

Mahāyāna Essence as Seen in the Concept of "Return to This World"

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I

"How now are we to understand this Pure Land? Is there really some special *place* other than this world to which we may go after death, a Pure Land of joy and peace? . . . Do common folk, for the most part, believe that their faithful repetition of the *nembutsu* will assure their entry into some sort of Pure Land—wherever that may be—after they die? Perhaps sophisticated Buddhists, following the lead of Shinran, understand that the Pure Land is not a real place at all, but basically a *symbol* for a different state of mind; but would such a notion be attractive and acceptable to ordinary practitioners of Shin Buddhism?"¹

Gordon D. Kaufman, a leading Christian theologian at Harvard Divinity School, has asked this question to those of us who are inside the Shin Buddhist tradition concerning the crucial Shin concept of the "birth into the Pure Land." We should not ignore this question because it was raised by an outsider of the Shin community, nor because it is a problem of "faith" to be solved only subjectively and individually through an indescribable religious experience. If we assume such an attitude, Shinran's Pure Land doctrine will lose its universal significance of making human life meaningful for the contemporary world.

Kaufman himself addresses a similar question to Christians concerning the crucial concept of "God." His own theological work started with and may end by finding a reasonable answer legitimate to the modern way of thinking. In such a reconstruction of the concept of "God," he criticizes a view that "God" can be conceived only through a special religious experience, because it confines "God" within the "circle of faith," not giving a fundamental meaning for the life of all contemporary people.

When we treat the problem of the "birth into the Pure Land" from Kaufman's standpoint, there arise several questions. These questions should mostly be attributed to a typically traditional way of placing it on linear time; namely, it is placed on a simple straight line of

"hearing the teaching" → "realizing *shinjin* by saying Amida's Name" → "attaining birth in the Pure Land." In such an ordering of these key notions of Shinran's thought on linear time, *shinjin*, which is the most primordial in his soteriological system, would lose its true meaning and fall into a mere "ticket" to get to the Pure Land after death only in order to have the sensual pleasures therein—as has been taught and appreciated within the Shin community.

Regarding *shinjin* as a "ticket" for attaining birth in the Pure Land has blurred its actual function in a religious life for hundreds of years—since the introduction of Pure Land Buddhism to Japan—in spite of the efforts to amend such a view by several Pure Land masters including Shinran. This view also regards the Pure Land as a place where people escape from actual human life, which is full of sorrows and pains with which it is hard to deal. For those who consider the Pure Land in such a way, it becomes a "future paradise," without giving a concrete meaning for the present life.

There is another way of thinking of *shinjin* as a product of religious intuition, through which "birth in the Pure Land" is to be only mystically experienced beyond the realm of this empirical world. It is a Pure Land Buddhist version of the "revelation of God" in the Christian sense. However, equating our present existence with Amida and seeing this actual world as nothing other than the Pure Land through intuition was strictly criticized by Shinran,² for in that case the standpoint of "ordinary beings" (*bombu*) in the Pure Land tradition will be lost and it will be transformed into an esoteric Buddhist tradition for sages. For his part, Kaufman would strictly criticize such a view because it lacks a universal religious significance for people in the present world.

All we can do, therefore, to make the concept of "birth in the Pure Land" intelligible for our contemporaries is to reconstruct it on the basis of the true significance of the "ultimate reality," which is to be traced back to the fundamental truth of Mahāyāna. To speak of the concept of "birth in the Pure Land" from a Mahāyāna standpoint, the concept of "return to this world" is indispensable to make the concepts more meaningful than it literally expresses. The concept of "return to this world," however, has also been understood on the linear line mentioned above, which will hardly be acceptable by modern people. In this sense, we also have to rethink this concept in the light of the fundamental Mahāyāna doctrine.

The central purpose of my presentation is to claim that *shinjin* or *nembutsu* as revealed by Shinran is nothing but the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path, and that it is the concept of "return to this world" (*gensō-ekō*) which fulfills the actual significance of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path to its utmost.

II

Placing the concept of "birth in the Pure Land" on linear time and regarding it as occurring after death has long occupied the minds of Pure Land followers, and has smoothly been accepted by them. "Despising this defiled world and hoping to be reborn in the Pure Land" used to be a slogan of the Pure Land tradition in this country. It was only when the Western way of thinking was introduced to Japan after Meiji Imperial Restoration that such a view began to be grasped from another perspective with a strict criticism of the "orthodox" way of viewing it. And yet, such a view still remains deep at the bottom of fairly many people's minds even today in this country.

It was Nonomura Naotarō who first had doubt about the traditional interpretation of "birth" limited only to the matter of after death. His criticism of the traditional view had two points: one is that the final purpose of the Pure Land teaching is not to be born in the Pure Land after death, and the other is that all the myths or mythological expressions of the Pure Land scriptures are no more than the means to lead us to *shinjin* (in Nonumura's terminology, *jinshin*, or deep mind) which Shinran advocated in order to let us know the true religious significance in our life.³ His claim, however, was too radical a one to be accepted by the "orthodox" scholars of Nishi-Hongwanji at that time, and resulted in a purge from his post at Ryukoku University. It is now almost seventy years since that time.

Similar pressures were brought upon Soga Ryōjin and Kaneko Daiei at Otani University for their "heretical" interpretation of "birth" and "Pure Land." They were both successors of Kiyozawa Manshi, who aimed at the reconstruction of the teaching of Higashi-Hongwanji in order to make it understandable to people who were being brain-washed by the Western way of thinking. Soga's claim was to find Amida at the deepest depth of one's existence, in which sense Amida cannot be objectified as something existing over-against us. Kaneko also tried to place the Pure Land within the spiritual realm which is not objectifiable, unlike the "orthodox" way of taking it as a concrete world existing somewhere apart from this world. Both Soga and Kaneko developed their understanding by taking over Kiyozawa's firm belief that religious truth is to be subjective and personal, which can be summarized in his words that "We do not believe in Buddha or God because they actually exist; they exist because we believe in them."⁴ It goes without saying that such a claim was a challenge to the traditional and "orthodox" view that everything concerning the religious life of Shin Buddhists starts from believing in the factual existence of Amida and Pure Land somewhere in the universe and sometime after death.

We have here come back to a point that the Pure Land "is not a

real place at all, but basically a *symbol* for a different state of mind," which Gordon Kaufman criticizes for not being acceptable by common people. Though Kaufman is suspicious about this, the "practitioner of *shinjin*," in its true sense in Shinran's terminology, neither grasps his/her "birth in the Pure Land" as a symbolic psychological matter, nor does he/she believe in it as a real substantial place to which we go after death. A "practitioner of *shinjin*" overcomes both extremes.

In the above sense, the following description by D.T. Suzuki may sound similar to what Kaufman rejects for his "symbolic" understanding of Amida and the Pure Land only appreciated by "sophisticated" Buddhists:

We don't go out of this world in order to be born in the Pure Land, but we carry the Pure Land all the time. Being born in the Pure Land means discovering the Pure Land in ourselves... My conclusion is that Amida is our inmost self, and when that inmost self is found we are born in the Pure Land. The kind of Pure Land located elsewhere, where we stay, is most undesirable.⁵

This view by Suzuki may be acceptable from the standpoint of Zen way of thinking, which is quite similar to the following claim by Shin'ichi Hisamatsu:

Searching neither for Buddhas or Gods outside of man, nor for paradise or Pure Lands in other dimensions, Zen advances man as Buddha and actual existence as the Pure Land.⁶

Even if we admitted such an interpretation by Zen thinkers, it would stand opposed to Shinran's lamentation found in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*:

The monks and laity of this latter age and the religious teachers of these times are floundering in concepts of "self-nature" and "mind-only," and they disparage the true realization of enlightenment in the Pure Land way.⁷

It would be sufficient only to say that Shinran's standpoint is based on the actuality of *bombu* in whom the dichotomy of man and Amida, and of this world and the Pure Land is impossible to overcome. Moreover, if such a dichotomy can be overcome as Suzuki and Hisamatsu argue, there would be no room for the salvation of *bombu* through Amida's working.

III

So far, we have discussed roughly the two types of thinking of "birth in the Pure Land." One is to place it on linear time after death as being "born" into somewhere called "Pure Land" which is generally conceived as being a substantial entity. The other is to equate Amida and Pure Land with our inmost self and this actual world in which we are living. This identity can be realized through a special religious intuition. Which of the two would be right?

We have to say that both may be accepted and also be rejected by Shinran. Because, for Shinran, "birth into the Pure Land" never fulfills its true significance without realizing *shinjin*, an awakening to the universal compassion working on everyone of us.

In this sense, the concept of "birth in the Pure Land" is explained as something which reveals the resultant state of *shinjin* in order for us, who are living in the world of cause-and-effect, to be involved in such an awakening. Therefore, some might well anticipate in *shinjin* that they will be born in the Pure Land beautifully adorned as various *sūtras* describe, and others that they will go to a world of nothingness. Either may be right if it is spoken with *shinjin*.

This sort of discussion has been repeated for a long time—since the introduction of Western way of thinking, or even before then—and seems to be going on as long as the Shin doctrine is comprehended only theoretically. But from the perspective of viewing Shin Buddhism as a Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path, i.e., on the ground of religious practice, the problem of "birth in the Pure Land," with the above-mentioned two ways of answering it, would merely have a secondary significance. In other words, the assumption that "birth in the Pure Land" has its utmost importance as the final goal of the Shin practice would only perplex people within and without.

When we read Shinran carefully, we necessarily find the liberation from the present state of ourselves to be his central concern, and our future destiny to be a secondary one. It is clear that *shinjin* is his central concern and it is this *shinjin* that locates Shin Buddhism right on the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path. This issue of when "birth into the Pure Land" is realized, at the present moment or after death, should be explored on this dimension.

The concept of "return to this world," which is usually conceived as something we perform after "birth in the Pure Land" upon death, should be reconstructed from the perspective of Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path. Needless to say, this concept represents the Pure Land Buddhist version of the Mahāyāna idea of "benefiting others" along with "benefiting oneself," both of which are necessarily required of a Mahāyāna Bodhisattva for the fulfillment of his/her ideal. Shin Buddhism, how-

ever, has long been conceived as a Buddhist school associated only with a very personal and individual salvation. Consequently, *shinjin* is regarded as a special sort of self-satisfaction; as a matter of course, it tends to confine one to one's inner self and is not opened up to the outside world. This seems to be a natural effect of the aspect of *shinjin* which explores one's true nature from a negative perspective. The negative aspect that one is full of blind passions and bound by evil karma, not having any possibility to reach enlightenment or to be saved, is truly an awakening developed through *shinjin*, but it does not necessarily mean the impossibility of the salvation of other people. The concept of "return to this world" as a Pure Land expression of "benefiting others," the ideal of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path, should not be apart from "benefiting oneself" expressed as attaining "birth in the Pure Land."

In addition to the fulfillment of "benefiting others," the concept of "return to this world" can also be regarded as a Pure Land Buddhist version of the Mahāyāna concept of "*nirvāṇa* having no place to stay in" (J. *mujū-sho-nehān*, Skt. *apratisthita-nirvāṇa*).

The notion of Shinran's concept of "returning to this world" is based on the Twenty-second Vow of Amida described in the *Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life*, which states:

When I attain Buddhahood, the bodhisattva of other Buddha-lands who come and are born in my land will ultimately and unfailingly attain [their rank of] "succession to the position [of Buddhahood] after one lifetime"—except for those who, in accordance with their own original vows, freely guide others to enlightenment, don the armor of universal vows for the sake of sentient beings, accumulate roots of virtue, emancipate all beings, travel to Buddha-lands to perform bodhisattva practices, make offerings to all the Buddhas and Tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, awaken sentient beings countless as the sands of the Ganges, and bring them to abide firmly in the unexcelled, right, true way. Such bodhisattvas surpass ordinary ones, manifest the practices of all the bodhisattva stages, and discipline themselves in the virtue of Samantabhadra. Should it not be so, may I not attain the perfect enlightenment.⁸

The intent of this Vow is that Bodhisattvas (Pure Land practitioners) who are born into the Pure Land immediately dwell in the assured state for becoming Buddhas except those who wish to return to this world in order to save others. However, among the names of this Vow called by Shinran—"the Vow of necessary attainment of the rank next to Buddhahood," "the Vow of attainment of Buddhahood after one lifetime," "the Vow of directing virtue for our return to this world"—

more emphasis was put on "the Vow of directing virtue for our return to this world" than the other two. Such an interpretation is based on Vasubandhu's "fifth gate of emergence":

With great compassion, one observes all sentient beings in pain and affliction, and assuming various transformed bodies to guide them, enters the gardens of birth-and-death and the forests of blind passions; freely sporting there with transcendent powers, one attains the state of teaching and guiding. This is brought about by the directing of virtue through the power of the Primal Vow.⁹

With a detailed comment by T'an-luan on this passage, Shinran developed further the concept of "return to this world," as Amida's virtue directed, in order for us to realize the true significance of *shinjin* in terms of the Mahāyāna Bodhisattva path. The "orthodox" interpretation of this, however, is that immediately after attaining "birth in the Pure Land" at death, one returns to this world in order to save others who are suffering in this defiled world. The problem is that it, too, is located only in linear time, and is not directly associated with the present moment of realizing *shinjin*.

We cannot but say that in Shinran's thought there is an element which equates *shinjin* (realized at the very present moment) and the enlightenment in the Pure Land (generally understood to be attained at the moment of death), in other words, an equation of the present time and the future. Namely, the one-moment of realizing *shinjin* at the present moment includes future. As for this, Nishitani Keiji states as follows:

Simultaneity is defined as a "unity of time and eternity." It is an "atom of eternity" (Kierkegaard) in time, or a moment at which we touch something eternal. "Present" and "moment" is that in which such simultaneity is established. A "moment" is in linear time and yet beyond it.¹⁰

If we understand *shinjin*, a crucial concept in Shinran's thought, on this basis, the following description will no more be conceived in linear time only, as it has been in the "orthodox" doctrine:

As I humbly contemplate the true essence of the Pure Land path, I understand that Amida's directing of virtue (to sentient beings) has two aspects: the aspect for our going forth to the Pure Land and the aspect for our return to this world (to save all other sentient beings).¹¹

Further he praises:

The countless great bodhisattvas of the land of happiness
Have reached "succession to Buddhahood after one lifetime";
Entering the compassionate activity of Samantabhadra,
They unfailingly work to save beings in defiled worlds.¹²

Those who reach the Pure Land of happiness
Return to this evil world of five defilements,
Where, like the Buddha Sakyamuni,
They benefit sentient beings without limit.¹³

And further:

The directing of virtue of our return to this world is such
That we attain the resultant state of benefiting and guiding
others;
Immediately reentering the world of beings,
We perform the compassionate activity that is the virtue of
Samantabhadra.¹⁴

These statements of Shinran's are praise of the notion of "return to this world." In these we can find two perspectives; one is a perspective based on linear time, and the other, beyond time. As stated above, the two aspects of "birth in the Pure Land" and "return to this world" have traditionally been taught to be matters in linear time only. But, if we understand on the basis of Nishitani's view that *shinjin* includes both present and future (and consequently past, too), Amida's directing of virtue to beings should transcend linear time, and yet embrace it. A "practitioner of *shinjin*" lives in linear time when viewed from the perspective of living in this world with a limited physical existence, and, at the same time, transcends it when viewed from the perspective of Amida's working beyond time.

We have already noted above that in Shinran's thought there is something inseparable between *shinjin* and enlightenment. Concerning the concept of "return to this world," too, we have to take this element into account. Namely, a person of *shinjin* is one who is seeking after birth in the Pure Land, but for other people who are acquainted with that person of *shinjin*, he/she may appear to be as guiding *them* to the final realization.

For instance, Hōnen was one who himself was aiming at attaining "birth in the Pure Land" through *nembutsu*, but for Shinran Hōnen was an incarnation of Amida or a Bodhisattva working for the salvation of him. Shinran, too, was going on the path to the Pure Land under

Hōnen's guidance, but for other people he may be a Buddha or a Bodhisattva who has returned from the Pure Land in order to enable us to realize the true compassion.

All the *myōkōnins* who appeared in the history of Shin Buddhism can be described in the same way. Looking up to all the predecessors of *shinjin* as Buddhas or Bodhisattvas who have returned from the Pure Land to guide him/her to enlightenment, a *myōkōnin* penetrates deeply into his/her inmost self as one who is not possessed of any possibility to be saved. And yet, such a *myōkōnin* is looked up to by others as one who has returned from the Pure Land to lead them there.

Suppose a person is going on a path, along which many people must have walked to get to the destination. In the same way, a person of *shinjin* follows the way guided by many predecessors, which means just on the path to the final realization there is an encounter with one who has returned from there. *Shinjin* is that which enables one to be awakened to such an encounter. The concept of "return to this world," therefore, is to be realized by a person of *shinjin*, who again is looked up to by others as one who has returned from the final destination to guide them. In this sense, we will be able to say that "going (to the Pure Land)" is one with "return (from the Pure Land)," or, more shortly, "going is returning."

NOTES

- ¹ Gordon D. Kaufman, "Religious Diversity and Religious Truth," paper presented for the Colloquium Celebrating the 350th Anniversary of the Founding of Ryūkoku University.
- ² See n. 7.
- ³ Nonomura Naotarō, *Jōdokyō Hihan*, or A Criticism of Pure Land Buddhism, (Kyoto: Chugai Shuppansha, 1923).
- ⁴ Kiyozawa Manshi, "Waga Shinnen", or My Faith, *Kiyozawa Manshi*, (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1970), p. 195.
- ⁵ D.T. Suzuki, *Shin Buddhism*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), pp. 40-41.
- ⁶ Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, "Zen as the Negation of Holiness," in Frederic Franck, ed., *The Buddha Eye*, (New York: Crossroad, 1982), p. 174.
- ⁷ *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, A Translation of Shinran's *Kyōgyōshinshō*, (4 vols. Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1985) II.201.
- ⁸ Ibid., III. 368.
- ⁹ Ibid., III. 365.
- ¹⁰ Nishitani Keiji, "Shinran ni okeru Toki no Mondai," or The Problem of 'time' in Shinran's Thought, *Gendaigo-yaku Shinran Zenshū*, (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1975), X.116.
- ¹¹ *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Chapter on True Teaching, *Shinshū Shōgyō Zenshō*, II.2.
- ¹² *Hymns of the Pure Land*, A Translation of Shinran's *Jōdo Wasan*, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1991), p. 19.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 21.
- ¹⁴ *Hymns of the Pure Land Masters*, A Translation of Shinran's *Kōsō Wasan*, (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1992), p. 29.