

The Idea of the Last Dharma-Age in Shinran's Thought, Part 1¹

Kyōshin Asano

Professor Emeritus

Ryukoku University, Kyoto

INTRODUCTION

THE GOAL OF THE BUDDHIST PATH is to realize unsurpassed enlightenment by awakening to and overcoming the impermanent nature of the existential world. In Japan as well, the Buddhist path that was transmitted through China was also founded in both the realization and overcoming of the impermanent nature of reality. The awakening that comes from understanding the impermanent nature of reality is the first step toward practicing the Buddhist path. It is through practicing the Buddhist path that one is able to overcome the impermanent nature of existence and realize the realm of unsurpassed enlightenment.

The doctrines that the Buddha expanded during his forty-five years of propagation are said to have reached eighty-four thousand in number. Over time, the transmission of these doctrines incorporated various complex conditions that existed during its history of propagation. One such example was the construct of the three dharma-ages: the right dharma-age, the semblance dharma-age, and the last dharma-age. This construct became so prevalent that it began to influence how the doctrine was transmitted. In the period corresponding to the last dharma-age, it was said that of the three pillars of teaching, practice, and enlightenment—a system indicating the process toward enlightenment—the two characteristics of practice and enlightenment were lost. This last dharma-age connoted a breakdown in the ability of the Buddhist path itself to overcome impermanence and bring about the attainment of enlightenment. By forcing those who would attempt to resurrect the right dharma-age into a re-examination of Śākyamuni's teaching itself, it drove them to discover a new system of thought and thereby re-establish the path toward enlightenment.

Within the historical development of Japanese Buddhism, it was during the era of what is known as Kamakura Buddhism that the concept of the dharma-ages received noticeable acceptance. In particular, the construct was introduced as one of the fundamental doctrines of Pure Land Buddhist transmission. Genshin (942–1017), who was representative of the

pioneers of the Japanese Pure Land Buddhist tradition, states the following at the outset of his work, *Ōjō yōshū* (*Essentials for Attaining Birth*),

The teaching and the practice for birth in the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss are the eye and the foot in the latter age of this defiled world. Who then—monk or layman, noble or common—would not depend on it?²

Genshin indicates that the path toward enlightenment in the latter age of this defiled world is found in “the teaching and practice for birth in the Pure Land of Utmost Bliss.” He then carefully explicates the teaching and practice for the last dharma-age in his work of three fascicles.

Later, Hōnen (1133–1212) took refuge in the Pure Land path based on the writings of Genshin, and accomplished the monumental task of making the Pure Land School independent of other Buddhist schools. This was declared in his text, *Senjakushū* (*Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal Vow*). There, Hōnen imparts the classification of the two gates of the Path of Sages and the Pure Land path found in *An-lo-chi* (*Passages on the Land of Happiness*) by Tao-ch’o (562–645), and then states,

In the present time, it is difficult to attain enlightenment through the Path of Sages. One reason is that the Great Sage departed from this world in the far distant past. A second reason is that, while the truth is profound, [human] understanding of it is slight. For that reason the “Moon-Matrix” section of the *Ta-chi ching* (*Great Collection Sutra*) states, “Out of billions of sentient beings who seek to perform practices and cultivate the way in the last dharma-age, not one will gain realization. This is now the last dharma-age; it is the evil world of the five defilements. This one gate—the Pure Land way—is the only path that affords passage.”³

Hōnen clearly and carefully makes the point that the single gate of the Pure Land path is the path that one should take in order to attain emancipation during the last dharma-age. That is to say, it is the path that is suitable both to the period and to beings. His sense that the Pure Land School is the path to achieve emancipation during the last dharma-age is also presented in various other works, many of which are compilations of his spoken words.⁴ Among Hōnen’s disciples, Shinran (1173–1262) in particular held a deep interest in the idea of the three dharma-ages. He inherited the idea in his own unique fashion, and revealed the path of emancipation during the last dharma-age. By describing a path that neither needed nor could support the efficacy of practice, he went so far as to show the value of a path of “pure religiosity.”

Research on Shinran's idea of the last dharma-age has been undertaken from many perspectives, from orthodox standpoints to the perspectives of religious studies, philosophical history, and religious philosophy. Because the results of this body of research are voluminous and have already been discussed elsewhere, there is probably no need to add to it in this study. Instead, this study will examine the attitude with which Shinran inherited the idea of the three dharma-ages, which forms the foundation of his faith. Through this inquiry, I propose to venture my own ideas with the hope of establishing the foundations of my own faith. It would be my good fortune if I were to be able to receive the criticism of many.

SHINRAN'S VIEW OF THE LAST DHARMA-AGE AS SEEN IN THE *KYŌGYŌSHINSHŌ*

The Last dharma-age: Viewed from the Perspective of Its Appropriateness to the Times and Beings

By turning from the Path of Sages and becoming a disciple of Hōnen, Shinran was able to gain the path of salvation in the after-life (the path of gaining emancipation). He was able to receive the teaching of the earlier Pure Land teachers of India, China, and Japan, and spread this path to others through his many writings in Chinese and Japanese, beginning with his principal work, the *Kyōgyōshinshō* (*A Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*). Needless to say, the idea of the three dharma-ages, which formed the foundation of Pure Land thought after the writings of Tao-ch'ō (562–645), was incorporated into many of Shinran's writings. In particular, references are found in both the *Kyōgyōshinshō* and the *Shōzōmatsu wasan* (*Hymns of the Dharma-Ages*).

The way in which this incorporation took place could be seen by examining the Chapter on the Transformed Buddha-bodies and Lands of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. There we discover that he writes of his joy in having turned and entered into the true, universal Vow in his spiritual declaration known as *sangan tennyū* (turning and entering the three vows), which follows his explication of the provisional teachings of the essential gate and the true gate. This is followed by an interpretation of the Path of Sages, in which he indicates, from a Jōdo Shinshū perspective, how to understand the Path of Sages from the perspective of the theory of the three dharma-ages.

Truly we know that the teachings of the Path of Sages were intended for the period when the Buddha was in the world and for the right dharma-age; they are altogether inappropriate for the times and beings of the semblance and last dharma-ages and the

age when the dharma has become extinct. Already their time has passed; they are no longer in accord with beings.

The true essence of the Pure Land way compassionately draws all of the innumerable evil, defiled beings to enlightenment without discrimination, whether they be of the period when the Buddha was in the world, of the right, semblance, or last dharma-ages, or of the time when the dharma has become extinct.⁵

Here we can see, first of all, that Shinran makes a determination as to whether the two teachings—the Path of Sages and the Pure Land Path—are effective in leading to, or in closing off, the attainment of emancipation during the right, semblance, and last dharma-ages, or during the period of the complete extinction of the dharma. The Path of Sages, he states, is a path for attaining emancipation only during the time when the world is in the right dharma-age, and it is not efficacious during other period. In contrast, Jōdo Shinshū (“the true essence of the Pure Land way”) demonstrates its efficacy for attaining emancipation during the right dharma-age certainly, but also during the times when the Path of Sages is no longer effective, that is, during the semblance dharma-age, the last dharma-age, and even during the period of the complete extinction of the dharma.

Shinran’s determination as to whether a path leads to, or closes off, the attainment of enlightenment is extremely severe. For instance, he states that even during his lifetime the Path of Sages was already unable to lead practitioners to enlightenment; it had lost its value as a Buddhist path. On the other hand, he states, the Pure Land Path is currently effective in leading to the attainment of enlightenment. Its efficacy has been demonstrated since the time of Śākyamuni Buddha’s propagation of the teaching, up through the last dharma-age and even during the period of the complete eradication of the dharma. Thus, he declares the determination of whether a particular path is to be discarded or upheld as a Buddhist teaching is based on whether the Path of Sages or the Pure Land Path leads to, or closes off, the attainment of enlightenment during the three dharma-ages.

Particular note should be given to the fact that, within the course of the historical development of the Pure Land Path, this point represented a stance unique to Shinran. The distinction between the Path of Sages and the Pure Land Path, as well as the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of the paths during the last dharma-age (which we will discuss later) had already been emphasized by Tao-ch’o in his *An-lo-chi* (*Passages on the Land of Happiness*). Further, Hōnen had already made clear the efficacy of the Pure Land Path throughout the three dharma-ages and during the period of the extinction of the dharma in Chapter 6, entitled “The Nembutsu in particular will remain when all other practices have disappeared ten thousand years after the last dharma-age” and Chapter 12, “The Buddha did not confer the meditative or non-meditative practices on Ānanda, but instead

conferred him with the Nembutsu alone" of his *Senjakushū*.

Shinran, however, combined the perspectives of Tao-ch'ō and Hōnen, and clarified the provisional nature of the Path of Sages during the present age. For him, the Path of Sages has dimensions that could either lead to, or close off, one's attainment of enlightenment depending upon in which of the three dharma-ages one lived. In contrast, the teaching of Jōdo Shinshū is effective in allowing one to attain emancipation in any of the three dharma-ages, and even during the period of the complete eradication of the dharma. From this perspective, it becomes easy to understand how Shinran could regard Jōdo Shinshū in particular as the primary reason for Śākyamuni's appearance in this world.

We can see that one factor in Shinran's determination of whether the Path of Sages or the Pure Land Path leads to, or closes one off from, enlightenment was the question of which of the three dharma-ages one finds oneself within. Another determining factor was whether or not the Buddhist practitioner has the capacity to persevere in the practices of the Buddhist path. In other words, the passages quoted above indicate that the various teachings of the Path of Sages are not suitable to either the time period or to the capacities of beings living during the semblance dharma-age, the last dharma-age, or the age of the complete extinction of the dharma. In Shinran's phrase, "Already their time has passed; they are no longer in accord with beings," the term "already" indicates that the period [from which he speaks] is not the right dharma-age, and that beings of the period do not have the capacity to persevere in the practices of the Path of Sages.

In contrast to this, the Pure Land Path allows one to enter and gain the fruit of enlightenment throughout the right, semblance, and the last dharma-ages, as well as the period of the complete extinction of the dharma. The term "already" indicates that the only path that allows one to gain emancipation during these time periods and that is appropriate to the capacities of beings living during these periods is the Pure Land Path. According to Tao-ch'ō, one must determine whether or not beings have the capacity to gain emancipation by determining the conditions of the age. That is to say, the value of a teaching of emancipation can be determined from the perspective that "beings acquire the conditions of the age in which they live." (In other words, the capacity of beings to attain emancipation is determined by the conditions of the age in which they live.) Thus, the term "already" serves not only as Shinran's declaration of deep religious introspection, but it also expresses the incorporation of this extraordinary idea of the three dharma-ages into his thought.

Shinran then sets out to determine the year of Śākyamuni's entry into *parinirvāṇa* and clearly explain the distinctive characteristics of each of the three dharma-ages. By doing so, he concludes that the only path for attaining emancipation in correspondence with the time period and the

capacities of beings is the single gate of the Pure Land Path. To demonstrate this, Shinran cites a series of four passages from Tao-ch'ō's *An-lo-chi*:

Concerning this, Master Tao-ch'ō of Hsuan-chung temple states:

Those who practice the way must continue without interruption for ten thousand kalpas before they can attain the stage of nonretrogression. Foolish beings of the present are said to be in reality "those whose thoughts of entrusting are as light as feathers." Further, they are called [bodhisattvas merely in] "provisional name," "those not settled," and "foolish beings outside [the bodhisattva stages]." They have not yet departed from the burning house [of samsaric existence].

How do we know this? In the *Bodhisattva-Ornament Sutra*, the stages of practice leading to attainment of enlightenment are minutely distinguished; because of the principle functioning here, these stages are called the path of difficult practice.⁶

Further, he states:

I will clarify the reason for the Pure Land teaching by relating it to beings through its connection with the times and encourage them to take refuge in it; here, if the beings, the teaching, and the times are not in accord, it would be difficult to perform practice and difficult to attain enlightenment. The *Sutra of Mindfulness of the Right Dharma* states:

When practitioners single-heartedly seek enlightenment,
They must always consider the times and the means;
If the times are inappropriate, there are no means.
This is called "loss"; it is not beneficial.

Why? Because it is like rubbing green wood to build a fire; fire cannot be made, for the time is not right. Because it is like merely breaking dry wood to build a fire; a fire cannot be made, for wisdom is lacking.

The "Moon-Matrix" section of the *Great Collection Sutra* states:

During the first five-hundred year period after the Buddha's *parinirvāna*, my disciples will be resolute in acquiring wisdom. During the second five-hundred year period, they will be resolute in cultivating meditation. During the third five-hundred year period, they will be resolute in listening to the teaching and sutra-recitation. During the fourth five-hundred year period, they will be

resolute in constructing towers and temples, practicing meritorious conduct, and performing repentance. During the fifth five-hundred year period, they will be resolute in conflict and strife, which will become widespread with the good dharma being diminished.

In ascertaining the nature of sentient beings of the present, we must consider that we are now in the fourth five-hundred year period following the Buddha's departure from this world. This is indeed the age when beings should perform repentance, practice meritorious conduct, and recite the Buddha's Name. In a single utterance of the Name of Amida Buddha, karmic evil that would involve one in eighty billion kalpas of birth-and-death is eliminated. Even a single utterance is thus; the person who practices the constant saying of the Name, then, is none other than the one who is always performing repentance.⁷

Further, he states:

In distinguishing the sutras that will remain in the world from those that will disappear, we must consider that all the teachings of Śākyamuni's lifetime will last through the five hundred years of the right dharma-age and the thousand years of the semblance dharma-age; during the ten thousand years of the last dharma-age, sentient beings will diminish in number, and the sutras will all disappear. The Tathagata, out of pity for the sentient beings in the various forms of pain and torment, will have this sutra in particular survive, remaining for a hundred years.⁸

Further, he states:

The *Great Collection Sutra* states,

Out of billions of sentient beings who seek to perform practices and cultivate the way in the last dharma-age, not one will gain realization.

This is now the last dharma-age; it is the evil world of the five defilements. This one gate—the Pure Land way—is the only path that affords passage.⁹

As Shinran indicates, the first passage is based on the *Bodhisattva-Ornament Sutra*. According to this sutra, bodhisattva practices are divided into fifty-two stages. It is said that ten thousand kalpas of practice are required for a bodhisattva to progress from the first of the ten levels of faith, which constitutes the first stage of practice, to the fulfillment of the ten levels of settlement (and thereby the attainment of the stage of endurance, or, the

stage of true settlement according to the *Benevolent King Sutra*). From this, one can appreciate how difficult the path is. How much more so, writes Tao-ch'ō, would it be impossible for those who have yet to practice the Buddhist path—those “foolish beings outside [the bodhisattva stages]” who have not even entered the ten levels of faith—to attain that bodhisattva stage. We must note that Tao-ch'ō includes himself with all of the weak and evil foolish beings of the present age.

According to the last three passages, when the Buddhist teachings are re-examined through a consideration of the circumstances of both the times in which Tao-ch'ō lived—a period far removed from Śākyamuni's departure from this world—and sentient beings—persons of karmic evil and inferior capacity—it becomes clear that the doctrine of birth in the Pure Land makes possible the attainment of emancipation in accordance with the circumstances of both the times and the beings living within it. By clarifying the circumstances of times in which he lived, Tao-ch'ō first determines that the period corresponds to the fourth of five five-hundred year periods, which are described in the *Great Collection Sutra*. In this period, he writes, it is still possible to build stupas and temples, do meritorious acts, and perform practices of repentance. Next, through an explication of the theory of the three dharma-ages, which could also be seen as a theory of historical decline, he determines that the fourth five-hundred year period falls within the last dharma-age. Further, he states that this is an evil world of the five defilements, the result of which is that it is impossible to attain emancipation through the path of difficult practices. He makes it clear that the single gate of birth in the Pure Land is the sole path that leads to enlightenment.

Particular note should be given to the relative order in which the four passages from the *An-lo-chi* have been cited by Shinran. Tao-ch'ō's text, as a whole, elucidates the teaching of birth in the Pure Land throughout all of its twelve major divisions. Yet, the first passage cited by Shinran is taken from the fifth major section of the *An-lo-chi*. The second cited passage is from the first of nine subsections of the first major section. This and the fourth passage cited by Shinran are among the most notable passages of the *An-lo-chi*. The third cited passage is found in the third of three subsections in the sixth major section. Finally, the fourth cited passage is set out in the last of five question-and-answer segments in the third of four subsections in the third major section of Tao-ch'ō's text. This final passage, it is said, presents a classification of the two gates of the Path of Sages and the Pure Land Path. By highlighting these particular passages and presenting them in a revised order, it could be said that Shinran was seeking to reveal Tao-ch'ō's own view of the last dharma-age (from the perspective that “beings acquire the conditions of the age in which they live”), and to point directly to the path for attaining emancipation, based upon this. It could also be said that it reveals Shinran's own view of the last dharma-age from the perspec-

tive that "beings acquire the conditions of the age in which they live." Accordingly, Shinran states,

Thus, the multitudes of this evil, defiled world, ignorant of the distinctive characteristics of the latter age, revile the behavior and attitude of monks and nuns, but all people of the present, whether monk or lay, must take measure of their own capacities.¹⁰

With this severe exposition, Shinran turns toward his contemporaries, both practitioners of the Buddhist path and those within worldly life, and states that because they do not understand the distinctive characteristics of the latter age in which they live they viciously slander the behavior and attitudes of monk and nuns. He urges those people to reflect upon the circumstances of the times and upon their own capacities, without casting their eyes upon others.

Persons pursuing the path of enlightenment today, some seven hundred fifty years after the time of Shinran, should not lose track of that which Shinran himself deeply wished for. This is also the spirit that runs throughout the entirety of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. It is immediately evident in the religious attitude of Shinran, whose explication of Jōdo Shinshū offered a great many expressions such as, "monks and laity of this latter age,"¹¹ "[w]e, an ocean of beings in an evil age of five defilements,"¹² "[m]onks and laity of this defiled world,"¹³ and the "multitudes of this defiled world."¹⁴ The present age is indeed that of the last dharma-age of this defiled world. The capacities of beings are indeed corrupt and defiled. For this age and for such beings, the one teaching that radiates a pure, brilliant light of attaining emancipation is the true essence of the Pure Land way. One can also perceive this in the intent of Shinran's words of praise and lament,

This is the teaching and practice for our latter age; devote yourself solely to it. It is eye and limb in this defiled world; do not fail to endeavor in it.¹⁵

It is . . . the true teaching in consummate readiness for the beings of this day.¹⁶

Shinran's View of the Yearly Progression of the Last Dharma-age and Its Internal Features

We have seen that at the foundation of Shinran's teaching lies a deep reflection on the historical decline of the transmission of Buddhist doctrine. We will now examine the period of last dharma-age in more concrete terms.

We will first examine the period of the last dharma-age that Shinran experienced directly. We discover that he simply accepted the yearly

progression presented in the third passage of Tao-ch'ó's text, which was cited above. That is the theory that the right dharma-age lasted for five hundred years, the semblance dharma-age lasted for one thousand years, and the last dharma-age will last for ten thousand years. Immediately after urging that "all people of the present, whether monk or lay, must take measure of their own capacities," Shinran then presents this calculation,

Considering the teachings concerning the three dharma-ages, we find that the date of the Tathagatas' *parinirvāṇa* falls on the fifty-[first] year (the year water/monkey) of the reign of Kung Mu, the fifth emperor of the Chou dynasty. From that year of water/monkey to the first year of our Gennin era (the year wood/monkey) it is 2,1[8]3 years. Based on the *Auspicious Kalpa Sutra*, the *Benevolent King Sutra*, and the *Nirvana Sutra*, we find that we are already 6[8]3 years into the last dharma-age.¹⁷

In the first year of the Gennin era (1224) Shinran was fifty-two years of age. Shinran calculates that that year would correspond to 2183 years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*.¹⁸ Because 1224 was 2183 years after the death of the Buddha, it would also be 683 years into the last dharma-age.¹⁹ Based on this, we could calculate that the first year of the last dharma-age would have occurred 1501 years after the Buddha's departure from this world. From this, we can know that Shinran's calculations were based on the same dharma-age theory that was used by Tao-ch'ó.

We have seen that Tao-ch'ó utilized the temporal structure of the right dharma-age lasting for five hundred years, a semblance dharma-age lasting for one thousand years, and the last dharma-age lasting for ten thousand years. Yet, to support that theory he does not record the yearly progression of the time since the Buddha's death. Nor does he point to competing theories regarding the right and semblance dharma-ages in order to argue concretely that his era was within the last dharma-age. Instead, he simply relies on the conventions existing in the Buddhist world. He simply records the years in which each of the three dharma-ages are said to end, but provides no other preliminary work to support his argument.

Shinran, on the other hand, calculates the yearly progression from the Buddha's demise to the first year of the Gennin era, basing his argument on the explications of the dharma-ages found in the *Mappō tōmyōki* (*Lamp for the Last Dharma-Age*) attributed to Saichō (766 or 767–822).²⁰ Thus, he uses "the fifty-[first] year (the year water/monkey) of the reign of Kung Mu, the fifth emperor of the Chou dynasty" (949) as the reference point for the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. Similarly, his theory that the last dharma-age began 1,501 years after that date relies on the *Auspicious Kalpa Sutra*, the *Benevolent King Sutra*, and the *Nirvana Sutra*, three expositions that are recorded in the *Mappō tōmyōki*. Each of those sutras employs the theory

that the right dharma-age will last for five hundred years and the semblance dharma-age will last for one thousand years. From this, Shinran is able to calculate that, in the first of year of the Gennin era (1224), "we are already 6[8]3 years into the last dharma-age."

Thus, although Shinran's view of the yearly progression of the dharma-ages coincided with that of Tao-ch'ō, his was inherited from the *Mappō tōmyōki*. We have seen that there were two lines of transmission within Japanese Buddhism regarding the yearly progression of the dharma-ages. The first held to a five hundred year right dharma-age, and a one thousand year semblance dharma-age. The second, and mainstream school of thought during Shinran's time, argued for a one thousand year right dharma-age and a one thousand year semblance dharma-age. Shinran, however, did not employ the explanation in vogue at the time. Instead, in the same manner as his teacher, Hōnen, had before him,²¹ Shinran utilized the former theory, which posited a five hundred year right dharma-age and a one thousand year semblance dharma-age, in order to situate the last dharma-age historically. This led to his endorsement of Tao-ch'ō's assertion that, "This is now the last dharma-age," which we discussed above.

Correctly speaking, therefore, the fourth of the five five-hundred year periods was the time when the last dharma-age began.²² Among the Pure Land masters recognized by Shinran, the four masters after Tao-ch'ō all lived within the period of the last dharma-age. In that light, all of these masters' assertions help to establish the immutable authenticity of the Pure Land teaching of attaining emancipation during the last dharma-age. Furthermore, Shinran's life took place some six hundred years into the last dharma-age. When one considers the attributes of the state of society during his lifetime, its similarities to the descriptions of the fifth of the five-hundred year periods in the *Great Collection Sutra* are chilling. When considered along with his personal recognition of the inefficacy of attaining enlightenment through self-power, it is possible to say that Shinran had reached the point where his search for a teaching and practice in the latter age would save him in the life-to-come.

Having now inquired into Shinran's view of the yearly progression of the last dharma-age, let us next make an inquiry into the internal features of this last dharma-age. First, the passages from the *An-lo-chi* cited above demonstrate Shinran's standpoint in contrast to the Path of Sages. At the same time, however, these passages also reveal the internal features of the last dharma-age. For instance,

Foolish beings of the present are said to be in reality "those whose thoughts of entrusting are as light as feathers." Further, they are called [bodhisattvas merely in] "provisional name", "those not settled," and "foolish beings outside [the bodhisattva stages]." They have not yet departed from the burning house [of samsaric existence].²³

During the fourth five-hundred year period, they will be resolute in constructing towers and temples, practicing meritorious conduct, and performing repentance. During the fifth five-hundred year period, they will be resolute in conflict and strife, which will become widespread with the good dharma being diminished.²⁴

The *Great Collection Sutra* states,

Out of billions of sentient beings who seek to perform practices and cultivate the way in the last dharma-age, not one will gain realization.

This is now the last dharma-age; it is the evil world of the five defilements.²⁵

Further, when we compare the descriptions with the explications of the *Mappō tōmyōki*, we are able to make an even more concrete inquiry into these internal features.

The first internal feature of the last dharma-age is the fact that not even a single person has been able to achieve realization through the practices of the Path of Sages. In the *Mappō tōmyōki*, Saichō explains this by comparing the two sutras, the *Sutra of Mahāmāya* and the *Great Collection Sutra*, which were mentioned previously. That is, he refers to the portion of the *Sutra of Mahāmāya* that describes the events of the one thousand, five hundred-year period that followed the death of the Buddha.

In the *Sutra of Mahāmāya* it is stated:

During the first five hundred years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*, seven holy monks, sages all, including Mahākāśyapa, will uphold the right dharma in succession so that it does not perish. After five hundred years, the right dharma will become completely extinct.

Six hundred years after, the ninety-five kinds of nonbuddhist teaching will arise and vie with each other, but Aśvaghōṣa will appear and subdue them all.

Seven hundred years after, Nāgārjuna will appear and demolish the banners of wrong-views.

Eight hundred years after, monks will give themselves to self-indulgence and only a few will attain the fruit of enlightenment.

Nine hundred years after, menials will be made into monks and nuns.

One thousand years after, on hearing of the contemplation of bodily impurity, they will be enraged and give it no thought.

One thousand one hundred years after, monks and nuns will

take wives and husbands, and will break and revile the precepts.

One thousand two hundred years after, monks and nuns will have children.

One thousand three hundred years after, the yellow monk's robe will be changed to white.

One thousand four hundred years after, the four kinds of disciples will all be like hunters, and will sell the offerings made to the Three Treasures.

Here I declare: One thousand five hundred years after, two monks in the land of Kausambi will fall into dispute with each other and finally kill each other. As a result, the teachings will be stored in the naga's palace.

This passage is also found in the *Nirvana Sutra*, fascicle eighteen, the *Benevolent King Sutra*, and others. According to these sutra passages, after 1,500 years, there will be no precepts, meditation, or wisdom.²⁶

Next, Saichō cites the explanation found in the *Great Collection Sutra*, which concretely states,

Therefore, the *Great Collection Sutra*, fascicle fifty-one states:

During the first five hundred years after my nirvana, monks and others will be resolute in attaining emancipation through the right dharma that I have taught. (The first state of sagehood that is attained is termed emancipation.) In the next five hundred years, they will be resolute in meditation. In the next five hundred years, they will be resolute in listening to the teaching. In the next five hundred years, they will be resolute in constructing temples. In the last five hundred years, they will be resolute in conflict and disputes, and the pure dharma will sink into dormancy. . . .

This passage means that during the first three five-hundred year periods, the three dharmas of precepts, meditation, and wisdom will, in succession, be resolutely upheld. This corresponds to the two periods in question above: the right dharma lasting five hundred years and the semblance dharma lasting one thousand years.

The period from that of temple construction on is the last dharma-age.

.

In the last dharma-age, only the verbal teaching remains; there is no practice or realization.²⁷

Although there are some differences in the explications of these two sutras, they both state that the period of the last dharma-age begins fifteen hundred years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. By the end of the five hundred year right dharma-age and the one thousand year semblance dharma-age, the three learnings of precepts, meditation and wisdom will have been completely eradicated. As a consequence, no one will be able to attain enlightenment during the last dharma-age. This point is made clear by the way in which the author of the *Mappō tōmyōki* has arranged the sutra passages within his text.

One could also use the notion of the three pillars of teaching, practice and realization to describe the internal features of the dharma-ages. That is, the right dharma-age (resolute in emancipation and wisdom) is endowed with the three pillars of teaching, practice, and realization. The semblance dharma-age (resolute in meditation and precepts) possesses only the two pillars of teaching and practice, since the realization of enlightenment (emancipation) does not exist. The last dharma-age (lacking in precepts, meditation, and wisdom; resolute in conflict and disputes) becomes a period having none of the pillars; "only the verbal teaching remains; there is no practice or realization."

The *Mappō tōmyōki* goes on to explain that, even the Buddhist teaching that exists only verbally will finally disappear, to be stored away and hidden in the naga's palace. Thus, there will be no dharma to abuse; there will be no precepts to break. Since there will be no precepts to break or observe, there will be monks "in name only." Such monks in name only, who are without precepts, are the "true treasures of the age"; they are seen as "fields of merits."²⁸ Such nominal monks who keep no precepts ought to be referred to as "pale reflections of the good dharma." This is the form that monks and nuns will take during the last dharma-age. Yet, here is the idea that monks and nuns of the last dharma-age who, having shaved their heads and beards, and donned monks' robes, are monks and nuns in appearance only are still described as "true treasures of the age" and the "field of merits." The reasoning behind that idea can be found in the *Mappō tōmyōki*, which examines passages from the *Great Collection Sutra* to explain the meaning of "true treasures of the ages" for the semblance and last dharma-ages.

In this passage, eight kinds of priceless treasures are mentioned: the Tathagata, pratyekabuddhas, śrāvakas, and those of the first three fruits; beings who have realized meditation, monks who observe precepts, and monks who break precepts; and monks in name only who are without precepts. These are the priceless treasures of the right, semblance, and last dharma-ages, respectively. The first four belong to the right dharma-age, the next three to the semblance dharma-age, and the last to the last dharma-age.

Thus we know clearly that those who break precepts and those who have no precepts are all true treasures.²⁹

The *Mappō tōmyōki* then provides further reasons for being able to refer to such beings as the “true treasures” of the three dharma-ages through its examining of the *Nirvana Sutra* and the *Sutra of Ten Wheels*. The text goes on to explain the meaning of the “true treasure” of the last dharma-age in this way,

Next, after the end of the semblance dharma-age, there are no precepts whatsoever. Recognizing the momentum of the times, the Buddha praises those who are monks in name only, declaring them to be the field of merits for the world, in order to save the people of the last dharma-age. The *Great Collection Sutra*, fascicle fifty-two, states:

If, in the last age that follows, there is a monk in name only who, in accord with my teaching, shaves his hair and beard and wears a monk's robe, and if there are lay supporters making offerings to him, these latter will acquire immeasurable merit.

Further, the *Sutra of the Wise and the Foolish* states;

If in the future, in the last age when the dharma-vehicle is about to perish, nominal monks should take wives and have them bear children, still lay supporters should pay homage to groups of four or more such monks just as they would to Śāriputra, Mahāmaudgalayāna, and the others.

Further, it states:

If one beats and scolds monks who break precepts, failing to recognize that they wear monk's robes, the offense is the same as causing blood to flow from the bodies of a hundred million Buddhas. If, because of the dharma that I teach, sentient beings shave their hair and beard and don monk's robes, though they may not observe the precepts, they all bear the seal of nirvana already³⁰

As these passages indicate, even monks in name only, who are without precepts, can still serve as conditions for guiding lay persons who have yet to gain the virtue of the dharma. For this reason and also because monks without precepts already “bear the seal of nirvana,” they can be called the “true treasure” of the last dharma-age, and can be seen as “fields of merits.”

Further, it is bad enough that the internal features of the last dharma-age include the existence of monks in name only, who are without precepts. Still, we should not overlook the fact that the practice of making offerings

to them is no longer a regular occurrence. This is exactly what Tao-ch'ó's expression, "foolish beings of the present" refers to: their thoughts of faith are light like feathers; they are "not settled" as to whether they will or will not regress in their quest for toward enlightenment; moreover, they are on the outside of even the initial stages of the Buddhist path of practice, and dwell exclusively within the burning house of the evil world of five defilements; and even though they may wish to be freed from suffering, they are unable to accomplish that in any way through their own power. Such is the state of existence of those who make up the internal features of the last dharma-age.

This perspective, as seen from Shinran's thought, is not limited solely to the last dharma-age. It includes not only the semblance dharma-age, but applied even to the right dharma-age. Hidden in the shadows of the Path of Sages during the right and semblance dharma-ages, it continued to exist in a state of complete neglect. It was as if the remnants of its life were barely sustained until the last dharma-age. The gradual progression of the three dharma-ages has evolved naturally, and now, during the last dharma-age, the central issue has become one of attaining emancipation. As a result, Shinran takes the position that the Pure Land way—the path upon which "foolish beings of the present" can attain emancipation—has had efficacy throughout the right, semblance, and last dharma-ages. He further asserts that the Path of Sages lies at the level of an expedient, or, provisional teaching that leads one to the Pure Land Path. It follows that this last dharma-age is instead necessary for the Path of Sages itself. It is only through historical circumstances that it did not ally itself with the Pure Land Path. Even for Śākyamuni Buddha himself, the reason for his appearing in this world was to open wide the path upon which "foolish beings in the present" can attain emancipation throughout all of the three dharma-ages.

For this reason, according to Shinran's thought, the last dharma-age is not simply an excellent external system that reveals the internal, true form of "foolish beings of the present." It does not simply stop at the individual level, but is a system that completely fills the ocean of all beings. One could probably refer to it as a clear recognition of the nature of karmic evil, which has existed from the beginningless past. Or, stating it in another way, it is the clear recognition of one's true form as a foolish being, which one becomes able to acknowledge for the first time when illuminated by the light of Amida Buddha's salvation.

Translated by John Iwohara

NOTES

1. This article was originally published in Japanese as "Shinran Shōnin ni okeru mappō shisō," the fourth chapter of Asano Kyōshin, *Shinran to Jōdokyōgi no kenkyū* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshōdō, 1998). Part 2 will be published in the *Pacific World*, Third Series, 4 (2002). For the most part, the English translations of passages from Shinran's texts have been taken from The Shin Buddhism Translation Series, *The Collected Works of Shinran* (hereinafter *CWS*), (Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, 1997).
2. Genshin, *Ōjō yōshū (Essentials for Attaining Birth)*, *Taishō*, vol. 84, p. 33a; *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* (hereinafter *SSZ*), vol. 1 (Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 1983), p. 729; Ryukoku University Translation Center, *The Kōso Wasan: the Hymns on the Patriarchs* (Kyoto: Ryukoku University, 1974), p. 11.
3. Hōnen, *Senjaku hongan nembutsushū (Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal Vow)*, in *Taishō*, vol. 83, p. 1a; *SSZ*, vol. 1, p. 929. The passage cited from the *Great Collection Sutra* can be found in *CWS*, p. 244.
4. See Asano, *Shinran to Jōdokyōgi no kenkyū*, Chapter Three, "Hōnen Shōnin no mappō kan."
5. Shinran, *Ken Jōdo shinjitsu kyōgyōshō monrui (A Collection of Passages Revealing the True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way)* (hereinafter, *Kyōgyōshinshō*), in *SSZ*, vol. 2, 166; *CWS*, p. 240.
6. Tao-ch'ō, *An-lo-chi (Passages on the Land of Happiness)*, in *Taishō*, vol. 47, p. 16b; cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 167; *CWS*, p. 242.
7. *Taishō*, vol. 47, 4a25; cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 167; *CWS*, pp. 242–3.
8. *Taishō*, vol. 47, 18b15; cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 168; *CWS*, p. 243.
9. *Taishō*, vol. 47, 13c8; cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 168; *CWS*, pp. 243–4.
10. *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 168; *CWS*, p. 244.
11. *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 47; *CWS*, p. 77.
12. *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 44; *CWS*, p. 70.
13. *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 157; *CWS*, p. 228.
14. *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 143; *CWS*, p. 207.
15. Shinran, *Jōdo monrui jushō (Passages on the Pure Land Way)*, in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 443; *CWS*, p. 295.
16. *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 4; *CWS*, p. 10.
17. *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 168; *CWS*, p. 244.
18. According to Shinran's calculations, the first year of Gennin (1224) corresponded to 2183 years after the Buddha's death, or, 683 years into the

last Dharma-age. In reality, however, 1224 would correctly correspond to 2173 years after the Buddha's death, or, 673 years into the last Dharma-age. Zonkaku corrects this discrepancy in his *Rokuyōshō* (*SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 401), "The character '8' is erroneous; it should be '7.' . . . In the same way as above, the character '8' is not correct; it should be '7.'" [Translator's note: The *CWS* translation adopts the correct dates. However, since the author has adopted the former set of dates, the present translation will reflect them as well.]

19. See fn. 18.

20. There is some question as to whether Saichō was the author of the *Mappō tōmyōki*. Since both Hōnen and Shinran took the position that Saichō did author the text, we will follow that here as well. It cannot be denied that, since Hōnen and Shinran took the text to be that of Saichō, it was for them a definitive source for calculating the yearly progressions of the dharma-ages and for descriptions of the inner features of the last dharma-age.

21. See Asano, *Shinran to Jōdokyōgi no kenkyū*, Chapter Three, Section Two for reference.

22. A calculation of the number of years from the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa* until Tao-ch'ō's lifetime would show the following: if the date of the Buddha's demise was during fifty-first year of the reign of Kung Mu, the fifth emperor of the Chou dynasty (949 BCE), then, since Tao-ch'ō lived from 561–645 CE, he would have lived some 1,511 to 1,594 years after the Buddha's *parinirvāṇa*. According to the theory of a five-hundred year right dharma-age and one thousand year semblance dharma-age, Tao-ch'ō would have lived during the very beginning of the last dharma-age.

23. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 167; *CWS*, p. 242.

24. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, pp. 167–8; *CWS*, p. 243.

25. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 168; *CWS*, p. 244.

26. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 169; *CWS*, pp. 245–6.

27. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, pp. 169–170; *CWS*, pp. 246–7.

28. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, pp. 170–1; *CWS*, pp. 247–8.

29. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, p. 171; *CWS*, p. 249.

30. Cited in *SSZ*, vol. 2, pp. 173–4; *CWS*, p. 252.