

# PACIFIC WORLD

Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies

Third Series Number 11  
Fall 2009

Special Issue Celebrating the  
Sixtieth Anniversary of the  
Institute of Buddhist Studies  
1949-2009



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Acknowledgment: This annual publication is made possible by the donation of BDK America of Berkeley, California.

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## **Basing Our Personhood on the Primal Vow**

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### CONSTRUCTING THE SELF WHILE DISCERNING ITS NON-SUBSTANTIALITY

Constructing one's self-identity, forming one's character, is a real process within the universal flow of events. I will be claiming that this sub-process within the universal flow which is one person's subjectivity is interdependent with other persons, other activities, with cultures in which that person lives, and with various aspects of his or her own biology. Buddhist tradition helps us to understand that there is no uniquely self-same soul thing underlying this process of unifying the self, this building of our personhood.

The Pure Land stream of Mahāyāna tradition was polyvalent from the outset. In a real sense one of its streams of development culminates in the school of Jōdo Shinshū, when we understand it in terms of the writings of its founder, Shinran. In Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist tradition the process of forming one's identity as a self is not de-constructed or discontinued. Discovering that this process of identity-building is multi-leveled and interdependent with the lives and actions of others helps to demystify the self without denying that it, in some sense, exists or is real.

Discerning the non-substantiality of the self is not facilitated by pretending that it is not real or important. Rather than trying to deconstruct the self, the stream of Buddhist tradition our school is situated within points out its interdependence. The Hindu and Jain notion of a soul, the *ātman*, is thought to name a reality that is eternal, uniquely self-same, and non-physical, which constitutes the essence of personal identity. In Pure Land Buddhist practice we rely upon the fundamental vow of Amida, which defines the Buddha and ourselves in terms of one another. This sort of interdependence is consistent with the Mahāyāna view that nothing and no one possesses an essence. What we have in

this form of Buddhist practice is, I believe, a supposition of a coherent process of ongoing character-building where the self is not uniquely self-same. There is a paradox to this way of thinking at a philosophical level. Nonetheless, if we try to construct a conceptualization of the subjectivity assumed in *nenbutsu* practice, I think this is what we get.

The vows of Amida Buddha are the fulfillment of the ages-long quest of the Bodhisattva Dharmākara. The person, Dharmākara, in the narrative of the *Larger Sutra* has partially discerned and is deliberately reinforcing the interdependent nature of the process of building self-identity. The Bodhisattva Dharmākara who makes the vows is a paradigm, or classic exemplar, of the process of forging a character that is based upon embracing one's dependence on others. Dharmākara defines the buddha he will become, Amida, in terms of the ability to lead others to enlightenment as pure and thorough-going as his own.

This Pure Land tradition within Mahāyāna, particularly as it is worked out in the thought and practice of Shinran Shōnin, displays an understanding of the self as inseparable from others, as rejecting unique self-sameness, without the error of implying that personal identity is unreal and without reducing it to some static model such as that of a cart.

#### NARRATIVE IDENTITY

One component of identity construction is the narrative process. Dennis Hirota glosses Paul Ricoeur's view in this recent passage: "Narrative is a configuring operation in which diverse and multiple phenomena are unified by being formed into actions of agents with goals, motives, and inter-personal relationships in a 'conceptual network.'"<sup>1</sup> Or, in the words of the philosopher Ricoeur himself, "[The identity of the self] rests on a temporal structure that conforms to the model of dynamic identity arising from the poetic composition of a narrative text."<sup>2</sup>

Such narrative processes are only a part of constructing one's personhood. I have argued elsewhere that not only narrative but also the unification that our bodies engage in while forming our biological personhood must be taken into account when investigating personal identity.<sup>3</sup>

At this time, I want to especially emphasize the role of narrative in our self-understanding. The vows of Dharmākara and his fulfillment of them in becoming Amida Buddha are explained in narrative

fashion in the *Larger Sutra* on Amida Buddha.<sup>4</sup> This narrative is often described with terms like “symbolic” or “metaphorical,” but the vows in that narrative have real descriptive function. There is, to speak in the old way, an isomorphism, a sameness of form between the vows in the text and what is actually happening in the practitioner’s life and in the compassionate activity of Amida Buddha. The fundamental structure of the vows—“if I do not fulfill this promise may I not attain Enlightenment”—shows the interdependent nature of Amida’s identity.<sup>5</sup> Dharmākara Bodhisattva is promising to become a buddha (named Amida) whose identity is interdependent with the liberation of those who entrust themselves to his vow-power.

Interdependent identity is built into Dharmākara’s vows. The promise to liberate those who entrust themselves to the Buddha’s enacting of those vows is not metaphorical or symbolic. We have the description of a promise to lead to enlightenment those who wish the help of the buddha whom Dharmākara will become. There is no more accurate description of the primal vows that might replace the description in the text. That is to say, there is no more precise blueprint of the matter described, in deference to which the text of the vow could be considered a symbolic rendering.

#### INTER-SUBJECTIVE IDENTITY-BUILDING

A recent attempt to look at self-building in both Western and in Japanese Buddhist sources has been made by Steve Odin in his *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism*.<sup>6</sup> I am surprised at the stress Odin places on Fichte. As informed as his briefer references to Hegel are I feel he gives insufficient credit to Hegel for establishing an understanding of personal identity as interdependent with other persons’ perceptions and with society and culture. It is Hegel’s description of the interdependent nature of self-consciousness that is the inspiration for most of the development Odin traces leading up to the thought of G. H. Mead a bit more than a century later. The *locus classicus* for Hegel’s attribution of self-identity to a relationship between persons is, “Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized.’”<sup>7</sup>

The foundational work in Hegel’s view of inter-subjective identity formation has been developed in many directions, including in the work of Ricoeur mentioned earlier. Mara Rainwater has remarked that

concern with linguistic issues such as the nature of meaning and interpretation “led Ricoeur to develop a model of selfhood that privileges a narrative (*ipse*) identity emerging cumulatively and inter-subjectively, always mediated by others.”<sup>8</sup> This could describe the building of personhood not only by the practicing Pure Land Buddhist but by the buddha-to-be Amida in his bodhisattva stage as well.

#### NARRATIVE NOT SO GRAND

My reasons for discussing, in a preliminary way, the inter-subjective and narrative bases of identity formation do not include proffering a grand narrative for all Buddhists. Richard Payne has recently attempted to trace a Buddhist grand narrative in brief outline: “This narrative structure would start with a primal condition of ignorance and its consequent suffering, move into an arising of the intent to awaken, and culminate in insight into the emptiness of all conditioned existence and the liberation of all sentient beings.”<sup>9</sup>

I do not mean to either champion or oppose such grand narratives that seek to be normative, or describe a normative process, for all Buddhists. The narrative of the vow, which I speak of as being involved in the continuing formation of the personhood of Pure Land Buddhists, may well, logically, presume such a grand narrative. But the terms Dr. Payne is using in formulating the grand Buddhist narrative are terms foreign to the thinking of most of the Pure Land Buddhists in the past or at present. You would be hard-pressed to find a significant number of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists at present, for example, who understand their lives in terms of progressing toward “insight into emptiness.” What he has said so far on this topic is quite good. He is showing how different the narrative behind Buddhist living is from the narrative that informs Christian living: “Rather than the sequence of creation, fall, and redemptive atonement, we have ignorance, intent to awaken, and insight into emptiness.”<sup>10</sup> This is a very good attempt at contrasting a Buddhist grand narrative to a Christian version. It can be argued that “insight into emptiness” can describe the fulfillment that will come to Pure Land Buddhists at the conclusion of their journey. However, since very few actually on the Pure Land Path and a miniscule number of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists would think about it this way such a grand narrative is not useful in explaining the construction of personhood by Buddhist practitioners in Shinran’s lineage.



I do not really wish to provide my own version of a Shinshū grand narrative because it is beside the real point of this paper. My point is rather simple. Shin Buddhists continue to construct our personhood on the way to enlightenment in the Pure Land. While accepting *anātman* as a denial of a uniquely self-same, spiritual, eternal essence that underlies and accounts for personhood, Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists retain a coherent sense of self and continue to engage in character-building.

Ricoeur also expresses suspicion of forming one grand narrative under which every aspect of character-building could be united. I share the reservations of Ricoeur as summarized by his long-time translator, Kathleen Blamey: “This is primarily because every global, totalizing project is necessarily reductive: a comprehensive philosophy of language would, in principle, resolve the diversity of discourses into an artificial unity and level off the specificity characterizing different language games.”<sup>11</sup>

The ways of feeling about the *nenbutsu* path to enlightenment, the phenomenologies of experience of individual practitioners, the ways of being rooted in the fundamental vow of Amida, vary rather widely. Some of the differing sensibilities that are time-honored within Shin tradition would fail to fit together neatly into a single narrative. One Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist may very simply consider the *nenbutsu*, the vocal expression of reliance combined with Amida Buddha’s name, in the terms, “[W]hen I call the Buddha’s Name, it’s the Buddha calling me.”<sup>12</sup> Not only the subjectivity of the *nenbutsu* practitioner (*nenbutsu-sha*) is presupposed on this view but a subjective dimension of Amida Buddha is presumed as well. The various ways we see Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists thinking about issues such as the nature of the *nenbutsu*, the meaning of enlightenment in Amida’s Pure Realm, etc. are all based on rather straightforward assumptions about personal identity. Although he speaks in terms of the “heart of the persons of true and real shinjin,” Shinran’s student Kyōshin has a universalistic tendency to his view of what being born into the Pure Land means: “The statement, ‘they attain nirvana,’ means that when the heart of persons of true and real shinjin attain the fulfilled land at the end of his or her present life, that person becomes one with the light that is the heart of the Tathagata, for his reality is immeasurable life and his activity is inseparable from immeasurable light.”<sup>13</sup> This narrative concluding in Oneness is quite different from the perspective of another of Shinran’s close disciples, Ren’i, as also expressed in *Mattōshō*: “Whether one is

left behind or goes before, it is surely a sorrowful thing to be parted by death. But the one who first attains nirvana vows without fail to save those who were close to him first and leads those with whom he has been karmically bound, his relatives, and his friends.”<sup>14</sup>

This extremely personal take on awakening through the auspices of Amida’s Pure Realm and returning to save others closely parallels the oral teaching of Shinran as recorded in Article Five of the *Tannishō*.<sup>15</sup> We see Shinran and Ren’i, who has taken his master’s teaching to heart, envisioning the denouement of enlightenment in terms of their relationships to persons for whom they care deeply.

As a practicing Jōdo Shinshū Buddhist I tend to see the various narratives, the various ways of being a Jōdo Shinshū path-traveler, as different styles of basing the ongoing formation of personal character on the fundamental vow of Amida Buddha. Even this narrative structure—experience the vocal *nenbutsu*, e.g., “*Namo Amida Butsu*,” as the commitment to universal liberation (*hongan*); receive trusting-confidence (*shinjin*); progressively view the three poisons of greed, hatred, and delusion with distaste; attain nirvana at the moment of death; return to help first those we care deeply for and then all sentient beings—may not be universal in the actual thought and feeling of all Shin Buddhists. My categorizing other Pure Land Buddhists’ way of living according to this particular narrative identity does not assume that they see their participation in Pure Land tradition in the way I describe. Despite using such an almost grand narrative in my own understanding of the Pure Land way, I am not advocating the acceptance of such a narrative precisely because I believe that it would, to borrow Blamey’s phraseology quoted above, “resolve the diversity of discourses into an artificial unity and level off the specificity characterizing” differing narrative understandings of their spiritual practice by various Pure Land Buddhists around the globe.

Again, I do not intend to formulate my own grand Buddhist narrative along the lines that Richard Payne has begun to work. I am not even suggesting that a single narrative might apply to all Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists’ thinking and feeling about their religion. I simply want to remark that there is a natural supposition of the coherence and importance of personal subjectivity in the Pure Land stream of Mahāyāna tradition. This seems especially true in the Hongwanji-ha school to which I belong. As I find the modern accentuation of narrative processes as part of identity formation persuasive, I have spent some time discussing the narratives in the background of Pure Land practice.

## CONCLUSION

It is somewhat embarrassing to present this paper at an academic conference. The IBS Winter Symposium in 2008 has consisted of papers by competent and, in most cases, well-known scholars. I am not a scholar. I am a temple minister with concerns at what I do not mind calling the practice level. My concerns might even be described as pastoral. A Buddhist scholar will find nothing new in what I am saying, nothing challenging, and probably nothing interesting. In conclusion I am saying that the self is a real process that presupposes nothing like a soul to explain its identity. Scholars will rightly say that I am only repeating the Mahāyāna position that the self exists in a conventional sense but is empty of a *svabhāva* or unique essence. At a practice level I think we need to honor the importance of character formation in a way that elevated talk of emptiness and no-*svabhāva* does not facilitate. To say no more than that the self could be said to exist in a conventional sense is not adequate.<sup>16</sup>

The individual Buddhist practitioner must not be led by scholars and meditative adepts to believe that personhood is not real and important. I agree in substance with Musashi Tachikawa: “At present, a human being is grasped as an irreplaceable individual, and it is only through relations among individuals that the formation of the individual can be understood. Buddhism, standing in opposition to such a conception of the individual, leads the individual to extinction and to authentic rebirth. It is when a relevant understanding of the person has been achieved that the concept of the bodhisattva will take on meaning for our own age.”<sup>17</sup> In the Jōdo Shinshū tradition the self is taken for granted and treated in a very natural fashion. The remarks attributed to Shinran in Article Five of the *Tannishō* display a discrete self considered to attain enlightenment through the auspices of Amida Buddha’s Pure Land of Influence (O Jōdo).

Having undergone death and immediate awakening to buddhahood, this person returns to earth and/or other conditioned realms and immediately begins to help those with whom he or she has close karmic relations: Were saying the Name indeed a good act in which a person strove through his own powers, then he might direct the merit thus gained toward saving his father and mother. But this is not the case. If, however, he simply abandons such self-power and quickly attains enlightenment in the Pure Land, he will be able to save all beings with transcendent powers and compassionate means, whatever karmic suffering they may be sinking into in the six realms

and the four modes of birth, beginning with those with those with whom his life is deeply bound.<sup>18</sup>

We see here a very concrete, personal focus on attaining enlightenment and then helping first those with whom we have a deep connection. This is quite different from the emphasis on liberating all beings without discriminating between those we love and those whom we have no special, positive feeling toward which is more often heard in Mahāyāna discussions.<sup>19</sup> Of special interest to me here is that it is presumed to be the same person who aspires for entry into the transformative realm of Amida Buddha's influence, who enters that realm and who returns with "transcendental powers and compassionate means." Without trying to underpin the unity of that subjectivity with a theoretical construct like "soul" or "*ātman*" or denying it, Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists move forward on the path to awakening through the auspices of Amida Buddha's Pure Land. I wonder if some of our friends in other streams of Buddhist practice may not have confused themselves with too much worrying about how the self can exist without a soul underlying it and accounting for its ongoing unity. I remember the physicist Dr. Michio Kaku remarking that as an undergraduate he questioned how wave phenomena could move through empty space. He was told by the physics professor, "It just does, so get used to it!" This may be a very poor answer to give to physics students. It is because many of them did not accept such dismissive comments that they went on to develop string theory. However, if you ask me how I can be the same person who was a deluded Catholic forty-some years ago, who is now a (deluded) Buddhist and who will be a liberating factor in the enlightenment of others through the auspices of Amida's vow-power at some future time, I might well answer: "That's how it is, so just get used to it." You may consider this very naive, but it is perhaps what Ricoeur means by secondary naiveté. While realizing how problematic all this is, while accepting that there is no soul, while not knowing how I can be the same subject of experience and action after death that I am now, I naively look forward to participating in the liberation of all suffering and deluded beings—beginning with my personal friends, moving on to assist all gentle persons of good will who are not yet enlightened, and only much later concerning myself with helping persons who embrace discrimination and advocate warfare.

## NOTES

1. Dennis Hirota, *Asura's Harp: Engagement with Language as Buddhist Path* (Heidelberg, Germany: Winter, 2006), 129.
2. Paul Ricoeur, as quoted by his long-time translator, Kathleen Blamey, in her article, "From the Ego to the Self: A Philosophical Itinerary," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1995), 598.
3. Gregory G. Gibbs, "Shinjin as a Transformation in Identity," *The Pure Land*, n.s., nos. 13–14 (December 1997): see esp. 62.
4. See Hisao Inagaki, "The Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life," in *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A Study and Translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1995), esp. 236–253.
5. *Ibid.*, esp. text of the eighteenth vow, 243.
6. Steve Odin, *The Social Self in Zen and American Pragmatism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996).
7. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Bailey (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), 229. These days Miller's translation is more in use: "Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged." G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111.
8. Mara Rainwater, "Refiguring Ricoeur: Narrative Force and Communicative Ethics," in Paul Ricoeur, *The Hermeneutics of Action*, ed. Richard Kearney (London: Sage, 1996), 100.
9. Richard K. Payne, "Individuation and Awakening: Romantic Narrative and the Psychological Interpretation of Buddhism," in *Buddhism and Psychotherapy*, ed. Mark Unno (Boston: Wisdom, 2006), 48.
10. *Ibid.*, 50.
11. Paul Ricoeur, as quoted by his long-time translator, Kathleen Blamey, in her article, "From the Ego to the Self: A Philosophical Itinerary," in *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago: Open Court Press, 1995), 598.
12. This phrasing of a time-honored Pure Land way of speaking comes from "Gassho to Amida" by Rev. Kenryu Tsuji. Rev. Tsuji's piece is included in many services at Jōdo Shinshū temples in North America and in the Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii. It seems that other temples, like my own, hand this out in xerographic copy rather than print it in a service book. The precise wording here is from the "Gassho to Amida" used at the Oregon Buddhist Temple, 3720 S.E. 34<sup>th</sup> Ave., Portland, OR 97202.

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13. From the letter traditionally numbered fourteen in the “Lamp for the Latter Ages,” *Collected Works of Shinran*, 2 vols. (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-Ha, 1997), 1:541.
14. *Ibid.*, 1:545.
15. That passage quoted on the next page and attributed in note 18 when compared with Ren-i’s gloss of Shinran here verifies that this very person-centered interpretation of birth into the Pure Land and return as an individual buddha who still recalls his or her affection for close associates was, indeed, Shinran’s teaching.
16. Anne C. Klein has spoken of the need for Buddhist tradition to take personal history more seriously than it has in the past. (These specific remarks were made at a discussion termed “Buddhist Feminist Dialogue” at the First Presbyterian Church in Berkeley, CA in October 1988.) Her insistence that subjectivity must be an issue in Buddhist philosophizing can be found, among other places, in Anne C. Klein, “Buddhist Understandings of Subjectivity,” in *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements*, ed. Karma Lekshe Tsomo (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 24–34. Musashi Tachikawa has also called for a more developed Buddhist theory of personhood. See especially Musashi Tachikawa, “The World and Amida Buddha,” in *Toward a Contemporary Understanding of Pure Land Buddhism: Creating a Shin Buddhist Theology in a Religiously Plural World*, ed. Dennis Hirota (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 230–231.
17. Tachikawa, “The World and Amida Buddha,” 231.
18. Dennis Hirota, trans., *Tannishō: A Primer* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1991), 25.
19. Discussions with Dennis Hirota at the Hongwanji International Center in 1992 led me to see this aspect of *Tannishō*, Article Five. The interpretation of this passage that I give here is Dennis Hirota’s interpretation. I would not want to hold him to all the implications I develop here and I might later draw from his interpretation, but I wish to credit him with the fundamental insight into Article Five, which I rely upon here.