

## The Nature and Importance of Subjectivity in Shin Buddhism<sup>1</sup>

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### INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

My goal in this article is to respond meaningfully to the prompt “subjectivity in Shin Buddhism,” accepting as a warrant for its value the title of the 2015 IASBS conference “Subjectivity in Pure Land Buddhism.” One might think that, because Shin Buddhism is a species of Pure Land Buddhism, the importance of subjectivity in Shin could be comprehended by a thorough review of the importance of subjectivity for Pure Land teachings in general. But this is not a viable strategy so far as I can tell by studying the content of the IASBS presentations. The reasons for this are not a fault of those presentations. The problem is, rather, that *subjectivity* and *intersubjectivity* were used in diverse ways by different authors of the IASBS presentations, while *objectivity* appeared rarely if at all. As valuable as that collected material is for other purposes, much of it did not provide a deep assessment of subjectivity in Shin Buddhism.<sup>2</sup>

Here is an overview of the article, beginning with the conclusion: *the great beauty of Shin Buddhism emerges from an undefended subjective encounter between oneself and what Shin teaches is beyond oneself*. Everything is already available to prepare for and engage in the encounter. But there are problems facing aspirants at this historical moment. One of the problems is that we have learned to distrust subjectivity, believing it to be inferior to the reigning traditions of science, technology, and

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1. I dedicate this article to my friend Tom Corbett of Chicago, with whom I shared a very instructive moment during the 2015 IASBS Conference.

2. There were exceptions, and I am delighted that some of those authors also appear in the pages of this special section.

in general, of *objectivity*. Skepticism about the value of subjectivity is encouraged in order to protect students and seekers from being hoodwinked by false claims and empty promises. Here I attempt to show how this skepticism works in everyday life and in scholarly circles. I claim further that by always keeping one's guard up, one sometimes keeps truth out. The final section of the article offers an account of authentic encounter that makes the usual skepticism about subjectivity irrelevant.

A full understanding of subjectivity requires working through numerous and sometimes overlapping conceptual contrasts: subject vs. object, personal vs. impersonal, first person vs. third person, private vs. public, inner vs. outer, unreliable vs. reliable, biased vs. unbiased, illusory vs. veridical, false vs. true, active vs. passive, descriptive language vs. performative language. This is a lot to take on board, and only a small amount can be accomplished here.

A comment about the audience I keep in mind: Beyond the traditional readers of the journal, I hope to reach out to people who are neither academics nor ordained religious professionals, but rather laypeople from all walks of life who want to engage with religion and understand more than they do now. Religious understanding is more than a sport for professors and clergy taking in each other's intellectual laundry. After all, Hōnen and Shinran came down from Mount Hiei to escape the sterility and hypocrisy of religiosity limited to specialists; they took their devotion to the streets of Kyoto. We should honor them by trying to keep growth of understanding available to sincere and aspiring citizens in our own time. I hope professional readers will forgive me if I tell them too many things they already know.

#### ARTICULATING BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT SUBJECTIVITY: ON FIXES

Like animals, nouns change their character when they get "fixed." But the changes go in opposite directions. Fixing an animal simplifies the animal by removing its reproductive capacity and the associated complications. Fixing a word by attaching a *prefix* or *suffix* to it complicates the word by conditioning, generalizing, or abstracting its root meaning.

The fixing creates inevitable ambiguity when the root word has multiple meanings but the fixing doesn't specify which of them is being abstracted or generalized. In some cases, the suffix carries a bigger

burden of meaning than the root, which brings animals back into the metaphor: the tail wags the dog.

The suffix “-ivity” is a case in point, when it fixes subject and object into subjectivity and objectivity. Confusion has arisen about what the fixed nouns refer to. Some very good philosophers have tried to straighten out the confusion by using another fix, “intersubjectivity”; see, for example, Donald Davidson’s *Subjective, Intersubjective, Objective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001) and Richard J. Bernstein’s *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988). Notice that the “-ivity” is now doing all of the work: it has become the whatever-it-is that takes place between or among subjects. Whatever that -ivity of intersubjectivity is, it is not the -ivity of either subjectivity or objectivity.

One source that addresses the topic head-on in Buddhism is Professor Takamoro Shigaraki’s text *Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path: Living a Life of Awakening* (Somerville, MA: 2013). Here subjectivity and objectivity are contrasted as defining features of the teachings of Shinran and Rennyo, respectively. For Shigaraki, Shinran’s teaching of subjectivity is the true teaching while Rennyo’s teaching of objectivity is an error, occasioned in part by the particular historical circumstances in Japan during Rennyo’s tenure as the Eighth Abbot of Hongwanji at the end of the fifteenth century. I address this theme at the end of the article.

To advance the task of getting clear on subjectivity, it helps to notice that -ivity is already two fixes away from subject. The first fix gives the adjective “subjective,” and then the second fix creates the new noun “subjectivity.” Because the word is a noun (person, place, or thing, as we learned long ago), we are led to understand that there is a something, however abstract it may be, that subjectivity stands for. What is it? And what about whatever-it-is, is important for Shin Buddhists to understand? That is the task I set myself in this article.

Sticking with subjectivity itself, I begin by discussing how the fixed subject fares in a modern general-purpose dictionary.

#### A DICTIONARY FOR THE AMERICAN HOME

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary, an everyday friend, defines subject, subjective, and subjectivity clearly but not always helpfully. It begins with a reminder that in the old days rulers had *subjects* who could be *subjected* to penalties for failure to obey the ruler’s commands.

This use is marked *obsolete*, and the dictionary assumes that readers will understand why: Americans are not subjects—we are citizens. This is all right as far as it goes, but it may not go far enough. What is obsolete in everyday English may be doing powerful work in philosophical and religious uses, either in English or other languages frequently translated into English.<sup>3</sup>

A second problem shows up in a subsequent definition, where subjective is “characteristic of or belonging to reality as perceived rather than as independent of mind....” The problem begins when we slide too swiftly past the phrase “independent of mind” as if everyone understands its possible meanings and their implications, some of which are in fact destructive. Without fully justifying the proposal here, I propose that we consider the phrase “independent of mind” to be the linguistic equivalent of an Improvised Explosive Device that will blow up virtuous vehicles (e.g., Mahāyāna Buddhism) that fail to avoid it. Or, less harshly, we should at least understand that the phrase “independent of mind” points to no more than an abstract *idea* based on other abstract ideas going back centuries; and ideas, after all, exist only in minds.<sup>4</sup> Anything alleged to be independent of mind would in fact be transparent or invisible to any mind, that is, *anybody’s mind*, unavailable as a topic of conversation. While there are almost certainly aspects of reality that are now obscure to some of us or all of us, it is completely certain that efforts to illuminate such reality are always and inevitably the work of minds, regardless of the sources of the minds’ information for doing the work.<sup>5</sup> This fact is both true and poignant

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3. Etienne Ballibar, Barbara Cassin, and Alain de Libera, “Subject,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables*, ed. Barbara Cassin (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1069–1091.

4. One could add of course that ideas also exist in petrified form in libraries, museums, electronic storage devices, and so on. OK. It is true that Karl Popper’s World 3 is an attractive place to store or bury traces of mentality (Karl Popper, “Three Worlds” [Tanner Lecture on Human Values, University of Michigan, April 1978]). That point is not central to the argument I’m making, which is establishing the negative valence of subjectivity in both ordinary and academic English use.

5. Robert Nozick (*Invariances: The Structure of the Objective World* [Cambridge MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001], 75) stated the relevant distinction between objective and subjective more helpfully: “The notions of ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ are contrasting notions, at

when minds admit their ignorance and emotionally surrender to it, which of course is often characteristic of religious experience.<sup>6</sup>

Subsequent entries for subjective in the Merriam-Webster dictionary roll downhill toward the sense of subjective that points to erroneous judgments due to vulgarity, ignorance, or dysfunction. This is the sense of subjectivity captured when someone says about someone else, “That’s just *his opinion*,” or “There’s no accounting for *her taste*.” The entries also note minor variations in everyday uses of subjectivity. Usually it is a characteristic of the *person or the person’s mind*, but sometimes it is located in the person’s *brain*, for example when referring to sensory mistakes like visual illusions, hallucinations, and sensations felt in a phantom limb.

In the final definition, the sense of subjective as a pejorative adjective is made explicit: “Lacking in reality or substance: illusory.” This lays bare what has been lurking in earlier meanings: *what is subjective is not completely reliable or trustworthy*.

So my first point about subjectivity is that it has a shady character in ordinary English. As just described, to be subjective is to be opinionated and resistant to fact, or to rely too much on one’s own perceptions and conclusions without due regard for the views of others, or to have a condition that creates misleading sensations and perceptions. It is common during an argument to assert that being “objective” is preferable to being “subjective,” particularly when the person I’m arguing with won’t change her mind to accept what I know to be true and real—objectively, of course.

This everyday critique of subjectivity is not the only one that is relevant to our theme. During much of the twentieth century, subjectivity carried a rather bad odor around English and American philosophy departments. It was also ruled out-of-bounds in psychology

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least insofar as objects and subjects themselves contrast. Something is objective when (or to the extent that) it is determined in its character by the features of an object; it is subjective when it is determined in its character by states such as consciousness, emotions, and desires that are intrinsic to being a subject.... The objectivity or subjectivity of a belief can crosscut the objectivity or subjectivity of the fact believed; all four combinations are possible.”

6. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1902), Lecture IX.

departments enthralled with the rigors of behaviorism.<sup>7</sup> But over the same time period, philosophers in Germany and France drew on earlier Continental and English philosophies to develop diverse schools of thought about the subject and subjectivity, which, in general, have elevated these ideas (not to say “subjects” in yet another sense of the word) to prominent places. My intention in the next section is very briefly to place subjectivity into these scholarly contexts and, finally, to rehabilitate it from the rather dismal status it has acquired in everyday English.

SUBJECTIVITY GOES TO GRADUATE SCHOOL AND ENCOUNTERS  
DANIEL DENNETT

We begin by returning to the distinction between “subject” and “ivity.” Focus first on the subject, in the sense of a subject as a *normal adult human being*. The subject sees, hears, tastes, smells, touches, and experiences various sensations that she experiences as coming from various places within her body, including pains of various sorts. The sleeping subject also has a mental life when she dreams. Mental life has various characteristics such as thinking in words or in mental images. Sometimes thoughts are accompanied by sensations that we locate in various bodily locations, whether as feelings without obvious labels or as feelings that bring labels with them, like anger or hunger or stiffness or itch. The feelings, and hence the labels, can of course become difficult to specify, like “a vague sense of longing” or “a name on the tip of my tongue.” Growing up, we learn to talk about all of this with some degree of confidence. As adults, we encounter others who, so far as we can tell, have richer or poorer mental lives and expressive vocabularies than we have.

What I’ve described is just being alive as a person living among others, all as *subjects in the sense of being the locations of mental lives*. So in the most general but also simplest sense possible, mental life is the “ivity” that characterizes the human subject. To begin at the beginning, that’s all that subjectivity is. But there is a weasel-phrase, a cop-out, in that description: I wrote “so far as we can tell.” That phrase is an admission that there is privacy or *interiority* of mental life that characterizes each subject uniquely. So statements I might make about

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7. See for example, T.W. Wann, *Behaviorism and Phenomenology: Contrasting Bases for Modern Psychology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

your mental life do not have the same claim to being correct as statements I make about my own mental life. I have privileged access to my thoughts, images, feelings, dreams, and so on, as do you to yours. To introduce a phrase that has become commonplace, I know *what it is like* to be me at every instant.<sup>8</sup> I can only guess or infer what it is like to be you.

In the description above, I included just the most basic forms of mental life, sensations and some labeling of them. But we have a much larger vocabulary, obviously, of our own mental events, and we assume that other people have such events going on as well. There is a name that has been given to the collection of the variety of mental events and how we tie them together when thinking about ourselves and about others. The name is *folk psychology*, also known as common-sense psychology.

For the past several decades, folk psychology has been championed by the American philosopher Daniel Dennett. Forty years ago he published a book-length defense of folk psychology, contrasting it with the behaviorism that had been the prevailing academic psychological doctrine (dogma, even) between roughly 1920 and 1960. He dismissed behaviorism because it had not delivered on its promises to predict human behavior using traditional scientific method:

...we can make a few important inroads, but the bulk of [human] observable macro-activity—their “behavior”—is hopelessly unpredictable from these perspectives.... But there is another perspective, familiar to us since childhood and used effortlessly by us all every day, that seems wonderfully able to make sense of this complexity. It is often called *folk psychology*. It is the perspective that invokes the family of “mentalistic” concepts, such as belief, desire, knowledge, fear, pain, expectation, intention, understanding, dreaming, imagination, self-consciousness, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

It might appear, according to Dennett, that folk psychology is just what everyone already understands because we are competent users

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8. The classic location of this phrase is Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–456. It has not won unanimous approval; see, for example, Douglas R. Hofstadter, “Reflections [on Thomas Nagel’s ‘What Is It Like to be a Bat?’].” In *The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*, ed. Douglas R. Hofstadter and Daniel C. Dennett (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 423.

9. Daniel C. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 7.

of our own languages, without being technical experts. In that case, a dictionary like the Merriam-Webster would be sufficient to resolve disagreements about the semantic content of folk psychology; folk psychology would be uncontroversial. But without doubt, that has not been the case. Between 1987 and 2017, folk psychology has been subdivided by philosophers into several varieties, which in turn have been analyzed, criticized, and defended in various ways.<sup>10</sup>

The splintering and refining of folk psychology isn't a particular problem for our purposes. Our targets are subjectivity and subjective, and we've already seen how ordinary Americans use subjective—as a conclusory criticism of someone else's opinion or argument. So if ordinary American use is the standard for folk psychology, then we have to jettison folk psychology as far as subjective and subjectivity are concerned and walk deeper into the groves of academe seeking clarification.

A useful first step is to notice that Dennett put the word *mentalistic* between quotes in his description of folk psychology. (He did the same thing with behavior but we'll ignore that here.) Why did he do that?

These quotation marks are *scare quotes*, also called *shudder quotes* or *sneer quotes*.<sup>11</sup> They mean that the author is distancing herself, for one reason or another, from something about the text inside the quotes. Thus Dennett is advising readers that he doesn't buy all the baggage that mentalism traditionally carries. For Dennett, some of mentalism's baggage is excess. He stated the case like this: "I begin, then, with a tactical choice. I declare my starting point to be the objective, materialistic, third-person world of the physical sciences. This is the orthodox choice in the English-speaking philosophical world..."<sup>12</sup> While

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10. Ian Ravenscroft, "Folk Psychology as a Theory," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved January 7, 2017, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/folkpsych-theory/>. For many scholars working in this area, folk psychology is *not* merely a condescending label for how laypeople talk about minds and conduct. Perhaps the most important application of folk psychology has been specifying the conditions for criminal responsibility in American law. Here the leading champion of folk psychology has been Stephen Morse (e.g., "Determinism and the Death of Folk Psychology," *Minnesota Journal of Law, Science & Technology* 9 [2008]: 1–19).

11. "Scare Quotes," in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, retrieved January 7, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Scare\\_quotes&oldid=758572450](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Scare_quotes&oldid=758572450).

12. Dennett, *The Intentional Stance*, 5.



disavowing behavior as the best endpoint for psychological analysis (because it is hopelessly unpredictable), Dennett nevertheless affirmed the materialism of American philosophy that was orthodox at the time of his publication.

Notice that subjectivity is implicitly rejected from the scheme. Subjectivity points to understanding from the perspective of the subject, also known as the first-person perspective, which Dennett rejected in favor of the third-person perspective.<sup>13</sup> This means that a verbal report by the subject about her own mental life is treated just like anything else the subject does; it has no special or privileged status.

Practically speaking, then, whatever a subject in a psychological experiment says or does becomes a bit of information for someone else (presumably a psychologist, cognitive scientist, neuroscientist, philosopher, or other technical expert), who proceeds just like physicists do with the information they collect. Verbal reports about what they are experiencing do not amount to reports of a mental stuff or realm that is anything but thoroughly, completely, material. Whatever mental life or a mental event is composed of, it is not different from the regular physical stuff of the world.

Subjectivity doesn't get much respect from this approach to psychology. In this approach, the -ivity of the subject, no matter what the subject says about it, is really and only a physical state of affairs that needs to be described in terms that are appropriate to such states of affairs: mass, volume, duration, electromagnetic values. If this is the state of philosophical orthodoxy, then it is no wonder that philosophers as well as psychologists have flocked to neuroscience for fundamental answers to questions about human nature. Whatever minds may be, brains are thoroughly material. If answers in neuroscientific terms are available for psychological questions, those answers are preferable to answers that are not so materially grounded.

There are two ways to interpret the claims for the worth of such anti-subjectivity. First, recall Dennett's emphasis on the *tactical* nature of his position. To say that it is tactical suggests that it is neither strategic nor theory-based, but rather an approach to psychology that can be abandoned quickly when a better alternative comes along. We can call this *methodological materialism*; it presses for satisfying materialistic

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13. These terms come from grammar: I am the first person, you are the second person, and he, she, or it is the third person (singular).

answers without insisting that there can be no other kind. The second interpretation takes that extra step, claiming that there is nothing beyond material nature in the world, and anyone who thinks that there is, is wrong.

In his 1991 book *Consciousness Explained* (Boston: Little Brown & Co.), Dennett described a method of psychological research that, he claimed, would allow subjectivists and objectivists to live peacefully together, perhaps like cowboys and farmers on the range. He gave the method a very long academic name: heterophenomenology. To understand why he would do such a thing, we need to view the word as another fix, this time the prefix hetero, which is an eye-catcher for reasons irrelevant to our task here. In current context, hetero is understood as “different” or “other.” So the term means the other, different, or alternative phenomenology. This is only helpful, of course, if one understands what phenomenology is to begin with.<sup>14</sup>

#### PHENOMENOLOGY: FOREIGN AID FOR SUBJECTIVITY

David Woodruff Smith provides a useful starting place from which to understand phenomenology:

The discipline of phenomenology may be defined initially as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness.... Phenomenology

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14. There is space here for only the briefest sketch; readers are encouraged to dig deeper with Dermott Moran, *Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi, *The Phenomenological Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2012); Dan Zahavi, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Phenomenology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved January 10, 2017, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/phenomenology/>; and Joel Smith, “Phenomenology,” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved January 14, 2017, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>. Shorter accounts are also widely available, e.g., Marvin Farber, “Phenomenology,” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Western Philosophy*, ed. Jonathan Ree, and J. O. Urmson, 3rd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2005), 280–282; Reinhardt Grossmann, “Phenomenology,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 658–660; Charles Guignon, “Phenomenology,” in *A Companion to Epistemology*, ed. Jonathan Dancy and Ernest Sosa (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 342; and Joseph J. Kockelmans, “Phenomenology,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, ed. Robert Audi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 578–579.

studies conscious experience as experienced from the subjective or first person point of view. This field of philosophy is then to be distinguished from, and related to, the other main fields of philosophy: ontology (the study of being or what is), epistemology (the study of knowledge), logic (the study of valid reasoning), ethics (the study of right and wrong action), etc.<sup>15</sup>

First, phenomenology embraces subjectivity, the first person viewpoint. The assumption is that competent individuals can learn a style of disciplined consciousness that attends carefully to its own contents. It is generally assumed in philosophy that consciousness is always about something. The word philosophers use to name that characteristic of consciousness is *intentionality*. Specific instances of mental events in any of the folk psychological categories (e.g., belief, desire, knowledge, fear, pain, etc.—see Dennett’s list above) can fall under the phenomenologist’s scrutiny. There is nothing casual about the process. The aspiration is to strip away (“bracket” and “reduce” are the terms of art) experiential excess, to render experience free of surplus, including the status of intended objects in causal, developmental, or historical contexts. The slogan of early phenomenology was “back to the things themselves.”<sup>16</sup> A major issue was how to distinguish, in the case of ordinary visual perception, between the conscious content and the intentional object in the world associated with that content.

Second, phenomenology as a disciplined method must be placed in its particular historical context; this is the importance of *initially* in Smith’s paragraph.

Phenomenology was developed originally by the German Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who turned from mathematics to philosophy under the influence of the philosopher and psychologist Franz Brentano (1838–1917). It was Brentano who, in 1874, introduced the modern philosophical sense of intentionality to philosophy and psychology. Brentano’s interest was in supporting a genuine scientific psychology, but Husserl developed his own theory and methods in a different direction, rejecting criticisms from other philosophers that

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15. David Woodruff Smith, “Phenomenology,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, emphasis added.

16. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Finlay, ed. Dermot Moran (orig. pub. 1900-1901; New York: Routledge, 2001), 168.

his work was reducible to psychology. During the years of his philosophical writing between 1900 and 1936, Husserl frequently reworked his ideas.

Several major philosophers subsequently acknowledged his contributions but moved beyond them, producing the existentialism that characterized French and German philosophy in the aftermath of the Second World War. Prominent members of this group were John-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Martin Heidegger.<sup>17</sup>

For much of its early life, phenomenology was a European enterprise flowing from the earlier philosophies of Kant and Hegel. A parallel effort in the United States was the introspectionist psychology of Edward Titchener (1867–1927), an Englishman who had studied psychology in Germany with Wilhelm Wundt (who like Husserl was a student of Brentano's) before establishing one of the early psychological laboratories in the US, at Cornell University in the 1890s. There were overlaps between introspectionism and phenomenology. For example, just as Husserl insisted that phenomenology must focus on the mental representation of the intentional object rather than the object in the world beyond the subject, so Titchener insisted that introspection address mental representations themselves. He criticized paying attention to the external object, labeling such mental work “the stimulus error.”<sup>18</sup> It turned out that introspectionism in Titchener's style was short lived in the US, not lasting for long beyond the second decade of the century.<sup>19</sup>

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17. Wolfgang Huemer, “Franz Brentano,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved January 13, 2017, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/brentano/>; Marianne Sawicki, “Edmund Husserl,” in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, retrieved January 13, 2017, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/>; see also the sources cited above.

18. Edwin G. Boring, “The Stimulus Error,” *American Journal of Psychology* 32 (1921): 450–471. For relative ease of expression, I have written as if the categorical distinction between an external object and its internal representation is philosophically uncontroversial, but it is not. For introductions to why it is not, see, for example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

19. For a clear and comprehensive review of introspection old and new, see Eric Schwitzgebel, “Introspection,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,

My intent in this section has been only to show that subjectivity, as disciplined first person reporting of experience under the label of phenomenology, has been honored in European philosophy for more than a century. At this time, phenomenology has active representation in the US as well; for example, the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy has organized more than fifty annual meetings.<sup>20</sup> Still, American introspectionist psychology failed in its phenomenology-like mission early in the twentieth century, in part because of its uncertain subject matter and in part because of uncontrolled variability in participants' reports.

How does Dennett's heterophenomenology assist or diminish the work of phenomenologists? Dennett has clarified the intended scope of heterophenomenology in response to criticisms. In 2001, for example, he emphasized the breadth of data that the heterophenomenologist would collect and analyze. In addition to verbal reports by subjects, "all other behavioral reactions, visceral reactions, hormonal reactions, and other changes in physically detectable state are included within heterophenomenology."<sup>21</sup> In 2003 he continued the explanation. If it had been unclear before, by 2003 it became crystal clear that Dennett's aspiration is to save phenomenology for science by insisting on heterophenomenology: "Scientists have always recognized the need to confirm the insights they have gained from introspection by conducting properly controlled experiments with naïve subjects. As long as this obligation is met, whatever insights one may garner from 'first-person' investigations fall happily into place in 'third-person' heterophenomenology." Later, in a concluding comment, he says that heterophenomenology is, "after all, just the conservative extension of standard scientific methods to data gathering from awake, communicating subjects."<sup>22</sup> And in a 2007 article devoted to reconsidering

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retrieved January 16, 2017, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/introspection>.

20. See [www.sep.org](http://www.sep.org).

21. Daniel C. Dennett, "The Fantasy of First-Person Science," retrieved January 11, 2017, <https://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/dennett/papers/chalmersdeb3dft.htm>.

22. Daniel C. Dennett, "Who's on First? Heterophenomenology Explained," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 10 (2003): 21, 29.

heterophenomenology, Dennett calls it “*the bridge between the subjectivity of human consciousness and the natural sciences.*”<sup>23</sup>

What still remains unclear about heterophenomenology is what the label adds to the rigorous psychology and cognitive science that Dennett has swept up to describe its content. But this is a matter of no consequence for our purpose here. We can move on.

To summarize progress so far:

- We understand the pejorative baggage that subjectivity carries in ordinary and much scholarly English usage;
- we understand that phenomenology, by contrast, honors disciplined subjectivity as the natural (perhaps the only) location for deepening the philosophical understanding of itself, as the form and contents of consciousness;
- we understand that scientific progress in understanding subjectivity, as the form and contents of consciousness, certainly benefits from the methods of psychology and cognitive science (call them heterophenomenology if you like), and may be impossible be without them.

Now we are in position to inquire about the nature and significance of subjectivity in Shin Buddhism.

#### THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SUBJECTIVITY IN SHIN BUDDHISM

*Everything has been said, but not everyone has said it yet.*

—Mo Udall<sup>24</sup>

The eighteenth vow of King Dharmākara in homage to Lokeśvararāja Buddha, as described by Gautama Buddha in conversation with his attendant Ānanda in the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, plants the root of subjectivity in Shin Buddhism:

If, when I attain Buddhahood, sentient beings in the lands of the ten directions who *sincerely* and *joyfully entrust* themselves to me, *desire* to

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23. Daniel C. Dennett, “Heterophenomenology Reconsidered,” *Phenomenology & Cognitive Science* 6 (2007): 249.

24. Mo Udall, “The Quotations Home Page—Alphabetical by Author—Series 17,” retrieved January 23, 2017, [http://www.theotherpages.org/quote/alpha\\_u1.htm](http://www.theotherpages.org/quote/alpha_u1.htm).

be born in my land, and call my name even ten times, should not be born there, may I not attain perfect Enlightenment. Excluded, however, are those who commit the five gravest offenses and abuse the right Dharma.<sup>25</sup>

Sincerity, joyfulness, entrusting, desire; all are conditions of mind. Together they are called *shinjin*. It seems reasonable to say that they are *required* aspects of the minds of sentient subjects during their recitations of the sacred name—Namo Amida Butsu—if the subject is to realize the desired result, which is birth in Amida’s Pure Land. Read this way the eighteenth vow is a conditional promise uttered by a king in the presence of a buddha. In very modern terms, it sounds like this:

Sentient beings who say my name in a certain frame of mind will be reborn in my wondrous land. I guarantee it, risking my own eventual perfection as collateral.

The sutra describes momentous events occurring in the wake of Dharmākara’s completed vows, including an earthquake, flowers falling from heaven, celestial music, and a voice from the sky assuring Dharmākara of his “highest, perfect Enlightenment.” And then, Gautama Buddha tells Ānanda rather simply that “...Dharmakara kept all those great vows which were true, unfailing and unsurpassed in the whole world, and intensely aspired to attain Nirvana.”<sup>26</sup>

So Dharmākara kept his promise but had not finished his work. He still had to construct his wondrous abode, *Jōdo*, the Pure Land. The sutra spells out over several pages how he did it, by fulfilling the many demands of the bodhisattva path all the way to the perfection of nirvana. It took an incalculably long time. Since his perfection he, who is now Amida Buddha, has resided in his Pure Land, which is located in the West at an extraordinary distance, for “about ten kalpas.”<sup>27</sup>

It is no understatement to say that this text, which is the source of a major current in the stream of Mahāyāna Buddhism, has been wide open to interpretation almost from its creation.<sup>28</sup> Our focus is on the

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25. Hisao Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1994), 243; emphases added.

26. *Ibid.*, 251.

27. *Ibid.*, 253.

28. For alternative accounts of the sutra’s creation and history, see Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, and Paul Williams, *Mahāyāna Buddhism: The Doctrinal Foundations*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).

interpretive revolution created by Shinran Shōnin in thirteenth century Japan. Shinran, after paying pious homage to seven previous Pure Land interpreters from India, China, and Japan, rendered a radical interpretation of the vow and the essential message of the sutra. With a stroke of religious genius, he established the ground for Jōdo Shinshū, True Pure Land Buddhism.<sup>29</sup>

How is the modern Western religious seeker to understand Shinran's insight? What does subjectivity have to do with it? Consider each element of the vow in turn:

*State of mind:* The vow is explicit and unequivocal in its specification of subjective circumstance: the mind is to be joyous, sincere, aspiring. Shinran provided textual histories of each of these terms, and modern commentators have provided very helpful expanded glosses on his interpretations.<sup>30</sup> I return to this below.

*Say my name:* The vow's behavioral requirement seems modest: to call Buddha's name while in the specified state of subjectivity.

*Even ten times:* Shinran analyzed in detail the question of required repetitions. After citing many textual sources, he emphasized that numerosity is not the point:

...the dispute over once-calling and many-calling is pointless. The tradition of the Pure Land teaching speaks of birth through the *nem-but*su.<sup>31</sup> Never has there been mention of "birth through once-calling" or "birth through many-calling." Please understand this.<sup>32</sup>

*(Re)Birth in the Pure Land:* The interpretive going gets tougher at this point, beginning with the plain fact that "to be born in [Amida's] land" is not a typical object of modern Western desire. Unlike Shinran and his Pure Land predecessors, many modern Westerners seeking new religious understanding do not easily assume the reality of traditional Buddhist cosmology: innumerable connected births, lifetimes, and deaths of sentient beings (subjects as locations of awareness) over vast time periods, and countless buddhas residing in their holy abodes in

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29. *The Collected Works of Shinran, Volume I: The Writings*, Shin Buddhism Translation Series (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-Ha, 1997).

30. (e.g., Shigaraki, 2013)

31. Calling the Buddha's name: *Namo Amida Butsu*.

32. *Collected Works of Shinran*, 1:489–490.



all directions of the compass.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps a historical perspective would help such a person find her way.

By the time Shinran became a Tendai monk on Mount Hiei around the year 1170, there was already deep concern among some Japanese Buddhist groups that the world was deep in the age of *mappō*: the *buddhadharma* had become degenerate, and human beings were incapable of religious awakening based on their own efforts.<sup>34</sup> Shinran was deeply affected by this teaching and wrote movingly about it:

Ignorance and blind passions abound,  
Pervading everywhere like innumerable particles of dust.  
Desire and hatred arising out of conflict and accord  
Are like high peaks and mountain ridges.

Sentient beings' wrong views grow rampant,  
Becoming like thickets and forests, brambles and thorns;  
Filled with suspicion, they slander those who follow the nembutsu,  
While the use of violence and the poison of anger spread widely.<sup>35</sup>

It is *just because* of the miserable state of human nature that Amida Buddha's fulfilled vow is the only salvation available. In earlier ages after the death of Gautama Buddha (ages of the right dharma and the semblance dharma), intense personal effort could be spiritually efficacious. But no longer; without help, no one awakens to ultimate truth.

Given this historical perspective, there seem to be at least two paths forward for the adult<sup>36</sup> English-speaking newcomer to Shin. One is more traditional than the other, and it likely represents more

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33. Though not presented in a Shin context, Stephen Batchelor's *Confessions of a Buddhist Atheist* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010) describes the author's struggles with Buddhist accounts of rebirth and karma.

34. Kyoshin Asano, "The Idea of the Last Dharma-Age in Shinran's Thought. Part 1," *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., no. 3 (2001): 5-25 and "The Idea of the Last Dharma-Age in Shinran's Thought. Part 2," *Pacific World*, 3rd ser., no. 3 (2001): 53-70; Michele Marra, "The Development of *Mappō* Thought in Japan (I)," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 15 (1988): 25-54 and "The Development of *Mappō* Thought in Japan (II)," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 15 (1988): 287-305.

35. *Collected Works of Shinran*, 1:400.

36. I've qualified the newcomer as an adult because the way that children have traditionally learned Shin Buddhism in America, as members of the Japanese-American community, is deeply tied to family and community cultural practices, a topic beyond the scope of this article.

accurately the understanding of Japanese-American laypeople on the mainland and in Hawaii throughout most of the twentieth century. On this path, Amida Buddha and his Pure Land in the West are simply real; but they are *fully realized* in the next lifetime. The religious meanings of *faith* and *belief* familiar to us in American religion fit comfortably in this Buddhist setting as well. It is beautifully evoked, for example, in the descriptions of Japanese-Hawaiian Shin sentiment presented by Taitetsu Unno.<sup>37</sup>

Richard St. Clair describes the traditional position clearly:

True Shin Buddhism teaches that there is no calling greater than attaining SHINJIN, and moreover, that attaining SHINJIN is the sole objective of the Nembutsu path, reciting “Namu Amida Butsu” (I take refuge in Amida Buddha) singlemindedly and with simple gratitude for the benevolent salvation that we receive in this life with the promise of Buddhahood at the end of this life when we go to the Pure Land (jodo) of Amida Buddha.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to the positive teaching as expressed above, there is a critical component expressed by this proponent of the traditional view: The issue of deviations from Shinran’s teachings is still a problem today, expressed in terms of doubt—and often resolute disbelief—about the reality of Amida Buddha and His Pure Land. Shinran was completely clear and unambiguous about the true reality of Amida and His Pure Land, for he devoted an entire chapter (chapter 5) of his *Kyōgyōshinshō* to “True Buddha and Land.”

Such doubt and disbelief is simply an expression of ego and ignorance. Unfortunately it has been expressed by some of the leading Shin scholars, and even leading Shin ministers, of our time and represents a threat to the vitality of the greater Sangha of True Shin Buddhism as set forth originally by Master Shinran and later revived by Master Rennyo.

In order for a Shin Buddhist to be a true teacher of the path of Nembutsu-faith, one must be a person of settled SHINJIN. Unless one has himself or herself already attained SHINJIN, he/she cannot understand the process of awakening to Amida’s Primal Vow. And

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37. Taitetsu Unno, *River of Fire, River of Water* (New York: Doubleday, 1998) and *Shin Buddhism: Bits of Rubble Turn into Gold* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

38. Richard St. Clair (Shaku Egen), “True Shin Buddhism,” retrieved January 27, 2017, <http://trushinbuddhism.blogspot.com>.

attaining SHINJIN depends upon singleminded belief and refuge in the REAL AND TRUE BUDDHA AMIDA.<sup>39</sup>

Among the unnamed scholars accused of error in St. Clair's text is, almost surely, the late Tamaro Shigaraki (1926–2014), who is recognized as “one of the leading Shin Buddhist scholars in the world today.”<sup>40</sup> And indeed there are a few dimensions along which Shigaraki's modernism contrasts strongly with the views expressed by traditionalists.

Shigaraki's modernism is evidenced by his rejection of the nature of *shinjin* taught by the eighth religious leader of the Shin tradition, Rennyo Shōnin (1415–1499):

[Rennyo's] approach [to *shinjin*] was exclusively dualistic and objectifying, as we can see clearly in his expression “I rely on Amida to save me” (*tasuketamae to tanomu*) and in similar instructions given to his followers. This view completely loses sight of the fact that the Primal Vow [eighteenth] of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* reveals *shinjin* to be ... nondualistic and subjective in nature.<sup>41</sup>

Shigaraki furthers this theme by identifying the nature of Shin salvation as “the establishment of personal subjectivity [that is] a growth of our humanity—which takes place at the level of our own subjectivity, the deepest level at which human life operates.”<sup>42</sup> For laypeople, who are the intended recipients of Shin teaching, what matters is the experience of awakening to Amida Buddha as the symbol of “*that fundamental principle that pervades this world and all human life.*” There is a gradual transformation that accompanies the recitation of *nenbutsu* mindfully, sincerely, open to increased understanding that the power of the truth is found in Amida Buddha, as universal wisdom and compassion, rather than in the power of the subject's rational calculations (*hakarai*).

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39. *Ibid.*; capitalized words and quotation marks in the original.

40. David Matsumoto, “Translator's Notes,” in *Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path: A Life of Awakening* by Takamoro Shigaraki (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2013), 3.

41. Shigaraki, *Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path*, 78. The ellipses in this sentence exclude Shigaraki's identification of *shinjin* with *prasāda*; please see his book for more about this.

42. Shigaraki, *Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path*, 114.

Shigaraki explicates *shinjin* as a transformation of subjectivity that does not rely on the promise of post-mortem continuation of whatever-it-is-that-makes-it-across.

And in that sense, it represents a modernist rather than a traditional Shin Buddhist viewpoint. Yet this is hardly a rejection of Shin history, because it is in Shinran's writing, approximately two centuries earlier than Rennyō's, where Shigaraki finds the true teaching. In Shigaraki's terms, the usual preference for objectivity over subjectivity is turned on its head. And this subjective turn offends traditional sensibility.

At this point, the layperson who wants to go directly to the source can become intimidated by the size and complexity of Shinran's published works. The texts can be daunting. Moreover, they are not unequivocal. I claim no expertise in Shinran's oeuvre, but I am confident that one can find textual support for opposing themes and variations among the very large number of expositions, annotations, hymns, notes, and posthumous transcriptions that are bound together as the *Complete Works*. So the interpretation of Shinran in today's English becomes a specialist's workplace where the caveat against fools rushing in is totally appropriate.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, some of Shinran's texts reach across the centuries with such force and clarity that today's ignorant layperson, such as the current author, can find hints about "fundamental principle" that is all pervasive and attempt to live accordingly. To illustrate with an example of great importance to me personally, I include here a fragment that Shinran quotes from one of his historical heroes, the seventh century Chinese master Shandao:

One truly knows oneself to be a foolish being full of blind passions, with scant roots of good ... unable to escape this burning house. And further, one truly knows now, without so much as a single thought of doubt, that Amida's universal Primal Vow decisively enables all

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43. Reliance on translators' skills and probity is complete. Perhaps all Shin laypeople should read Andrew Tuck's essay on Western interpretations of Nāgārjuna as an example of how original Buddhist texts do not defend themselves very well against changes in the direction of interpretive winds: Andrew P. Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: On the Western Interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

to attain birth, including those who say the Name even down to ten times, or even but hear it. Hence it is called “deep mind.”<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, *deep mind* is one of the three minds that Shigaraki explicates as a key mental state noted in Amida’s realized Primal Vow, corresponding to the exhortation for entrusting.<sup>45</sup>

Because of our historical circumstance mired in *mappō*, we must depend on the endless skill and compassion of Amida to enable the arising of deep mind as a component of awareness. In the aspiring mind, consciousness changes to embrace the good news, while fully experiencing the continuation of the bad news.

This is difficult to describe, in large part because it is difficult to experience. Moreover, there is a large metaphysical problem to face up to regarding the consequences of death in relation to the nature of the Pure Land. In the case of modernists, “birth” points to the gradual awakening in the prepared mind of the Shin subject in this lifetime. To borrow a term from the law of contracts, the awakened modernist accepts the Pure Land “as is, where is.” For traditionalists, on the other hand, “birth” points to a glorious condition to be experienced the next time around, after inevitable death in this life. Deep trust in the reality of the Pure Land allows a joyful relaxation in the assurance of that eventuality, irrespective of the circumstances of the present life.

To hold the traditional view is to accept a reality beyond what is ordinarily taken as the totality, or closure, of the physical universe. But in fairness to and partial support for the traditional position, I note that serious arguments against the totality of physicalist explanations have been offered up by some philosophers, physicists, psychologists, and historians of science.<sup>46</sup>

I must resist the temptation to extend the current article further in that important direction. It has to be enough to say that the

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44. *Collected Works of Shinran*, 1:55.

45. Shigaraki, *Heart of the Shin Buddhist Path*, 83.

46. Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Varadaraja V. Raman, “Quantum Mechanics and Some Hindu Perspectives,” in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and Science*, ed. James W. Haag, Gregory R. Peterson, and Michael L. Spezio (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 156–168; Charles T. Tart, *The End of Materialism* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2009); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th anniversary ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

traditionalist need not apologize for holding beliefs that depend on the universe not being closed under the domain of physics. On the other hand, the traditionalist should not claim that reflective subjectivity, indeed *trained subjectivity*, plays no part in what happens to him or her over the course of Shin practice. Sooner or later, modernist and traditionalist alike are required to dig to the deepest sources of personal instruction.

This sentiment was expressed clearly by the traditionalist Paul Roberts in considering the questions of the nature of Amida Buddha and Pure Land:

Ultimately, no one can decide this question for another. Each person has the privilege and the responsibility to listen deeply, and wait for the answer to arise from the deepest part of his or her being.<sup>47</sup>

Roberts is exactly right. We are here at the borderland of understanding and knowledge, where the ultimate sources of instruction are subjective and embodied. As we reflect on what we learn this way, some of us take the lessons as creating true beliefs about the actuality of certain past events and the assurance of certain future events. Others of us take the lessons as openings to the truth of the here and now, the limitless present. In either case, to admit frankly the source of one's understanding, and to avow the understanding as a guiding light for living one's life, is to render into irrelevance the skepticism usually directed against subjectivity.

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47. Paul Roberts, "The Problem of Modernism in Jodo Shinshu Buddhism: The Writings of Takamoro Shigaraki," retrieved January 24, 2017, [http://trueshinbuddhism.blogspot.com/p/blog-page\\_24.html](http://trueshinbuddhism.blogspot.com/p/blog-page_24.html), 4.