

# “Reikon” and “Soul”



by Kyogyo Miura

As a preface, the terms “*reikon*” and “soul” are rarely found in Jodo Shinshu publications, such as the *Shinshu Seiten*, which was published by the Buddhist Churches of America in 1978, because the concepts of *reikon* and soul are definitely not Shinshu-istic.

Jodo Shinshu is a very radical teaching that never relies on superstitious doctrines or concepts such as *reikon* or soul. It is a very realistic teaching, so realistic that Shinshu influence totally erased the original superstitious cults in some areas of the northern part of Japan. Cultural anthropologists would have a difficult time finding original folk culture in that region.<sup>1</sup> However, it seems *reikon* and soul are very common words and concepts, and many people, even Shinshu members, use them. Clarification, therefore, is needed.

As an introduction, I would like to quote a common question upon which to contemplate: “What happens after one dies?” Usually in common belief, no matter in the East or West, people assume an immortal part of man as having permanent individual existence, or they think immaterial essence or substance the actuating cause of the individual life, just as an animating principle, and they call this “*reikon*” or “soul,” or “atman,” which gives life to a body.<sup>2</sup> They think when one’s life ends the body dies and the *reikon* or soul, or “remains,” reincarnates according to the judgment made by a supreme being. Therefore, people at funerals often pray, “May his soul rest in peace (or in heaven).” In Japan they used to say, “Soldier’s soul rests in Yasukuni Shrine” (and some soul may have gotten lost and now rests in the shadow of grass-blades!).

Contrary to this, the Buddhist teaching is known as a no-soul school. It shares with Indian materialists the denial of a soul and the denial of a God in the sense of an eternal person who can willfully create, destroy, punish, reward, and judge man, but it diverges from them in recognizing Karma and Nirvana<sup>3</sup> as Buddhism teaches that nothing is eternal. In fact, since everything is in a state of constant change, there cannot be any permanent unifying factor like a *reikon* or soul.<sup>4</sup> For this reason Sakyamuni Buddha really didn’t bother to answer questions such as, “What happens after one dies?” or, “Where does one go when one dies?”

Now, proceeding to the main subject, one thing has to be clarified: If Buddhism denies the eternal substance of *reikon* or soul what is the individual essence that receives salvation or redemption (*sukui* or *shinjin*), in Shin

Buddhism? This question precisely means, “What is the ‘I’ or ‘Self,’” or, “How did this ‘I’ come into this life?” In thinking about these questions there is a popular Buddhist saying: “If one wants to know his past, observe his effects in the present life. If one desires to know his future, observe his causes in the present.”<sup>5</sup> In Buddhism, as this saying indicates, since all things arise interdependently through innumerable causes and conditions in the past and present, this “I” was born with causes and conditions, too.<sup>6</sup> The *Jobungi* states, “When one desired to be born, (the ‘I’ came) into life with one’s karma-consciousness as the internal cause, and with pure blood of the father and mother as the physical condition.” The internal cause of karma-consciousness continues, as the basis of one’s self carrying all his past karmas along,<sup>7</sup> and this karma-consciousness never constitutes an animating factor like *reikon* or soul. It is all a putting together of karma and is like various kinds of magnetic signals on a recording tape. When the karma-consciousness meets the physical condition of conception, the “I” begins to exist. This relation between karma and condition is as if the result of sound was reproduced by the cause of magnetic signals, through a tape recorder as the condition. This is how the “I” came into this life.

The next question is, “What is this ‘I’ or ‘Self?’” People tend to presume illusory concepts of “I” regarding this question, particularly in three aspects: the physical, intellectual, and social. The following points are examples of the Buddhist view:

Firstly, the physical body is just a container of life. This container is borrowed and is not one’s property. If the body were really one’s own, one should be able to possess it forever. Thus, one borrows the body at birth and uses it until he dies.

Secondly, intelligence is also something one borrows. One’s knowledge, for example, is obtained after his birth. That means one learns his mother tongue from the people who surround him, he understands things and he obtains knowledge. But whatever he acquires, when he dies, he is never able to take with him. Some people, even before they die, get too old to remember things! This proves that intelligence is a borrowed thing and not one’s real nature.

Lastly, the social aspect is the self which tries to identify with social values. This includes financial capacity, social

prestige, possession of property, family life and its members, etc. No matter what it is, no one is able to possess it forever, as we have seen in the first two examples.

All these aspects show that none can be the property of the "I," nor part of the "I." This proves they are just things borrowed at one's birth. When one retracts the external and internal factors of the "I," the remaining is the "I" which is a compound of karma and conditions, and is called karma-consciousness as a whole, and is the result of ignorance. Ignorance is the result of evil or blind passions and refers generally to troubled mental activity caused by a deluded mind and body. The primary ones comprise evil impulses that lie at the foundation of every tormenting thought and desire. They are: 1. desire to have, 2. anger, 3. folly, 4. self-conceit, 5. false views, and 6. doubt.<sup>8</sup> Even though a person, after birth, never learns these impulses, they can emerge by themselves. This proves the karma-consciousness of ignorance and evil passions is the true nature and the real "I."<sup>9</sup>

The main question, "What is the individual essence that receives salvation, or *sukui*, in Shin Buddhism?", finally has to be answered. In Buddhism, the "I" is proved to be the karma-consciousness of ignorance and evil passions, and if this "I" that borrows external aspects dies without security, there is no peace forever. Ignorance is the basis of all evil passions and is the greatest hindrance to the attainment of Supreme Enlightenment.<sup>10</sup> Since this "I" is the karma-consciousness of ignorance and evil passions, it is hardest for the "I" to achieve Enlightenment.

In Jodo Shinshu, Amida Buddha, who established the Original Vow with which He declared His Compassion and Wisdom, describes in essence: If this "I" of insecurity can't be saved, may I not attain the Highest Enlightenment.<sup>11</sup> Amida's Original Vow can be understood as follows:

The "I" is expressed as "*Namu*." "To attain" means attainment in terms of becoming a Buddha and is expressed as "*Butsu*." And "the Highest Enlightenment," of which the essence is eternal Life and Light symbolizing His Compassion and Wisdom, is expressed as "*Amida*." Thus, the Name of the Buddha, "*Namu Amida Butsu*," can be interpreted as the "I" of insecurity, able to become one with the Life of Amida.<sup>12</sup> A further interpretation is "*Namu* is 'Ki'," which is the Faith of sentient beings in Amida Buddha. Next, the meaning of "Amida Buddha" is "*Hō*," which is Amida Tathagata's Saving Power of sentient beings. Therefore, it can be called "*Namu Amida Butsu* of oneness of Saving Power and Reliance."<sup>13</sup> *Namu Amida Butsu*, the Name, shows that the object of Amida Buddha's salvation is none other than the "I" of ignorance and evil passions. Shinran Shonin, founder of Jodo Shinshu, described this in the *Kyogyoshinsho*.

*I truly know that without the merciful father of the virtuous Name, there would be no cause for Birth, and without the compassionate mother of Light, there would be no condition for Birth. Even if the cause and the condition are united, without the karma-consciousness of Faith, there would be no reaching*

*the Land of Light. The karma-consciousness of True Faith is the internal cause, and the father of Name and mother of Light are the external conditions. When the internal cause and the external conditions are united, one realizes the True Body of the Recompensed Land (Amida's Pure Land).<sup>14</sup>*

In Jodo Shinshu, the object of Amida's salvation, or *sukui*, is the "I" of karma-consciousness, and with the Compassion and Wisdom of Amida this karma-consciousness of ignorance and evil passions is transformed into that of True Faith. This makes it possible for the "I" to attain the Right Established State of Mind which is equivalent to the True Enlightenment. Shinran Shonin thus wrote in the *Shoshinge*:

*If the single thought of joy is awakened in one's mind,<sup>15</sup> one attains Nirvana even without destroying the evil passions. Both the wise and the ordinary—even the grave offenders and slanderers of the Dharma—are all equally converted, just as all the waters flow into the ocean and gain one (the same) taste.<sup>16</sup>*

This indicates no matter what state the "I" is in Amida's working converts the ignorance and evil passions into a seed of attaining Enlightenment and, "Even without destroying the evil passions" means this can happen even while one is still alive.

As a conclusion, if any teaching was for a visualized substance like *reikon* or soul, one could easily solve the problem in this world and surely the answer would be mundane. In Jodo Shinshu, everything that can be visualized, whether material or immaterial, is just a borrowed thing and is temporary. The "I" which is a compound of karma and conditions can be defined as the karma-consciousness of ignorance and evil passions. The ignorance and evil passions originated from the view that there really is an eternal substance known as *reikon*, or ego-soul.<sup>17</sup>

As there is no such individual essence as *reikon* or soul, and rather than pursuing this idea of *reikon* and soul, *nembutsu* is Amida Buddha's Wisdom that makes one realize a borrowed thing as exactly a borrowed thing and that makes one aware of the real and true "I" of karma-consciousness. The *nembutsu* proves to anyone a superb way to transform the suffering that derives from ignorance and evil passions deep within and lead him to the Highest Enlightenment right at this very moment and space.

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## NOTE:

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The Shin Buddhism Translation Series is in the process of publishing the complete writings of Shinran Shonin. An introduction to the Six Aspects is found in volume 1, no. 1 of The Pacific Journal, which includes a digest by Bishop Seigen H. Yamaoka, and articles by BCA ministers, Toshio Murakami, Ken Yamaguchi, Kakuye Tada, Hiroshi Abiko, LaVerne Sasaki, and Professor Shojo Oi of the Institute of Buddhist Studies.

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3. Snow, Elson B., "Mahayana Notebook; Demarcation," Wheel of Dharma, vol. 7, issue 7, July 1980.
4. King, Rev. June, "Answers to Common Questions on Buddhism," in leaflet published by North-West Buddhist Ministerial Association, 1980.
5. Compiled by the Ryukoku University, Bukkyo Yoron, 13th ed., p. 23, Hyakkaen Publication, Kyoto, Japan, 1967.
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7. See Shinshu Seiten, "Kyogyoshinsho," BCA, p. 512. 1978.
8. Suzuki, D. T., translator, Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Shinshu Otani-ha Publishers, Kyoto, 1973. Kawata Press, Tokyo.
9. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, pps. 431-432.

10. Suzuki, D. T., translator, Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Shinshu Otani-ha Publishers, Kyoto, 1973, Kawata Press, Tokyo. p. 206.
11. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, pps. 10-12. See 11, 12, 13, 17, 18, 22, 19, 20, and 28th vows. Also see p. 441.
12. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Rennyō's Interpretation of the Name," p. 449.
13. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Gobunsho," p. 271.
14. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 85.
15. See Shinshu Seiten, BCA, "Shoshinge," p. 152.
16. Suzuki, D. T., Kyogyoshinsho, Ed. by Eastern Buddhist Society, Published by Shinshu Otani-ha, Kyoto, 1973. Kawata Press, Tokyo.
17. Ibid. p. 206.

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*and the more I listen to the Teachings, my shinjin melts away, nothing remains, everything disappears. For this, I am truly grateful to the snowman.*<sup>4</sup>

Once, when Osono was walking on the road of a village in Ise she was saying the *nembutsu*. A man walking nearby heard her and said, "There goes the old lady mouthing empty *nembutsu*." Osono heard what the man had said and rushed back to him saying, "Thank you for saying that, thank you! You just don't know where you'll find a good friend." The man, startled by what Osono was saying, turned to her and said, "You don't have to get mad!" To this Osono replied:

*No, no, I'm not mad. I came to thank you. If the nembutsu that comes out of the mouth of this old lady turns into merit and I'm to be saved by that, what am I supposed to do??? I'm truly grateful for this empty nembutsu that comes out of me after I've been saved. I'm really grateful to you for letting me know; I'm really grateful to you for letting me know.*<sup>5</sup>

Years later, when Osono was on her deathbed, a devotee came to see her and asked, "Can you explain your understanding of the Buddha-dharma to me?" Osono answered, "I don't have any understanding to explain, just that during my lifetime I have come to realize that any understanding is beyond me."

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