

Chapter 21

The Ultimate End of Faith (Part 3)

The Pure Land tradition is chiefly known as a popular teaching designed to offer hope to the suffering masses for a blessed hereafter in a land of peace and bliss established by the Buddha Amida. The major, popular practice employed to be reborn in that land is the recitation of the name of Amida. As a consequence of its history, Pure Land Buddhism is usually regarded as an otherworldly faith and an inferior path for those who are unable to engage in the traditionally rigorous, monastic disciplines. It has been regarded as an upaya to console ordinary people and is part of the teaching of all Mahayana Buddhist schools. According to the general theory, birth into the Pure Land provides the optimum environment for the fulfillment of Buddhist disciplines and the attainment of enlightenment.

In Japan during the Heian era the teaching was particularly esteemed by the nobility who built many halls and temples in honor of Amida in order to assure their rebirth into the Pure Land. Through Genshin's "Ojoyoshu" (Treatise on the Essentials of Rebirth [in the Pure Land]), as well as other forms of Pure Land literature, the efforts of popular preachers and itinerant Nembutsu monks, and later in the Kamakura period, Honen's teaching of the Sole Practice of Nembutsu, the belief penetrated deeply into Japanese society. The Hell Scrolls in art, depicting vividly the tortures of hell, and such works as the Tale of the Heike brought the message directly to the people.

In the context of world religions, Pure Land teaching is a response to the constant human concern about the nature of the afterlife. Religious faith attempts to console people facing unbearable tragedy and sorrow. It also attempts to fortify the individual against the frustrations of life's hopes and efforts. Consequently, elaborate systems of afterlife have developed in the world's great religions to respond to these serious questions. The moral character of Pure Land teaching, based in the principle of karma, also gives expression to the human demand for justice. Through the principles of interdependence and transfer of merit, the teaching offered a practical means whereby people could assist their loved ones in progressing to higher levels of rebirth. The symbols of the Pure Land and the contrasting hells which appear in Buddhist tradition express an understanding of the entire religious process of spiritual development, and give expression for human hopes and aspirations for fulfillment and perfection, as well as moral retribution.

While we have stressed the social and this-worldly orientation of Shinran's thought in order to highlight its contemporary relevance, a comprehensive religious faith must embrace concerns of both this life, and the afterlife. The most serious personal problem for individuals as they progress through life is the issue of death, their own or those whom they love dearly.

In his work among the masses, Shinran made use of Pure Land symbolism to console and encourage his followers. Therefore, it is essential to consider the Buddhist cosmology and Pure Land symbolism from which he drew.

Buddhist Cosmology

The early Buddhist cosmology is geared to stages of spiritual development and the principle of karma. Consequently, there is a gradated universe which combines material and spiritual elements arranged in a hierarchy of increasing spirituality and attainment. The Buddhist universe essentially has three levels or planes — the levels of Desire, Form, and Formless. Beyond these three is Nirvana.

Within the realm of Desire there is a three-story world involving five paths of rebirth. These range from the lowest-hell to animal, preta (hungry ghosts), humans, and gods. Later Asura, angry spirits or rebel gods, were added, making six. Beyond the realm of Desire is the World of Form which contains heavens correlated to four stages of dhyana (meditation trances) in the Brahma worlds. Altogether there are 17 stages. Finally, there is the Formless dimension which has four levels. Beyond all these dimensions and levels there is Nirvana which transcends all distinctions and gradations. Altogether there is an infinity of universes reaching the inconceivable totality termed the great thousandfold world or three thousandfold world ($1000 \times 1000 \times 1000 = 1$ billion). Every aspect of this cosmology is governed by karma and the level of discipline until one reaches final liberation.

Mahayana Cosmology

While the historical development is not entirely clear, the Mahayana tradition has added to the general cosmology the concept of Buddha land. Every Buddha has his land or realm as the fruition or fulfillment of his practice. This is represented in his body of fruition or body of reward. The establishment of the concept of Pure Land does not conflict with earlier cosmological concepts but perhaps completes or caps the system.

The Mahayana teachers accepted Early Buddhism as elementary. They also transformed the ideal goal from simply attaining Nirvana to Buddhahood. As a consequence of this alteration

there had to be changes in the symbol system leading to the proliferation of Buddhalands and expansion of the Cosmos. While each Buddha had his own Pure Land, the Pure Land of Amida eventually became the most prominent and chief path to achieve Buddhahood for the peoples of East Asia.

Thus, the various Mahayana texts, which narrate the status of the Pure Land and those who enter there, indicate that the Pure Land is beyond the three worlds — or levels — taught by Hinayanists. [1] Some texts state that there are no hells or hungry ghosts, nor the three worlds in the Pure Land. [2] It is a sphere superior to all worlds.

Among the various Pure Lands, individual texts assert the superiority of one land or another. Thus in the Older Kegon text Ch. 29, we are told that one kalpa in Sakyamuni's land is as one day in Amida's land. But a kalpa in Amida's land is one day in the land of Kongobutsu. The series ends with the land of Kenshu Buddha who abides in the Shorengesekai which is filled with many great Bodhisattvas such as Fugen (Samantabhadra) Bodhisattva.

Pure Land Teaching

Pure Land teaching as a movement, within the context of Mahayana Buddhist development, presented aspiring bodhisattvas as well as ordinary persons with the goal and prospect of achieving birth in the Pure Land established by Amida Buddha's Vows which are recounted in the "Larger Pure Land Sutra." An important factor indicated in this Sutra is the state of non-retrogression which assures final enlightenment to the aspirant. Vows 11 and 47 proclaim the state of non-retrogression and enlightenment. In earlier Buddhist understanding one could regress, depending on the condition of one's karma. It may be that the exponents of Mahayana were attempting to offer a stronger sense of security by establishing a point where the nature of the person or the environment did away with any possibility of backsliding.

We should point out that Buddhist scholars classified Pure Lands according to whether the land is the result of the fruit of Buddhahood or whether it was manifested for the sake of others — as an upaya. [3] As we earlier indicated in the discussion of Amida Buddha, the status of Amida Buddha was variously regarded and it was the same for the Buddhaland. [4]

The founder of the T'ien t'ai (Tendai) school in China, Chih I, distinguished four types of lands. Amida's land was an upaya in which the delusion of upaya is cut off but the delusion of fundamental truth remains (that is, traces of dualistic views remain). It is the world of followers of the Common Teachings (the doctrines common to all Buddhists) in the

classification of teachings according to T'ien t'ai. Amida's land is the abode where Sages and Common persons reside, as well as the land for Bodhisattvas who have not yet entered the first stage in the Bodhisattva path of 10 stages in the progress to buddhahood and enlightenment. In this system Amida's Pure Land is a preliminary level. Shinran, along with Zendo, an earlier Pure Land teacher in China, however, held that Amida's Pure Land is the highest level of attainment and reality.

Another issue which we encounter with the concept of the Pure Land is whether it has objective existence or only exists in the mind. Is it out there or only in the mind? In general, ordinary Pure Land followers tend to regard it as more of an objective existence where they can meet their deceased loved ones and ancestors in contrast to the subjective approach which views it as only existing in one's own mind.

The objective tendency derives from the statement of the Sutra that the Pure Land is in the West "beyond ten billion Buddha lands..." The subjective approach is based on the principle that if the mind is pure, the land is Pure. The "Vimalakirti Sutra" states, "If Bodhisattvas desire to attain the Pure Land, they must surely purify their own minds. According to the Purity of their mind, is the Buddhaland therefore pure." [5] The "Kegon Sutra" declares: If people desire to seek and know the Buddhas of the three worlds, they must surely contemplate in this way. The mind makes (produces) all the Tathagata." [6] In this perspective as one becomes enlightened, one's very body is Buddha, and this world as it is the land of Bliss. It regards the teaching of Pure Land as apart from and beyond the ordinary person as an upaya. It generally is the position of T'ien t'ai, Chan (Zen) and Shingon traditions and represents the Self-striving (jiriki) perspective.

There are a variety of issues relative to the character of Buddhist cosmology which are pertinent to the way Shinran deals with these facets of teaching. Shinran, in the Faith volume, rejects the Pure Land as simply a subjective reality. However, he does not reject the principle of Universal Buddha nature as we have seen. Rather, endowed trust as the True Mind of Amida is the realization of Buddha nature.

There is consequently the problem of reconciling the popular, traditional view of the objective existence of Amida and the Pure Land as "over there" with the understanding of Amida as the all-embracing Eternal Buddha reality which is immanent within our world. In this context the concept of two types of Law Body which we have discussed earlier may assist.

Shinran asserts in the Jinenhonisho that Amida is a medium, means, source that enables us to know the formless, colorless Dharmakaya. Like the Name (Myogo), belief in Amida and the Pure Land, though specific and seemingly limited symbols, direct the mind to contemplate the deeper reality from which the form of Amida and the Pure Land have emerged as the dynamic symbols that activate faith. Reality is objective to us to the extent that our minds do not create reality. We exist in reality. In that sense Amida and the Pure Land, as symbols of the highest reality, are not merely constructions of our mind, though they have arisen in the course of Buddhist history as a focal point of Buddhist aspiration and contemplation. In the course of the spiritual evolution of Buddhism, they have become vehicles to convey that reality to us.

Though Shinran enunciates a highly spiritual conception of human destiny, he still speaks of rebirth into the Pure Land implying survival after death and the objective existence of the land. He clearly denies that the Pure Land is merely in one's own mind. On a personal note Shinran writes in "Mattosho" letter #12:

"My life has now reached its fullness of years. It is certain that I will go to birth in the Buddha Land before you, so without fail I will await you there." [7]

In reference to the death of a disciple Kakushin-bo, the disciple Ren'i wrote with Shinran's approval:

"Whether one is left behind or goes before, it is surely a sorrowful thing to be parted by death. But the one who first attains nirvana vows without fail to save those who were close to him first and leads those with whom he has been karmically bound, his relatives, and his friends. It should be so, and since I have entered the same path of the teaching as Kakushin, I feel strongly reassured. Since it is said that being parent and child is a bond from a precious life, you too must feel reassured. It is impossible to express how moving and impressive it all was, so I will stop here. How can I speak of it anymore? I hope to say much more later.

"I read this letter to the Shonin in order to see if there were any errors; he told me that there was nothing to be added, and that it was fine. He was especially moved and wept when I came to the part about Kakushin, for he is deeply grieved by his death. [8]

Concerning the meaning of the term Pure Land, or Sukhavati as it is given in the Sutras, we should note that it generally means a land of happiness, pleasure, bliss. In the Chinese sutras two terms have been used most prominently and in various combinations. The "Larger Pure Land Sutra" uses the term Anraku, the land of peace and harmony. It is the land of peace-

tranquility and bliss. The “Smaller Pure Land Sutra” (Amidakyo) uses the term Gokuraku, which means extreme, highest bliss or pleasure.

In his writings Shinran shows a distinct preference for Anraku in various combinations. In the “Kyogyoshinsho,” he quotes texts using this term some 46 times, and three times in his own statements. In his writings apart from the “Kyogyoshinsho,” there are 64 references with Anraku, nine quotes and 55 statements of Shinran. In the “Kyogyoshinsho,” Gokuraku appears in nine quotes and in one statement of Shinran. In his various other writings it is used 21 times, with 10 from quotes. Rennyo in later times showed a greater preference for Gokuraku.

We may suggest that Shinran preferred Anraku because it was the term highlighted by the Sutra on which he based his teaching. Also, because he held a more abstract idea of the Pure Land, he may have avoided the more widely used and popular term Gokuraku. The Smaller Sutra “Amidakyo” gives a highly detailed picture of the Pure Land.

Among texts which have been influential in developing Pure Land thought are the “Treatise on the Pure Land” by Vasubandhu which is the earliest commentary on the “Larger Pure Land Sutra.” It is a short text discussing the 29 “accomplishments, adornments” or actualizations of the Pure Land organized around the Buddhaland (17), the Buddha (8) and the Bodhisattvas residing there (4).

The Second part of the text deals with practices which bring rebirth. His initial poem from which he then elaborates the qualities of the Pure Land has played a great part in the development of Pure Land teaching and in the thought of Shinran. He offers a summary of the vision of the spiritual meaning of Amida and the Pure Land.

Another significant text which was in the background of Shinran’s thought is the “Ojoyoshu” by Genshin. This work became a preacher’s handbook giving the information on damnation and salvation and the way to achieve salvation. Based on his descriptions compiled from Sutras, pictorial representations have been made and used in ways similar to modern evangelists. The descriptions of sufferings are graphic, as are also the portrayals of the bliss of paradise.

Shinran’s View of Human Fulfillment

I. Introduction

As with other Pure Land teachings, Shinran bases his view within the tradition, but also modifies the interpretation in consonance with his own experience and effort to present Pure Land faith as the supreme teaching of Buddhism.

In approaching his understanding we must focus on the final three volumes of the “Kyogyoshinsho: Realization, True Buddha Land and Transformed Buddha Land.” It is significant that Shinran does not just depict the beauties, glories and pleasures of the Pure Land as they are given in the Smaller Sutra. His is not a popular view. Prof. Mikogami Eryu [9] in his study of the “Kyogyoshinsho” indicates that Shinran does not offer an idolatrous, sentimental, or sensuous Pure Land even in the form of the Transformed Land, which is the land based on human aspiration and cultivation or self-striving.

Shinran bases his thought completely on his awareness of absolute Other Power. For him, the symbols manifest the highest level of spiritual existence imaginable or conceivable for the yet unenlightened ordinary person.

II. Realization

The section on Realization takes up the issue directly. The fulfillment of human existence rests in the perfection of the 13th and 22nd Vows.

The 13th Vow pledges that those born into the Pure Land will “abide in the company of those who have attained the right definite assurance and ultimately realize Nirvana.” [10] There are two features of this Vow which are central: 1) the entry into the company of the truly assured and 2) the attainment of Nirvana.

In Shinran’s interpretation, as we have already seen, the entry into the company of the truly assured is a status that is simultaneous with the reception of endowed trust (shinjin). In contrast to the Vow which presents this status as a future attainment concurrent with birth in the Pure Land, Shinran sees it as an experience of this life before birth in the Pure Land.

The basis for this alteration in the meaning of the Vow in the Larger Sutra is a statement in the Vow perfection text of the Nyoraie (Tathagata’s Assembly) which is a variant Pure Land Sutra. [11] This passage speaks of the people of that country, the Pure Land; and those that will be born there. They all definitely attain enlightenment. None are wrongly settled or unsettled. Implicitly they are truly assured or settled. In the “Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling,” Shinran quotes the Larger Sutra:

“The Sentient beings who will be born in that land all dwell among the truly settled, for in that Buddha land there is not one of those falsely settled or not settled.” [12]

According to Shinran, based on these texts, the status of being truly assured is a matter of this life.

The inevitability of Nirvana is stated by the Vow and follows immediately on birth into the Pure Land. Thus the Pure Land is itself a symbol for Nirvana. It is not a stage of practice leading to Nirvana. “That Buddha-land is pure and tranquil, wondrous and delightful. It is not apart from the enlightenment of uncreated nirvana.” [13]

Quoting extensively from Donran’s commentary to Vasubandhu’s Pure Land Treatise, Shinran expresses the universality and community of those in the Pure Land, as well as the basis of the soteriological process in the compassionate activity of Amida’s pure Vow Mind to benefit all beings. Because of the Buddha’s unconditional compassion, even foolish common people such as ourselves all attain Nirvana without severing blind passion. [14]

Establishing that birth in the Pure Land is Nirvana, Shinran moves to the second aspect of rebirth which is the principle of the bodhisattva’s return to this world to work for the salvation of others. It is the fulfillment of the 22nd Vow. The Vow speaks of bodhisattvas being assured of 1) ultimate Buddhahood in one more birth, 2) helping all beings freely, 3) surpassing ordinary bodhisattvas. Though the Vow portrays the activities of the bodhisattva and implies the stages of the bodhisattva path, Donran and hence Shinran, rejects such gradations. [15] These are provisional devices given by Sakyamuni.

As interpreted by Donran, we see the ideal of compassion lying behind this teaching. [16] The concept of the bodhisattva’s return indicates that the goal of religious faith is not self-serving salvation. Donran declares:

“Suppose there is a person who, without awakening the mind aspiring for supreme enlightenment, simply hears that bliss is enjoyed in that land without interruption and desires to be born there for the sake of the bliss; such a person will not be able to attain birth...” [17]

Selfish and faithless interest in such birth does not ensure salvation. Rennyō also pointed out that:

“...those who desire to be born in the land of Highest Happiness because they hear that one can have pleasure there do not become Buddhas. Those who trust in Amida become Buddhas.” [18]

Birth in the Pure Land is Birth of Nonbirth (Musho-no-sho).

III. True Buddha Land

The volume of the True Buddha Land does not have the focus on human fulfillment so much as establishing that it is the True Recompense Land of the Buddha. As such it is the land of highest realization because it is the fulfillment of the 12th and 13th Vows — the Vows of Infinite Light and Eternal Life.

In various passages Shinran emphasizes the aspect of Light. One Sutra states:

“The light of Amita Buddha shines greatest and those of all Buddhas cannot come to be the equal...The light of Amita Buddha is pure, faultless, and undefiled.” [19]

Quoting the “Nirvana Sutra,” the Buddha is described as “Birthlessness, and extinction, and egolessness, a deathlessness, a non-breaking, and a non-spoiling. He is not one made. So we say the Tathagata enters the Great Nirvana.” [20] The Tathagata is non-created and eternal. [21]

In its paradoxical way the Great Nirvana is non-sorrow and non-joy. Yet it is Great Joy. [22] It is also absolutely Pure. The Dharmakaya (the Body of Final Truth) is characterized as permanence, joy, self, and purity. On the background of the ultimate nature of Amida, Shinran discusses the Pure Land of Amida as a Recompense land among the various Bodies of a Buddha, resulting from the fulfillment of his Vows. While The “Sutra of Contemplation” speaks of Amida coming with a host of transformed Buddhas to meet devotees at their death, the Recompense body, exemplified by Amida, is eternal and can manifest various forms for the benefit of beings at any time.

Shinran concludes that the Buddha in the Sutras and later teachers present the Pure Land as a True Land of Recompense. There we manifest our Buddha nature through the power of the Vows. The “Nirvana Sutra” states: “The beings will be perfectly adorned, in the life to come, with the pure body and thus see the Buddha nature.” [23] Also the Larger Sutra states: “All are endowed with the bodies of the World of Uncreate and Birthlessness. Their corporeal existences pass to infinitude and eternity.” Final human fulfillment is realized in a transcendent sphere which is inconceivable in itself, but for reasons of human sentiment and

individual levels of spiritual understanding, it may be expressed in concrete mythic language and images.

IV. Transformed Land

Finally, in contrast to the True Buddha Land, there is a Transformed Buddha and Buddha Land. The last section of the “Kyogyoshinsho” presents a criticism of other religious perspectives of Shinran’s time. They are all based on self-striving and are egoistic in nature. Rather than condemning such people to hell, Shinran indicates that they attain birth in one or another region or suburb of the Pure Land and will ultimately attain enlightenment when they gain true faith.

For those people who do not have true faith, the principle of karma operates and brings them to the level of birth corresponding to the degree of their karmic bondage. There are three categories of teachings that bring one to a transformed land. The first is the teaching represented by the “Sutra of Contemplation” (symbolized by the 19th Vow) that includes mixed practices (the wide variety of spiritual disciplines in Buddhism combined with Pure Land practices), the meditative and moral practices. These forms of religiosity bring birth in the Borderland, Embryo Palace, and Land of Indolence. [24]

The second is the self-striving Pure Land Nembutsu of the 20th Vow. This approach brings Inconceivable Birth (Nanji ojo) in the Castle of Doubt and Embryo Palace. The third is the practice of non-Buddhist teachings such as Confucianism and Taoism and the religious beliefs associated with them. All alternatives apart from the faith based on the 18th Vow lead to rebirth in an outer region.

According to the “Nyoraie Sutra,” good deeds may keep people from faith in Amida’s Vow. The self-righteousness and self-centeredness that may attend our good deeds, accompanied by our spiritual pride, keep us from truly believing in Amida’s Compassion. The Sutra states: “Because of the good deeds they have done, they cannot obtain faith. Though they may be born in this country, they sit in the lotus and cannot come out. Those beings sit in the embryo of the flower. This is as if they are in the garden and palace.” [25]

We discussed the relations of these teachings under the topic of classification of doctrines and will not go into them here. We should note that Shinran, viewing all teachings as some form of expedient means of the Buddha for guiding people to enlightenment, does not condemn people to hell. Because of the nature of the Vow, despite one’s tortuous karmic evolution,

enlightenment will finally be attained. Shinran offered a hopeful and compassionate teaching, embracing the most evil person. However, from the human side, lack of faith and true understanding delays attainment and causes one to pass through various stages of suffering.

Karma functions in this context as a self-judgment. That is, we are born into a world which conforms to the level of spiritual insight we cultivate. Shinran does not speculate on the negative destinies. On the Compassionate side he states that "...the compassionate heart of the Bravest of the World extends even to criminals of the highest degree, blasphemers of the Right Dharma, indeed, to those who are utterly devoid of any stock of merit." [26] Later he writes also, "If one should miss this opportunity through being beclouded by a veil of doubt, one may have to wait in vain for another numberless kalpas." [27]

It is rare, according to Shinran, to meet the Dharma and attain true faith. On balance, Shinran's teaching is an expression of great compassion and hope for all mankind. Though the Buddha's compassion embraces us, our passion-ridden eyes cannot see. It is the mystery of life and destiny that we can awaken to that truth. It is this wonder and mystery that inspired Shinran as he saw it working in his life and strove to clarify and share it with others with all its paradoxes.

V. Conclusion

We have tried to present in a brief way the general outline of Shinran's understanding of the nature of human fulfillment. He relied on and made use of the traditional concepts that evolved in Buddhist thought. He also had to respond to the question about what happened to the person after death and how final enlightenment would be achieved. In our modern situation people will have many questions about these views. However, Buddhism is not a literalist, dogmatic tradition. We have to penetrate the spirit of the concepts and the intention of Shinran's teachings, namely to inspire and bring hope to the people of this age.

Taken symbolically, there is important spiritual meaning to be gained from the cosmology and view of religious life outlined by Shinran. He clearly indicates that true religious faith is not an egocentric sentimentality, but is the basis for meaning and sharing with others. It implies a spiritual community. He also indicates that religious symbols, though they have negative features such as hells and realms of suffering or retribution, emphasize hope and compassion. The negative symbols have developed in religious history along with heightened moral consciousness and sometimes reflect a desire for revenge in the midst of conflict. It is to

Shinran's merit that, despite the difficulties and opposition he experienced, he did not invoke these symbols to condemn or castigate his opponents.

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Notes

[1.] Daichidoron, p. 93 in Mochizuki Bukkyo Daijiten III, p. 2701

[2.] Yugashinjiron

[3.] Mochizuki, Bukkyo Daijiten p. 2702

[4.] See Mochizuki, Gokuraku II, pp. 1159-60

[5.] Shinshu Daijiten, I, p. 577

[6.] Ibid

[7.] Shin Buddhist Translation Series I, "Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattoshu," p.41

[8.] Ibid, pp. 49-50

[9.] Kyogyoshinsho Gaikan

[10.] Suzuki, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 176

[11.] Shinshushogyozensho I, 203

[12.] Shin Buddhism Translation Series, "Notes On Once-calling and Many-calling," p. 34

[13.] Shin Buddhism Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho" III, chapter on Realization, p. 357

[14.] Ibid., p. 360

- [15.] Suzuki, p. 184
- [16.] Suzuki, pp. 192-93
- [17.] Shin Buddhism Translation Series, "Kyogyoshinsho" III, Chapter on Realization, p. 381
- [18.] K. Yamamoto, Kikigaki, p. 122
- [19.] K. Yamamoto, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 204
- [20.] Ibid., p. 206
- [21.] Ibid., p. 207
- [22.] Ibid., p. 209
- [23.] Ibid., p. 232
- [24.] Ibid., p. 258
- [25.] Ibid., p. 24L.
- [26.] Suzuki, "Kyogyoshinsho," p. 3
- [27.] Ibid., p. 4