

Shinran's Religious Thought and Christian Mysticism

by Donald W. Mitchell

INTRODUCTION

Through study and also through dialogue with such persons as Professors Alfred Bloom, Taitetsu Unno and Ryusei Takeda, I have gained a better understanding and a great respect for the Pure Land Buddhist tradition. Through reading about the life of Shinran, and reading his own writings, I have also gained a deep appreciation for the profundity, the genius, and the sanctity of Shinran himself. This increase in my understanding and respect is what one might expect from the type of interfaith dialogue in which I have been engaged as a Christian. But, I have found another result of the dialogue; namely, I have come to a greater understanding and appreciation for my own Christian tradition in light of what I have learned about Pure Land Buddhism. More specifically I have gained a clearer understanding and appreciation for the place of faith and grace in my Catholic mystical tradition through my encounter with Shinran's religious thought concerning faith and grace.

What I would like to do in this article is to re-examine a particular type of Christian mysticism in light of what I have learned about Shinran's religious thought. In so doing, I will suggest along the way particular comparisons with some of Shinran's ideas. But, my main intent will be to share some reflections on my own tradition in light of Pure Land Buddhism with the hope that these reflections will enable Pure Land Buddhists to better reflect on their tradition in light of Christianity. This will, hopefully, contribute to a greater mutual understanding in the contemporary Bud-

dhist-Christian dialogue.

In terms of the Christian tradition, I take "mysticism" to refer to the dynamic of God's grace wherein one receives from God a loving knowledge that transforms one's life at its deepest core. Since the beginning of Christianity, there have been certain persons who, through the grace of God, seem to have been especially blessed in the mystical life. It would be impossible to relate the views of Shinran to each of the many varieties of Christian mysticism that have flourished throughout the centuries. So, I have chosen to speak only about one of the most important and orthodox mystics of our tradition. She is St. Teresa of Avila, the great Spanish mystic of the sixteenth century.

ST. TERESA'S 7 STAGES TO GOD

St. Teresa of Avila was an important reformer of our monastic tradition. She and her friend St. John of the Cross, of whom I will speak later, reformed the Carmelite monastic communities of which both were members. Among her writings is a book entitled *The Interior Castle* which is considered one of the foremost classics in mystical theology.¹ In this book, St. Teresa imagined the soul or self to be like a round castle with many mansions leading to the innermost chamber where the King resides. The King in the center of the castle represents God in the center of the soul or in the heart of the self. St. Teresa imagined the mansions of the castle to be arranged in seven concentric circles.

The Spanish term for mansions is *Moradas* from the verb *morar*—meaning “to dwell.”² So, the seven concentric circles of mansions are really seven ways or levels of dwelling in God’s grace. St. Teresa believed that many people live outside the castle paying attention to things other than the inner spiritual life. Outside the castle, these people live with “reptiles and other beasts” which represent sinful desires, and in so doing “they have become almost like them.” When these persons attempt to enter the castle, to dwell in God’s grace, the reptiles pursue them and try to turn them back to the life they lived before. The persons are attracted to the “light” coming from God’s presence within the castle, but they are disturbed and tempted by the “snakes and vipers and poisonous creatures.”⁴

This metaphor reminds me of the parable by the Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Shan-tao (613-681) about the man traveling west on a narrow path between two rivers pursued by “evil beasts” and “poisonous insects.”⁵ Shan-tao’s advice in this situation is the same as St. Teresa, namely, detachment, single-hearted perseverance, and especially entrustment to God’s grace. This entrustment is essential because the entering into the first mansions of the castle is through God’s grace. To desire or even think about turning to God is already to be influenced by His grace. St. Teresa would have understood Shinran when he said that “Amida Buddha also gave the mind which precedes and moves the individual to take up the discipline.”⁶

FIRST STAGE: PRAYER

According to St. Teresa, the first stage of dwelling in this life of God’s grace moves the person to prayer. Now, by “prayer” I do not mean what is often implied by the Japanese word “*inori*”, namely, asking for this-worldly benefits in a way that denotes a lack of trust in God. What prayer means for St. Teresa, and Catholicism, will hopefully become clear as we look at the different types

of prayer that she describes. For now let me make two points. First, prayer at the beginning of the religious life does help the person turn his or her attention to the God that saves. But second, St. Teresa saw that the recitation of prayer itself does not generate salvation. It does not have the power to save, because only the grace of God is what saves. Without the faithful entrustment to God, recitation for St. Teresa is not fully prayer: “If a person does not consider whom he is addressing . . . I do not consider that he is praying at all even though he be constantly moving his lips.” Again, this seems similar to the Shin Buddhist viewpoint that “mere recitation itself is insufficient unless it is inspired by a deep trust in Amida Buddha’s vow.”⁸

SECOND STAGE: GOD’S CALL

At the second level of dwelling in grace, God calls the person “ceasinglessly.” “and this voice of His is so sweet that the poor soul is consumed with grief at being unable to do His bidding . . . it suffers more than if it could not hear Him.” That is, the grace of God is like a light that attracts the person but also illumines the person so that he or she realizes how sinful he or she really is. So in this situation, the person experiences even more painfully the attacks of the reptiles that have followed him or her into the castle. The poor soul now painfully experiences its own wretchedness and may want to leave the castle or may even wish that it had never entered the castle in the first place. This reminds me of Shinran’s sensitive statement about his own experience of the wretchedness of this human condition: “I do not rejoice that I have entered the company of the truly assured; I do not enjoy the fact that I am approaching the realization of true attainment. O how shameful, how pitiful!”⁹

When St. Teresa spoke of her “wretchedness” or “miserable” condition, one should not see this as a negative psychological expression of self-deprecation. Rather it expresses what she felt as the burden of her own lack of response to God’s grace.

The more she experienced His grace, the more she felt the weight of her natural lack of responsiveness. However, while the light of God's grace illumines our wretched condition, it also presents us with the power and beauty of His grace and mercy. One realizes that this grace and mercy is the only source of our salvation. We cannot save ourselves by any "calculated self-work", as Shinran said.¹¹ So for the Christian mystics, this painful self-knowledge is a very important grace. In St. Teresa's words, it leads us to "reflect upon the wretchedness of our nature and what we owe to God. . . ."¹² This grace stimulates our faith in God as the only source of our salvation.

This again seems similar to Shinran's view that the infinite light of Amida Buddha both illumines one's sinful condition as well as makes one aware of Amida's compassion in a way that stimulates faith and trust in Amida Buddha's vow.¹³ St. John of the Cross described this religious experience with the metaphor of a log enkindled by a flame.¹⁴ The log represents the soul and the flame represents God's grace. When the log is in darkness it does not realize how wretched and dirty it is. But when it is enkindled, it gives off smoke and bad smells and is able to see what a state it is in. But it also realizes that if it entrusts itself to the flame, the fire will consume all of it into a new life of light and warmth.

THIRD STAGE: DISCURSIVE MEDITATION

So, the person enkindled by God's grace enters the third set of mansions. Here the person is led into a deeper prayer life. At this level, we have "discursive meditation," a prayer state in which one is illumined by God's grace through reflecting on scripture and theology. One is said to have acquired a "taste" for scripture. In this way, reading scripture is like eating a meal. One is nourished in the knowledge of spiritual things. There is also "affective meditation." In this type of prayer, God's grace stirs feelings, such as love and rever-

ence, that are directed toward God in gratitude for His grace and mercy. In both of these types of prayer, we are not talking about "meditative good works." For it is not the person who through his or her own work generates these insights and affections. Rather, they are generated by the indwelling of God. They are experiences of grace.

As one is drawn closer to God dwelling within, God's mind and heart arises more fully in the believer. To use St. John of the Cross' metaphor, as one is drawn by grace more and more deeply into the flame of God's love, God's light and warmth (mind and heart) permeate more and more one's whole life. This may be a similar process to what Shinran referred to as receiving the "sincere mind" which settles as the mind of faith.¹⁵ It is this activity of Amida Buddha's saving grace, and not the efforts of the person, that transforms the quality of the person's life. This faith is a light and warmth that dispel illusion and results in deeper reverence, virtue, and devotion.

While this may be true, it is possible for a person to begin to believe that he or she is responsible for the more healthy spiritual condition enjoyed in the third mansions. St. Teresa said that the "good" religious person can become very "careful," "upright," "obedient," and "orderly."¹⁶ These are some characteristics of their life that connote, to use Shinran's term, "calculation".¹⁷ As time goes on, one may trust more in oneself than entrust oneself to God's grace. For St. Teresa, and I think Shinran too, this is "pride". And it is pride that St. Teresa said "prevents us from making progress."¹⁸ The danger here is that one focuses on the spiritual riches that are received and not the source of the riches. In the end, this means to be focused on oneself and always to be concerned about how to improve or maintain one's spiritual status. St. Teresa said that this type of person is like a woman always powdering her nose, or a person who is always checking their spiritual temperature to see how holy they are.

What is needed in this situation is spiritual poverty and simplicity, self-forgetfulness and

humility. Therefore in the third mansions, God reminds persons that apart from Him they can do nothing. He does this by sometimes withdrawing His consolations. This is called "spiritual aridity" or, in a stronger form, a "dark night." Here, one does not feel any consolation from God. One's religious life seems to have dried up and the light gone out. One does not find pleasure or happiness in anything including religious practice. Through this experience, one realizes that practice or virtue is not what saves. One cannot save oneself, rather God alone is the source of everything including salvation. In this state of desolation, St. Teresa suggested that one can only renounce oneself in humility and entrust oneself into God's hands. St. John of the Cross said that one should have no desire, no concern, and no effort. One must renounce any self-calculation or reasoning, and rest quietly in one's faith in God's love and grace even though one does not "feel" that love or grace. One must have the "faith" that Paul implied when he said that "nothing that exists . . . nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39)

FOURTH STAGE: CONTEMPLATION

Purified in this way, the person goes on to the fourth mansions and a deeper welling in God's grace. The kind of prayer life that begins in this dwelling place is called by our tradition "contemplation." For us, contemplation is different from meditation. The term "meditation" is used to refer to the discursive and affective experiences mentioned above. The contemplative experience is deeper and one is very much aware that it arises from God. Sometimes it is referred to as "infused grace" because one senses that one's prayer experience is "infused" by God into the very depths of one's soul.

The first of these contemplative states is called "recollection."¹⁹ Here, one feels oneself

being recollected by God. One's mind and senses are involuntarily stilled, and one is drawn within oneself like "a tortoise withdrawing into itself."²⁰ The effect that God works in this state of recollection is the "enlargement" of one's heart to love God and others, an increase in freedom, and a deeper realization of God's greatness and one's own miserable condition.

The second type of contemplative state increases these effects and is called the "prayer of quiet."²¹ It lasts for only a minute or so, and is characterized by a deep sense of peace and quiet welling up from within which stills even the body. St. Teresa said that it is like being a fountain constructed over a source of water that quietly fills it from deep within. Through this type of graced prayer welling up from God present in one's center, one receives "ineffable blessings."

This image of being filled by a deep source of water reminds me of the description of the spiritual significance of the repetition of the name of Amida Buddha given by the contemporary Japanese Buddhist philosopher Yoshinori Takeuchi:

It is like someone excavating a well who has to bore through the layers of earth one after another until reaching the real, richest underground water-course, in order then to let the water gush forth from its inexhaustible source. In the same way, one must wander perseveringly through the many torments of the heart so that the genuine achievement of an encounter with the name of Buddha (the steadfast utterance of the name) can take place in one's innermost being.²²

FIFTH STAGE: MYSTICAL UNION WITH GOD

For the Christian, it is through such "water of grace" that the person is introduced into the full mystical life and is thereby "softened" to be more gentle and receptive to God's inner action. God's life infuses more fully into the person. This mys-

tical life takes form in the fifth mansions where one begins to experience what is called "union with God." Here, the person feels absorbed into God. The light and life of God become more and more the light and life of the soul. St. Teresa said that it is like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon.²¹ The process of metamorphosis has actually been taking place from the beginning of the religious life in a hidden way. Now the person realizes that it is renewed with the very life of God, and is able to live that life of love and compassion more and more fully with others.

As for love of neighbor, St. Teresa pointed out that while it is often hard to tell if one loves God, it is rather easy to tell if one loves his or her neighbor. So, at this stage there should be a decrease in self-will, self-love, and attachments, and a corresponding increase in freedom and compassion. Two things are important to keep in mind in this regard. First, St. Teresa said that this is not achieved by self-effort. It would certainly be difficult if not impossible to rid oneself of self-will by self-effort. Rather, she said that all these things come through grace, and that one must learn to "allow his Majesty to work."²⁴

The second thing to keep in mind is that the person in this union with God is not perfect. In allowing God's grace to work, he or she realizes even more deeply that blind self-will is still there, or in Shinran's terms, we are "foolish beings" who must depend to God's grace.²⁵ As evidence of this fact, St. Teresa often pointed to "the many faults that we always commit, even in doing our good works!"²⁶ As the Shin tradition is fond of pointing out, even if we gain some virtue, God saves us qua sinners.

SIXTH STAGE: MYSTICAL PHENOMENA

In the sixth mansions, this mystical life becomes characterized by certain mystical phenomena such as ecstasy, rapture, locutions and visions. People often incorrectly identify these phenomena

with the goal of the mystical life. However, they only make up a small part of the life of grace. And they are in the sixth mansions not the seventh, so they are not the final goal. In fact, some mystics do not experience these phenomena at all. However, I should perhaps say a few words about these experiences as St. Teresa came to understand them.

Ecstasy is not an "extraordinary" state of prayer. Rather, it is an ordinary part of spiritual growth where the faculties are stilled in a "sweet and gentle reflection on God." However, the mind is weak and sometimes the person falls into a swoon or a faint. Or the person can be so caught up in this state that he or she seems to be in a trance. On the other hand, a rapture is extraordinary. Unlike ecstasy that grows gently out of prayer, rapture happens suddenly and even explosively to the person. The person may feel transported or taken out of the body. St. Teresa said that when God "enraptures" the soul, He takes the person to Himself and "is showing her some little part of the Kingdom which she has gained. . . ."²⁷ Here, I am reminded of where I have read that in the Pure Land tradition there are times when people experience with great "joy" and "gratitude" a glimpse of the Pure Land.²⁸

A locution is when one hears something supernatural. In this way, God often awakens the soul through what is heard in a manner that transforms the person in a particular way. For example, one may hear "Be at peace," and then be able to be peaceful in a difficult situation. In a vision, the mystic sees something that awakens him or her to a deeper religious life. There are three types of visions. The first is when one sees something external to oneself. The second is when the object seen is experienced as an image only within the mind. The third type of vision is an imageless or "intellectual" vision. An intellectual vision is when one does not actually see something but realizes a truth deeply within one's heart. For St. Teresa, this type of imageless vision is the most important type. The other two types could be just the product of deception or an over active imagi-

nation. St. Teresa described a particular intellectual vision that may be of special interest to Buddhists. This was a vision "in which is revealed to the soul how all things are seen in God, and how within Himself He contains them all."²⁹ This refers to a dimension of God that embraces all beings like a boundless horizon and in which all things "live and move and have their being." (Acts 17:28)

Before going on to the final mansions, I would like to point out three things. First is that these mystical phenomena need to be discerned as to their validity. St. Teresa constantly warned that one can be fooled about these things and she suggested many rules for discernment that have been used down to today. Second, she also stated that these phenomena are not at all necessary for religious growth. Many very saintly people have never had any of these things happen to them. In fact, these phenomena could get in the way of growth if a person focuses on them and gives them undue importance. Such a person could become attached to these phenomena and end up calculating ways to gain more experiences. This could lead to all sorts of problems. So, St. Teresa warned that given this pitfall, and many others as well, one should not consciously seek these experiences nor try to cultivate them. Third, when we look at all the above-mentioned types of prayer (discursive and affective meditation, recollection, the prayer of quiet, the prayer of union), we can clearly see that prayer is not a "good work," nor does it mean asking for this-worldly benefits as the Japanese term "*inori*" may imply. Rather each prayer form is a different type of experience of God's grace.

SEVENTH STAGE: SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE

Finally, we reach the last mansions, the seventh mansions. Here is the true center of the soul where God resides. St. Teresa said that this is true for all persons. She said that God, "who is within it and is giving it being," is like "the sun."³⁰ All persons receive the light from this sun, as I think

Shinran teaches.³¹ But some people do not entrust themselves to its saving power and allow it to transform their lives. On the other hand, for those who through God's grace do enter the castle and discover this center of their being, the fullness of the spiritual life is found. Here, the person "feels within himself this Divine companionship . . . the most certain assurance of this Presence."³² And St. Teresa said that this condition is, to us a Pure Land term, "non-retrogressive": "She [the soul] has confidence that God will not leave her and that, having granted her this favor, He will not allow her to lose it."³³

St. Teresa referred to this state as a "Spiritual Marriage" which will never be broken, but which will also never be perfected here on earth. This union is only perfected after death, in heaven. But here on earth, there is a degree of unity. St. Teresa said that it is "as if in a room there were two large windows through which light streamed in: it enters in different places but it all becomes one."³⁴ Or elsewhere she said "it is here that the little butterfly to which we have referred dies, and with the greatest joy, because Christ is now its life."³⁵ As Paul said, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ within me who lives." (Gal. 2:20) To use Pure Land terminology, the mind of Christ arises fully in the mind of the believer.

What is a person like in this state? St. Teresa said that the unusual mystical phenomena, such as the raptures and visions that were experienced in the sixth mansions, no longer happen. Or if they do, it is only rarely. In these last mansions, the person's life is more peaceful and tranquil. In many ways it is more natural and simple. The person does not focus on himself or herself, but enjoys what St. Teresa calls "self-forgetfulness."³⁶ The person is very active in helping others but not in a busy, willful, and striving way. Rather, one's compassion and love is the spontaneous functioning of the mind of God expressing itself from the person's true center. The little things of daily life take on a new importance. One realizes, St. Teresa said, "that the Lord does not look so much at the

magnitude of anything we do as the love with which we do it."³⁷ Finally, there is a new ability to embrace the sufferings of daily life and draw from them a more pure love and compassion. Obviously, there is much suffering in following the journey that St. Teresa described. However, one is able to find a special presence of God in the midst of suffering and, united to Him, transform that suffering into a compassionate love for others. And perhaps this is the real goal of Christian mystical life.

JINEN-HÖNI

When I read again St. Teresa's chapters on the seventh mansions in preparation to write this article, I was reminded of Shinran's notion of a naturalness or "*jinen*."³⁸ It seems to me that Shinran clearly saw that the consciousness of self in calculated efforts in religious practice must be replaced with the consciousness of Amida Buddha working as Other Power within oneself. This Other Power functions in a way that "makes one so of itself (*jinen-honi*)"³⁹ It is the basis of realization which absorbs the person until he or she can act "spontaneously (*jinen*) totally with the mind of Amida."⁴⁰ Amida functioning in the person is *jinen*, that is, wholly natural and spontaneous. The person's actions are thereby not forced from the human will and are free from egotistical self-awareness. And, since the mind of Amida Buddha is compassionate, then its spontaneous expression in the person will result in compassionate activity. I think that both Shinran and St. Teresa would have agreed that whatever of this process is not finished in this world will be completed through grace in the next world.

SHINRAN AND RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION

Now that we have traced each of the seven spiritual stages of growth in St. Teresa's *The Interior Castle* and compared them with some of

Shinran's religious thoughts, I would like to suggest a comparison of this whole developmental process of the seven mansions with the three transformations of the spirit outlined by the Japanese philosopher mentioned above, namely, Yoshinori Takeuchi.⁴¹ Takeuchi has suggested a threefold transformation of the religious individual that corresponds to Kierkegaard's aesthetic, ethical and religious stages of existential transformation. For Takeuchi, the first stage is at the aesthetic or ethical level where one strives through one's own power for theoretical or ethical ideals. This stage ends in "shipwreck," when one realizes the depth of one's sinfulness. Out of despair, one turns to an encounter with the "name" of Amida Buddha and enters the second stage of religious consciousness. But this stage is a "misappropriation of the name", to use Shinran's terms. One does not yet accept the name as pure gift but "as one's own merit for one's own profit."⁴² However, over time with the repetition in prayer of the name escorted by Amida Buddha, one reaches the third level. There in total surrender to a dependence on Amida Buddha, one finds a final transformation of religious consciousness.

I would like to suggest that those people who pursue aesthetic and ethical ideals as described in Takeuchi's first stage, are living outside St. Teresa's Interior Castle. When they experience the "shipwreck" of their ideals and turn to the spiritual life of grace, they enter the Castle. So the first to third mansions would correspond to Takeuchi's second stage. Here the religious life is "good" but is also compromised by pride and self-centeredness. This situation begins to be healed through the aridity and dark night experiences at the end of the third mansions and one is led to a more authentic life of grace through contemplation. This life progresses through the fourth to seventh mansions that correspond to a movement into Takeuchi's third stage of genuine spiritual transformation. For both St. Teresa and Takeuchi, the final stages of religious life and consciousness are stages of pure grace that entail the complete surrender of faith.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, one of the goals of interfaith dialogue is mutual understanding. Through my study of Shinran's religious thought, I have not only gained a hopefully clearer understanding of the experience of grace in Pure Land Buddhism, but also of the experience of grace in my own Christian tradition. What I have presented here is a re-examination of St. Teresa's *The Interior Castle* in a way that emphasizes the place of grace and faith in the mystical life in light of my study of Shinran's religious thought. I hope this re-examination in light of Shinran's religious ideas will be a step in helping Buddhists to re-examine in turn their own tradition in a way that will foster a deeper mutual understanding of both Buddhism and Christianity in the context of our contemporary Buddhist-Christian dialogue.

FOOTNOTES

1. St. Teresa of Avila, *The Interior Castle*, Trans. and Ed. E. Allison Peers, New York: Doubleday, 1961.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 40-41.

5. Alfred Bloom, *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace*, Tucson, Arizona: The University of Arizona Press, 1965, p. 16.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

7. St. Teresa of Avila, p. 47.

8. Bloom, p. 73.

9. St. Teresa of Avila, p. 47.

10. Bloom, p. 29.

11. Shinran, *Letters of Shinran*, Ed. Yoshifumi Ueda, Kyoto: Hongwanji Interna-

tional, 1978, p.23.

12. St. Teresa of Avila, p. 53.

13. Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, *Foundations of Japanese Buddhism*, Vol. II, Tokyo: Buddhist Books International, 1976, p. 100.

14. St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, Trans. and Ed. K. Kavanaugh, O. Rodriguez, Washington D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1973, p. 587.

15. Bloom, p. 38.

16. St. Teresa of Avila, pp. 59-69.

17. Shinran, p. 23.

18. St. Teresa of Avila, p. 66.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 85-94.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 80-85.

22. Yoshinori Takeuchi, *The Heart of Buddhism*, New York: Crossroads, 1984, p. 57.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

25. Shinran, *Notes on "Essentials of Faith Alone"*, Ed. Yoshifumi Ueda, Kyoto: Hongwanji International, 1979, pp. 6-8.

26. St. Teresa of Avila, p. 123.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

28. Bloom, p. 66.

29. St. Teresa of Avila, p. 194.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

31. Bloom, pp. 55-58.

32. St. Teresa of Avila, p. 210.

33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 233.

38. Shinran, *Letters of Shinran*, pp. 14-16, 74-75.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

40. Matsunaga, p. 102.

41. Takeuchi, pp. 50-58.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 55.