

# Chapter 11

## *The Symbolic Structure of Faith*

What meaning can an ancient mythology or story have for persons in our alienated, absurd world? This is the question that must be explored in terms of the relevance and meaning of religious faith, as well as for secularized, scientific, modern men and women. This issue pertains also to Shinran's thought, as well as all contemporary religious thoughts.

Shinran was an exponent of the Pure Land thought and way of salvation. The foundation of his thought was based on the three sutras that are known as the Three Pure Land Sutras. As with all sutras, all the traditional stories that begin "Thus have I heard," (nyozegamon) are reputedly the vehicle for relating the teaching of Gautama Buddha. This phrase presumed to confer authority on the subsequent content as being in accord with the words of Buddha historically and with the truth itself.

The term nyo, or nyoze — "Thus" — has important meaning because it relates to such Buddhist philosophical principles as shinnyo — "true suchness" — and nyorai — the "Tathagata" (The Thus Come Thus Gone). The idea of nyo, or Thusness, signifies the essential truth of things and reality. In effect, it is an assertion of the truth of Buddhism. The nature of Buddhist truth, however, presents modern people with a variety of problems in their attempt to determine the historical accuracy of the sutras and the truth of religion. In traditionalist faith everything could be spelled out by merely quoting honored authorities. Nothing had to be proved. It was all assumed. In modern times, however, people question the meaning of truth of such assertions and expect reasonable answers to their problems. The quest for truth, which was at the root of all traditions, re-emerges as a focus of importance for truth-seekers in this modern era.

Ancient man always attempted to see his life against the backdrop of eternity. Human beings, the only creature whom we believe to be aware that he must die, has always had to reflect on life and its meaning. They could never bring themselves to believe that the powerful forces which sustain their lives could simply end when they died of illness, old age, or some tragedy. In all traditions there were myths which depicted human destiny after life in this world. Salvation religions not only focused on the continuation of life itself, but correlated the quality of that future life with the quality of one's present life. To inspire religious devotion, there

developed both positive and negative pictures of the afterlife. One might go to heaven, or one might end up in hell.

The heart of the story of these Pure Land Sutras is the endeavor of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara (Hozo Bosatsu) to acquire sufficient merit through his sincere practice to be able to secure the way to the Pure Land for all being everywhere in an infinite future. Once having achieved this, the Pure Land (described as being in the West, or the Western Paradise) and the Buddha Amitabha (Amida, the Buddha of Infinite Life and Light) await those who avail themselves of the means of rebirth provided by the Bodhisattva.

The “Larger Pure Land Sutra” tells the story, while the smaller “Amida Sutra” describes the Pure Land itself. The “Meditation Sutra” offers a variety of meditations whereby birth in the Pure Land may be achieved, but it also presents a system of meditation whose goal is to visualize the Buddha and attain union with him.

On the basis of these sutras, the various teachers in the popular Pure Land tradition began to spell out the implications and meaning of their contents for faith and practice. In China, there were teachers such as Hui Yuan who emphasized the system of meditation, while Tan Luan and succeeding teachers like Tao-cho and Shan-tao developed a popular teaching focusing on the practice of recitation of the Nembutsu (name of Amida Buddha), a practice that changed in meaning and emphasis as the Pure Land tradition evolved in China, and later, in the Kamakura period in Japan. Tao-cho and Shan-tao in their contribution to this evolution, brought the teaching into relationship with the theory of degeneration, or Mappo, maintaining that the simple recitation was an appropriate practice for common people in the last age of the disappearance of the Dharma (Mappo).

When we review the story of the Sakyamuni Buddha and his progress towards enlightenment, we would not expect the development of myths and stories dealing with future destiny and its possibilities since, fundamentally, Buddhism is non-mythological. Buddha himself was a human being who developed his human potential to the fullest and gained insight into the true nature of existence. In his teachings, the gods were displaced, and deprived of any serious role in a person’s attainment of enlightenment or Nirvana. Early Buddhist art did not represent the Buddha figure because, having broken through the bonds of existence, he must be regarded as inconceivable.

It could likewise be assumed that Buddhism would develop as a religion without myth as well as without image, and yet, from those earliest times, the devotion of his disciples and followers

gave rise to legends about the Buddha, and of course, in time, to impressions that could be visually conceived and represented. Over the centuries there evolved a biography replete with mythic and legendary features such as stories of the Buddha's birth, and of his attainment of enlightenment. In comparison to ordinary men, we might say that the Buddha virtually became a divine being in terms of Buddhist mythology and art. At the same time, however, Buddhism constantly held to the firm tradition that he was not divine, but as "the supremely awakened one" he was the highest human being.

With the development of Mahayana Buddhism, the myth-making tendency became even more pronounced. The figure of Buddha expanded from a historical person to a cosmic reality — all embracing and indwelling. The multiplicity of Buddhas who filled the infinite worlds of the universe all became manifestations of the Cosmic Buddha. In the "Lotus Sutra" we see that the Buddha (Sakyamuni), who taught 40 years and went into Nirvana, was really only one manifestation of the eternal Buddha who has never gone into Nirvana but continually strives for the salvation of all beings. With the advent of Pure Land thought, this eternal Buddha Amida symbolized the infinite time and space.

In the "Larger Pure Land Sutra," the story of Dharmakara's attainment of Buddhahood offers an eloquent testimony to the depth of compassion which Mahayana Buddhists perceived in the Buddha reality and which they felt impelled to express in the constant refrain of the Bodhisattva: unless and until all other beings can achieve the same goal, he would refuse enlightenment. The focus of this Sutra on the central characteristic of the Buddha being compassion is intensified also in the first of the four Bodhisattva Vows (shiguzeigan):

"However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save them ..."

Or, as another version states:

"I will save those who are yet to be saved; I will make those who are frightened feel secure; I will help enlighten those who are yet to attain enlightenment; I will cause those who are not in nirvana to be in nirvana." [1]

In this spirit of the ideal of compassion, there developed an emphasis on *dana*, or "giving," the first of the six perfections to be practiced by Bodhisattvas: *dana*, giving; *sila*, morality; *ksanti*, endurance; *virya*, energy; *dhyana*, meditation; and *prajna*, wisdom. In his "Outline of the Triple Sutra of Shin Buddhism," Prof. Fujimoto eloquently translates the application of these six perfections of the compassionate idea expressed in the Pure Land sutras:

“Each of the Bodhisattvas manages to become a friend of swarming sentient beings though not asked; takes upon his shoulders the people’s heavy burden; by preserving the inexhaustible stock of the Tathagata’s profoundest Dharma, protects and develops their seed of Buddhahood so it will not be destroyed; commiserates with them out of his ever-rising compassion; shuts the door of the three evil worlds, unlocking that of goodness; preaches the Dharma to the swarming people before being asked, just as a pious son loves and pays respect to his parents; takes care of sentient beings as well as he does of himself, thus carrying them to the Other Shore by means of the supreme root of goodness.” [2]

Religion and religious endeavors must be the realization of deepest compassion through identification with all beings whatever their state. Through all the intricacies and details of the myth, this is its central burden, the confirmation that the heart of reality is activated by compassion. It is a profound statement of the faith that ancient Buddhists had in the worthwhileness of life and in its inclusive universal meaning.

The ideal of infinite compassion also sets an example of mission for those who would believe in this myth. It dramatizes for us that from the heart of compassion new worlds of infinite potentiality are created and thus, this ideal shines as a message of hope in a contemporary world that does not seem much moved by creative efforts, a world of technological values where altruism often seems ineffective and valueless.

The composers of the ancient Buddhist sutras remain anonymous, since they ascribed everything they wrote to having heard the teachings directly from Sakyamuni Buddha, or from someone who had heard it repeated by one who had himself directly experienced hearing them. The chain of distance from the source expanded with the passing centuries, and composition continued, but the authority of that “Thus have I heard” was retained. It stirs the imagination to contemplate the depth of concern of those anonymous composers of the Pure Land sutras. Suffering humanity was their focus, and their path was not easy for often they were accused of distorting and perverting the original message of Buddha. However, they believed deeply in their mission and their commitment took them to the point of being willing to sacrifice their lives, as is illustrated in the “Exhortation to Hold Firm,” Chapter XIII of the “Lotus Sutra.”

Undoubtedly, the description in the sutra of the Buddha arising from contemplation with glowing countenance, followed by the inquiry of the disciples as to the reason for his exaltation and ecstasy, suggests the type of situation which must have produced the first versions of such sutras. They were, perhaps, inspired by concentration on the meaning of

compassion. As this aspect of Buddha was probed, its comprehensiveness had to be given concrete expression over against the traditional goal of Nirvana. The Pure Land of Bliss and Peace can be considered an expansion of qualities sometimes associated with Nirvana (as is the interpretation of Ryukyo Fujimoto in his "Triple Sutras" I, 19, 21). The Pure Land is not a place of isolation and simply individual enlightenment, but a place where fellowship and communion with Buddha and the Bodhisattvas is realized. Pure Land thought reflects the sociality of the Mahayana ideal of attaining Buddhahood together. The grandeur of their view was inspired by their deep human concern, a concern which emanates from and undergirds the symbolic structure of Shinran's thought.

Despite the idealism embodied in Buddhist and other myths, the form in which they are cast, their role in religious tradition have created problems as to what kind of authority and credibility these myths may have for contemporary culture. Modern people have come to believe that he is emancipated from myth. They criticize myth as "merely myth," by which they mean that the myth is an empty story. In western culture, from the time of Plato onward, myth has tended to have a negative meaning. In modern times Auguste Comte, a French sociologist, argued that with the development of civilization and science, society progresses from myth to metaphysics to science. The intellectual evolution of humanity has come to be accepted in the west as being an evolution from religion to philosophy to science. Many modern anthropologists have tended to view myth as evidence of a pre-logical mentality, and as representative of the childhood of humanity. It appeared that ancient people and contemporary primitive people live controlled by their myths, while presumably civilized people are guided by reason and science.

In Christian tradition there developed opposition between myth and history. Basic concepts were then brought into question. Is the Incarnation myth or history? Is the Resurrection myth or history? Buddhism developed outside the framework of these problems, but it did not long remain uninfluenced by the approach to their solutions once extensive contact with the West and western modes of thought began.

In Japan, such contact initiated similar questions to be faced by the traditional Mahayana Buddhist schools. Were the many Mahayana Sutras which claim to be taught by Sakyamuni (who is an historical person) really taught by him? Scholars began to discuss what is termed *Daijō hibusetsuron*, which is the theory that Sakyamuni Buddha did not teach the Mahayana sutras as had been traditionally assumed in the use of the opening phrase, "Thus have I heard . . ." (*nyozegamon*). A problem rose from this discussion. If Sakyamuni Buddha did not teach

them, what authority do these sutras have in establishing particular practices as the way to enlightenment over against the way of the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, etc. which Sakyamuni declares as the way in the earliest days of Buddhism. The issue in this, and the impact of western people's modern scientific preoccupation, was perhaps most clearly stated in the Meiji Era work, "The Historical Buddha and The Eternal Buddha," by Masaharu Anesaki:

" . . . The eternal truth of Buddha cannot result from visionary speculation; . . . it must be found in actual history." [3]

Another scholar, Murakami Sensho, in his text, "The Unity of Buddhism," also criticized traditional Buddhism in this vein and wanted all sects to unite with a unified doctrine, while at the same time maintaining a basic Mahayana outlook.

Stimulated by the quest for "basic Buddhism," 19th- and early 20th- century Japanese Buddhist scholarship advanced to the level of western studies in their assault on myth and application of historical research. The change in Japanese scholarship, in terms of this quest, did not occur in traditional Buddhist organizations in Japan, nor alter their views and practice to any significant degree. The practical issue facing Buddhist tradition in this period in Japan was not the same as that occupying the scholars. Rather, traditional Buddhist teachers were concerned with the confrontation with Christianity and Christian missions that political and social westernization patterns brought to Japan after an absence of three hundred years. This confrontation left traditional Buddhist groups generally defensive, and reluctant to change in their views of their own history and doctrines.

Among the attempts made to resolve the Japanese Buddhist dilemma between scholarship and faith referred to above was that of Murakami Sensho who declared "The criticism of Mahayana Buddhism is a problem of history, not of doctrine. From the doctrinal point of view, no one should doubt the Mahayana interpretation." [4] In straddling the fence of his sect connection and his scholarly approach, he concludes that the teachings of Mahayana, while not directly given by the Buddha, were a brilliant development of Buddhist thought. Another scholar, Maeda Eun in his work "An Interpretation of Mahayana History," claimed that the seeds of Mahayana did indeed lay in the teaching of Buddha during his lifetime. Kimura Taiken resolved the apparent conflict by regarding Mahayana as an effort to "revitalize primitive Buddhism from a deeper point of view." [5]

Against the background of this problem for Japanese Buddhists during the past century, we can understand Prof. Fujimoto's attempt to depict the basis for the origin of Mahayana Sutras:

"The Mahayana Tripitaka, we might say, is a kind of revised edition of the Hinayana one, for the former can be designated as the fruit of a revival movement rising among the direct disciples of Sakyamuni as well as later ones. It was in primitive Buddhism that the Sangha tended to be more stagnant in spite of the transient circumstances, becoming monastic in paying little attention to the lay people, and formalized in clinging to the time worn precepts or ritual." [6]

Dr. D.T. Suzuki, in his essay "The Development of the Pure Land Doctrine in Buddhism," begins by taking note of this:

"If we believe, as we must from the modern critical point of view, that the history of any religious system consists partly, in the exfoliation of the unessential elements, but, chiefly, in the revelation and the constant growth of the most vital spiritual elements which lie hidden in the words of the founder or in his personality, the following question naturally comes up for solution in our investigation of the history of Buddhist dogmatics: 'How much of the Pure Land idea is deducible from the teaching of primitive Buddhism so-called, or from the personality of Sakyamuni Buddha himself?'" [7]

From this perspective, Suzuki attempts to develop a philosophy of religious experience which would lead to such a formulation. After summarizing basic concepts and features of the Pure Land sutras, he concludes:

"Incidentally, let us note here that the idea of scriptural authority in whatever form is no more tenable and therefore that whatever ideas have proved vital, inspiring, and uplifting in the history of religion must find another way of establishing themselves as the ultimate facts of the religious consciousness. Scriptures, Christian and Buddhist, are divine revelations inasmuch as they tally with the deeper experiences of the soul and really help humanity break through the fetters of finitude and open up a vista full of life and light. In other words, authority must come from within and not from without ... This being our standpoint, the Pure Land teaching is to be interpreted, as I said before, in terms of religious consciousness, and not, as is done usually by its orthodox followers, in terms of scriptural authority or special revelation." [8]

These reflections bring us back to the original problem of what stimulates the production of myth, and what established its grasp on religious consciousness as a normative guide or

authority over against other similar or competing claims. The focal issue which must be considered is the nature of religious consciousness, and whether it contains sufficient principle within itself to determine religious truth without either analytical reasoning or metaphysical or philosophical reflection.

The structure of the sutras, which presents them as authentic words of Buddha, tends to suggest that there was once an objective basis for regarding the sutras, for although scholars might make qualifications, on the popular level they were given unquestioning reverence. Religion as a control instrument in society required that the ordinary person be encouraged in his belief in the truth of the religion, which in this case meant that Pure Land Buddhists be encouraged to rely on the authority and validity of these three sutras, and their expression of the myth of Amida's Vow. The impact of the exposure of Japanese scholars to the western analytical viewpoint, and the western tendency to discredit myth and assess everything in terms of verifiable historic research made the views of Suzuki and others who shared his insight into the validity of religious consciousness increasingly significant for our times. Is indeed, religious consciousness merely an illusion as Freud asserts? Is religion itself simply an opiate for the masses as Marx insisted? Both Freud and Marx have become themselves archaic in their views as the twentieth century nears an end.

To the contemporary mind, being religious and being a thinker are sometimes considered contradictory, but if religion is not to be oppressive and exploitive of people, or if it is not merely to be a control mechanism for society, then its foundations in thought and experience must be frankly faced. This is particularly essential if we are to continue to pursue the tradition that Buddhism is a serious quest for truth, and if Shinran's critical attitude and search for truth is to be realized in us.

A myth arises from the interaction of a consciousness and the world in such a way that the disparate and multitudinous elements of the world are given some degree of coherency and meaning. Myths direct themselves to the crucial problems of human existence — value and destiny, tragedy, good and evil. Myths arise from the awareness of human limitations and the apprehension of mystery or uncontrollable power in the world. While myths may not have factual reality as accepted in the day-to-day world, nevertheless they have a reality by virtue of pointing to aspects of human existence which give them more compelling power over the mind than have things in the concrete world. People will die for their pictures or myths of reality more readily than they will die for particular possession of things.



While myths are, on the one hand, products of consciousness and so are never apart from the mind, they point to something beyond the mind and consciousness which is the basis for that mind and consciousness. In the case of Amida and the Pure Land, this myth may have been the product of a consciousness moved by its aspirations and hopes for a higher existence, whereupon the myth asserts the reality of the higher life. This myth is not knowingly a product of its own consciousness. The author did not believe he made it up, but rather that he was the vehicle through which this higher reality was expressed.

In effect, myth leads not only to psychology but to metaphysics or philosophy in order to discover what basis there is in reality for the particular myths which have grasped the consciousness. For Buddhists, and perhaps mainly Pure Land Buddhists who center their religious existence about the symbols of that tradition, there is a necessity to explore more deeply the philosophical implications of the symbol system. It will not be sufficient to invoke the concepts of *hoben* (expedient means), *sunyata* (the doctrine of void) or to assess the claim that Amida or the Pure Land exist only in our minds. All these side step the issue as to why that particular myth should be an authority controlling religious life and action.

At the same time, there is necessity that the Pure Land myth preserve fundamental Buddhist affirmations concerning non-duality and objectivity. If Shinshu is to meet the challenge of the modern world, all these issues must be taken seriously, and particularly the issue of myth and the symbolic structure of *shinjin*, or the faith that completely entrusts in the true, real and indescribable that the myth reveals.

Earlier, we stated that modern man once believed he was emancipated from myth, but recent events have shown that this is not so. We have discovered in our times that people are moved by racial and economic myths (Nazis, KKK, capitalism, communism), national myths (flag), and myths of science. Humans are myth-making animals and in their myths they enshrine (as in advertising) the values and meanings that integrate their lives. Myths which ground a culture are rooted in the common experience of that culture. Myths are absorbed by the individual as norms for attitude and action. They have social enforcement in that there are penalties for opposing or otherwise rejecting the group myth. In a sense, in any and every culture, and at any and every time, including our own and perhaps even in most particular our own, one is born to these myths.

However, religious myth (apart from those religious myths which are part of the folk culture or have been absorbed into folk culture) has a different relationship, since it is the realization of the truth of the religious myth by the individual which brings the particular group into

existence. Religious myth gains its importance from the fact that it expresses what is ultimate for life. It reveals to the person the unconditional element of existence which places a demand on the person's existence that he take that element upon himself as his ultimate concern. Profound myth calls upon the person to make a commitment, to take a risk in faith. There is an element of judgment and critique in myth which strengthens the inner man, who is thus committed against the forces such as society and culture which would deny his true, concrete existence by merely subordinating him to some larger whole and depriving him of any real or significant possibilities of action. Profound religious myth is therefore liberating, liberating the individual from all forms of subjugating bondage so that, in effect, religious myth enables the person to discover his true self.

In Buddhist history in China, the Confucianists recognized the implications of Buddhist egalitarianism and myths depicting an ideal world. They repeatedly worked for the restraining of Buddhist activity among the masses. The Pure Land persecutions in Japan likewise were based on the realization of so-called "anti-social" aspects of the teaching — such as disrespect and neglect of the gods of the land — which meant to undermine the Kyodotai-communality-social solidarity of that era.

The history of religions indicates that myth is ambiguous. The myth that frees may also subjugate. I think this is what lies behind I-hsuan's statement that the terms Buddha and patriarch are terms of reverence but also bondage. When faith turns into belief, and experience transforms to doctrine and theory, religion becomes the taskmaster and tyrant over the human spirit. Hui-neng in the Platform Sutra remarks that if one practices with the mind, one turns the Lotus, but if one does not practice, the Lotus turns him.

The impact of ultimacy in the Buddhist myths of Pure Land has been limited largely because the teaching was regarded simply as a secondary and lesser alternative for reaching enlightenment. It was only a partial way. The history of the tradition reaching to Shinran was an evolution culminating in his awareness of greater depth and ultimacy in the teaching. Shinshu means that Shinran's Pure Land teaching is not merely one among many alternatives, but must in itself express the greatest depth of meaning and reality, else it could not be "true" in the full sense. The myth of Amida and the Pure Land is thus an essential element in the consideration of Shinran's religious philosophy. It provides the pattern of compassion which is to suffuse our personal existence. It thus requires careful religious and philosophical study, and reflection, as the basis for the symbol structure of Shinshu and as a religious myth whose expression of awareness of one's absolute bondage to the human condition is the very

expression that at the same time yields the absolute spiritual freedom that modern man so desperately seeks.

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## Notes

[1] "Japanese/English Buddhist Dictionary," p. 276b

[2] 47-48 "Shinshushogyo Zensho," I, 3-4

[3] Quoted in H. Kishimoto, "Japanese Religion in The Meiji Era," p. 161

[4] Ibid, p. 164

[5] Ibid. p. 167

[6] Ryukyo Fujimoto, "An Outline of the Triple Sutra of Shin Buddhism," I.P. 17

[7] D.T. Suzuki, "Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism," p.3

[8] Ibid. pp. 10-11