered through the east gate and looked up into the cloudless western sky, he had a vision that the gate of heaven had swung open and through it he could clearly and thoroughly perceive the Six Kama Heavens. With this inspiration, his respiratory illness suddenly disappeared and was cured. He is reported to have said to himself:

Man's life vanishes like the dew. There are Taoist medical books which explain minutely how to prolong life beyond the fixed limit. What I have to do now is to become one of the immortals by practicing the teaching of Taoism. After I attain the infinite life, I will be able to devote myself entirely to the cultivation of Buddhist virtue.<sup>1</sup>

With this aim, about 521 A.D., Donran arrived in the capital. There he not only read and studied Taoist classics, but also wrote several books on medicine, in which he emphasized the breathing exercises based on both the Taoist yoga practice of breath control and the Buddhist practice of counting the breaths. The aim of these practices is to prolong one's life and, if possible, to attain eternal life. As he recovered his health, Donran resolved to make a journey of over two thousand miles on foot to meet the great Taoist master T'an Hung-ching.

Donran, with some difficulty, received permission from the Emperor of that area to visit Mt. Mao where T'ao Hung-ching lived. The hermit welcomed Donran and gave him oral instruction in Taoist methods of prolonging life "as one would pour water from one jar into another."<sup>2</sup> To become immortal, Donran was taught, one must first take a special medicine called *Chin-tan*,

as well as other medical herbs. One must also keep a fast and practice various Taoist austerities. Since these practices had to be performed on a mountain, Donran decided to go back to Mt. Wu-t'ai where he hoped his practices would lead to his immortality.

Tao-hsüan gives a detailed account of Donran's dramatic encounter with Bodhiruci on his way to Mt. Wu-t'ai:

When T'an-luan heard the fame of the Indian *Tripiṭaka*-master Bodhiruci, he decided to travel to the capital Lo-yang to see him. When he met Bodhiruci, T'an-luan put a straightforward question to him. "Is there any Indian Buddhist scripture which is superior to this Taoist scripture, *Book of Immortals*, in the teaching of prolonging life?" Bodhiruci spit on the ground and shouted in anger. "How dare you say such a thing. The Taoist book is quite insignificant in comparison with Buddhist sūtras. Where in this country can you find the true teaching of attaining eternal life? By practicing Taoism you may prolong your life beyond the fixed limit, but like other people you must meet death sooner or later, for all men are bound by *saṃsāra* of the Triple World." Giving T'an-luan his Chinese translation of the *Sukhāvativyūha-upadēśa*, Bodhiruci continued, "If you practice the teaching stated in this book you will be able not only to undo the chain of *saṃsāra* in the six realms but also to attain Eternal Life (*Amitayus*)." T'an-luan received the book with respect and then and there he burned the *Book of Immortals* before Bodhiruci's eyes. Under Bodhiruci, T'an-luan studied Buddhism, reading many newly translated Buddhist scriptures.<sup>3</sup>

For the next three years, Donran studied Yogācāra Buddhism under Bodhiruci and made an important discovery: He found that both Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu had devoted their lives to the attainment of birth in the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. Resolving to follow their exam-

ples, Donran converted to Pure Land Buddhism. In 534 A.D., at the end of the Northern Wei Dynasty and when his teacher Bodhiruci moved to Yeh, Donran traveled north to spread the teachings of Amida Buddha. Tao-hsuan's *Hsi-kao-sêng chuan* gives a vivid account of Donran's activities in spreading Pure Land Buddhism:

T'an-luan not only practiced the teachings of Amida Buddha but also preached on them to all kinds of people, monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen, and even to non-Buddhists. His reputation as a Pure Land Buddhist spread far and wide. With reverent respect, the Emperor of the Tung-wei Dynasty called him "Shên-luan" (Divine Bird) and asked him to stay in the Ta-yen Temple in the province of Ping-chou. Later T'an-luan moved to the Hsüan-chung Temple in the province of Fên-chou. He frequently went out to a mound near Mt. Chieh, where he gathered his lay disciples and encouraged them to recite the Name of Amida Buddha. For this reason the mound became famous, and even today people call that mound "Luan-kung-yen" (the Mound of Master Luan).<sup>4</sup>

It was during his five years at the Ta-yen Temple that Donran wrote his great commentary on Vasubandhu's *Sukhāvatīvyūha-sūtra-upadesa*, a two *chuan* magnum opus entitled *Wu-liang-shou-ching yu-p'o-t'i-shēnyuan-shēng-chieh chu* in which, for the first time in the history of Buddhism, the mystery of Amida Buddha's powers were expounded. His great commentary begins with his joy in the discovery that faith in Amida Buddha alone enables one to reach the stage of non-retrogression and attain birth in the Pure Land. The work ends with his earnest exhortations to the reader to rely wholeheartedly on the power of Amida Buddha.

The emperor of the Tung-wei Dynasty, Hsiao-ching-ti, who was himself a profound Buddhist scholar, once encountered Donran and said to him, "I understand that there are innumerable Buddha lands in the ten quarters. Why do you

believe only in Amida Buddha of the western Pure Land? Is it not prejudice?"

"Yes," replied Donran. "The Buddhist scriptures state that there are countless Buddha lands and innumerable Buddhas in the ten quarters. But, to reach any one of those Buddha lands, one must have superior wisdom and compassion. I am not prejudiced, but I am a common mortal and do not have such wisdom or compassion. The reason why I believe in Amida Buddha is that Amida Buddha gives me his wisdom and compassion through his name so that I am able to attain birth in his Pure Land."

Through such statements, Donran taught the Emperor that Pure Land faith is not for intellectuals who accumulate a knowledge of Buddhism. It is for common people who know what they are in the eyes of Amida Buddha. Impressed greatly with Donran's full and factual understanding of Buddhism, the Emperor honored him with the title of "Shên-luan" and offered him the Ta-yen Temple.

After Donran moved to Hsuan-chung Temple, he composed the *Tsan A-mi-to-fo chieh* (*Gathās Praising Amida Buddha*) and the *Lüeh-lun an-lo-ching-t'u i* (*A Short Treatise on the Pure Land of Peace and Bliss*). The first, as the title indicates, is mainly concerned with praising Amida Buddha. Unlike his commentary, which presents the teaching of Pure Land Buddhism in a systematic and exhaustive manner, this book is the overflow of Donran's religious feeling. He praises Amida Buddha for his *prajñā* and *karuṇā* in the following words:

Amida Buddha's light of wisdom shines upon the darkness of the world, dissipating the darkness of our ignorance and delivering us from the endless *samsāra* of birth and death. His light of mercy reaches far and wide, carrying joy into the hearts of all and expelling the sorrows and griefs, evils and sins of all sentient beings. Amida Buddha, whose inexhaustible virtues surpass that of all other Buddhas in the ten quarters

is therefore not only praised by all the Buddhas but also respected by innumerable *bodhisattvas*. Hence, I prostrate myself and worship Amida Buddha.<sup>5</sup>

Donran also describes in this text the greatness of the *bodhisattvas* in the Pure Land and the Pure Land itself as a land where "comfort and ease prevail and the splendor of the Land is excellent and unsurpassed."<sup>6</sup> Concerning aspirants for the Pure Land, he says, "Even if the world be on fire, those who dare to pass through the flames in order to hear the sacred Name of Amida Buddha will attain birth in the Pure Land, where they will ultimately attain Buddhahood."<sup>7</sup> He ends with an exhortation that is as timeless as his Name. It speaks to us who are living during these latter years of the twentieth century as urgently as it spoke to Donran's contemporaries in medieval China, and, eight hundred years later, to Shinran in Japan: "I have praised Amida Buddha's oceanic wisdom and great compassion. May all the future generations in the ten quarters hear it and deepen their faith in Amida Buddha."<sup>8</sup>

In 195 *gathās*, Donran expressed the same feelings, the same conviction in language and imagery that appeals to the common person in every walk of life. In and out of the Hsüan-chung Temple, Donran devoted the last ten years of his life to spreading the teachings of Amida Buddha by encouraging his disciples to vow to attain birth in the Pure Land and to recite the sacred Name of Amida Buddha. His followers included laymen and laywomen as well as monks and nuns. As Shinran's teachings were to become during the Kamakura period in Japan, so too, centuries earlier, the *nembutsu* teaching, Donran saw himself as one of the common mortals who needed to be saved by the power of Amida Buddha. In the history of Chinese Buddhism, it was Donran who first made Buddhist thought accessible to all, and for this reason he won the respect of all classes of society.

Donran is recognized as the founder of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism. Even after his death at the age of eighty, his influence continued to affect

the development of Pure Land thought in China, and later in Japan. His spiritual heir, Dōshaku (Tao-ch'ō), whom Shinran also revered as one of his great teachers, became converted to Pure Land Buddhism after reading the inscription on Donran's tomb. What struck Dōshaku, and in turn Shan-tao, Hōnen, and Shinran—and what strikes us today as we move toward the twenty-first century—is that Donran felt he was living in a *Dharma*-less world.

In his writings, Donran stated repeatedly that he was living in a Buddha-less world, far removed in time and temperature from the days of Śākyamuni Buddha. Donran described his two spiritual masters, Nāgārjuna and Vasubandhu, as having lived in an age of quasi-dharma. Several centuries separated them from Śākyamuni, yet, to Donran, they seem to have lived in times and places where some semblance of *Dharma* teaching still could be found. He envied and admired their world, and yearned for his to be like that of Śākyamuni. But, at the same time, it was the *Dharma*-less, Buddha-less world in which he saw himself that made him aware of the reality of human nature, and of his own human condition.

In his writings, Donran cites Taoism and Confucianism as hindrances which prevented Buddhists of his time from practicing the *Dharma*. In both of these teachings the emphasis was on encouraging people to find worldly pleasures. Donran himself had been caught in the "perpetual youth" trap of Taoist magic while he suffered his long respiratory illness. But a third hindrance, and one about which Donran was quite clear and outspoken, was the doctrinal corruption within the Buddhist community itself. He could not ignore the fact that there were many Buddhist monks who yielded to the temptation to be regarded as "Master." Their attitude toward their religious practices was that they believed somehow they were doing good deeds and that those good deeds were the basis of their enlightenment. Donran also perceived that although these monks had a scholastic knowledge of the Buddhist teaching of unconditional compassion, they performed their Buddhist practices for their

own benefit rather than for the benefit of others. Donran regarded such monks as self-centered *śrāvakas*.

His poignant realization of the ugliness of the world, and the hopelessness of human beings, caused Donran to see the world and life around him in the light of the teaching of Amida Buddha. He found a practice by which all common mortals, such as himself, could attain the stage of non-retrogression. It was because his standard of comparison was the Pure Land of Amida Buddha that Donran described this world as impure, polluted by corruption, delusion and falsehood. By contrast with the Pure Land, he saw that everything in this world was illusory and transitory. He compared the world around him to a dark room or a burning house, for it was darkened by ignorance and aflame with lust, passion, desire, anger, and attachment.

"Having been ever sinking," confessed Donran, "and ever transmigrating in the Triple World of the five defilements since time immemorial, we common mortals have committed innumerable grave karmic sins—physically, verbally, and mentally. We have no chance for liberation."<sup>9</sup> He characterized the human body as a vessel of suffering, and the human mind as a container of sorrow. He was convinced that it was lack of faith in the true *Dharma* that caused people to commit sins. Blinded by ignorance and prejudice, they denied both the existence of the Buddha and the truthfulness of his teaching. Abusing the true *Dharma*, they were unable and often unwilling to awaken to faith.

But it was in this very world of defilement, and among such helpless and hopeless beings, that Donran encountered himself. The more he became aware of his own sinful and hopeless character, the more clearly and fully he realized that it was entirely impossible for him to attain the stage of non-retrogression by his own power. Through his inner experience, and his meditation upon the Buddha-Dharma, he came to the conclusion that the power of Amida Buddha alone could assure him of attaining his goal. In seeking a practice by

which he could attain access to the Buddha's power he found, from his study of Nāgārjuna's writings, that Amida Buddha had made the vows and established the Pure Land in order to attain access to the human mind—to endow such a one as Donran saw himself to be with this very power. This, Donran realized, was Amida's universal gift to all: his *ekō*.

Today, we are working at a huge task in which I see Donran's thought and insight both relevant and invaluable. This task of ours requires a new birth of courage, a new level of faith, and a new scope of vision. As we near the end of this twentieth century, a new world is coming to birth and the decisive factor will be whether we can be reborn; whether we can match the new age with the strength of a larger and deeper mind.

A new age demands new men, new women. Whenever civilization achieves new dimensions of power, or society moves into greater complexity, new kinds of persons are required. And a new world with its spacecraft, computers, and nuclear power will insist on our adjustment to new levels of human endurance.

Yet science, that popular contemporary teaching, cannot give us life's meaning. The primary mysteries of human life are not articulated or illuminated by the technological apparatus of science or industry. Birth and death, love and hate, joy and tragedy—these remain as they were in the time of Shinran. The meaning of human life is given neither by machine nor any combination of machines or refinement of machines.

Unless we can recognize the signs of Amida's Buddha power in our new world, as Donran did in his medieval China, and unless, by recognizing signs of this power, we can greet the evidence of the Vow-power's work with rejoicing, no amount of historical affirmation from the fifth century B.C. of Śākyamuni or the fifth century A.D. of Donran will suffice.

We are being tested, not to live with Śākyamuni Buddha but to live here and now in the midst of

vast revolutions in space travel, profound changes in life styles and work, loss of meaning, and anxiety and loneliness. Is our faith strong enough not merely to endure all this blindly, but creatively to see the Vow-power of Amida even now?

On the morning of August 15, 1945, the nuclear age in which we are living began. The light of the exploding atomic bomb was said to appear brighter than a thousand suns. Did its flash throw any light on the mysteries of human life? Was the flash a sign of Amida Buddha's Vow-power? Reflecting on Donran's thought, and reflecting on the effects of Donran's thoughts on Shinran's *nembutsu* teaching, it appears clearly and unmistakably to me that the answers to both of these questions are, "Yes!"

The flash was the *wisdom* that understands how confrontation with death can dissolve the pettiness, pretense, selfishness and superficiality which characterize so much of our normal unthinking years. Here and now Amida Buddha is present, though unseen. His teaching tells us of life's brevity, its insecurity, so that in the wisdom of this knowledge we may turn our hearts to him.

We need no reason, and no later day than this, to accept, as did Donran, our life eternal as Amida's *ekō*, his universal gift of wisdom and compassion, and his Pure Land, which is truth itself for each and every one of us. *Namu Amida Butsu!*

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#### FOOTNOTES:

1. *Taishō Daizōkyō*, 50, p. 470.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Shinshū Shōgyō Zensho*, I. 350.
6. *Ibid.*, I. 360.
7. *Ibid.*, I. 362.
8. *Ibid.*, I. 364.
9. *Taishō*, 47, p. 424.