

Subjectivity at the Heart of Jōdo Shinshū Spirituality and Doctrine: Defining the Meaning of Subjectivity

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1. PREFACE

One of the criticisms against Buddhism often centers around its ultimate aim of nirvana or full awakening, for it is seen as passive at best and nihilistic at worst. These views are based on the misunderstanding of the very nature of these words. Nirvana refers to the state when the blind passions have been extinguished, but its meaning is often misconstrued as the extinguishment of the person. Also, the hallmark Buddhist doctrine of “non-self” leads people to misunderstand it to mean that the person or the self does not exist.

When the criticism is not based on the question of existence or non-existence of the person, it can also be based on the questioning of the ability to feel, to think, and to have intentions like any other human being. The critics argue that an awakened person lacks feelings, thoughts, and will. In other words, an awakened person is too passive, acquiescent, and even indifferent.¹ They, in my view, question the very “subjectivity” of the awakened persons in Buddhism.

In this paper, I wish to propose that the above criticisms are unwarranted by offering some preliminary remarks about nature of “subjectivity” in Buddhism in general and focusing on the views of Shinran, the founder of the Jōdo Shinshū school.

1. The criticism is represented by one of the most popular popes of modern time, who wrote, “The fullness of such a detachment is not union with God, but what is called nirvana, as state of perfect indifference with regard to the world.” John Paul II., *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 86.

There are three dimensions to what I define as subjectivity that go to the heart of Jōdo Shinshū spirituality and doctrine. They are (1) subjectivity of seeking that is deeply personal, (2) subjectivity of deciding based on the autonomous self, and (3) subjectivity of awakening to one's true self. What we find common in these three dimensions of subjectivity is the quality of self-determination in which one functions as arbiter and authority for one's thoughts and actions.

However, this does not imply a form of narcissism and/or disengagement from others. To the contrary, there cannot be any full deepening of one's subjectivity without the awakening to the other-power that completely embraces the seeking person; this awakening in Shin Buddhism is referred to as "*shinjin* awakening." This, thus, points to the seeming paradoxical relationship in which one's subjectivity is heightened precisely because one's identification with other-power is heightened.

2. BASIS FOR SUBJECTIVITY

There is, as far I can see, no term in the classical Buddhist literature that *exactly* corresponds to the English word "subjectivity" as it is being used in this paper. Nevertheless, I believe we can locate a basis for subjectivity in the word, *nāthas* or *nātho* as we find in a well-known verse from the *Dhammapada* (*Dhammapada* 160).

Attā hi attano nātho,
ko hi nātho paro siyā;
Attanā hi sudantena,
nāthaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ.

Bhikkhu Thanissaro translates as follows.

Your own self is your own mainstay,
For who else could your mainstay be?
With you yourself well-trained,
You obtain the mainstay hard to obtain.²

The original Pāli verse argues that the "self (*attā*) is, indeed, what we are calling one's (*attano*) subjectivity (*nātho*)."

2. Ven. Bhikkhu Thanissaro, *The Dhammapada: A Translation* (Taipei: Buddha Dharma Education Assoc., Inc.), 66, http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/damapada.pdf.

We find the term “the self (*attā*)” in this verse, but it does not, in this context, refer to the “self” that is negated in the hallmark Buddhist teaching of “non-self” (*anattā*). Instead, that this self can transform to become the “mainstay” strengthens our view that the reality of what we are referring to as “subjectivity” can be affirmed.

This is further supported by the fact that, besides “mainstay,” other translations of *nāthas* include “saviour,”³ “protector,”⁴ “mastery,”⁵ and “refuge.”⁶ All of these meanings reinforce the notion that the self can be transformed to function as “subjectivity.”

In order to suggest that subjectivity is found throughout the development of Buddhist thought, for each of the three dimensions, I will be citing passages from (1) the above *Dhammapada* verse no. 160 and (2) earlier Buddhist texts, before citing Shinran’s writings that point to expressions of subjectivity. Let’s start on the first of the three dimensions.

3. THE SUBJECTIVITY OF SEEKING, WHICH IS DEEPLY PERSONAL

To seek the truth of Buddhism involves one’s own resolve, for a person often realizes the need to find a resolution to one’s search for answers to the existential questions regarding life and death, impermanence, and/or suffering. Thus, seeking primarily stems from no one else’s but one’s own search.

In the above *Dhammapada* passage, the dimension of seeking is seen in its *first* line, “Your own self is your own mainstay.” As previously

3. Ven. Weragoda Sarada Thero, *Treasury of Truth: Dhammapada* (Taipei: Buddha Dharma Education Assoc., Inc.), 534, http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/dhammapadatxt1.pdf: “The saviour of one’s self is one’s own self. What other person could be your saviour? This is a difficult kind of help—being your own saviour. It can be achieved only through self discipline.”

4. Acharya Buddhakkhitta, *The Dhammapada: The Buddha’s Path of Wisdom* (Kandy: BPS, 1985), 47, http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/scrndhamma.pdf: “One truly is the protector of oneself; who else could the protector be? With oneself fully controlled, one gains a mastery that is hard to gain.”

5. Ven. Weragoda Sarada Maha Thero, *Treasury of Truth: The Illustrated Dhammapada* (Singapore: Singapore Buddhist Meditation Centre, 1993), http://www.buddhanet.net/dhammapada/d_self.htm: “Oneself is refuge of oneself, who else indeed could refuge be? By good training of oneself one gains a refuge hard to gain.”

6. Ibid.

mentioned, that this self can constitute the “mainstay” conveys, in my view, the importance of the self in making the conscious effort in seeking to realize one’s own mainstay.

This is, in my view, intimately connected to the well-known passage found in the *Parinibbāna-sutta*, “Make yourself the light; make the dharma the light.” This was the Buddha’s reply to the question at his deathbed regarding the object of reliance and guidance in continuing to seek the Buddhist goal of awakening after Buddha’s passing. The Buddha did not identify a successor to take his place but, instead, made the dharma the source of reliance and further admonished his disciples to rely on oneself to *seek* and to practice the dharma.

This spirit is found in *A Record in Lament of Divergences (Tannishō)*, in which Shinran is quoted as uttering: “When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone!” It is certainly not the case that Shinran was “monopolizing” the Vow as being made just for himself, but expressing his joy and amazement in realizing that the Vow was tailored exactly for someone like himself.

And he arrived at his realization, for he had reflected deeply on himself and understood his predicament, which was that the Vow indeed resolves his personal spiritual needs and the intense seeking that emanated from it. His seeking was not one of intellectual questioning that expressed some superficial, intellectual concern, for example, “What happens to those hearing-impaired children who would be excluded from ‘hearing’ the Name.” While such concerns are commendable, the subjectivity of seeking calls for the seeker to first focus oneself to finding the reasons for seeking the dharma motivated by one’s own needs and concerns, which for Shinran, manifested in the words, “It (the Vow) was entirely for the sake of myself alone!”

4. THE SUBJECTIVITY OF DECIDING BASED ON THE AUTONOMOUS SELF

In exploring the second dimension, the subjectivity of deciding refers to the quality of not relying on someone else when deciding on one’s religious matter. I believe this is expressed in the second line of the

7. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, 2 vols. (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997), I:679. The underlined is translated by the author, and the same will apply to the rest of the quoted passages.

above *Dhammapada* passage, “For who else could your mainstay be?” One’s mainstay is oneself, for no one else can be your mainstay. Thus, one must decide for oneself and by oneself on matters related to one’s spiritual concerns.

Among the early scriptures, this is found in the well-known passage from the *Kālāma-sutta*.

Now, Kalamas, don’t go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, “This contemplative is our teacher.” When you know for yourselves that, “These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted and carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness”—then you should enter & remain in them.⁸

In Shinran’s case, he reveals the same spirit of relying on one’s own decision when he responds to his disciples who had traveled hundreds of miles from Kanto to visit him in Kyoto. They wanted to resolve the doubt that had emerged in their minds that there were some special teachings other than what Shinran had taught them for realizing *shinjin* awakening and the guaranteed attainment of buddhahood concomitantly with their birth in the Pure Land.

To this, Shinran flatly rejects any notion that he had any special teaching other than what he had already taught them and that the disciples were gravely mistaken in assuming any special or secret teachings. If they still doubted him, Shinran advises them to go seek the answer from the eminent scholars in Nara to the south or on Mt. Hiei to the north. And after expressing his own absolute reliance on the *nenbutsu* teaching taught by Hōnen, Shinran concludes: “Beyond this, whether you take up and accept the *nenbutsu* or whether you abandon it is for each of you to determine.”⁹

In another example of the subjectivity of deciding, I wish to cite Shinran’s harsh criticism of the political leaders of the time, including even the emperor.

8. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., “Kalama Sutta: To the Kalamas,” *Āṅguttara-nikāya* 3.65, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an03/an03.065.than.html>.

9. *A Record in Lament of Divergences*, in *Collected Works of Shinran*, I:662.

The emperor and his ministers, acting against the dharma and violating human rectitude, became enraged and embittered. As a result, Master Genku—the eminent founder who had enabled the true essence of Pure Land way to spread vigorously [in Japan]—and a number of his followers, without receiving any deliberation of their [alleged] crimes, were summarily sentenced to death or consigned to distant banishment. I was among the latter.¹⁰

This kind of criticism required bravery on his part, particularly in his time, for it had a potential for severe punishment. However, Shinran was ready to take the consequence, for he expresses his willingness and readiness when he admits, “Mindful solely of the profundity of the Buddha’s benevolence, I pay no heed to the derision of others.”¹¹

These expressions, in my view, clearly expressed his subjectivity of deciding based on the autonomous self when it came to his feelings toward the government’s repression of the Pure Land movement and its leadership.

5. THE SUBJECTIVITY OF AWAKENING TO ONE’S TRUE SELF

The subjectivity of awakening is found expressed in the last section of the *Dhammapada* passage, “With you yourself well-trained, you obtain the mainstay hard to obtain.” This mainstay is what is realized upon one’s awakening. Hence, it would not be available for those who have not yet been awakened.

Such a subjectivity of awakening is described in the early sutras as in the *Sutta Nipāta*. It discusses the qualities of such an awakened subjectivity.

The wandering solitary sage,
Uncomplacent, unshaken by praise or blame.
Unstartled, like a lion at sounds.
Unsnared, like the wind in a net.
Unsmearred, like a lotus in water.
Leader of others, by others unled:
The enlightened call him a sage.¹²

10. *The True Teachings, Practice, and Realization*, in *Collected Works of Shinran*, I:289.

11. *Ibid.*, I:291.

12. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans., “Muni Sutta: The Sage,” *Sutta Nipāta* 1.12, <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.1.12.than.html>.

Here, we see qualities of a sage, an awakened person. For example, a sage is unshaken by others' praise or blame.

In the following passage, we find a suggestion that a sage is involved in the ideals regarding the self, implying something like a true self, though not fully explicit: "The sages of the past were ascetics who controlled the self. They abandoned the objects of the five kinds of desire to carry out the ideals of the [truth of the] self."¹³ What we find in the earliest suttas suggesting or hinting at an awakened or true self becomes clearly expressed in the Mahāyāna sutras, such as the *Nirvana Sutra*. In this sutra, we find terms such as "True Self" (眞我) and "Great Self" (大我). With regard to the former, we find the following line:

The great physician king (Buddha) who feels compassionate for the world is tranquil in both body and in wisdom. Amidst the teaching of "non-self" there exists the True Self. I, thus, bow in deep respect to the Most Honored One.¹⁴

In this expression of deep devotion to the Buddha, the devotee acknowledges the hallmark teaching of "non-self." Despite that, however, he also acknowledges that there exists the "true self" in the Buddha, who exhibits calm and tranquility both physically and mentally. Hence, the true self is attested to in the very nature of the Awakened One.

With regard to the "Great Self," the *Nirvana Sutra* states:

Again, why is it called "the great nirvana"? Because there is the Great Self, it is called "the great nirvana." On account of the great freedom in non-self of nirvana, it is called the Great Self.¹⁵

Here, too, we find that the awakening of nirvana is tantamount to the emergence or the existence of the Great Self. The Great Self is associated with great freedom, which in turn is rooted in the realization of non-self of nirvana. Here we see a clear example of the "nirvanic self" which the *Nirvana Sutra* and some other Mahāyāna sutras advocated in contrast to the pre-Mahāyāna teachings, which focused merely on the unawakened "smaller self."

In turning to Shinran's thought, a seeker in the Pure Land path does not match the levels attained by the awakened persons in the Path of the Sages or of monastic Buddhism, but it is safe to assume that

13. *Brāhmaṇadhammika-sutta, Sutta Nipāta 2.7.*

14. *Taishō* no. 374, vol. 12, p. 590a19–20.

15. *Ibid.*, 520c15–16.

a subjectivity of awakening is realized in a person of *shinjin* awakening. Shinran expresses this in his *Gutoku's Notes*:

Concerning the entrusting of oneself to the Primal Vow, [to borrow the words of Shan-tao,] “in the preceding moment, life ends....” This means that “one immediately enters the group of the truly settled.” [T’an-luan]

Concerning immediately attaining birth, [to borrow the words of Shan-tao,] “in the next moment, you are immediately born.” This means that “one immediately enters the stage of the definitely settled.” [Nāgārjuna]

Further, “One is termed a definitely-settled bodhisattva.”¹⁶

These passages show that Shinran acknowledged the subjectivity of awakening in two ways. In diverging from Shandao’s interpretation, he took the position that the person of *shinjin* awakening enters the stage wherein his birth in the Pure Land is definitely settled. And unlike Shandao, who saw this settled state taking place after death in the Pure Land, Shinran saw it taking place in this very life.

Secondly, it is noteworthy to point out that Shinran refers to a person of *shinjin* awakening as one who is a “definitely-settled bodhisattva.” I wish to underscore “bodhisattva” since by any standard within Buddhist thought, a bodhisattva denotes an attainment of a higher awakened state.

Guaranteed of ultimate awakening, a person of *shinjin* awakening goes on to exhibit ethical qualities of not wanting to carry out evil acts. This can be seen as an expression of the subjectivity of awakening to one’s true self.

When, upon hearing this, a person’s trust in the Buddha has grown deep, he or she comes to abhor such a self and to lament continued existence in birth-and-death; and such a person then joyfully says the Name of Amida Buddha deeply entrusting himself to the Vow. That people seek to stop doing wrong as the heart moves them, although earlier they gave thought to such things and committed them as their minds dictated, is surely a sign of having rejected this world.¹⁷

16. *Gutoku's Notes*, in *Collected Works of Shinran*, I.594.

17. *Lamp for the Latter Ages*, in *Collected Works of Shinran*, I.553–554.

6. IN CLOSING

This is but a mere beginning in my effort to define and clarify the nature of “subjectivity” by looking at what I consider its three dimensions, that of seeking, deciding, and awakening. It is my plan to build on this for generating a deeper understanding of what “subjectivity” looks like in Buddhism in general and in Jōdo Shinshū in particular.

