



# Shinran and the Parable of the Burning House

by Shojo Oi

## DO WE NEED BUDDHA'S GUIDANCE?

At the close of a hard day we may sincerely ask ourselves, "Was today a good day for me?" or, "Was this day, gone forever, quite meaningful?" In answering these questions we will have many answers as each of us differs from the other. It is the role of the all embracing one to remind us that while today was perhaps a good day, it was not good enough for us to feel it was filled with worthy achievements.

At this point it becomes necessary to explain why this day may not have been as we would have wanted and why it could have been better had we really known how to make it more meaningful.

## BUDDHA'S GUIDANCE

To illustrate this, the Buddha laid down many parables. I will relay the most famous one: "The Parable of the Burning House." This is one of seven famous parables employed by the Buddha in one of His well known sermons and it appears in the Soothill translation of the *Lotus of the Wonderful Law* sutra. In this particular parable the teachings of the Buddha not only bring out the impermanence of human life but also show us what we are to do once we understand this.

*Sariputra! Suppose, in a (certain) kingdom, city or town, there is a great elder, old and worn, of boundless wealth, and possessing many fields, houses, slaves, and servants. His house is spacious and large, but it has only one door, and many people dwell in it, one hundred, two hundred, or even five hundred in number. Its halls and chambers are decayed and old, its walls crumbling down, the bases of its pillars rotten, the beams and roof-trees toppling and dangerous. On every side, at the same moment, fire suddenly starts and the house is in conflagration. The boys of the elder, say ten, twenty, or even thirty, are in the dwelling. The elder, on seeing this conflagration spring up on every side, is greatly startled and reflects thus: "Though I am able to get safely out of the gate of this burning house, yet my boys in the burning house are*

*pleasurably absorbed in amusements without apprehension, knowledge, surprise, or fear. Though the fire is pressing upon them and pain and suffering are instant, they do not mind or fear and have no impulse to escape."*

*Sariputra! This elder ponders thus: "I am strong in my body and arms. Shall I get them out of the house by means of a flower-vessel, or a bench, or a table?" Again he ponders: "This house has only one gate, which moreover is narrow and small. My children play; perchance they will fall into the fire and be burnt. I must speak to them on this dreadful matter, (warning them) that they would be injured by the fire." Having reflected thus, according to his thoughts, he calls to his children: "Come out quickly, all of you!"*

*Though their father, in his pity, lures and admonishes with kind words, yet the children, joyfully absorbed in their play, are unwilling to believe him and have neither surprise nor fear, nor any mind to escape; moreover, they do not know what is the fire he means, or what the house, and what he means by being lost, but only run hither and thither in play, no more than glancing at their father. Then the elder reflects thus: "This house is burning in a great conflagration. If I and my children do not get out at once, we shall certainly be burnt up by it. Let me now, by some expedient means, cause my children to escape this disaster." Knowing that to which each of his children is predisposed, and all the various attractive playthings and curiosities to which their natures will joyfully respond, the father tells them saying: "Here are rare and precious things for your amusement—if you do not come and get them you will be sorry for it afterwards. So many goat-carts, deer-carts, and bullock-carts are now outside the gate to play with. All of you come quickly out of this burning house, and I will give you whatever you want." Thereupon the children, hearing of the attractive playthings mentioned by their father, and because they suit their wishes, every one eagerly, each pushing the other, and racing one against another, comes rushing out of the burning house.*

*Then the elder, seeing his children have safely*

*escaped and are all in the square, sits down in the open, no longer embarrassed, but with a mind at ease and ecstatic with joy. Then each of the children says to the father: "Father! Please now give us those playthings you promised us, goat-carts, deer-carts, and bullock-carts!" Sariputra! Then the elder gives to his children equally each a great cart, lofty and spacious, adorned with all the precious things, surrounded with railed seats, hung with bells on its four sides, and covered with curtains, splendidly decorated also with various rare and precious things, draped with strings of precious stones, hung with garlands of flowers, thickly spread with beautiful mats, and supplied with rosy pillows. It is yoked with white bullocks of pure white skin, of handsome appearance, and of great muscular power, which walk with even steps, and with the speed of the wind, and also has many servants and followers to guard them.*

*Wherefore? Because, were I to give them to the whole nation, these things of mine would not run short—how much less so to my children! Meanwhile each of the children rides on his great cart, having received that which he had never before had and never expected to have.*

## IMPLICATIONS

The burning house is a symbolic expression of the ever-changing nature of human life. Just as the children refused to heed the warning of the father signalling impending danger, likewise, we tend to take things lightly; perhaps because we feel we already know about these things, or because we are too occupied with more immediate matters, or because we don't care about what may never happen to us or even occur at all. What could possibly happen and what actually happens may not be the same thing, since what truly happens is the result of our karma and all our actions up to the present moment. We can know what our karma directs only after it has happened. Perhaps this is better, for the agony of waiting for impending tragedy is sometimes unbearable.

The great elder in this case is, of course, the Compassionate Buddha. Just as the elder had many children whom he loved without partiality, we are all children of the Buddha. However, because we oftentimes fail to heed the words of the Buddha, He employs many kinds of expedencies to awaken us to the impending dangers in human life. In this parable the Buddha induced the children to come out of the burning house by offering wonderful playthings which the children had desired in the past.

In many of the commentaries on this parable, including the one written by Prince Shotoku during the Asuka Era, the three kinds of carts driven by the goat, the deer, and the ox represent the teachings of the Buddha, aimed at the two levels of *arhat* (*śrāvaka* and *pratyekabuddha*) and the *bodhisattva*. Attracted by the playthings they readily understood, the children came rushing out of the burning

house. This, too, is a symbolic expression of the way many people are attracted by the more understandable teachings of the Buddha and thus seek refuge in Him.

The three carts represent different levels by which man may attain. They are called the more understandable teachings, which lead man to a high level of life. However, these so-called understandable teachings may not enable man to reach the highest goal of Buddhahood. This is the reason the great elder had given his sons the best of ways leading to the highest goal; the goal of Buddhahood.

In the eyes of the Buddha these so-called readily understandable teachings are actually themselves expedencies and although they have worth they are not of the highest value. The teachings of the highest value are represented by the beautiful cart drawn by the white bullock which the great elder gave his children, over and above what they had expected.

In the example given us by the Buddha we find many implications. First, it has taught us the basic nature of life; that of impermanence, and the unexpected pitfalls which lie ahead. We may not be afraid of them simply because we cannot identify each of them, one by one. We may call this indifference or even ignorance of what lies ahead. Being in this hazy or unclear state was explained as *a-vidya*, or not-clearness, and this has always been translated as "*mumyo*" in Japanese sermons. The second implication is that, of the many teachings left us by the Buddha, there are some which serve to lead man into the way, while others not only lead into the way but enable one to reach the highest goal of Nirvana or Buddhahood.

The three carts, representative of these teachings which are all good and meaningful, are still not perfect and are difficult to follow. The last cart given to the children once they were out of danger, and which was driven by a white bullock, represents the highest level of attainment. The highest attainment is to reach the realm equal to that of Buddha.

## SHINRAN SHONIN AND THE PARABLE

Some students of Shin Shu doctrine, at the outset of their pursuit, often express their concern over a situation which has not been addressed adequately over the years. This situation centers around the Mahayana sutras our founder cited in his Main Book (*Kyo-gyo-shin-sho*) and the point in question is this: Why is there hardly any reference made in the Main Book, be it quotations from the sutra itself or passages from commentaries, to the *Lotus (Saddharma-Pundarika) Sutra*?

I too, was somewhat intrigued by this matter at one time and inquired of two of our Masters of Shin Shu Doctrine. At the beginning there were no definite answers to be found but, thanks to years spent in the study of Shinran's teachings and under the Masters' guidance, it became clear that there was no need to consider or seek an answer to this

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how important and soiled my heart and mind are, I cannot help but continue to be the same way. It is beyond my capacity to change. I begin to realize this total helplessness more and more, while at the same time experiencing the

absolute energy of Amida Buddha and His Wisdom and Compassion, and I cannot help but place my whole self in total reliance upon Him. This, I believe, is the essence of "ONENESS WITH AMIDA BUDDHA."

## SHINRAN AND THE PARABLE OF THE BURNING HOUSE

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question.

In short, the system of Shinran's conviction regarding the instructions and principles originate in the Buddha's sermons as relayed to Shinran through the Masters before him. They were all believers in the *Nembutsu* way and were well versed in the Buddha's instructions based on the three basic sutras. This is one reason why other major Mahayana sutras are not necessarily emphasized by most of the Masters. Shinran inherited and faithfully adhered to this tradition.

Despite our founder not citing any passage from the *Lotus Sutra* in his major writings, the basic ideas and concepts developed in the sutra are adopted. One example is the idea of the burning house which, in the *Lotus Sutra*, symbolizes the human world of *dukkha* (suffering). This expression appears many times and for our purpose a few examples are given here.

In Volume II of the *Shin-Shu Sho-Gyo Zen-Sho* (sacred books of Shin Shu), on the matter of Pure Faith, Shinran refers to the example of "The White Path and the Two Rivers" presented by the Master Zendo in China:

*To apply the situation in the form of a parable, by the eastern bank is meant the saha world of the burning house and by the western bank is meant the Treasure-land of Bliss.*

(SSZ II, 56-8)

Also in Volume II, on the true (but hidden) teachings of the three basic sutras, and referring to the *Anrakushu* by the Master Doshaku of China, we find the following passage:

*Although it has not been a period of time of 10,000 kalpas, all along, I have never been able to be freed from the agony of the burning house.*

(SSZ II, 153-7)

Doshaku, Master of Genchuji Temple, again said:

*Now those who sincerely follow the way to purity do so with an earnest mind and continuity, then having endured over a kalpa, for the first time realize the level of non-retrogression. Sentient beings of the present may be said to be of "such light-faith-minded, as it were hair and feathers." To them we may apply names such as bodhisattva-in-name-only, the bodhisattva of unsettled mind, or one outside of Buddhist traditions. These people have not been relieved of the sufferings of the burning house.*

Along with the concept of the burning house, another attempt Shinran made in establishing the Shin Shu flavor of the Buddhist concept was the *ekayana* or one-level principle of attainment. In this regard, Shinran expressed this concept as *ichijo-kai* (一乗海) or the sea of one vehicle attainment. In regard to the "sea of one vehicle attainment" the one vehicle is meant to be the Mahayana tradition in Buddhism and by Mahayana tradition is meant Buddha-yana of One Buddha vehicle. Thus, those who achieve the level of Mahayana tradition attain the level of *amuttara-sam-yak-sambodhi*. By this is meant the realm of Nirvana, the ultimate (highest) Dharmakaya. Those who achieve this realm are those who have realized completely the essence of the realm of *ekayana*, the one-vehicle level. There is no other level of Tathagata than this as the Tathagata is Dharmakaya.

The significance of the one vehicle in regard to attainment is that the level or plane of one's attainment is of the highest level as well as being of the same ultimate qualitative value. This gives Shinran's conviction a unique position through which "absolute *tariki*" (power of Amida Buddha's Vow) is brought into focus. This also becomes the basis of strong conviction on the part of Shinran regarding non-retrogression while in this existence, meaning even before one realizes *Ōjo*. These convictions of our founder are firmly rooted in the power of the Buddha's Vow. Thus, for our founder, *tariki* is no other power than the power of Amida Buddha's Primal (18th) Vow.