

Mahayana Essence
as Seen in the Concept of
'Return to This World'
(*genso-eko*)*

Michio Tokunaga

I

'How now are we to understand this Pure Land? Is there really some special place other than this world to which we way go after death, a Pure Land

*With thanks to *Muryoko* 無量光, *Journal of Shin Buddhism*, where this article was originally published.

of joy and peace? Do common folk, for the most part, believe that their faithful repetition of the *Nembutsu* will assure their entry into some sort of Pure Land—wherever that may be—after they die? Perhaps sophisticated Buddhists, following the lead of Shinran, understand that the Pure Land is not a real place at all, but basically a symbol for a different state of mind; but would such a notion be attractive and acceptable to ordinary practitioners of Shin Buddhism?¹

This is a question brought forth by Gordon D. Kaufman, a leading Christian theologian at Harvard Divinity School, to us insiders of Shin Buddhism concerning the crucial Shin concept of the ‘birth into the Pure Land.’ We should not ignore this question because it was raised by an outsider of the Shin community and also because it is a problem of ‘faith’ to be solved only subjectively and individually through an indescribable religious experience. If we assume such an attitude, Shinran’s Pure Land doctrine will

¹Gordon D. Kaufman, ‘Religious Diversity and Religious Truth’, paper presented for the Colloquium Celebrating the 350th Anniversary of the Founding of Ryukoku University.

lose its universal significance of making human life meaningful for the contemporary world.

Kaufman himself addresses a similar question to Christians concerning the crucial Christian concept of 'God'. His theological work started with, and may end by, finding a reasonable answer legitimate to modern ways of thinking. In such a reconstruction of the concept of 'God', he criticizes a view that 'God' can be conceived only through a special religious experience, because it confines 'God' within the 'circle of faith', not giving a fundamental meaning for the life of all contemporary people.

When we treat the problem of the 'birth into the Pure Land' from Kaufman's standpoint, there occur several questions about it. These questions should mostly be attributed to a typical traditional way of placing it in linear time; namely, it is placed on, so to speak, a simple and straight line of 'hearing the teaching' → 'realizing *shinjin* ('faith')) by saying Amida's Name' → 'attaining birth in the Pure Land'. In such a way of ordering these key notions of Shinran's thought according to linear time, *shinjin*, which

is the most primordial in his soteriological system, would lose its true meaning and fall into a mere 'ticket' to get to the Pure Land after death only for having sensual pleasures therein as has been taught and appreciated traditionally within the Shin community.

Regarding *shinjin* as a 'ticket' for attaining birth in the Pure Land has blurred its actual function in the religious life for hundreds of years since the introduction of the Pure Land Buddhism to Japan in spite of the efforts to amend such a view by several Pure Land masters including Shinran. This view also helped to regard the Pure Land as a place where people escape into from actual human life full of sorrows and pains which are difficult to deal with. In this sense, for those who consider the Pure Land in such a way, it becomes a 'future paradise' without giving a concrete meaning for the present life.

There is another way of thinking of *shinjin* as a product of religious intuition, through which 'birth in the Pure Land' is to be only mystically experienced beyond the realm of this empirical world. It is a Pure

Land Buddhist version of the ‘revelation of God’ in Christian sense. However, equating our present existence with Amida and seeing this actual world as nothing other than the Pure Land through intuition was strictly criticized by Shinran,² for in that case the standpoint of ‘ordinary beings’ (*bombu*) in the Pure Land tradition will be lost and it will be transformed into an esoteric Buddhist tradition for sages. But Kaufman would strictly criticize such a view because it lacks a universal religious significance for the life of people living in the present world.

All we can do, therefore, to make the concept of ‘birth in the Pure Land’ intelligible for our contemporaries is to reconstruct it on the basis of the true significance of the ‘ultimate reality’, which is to be traced back to the fundamental truth of Mahayana. To speak of the concept of ‘birth in the Pure Land’ from the standpoint of the Mahayana, the concept of ‘return to this world’ 還相回向 (*genso-eko*) is indispensable to make the concept more meaningful than

²Yoshifumi Ueda, ed., *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, Vol. II (Kyoto, 1985), p. 201.

it literally expresses. The concept of 'return to this world' however, has also been understood on a linear basis as mentioned above, which will hardly be acceptable by modern people. In this sense, we also have to rethink this concept in the light of the fundamental Mahayana doctrine.

The central purpose of my presentation is to claim that *shinjin* or *nembutsu* as revealed by Shinran is nothing but the Mahayana Bodhisattva path, and that it is the concept of 'return to this world' which fulfills the actual significance of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path to its utmost.

II

Placing the concept of 'birth in the Pure Land' on linear time and regarding it as a posthumous matter has long occupied the minds of Pure Land followers and has readily been accepted by them. 'Despising this defiled world and hoping to be born in the Pure Land' used to be a slogan of the Pure Land tradition in this country. It was only after Western ways of thinking were introduced to Japan following the

Meiji Imperial Restoration that such a view began to be grasped from another perspective with a strict criticism of the 'orthodox' way of viewing it. And yet, such a view still remains deep at the bottom of many people's minds in this country even to this day.

It was Nonomura Naotaro who first had doubts about the traditional interpretation of 'birth' limited only to a posthumous state. His criticism of the traditional view had two aspects; one is that the final purpose of the Pure Land teaching is not to be born in the Pure Land after death, and the other is that all the myths or mythological expressions of the Pure Land scriptures are no more than the means to lead us to '*shinjin*' (or in Nonomura's terminology, *jinshin* or 'deep mind') which Shinran advocated in order to let us know the true religious significance of our lives.³ His claim, however, was too radical a one to be accepted by the 'orthodox' scholars of the Nishi-Hongwanji at that time, and it resulted in him being purged from his post at Ryukoku University. This

³Nonomura Naotaro, *Jodokyo Hiban* ('A Criticism of Pure Land Buddhism'), (Chugai Shuppansha, Kyoto, 1923).

was almost eighty years ago.

Similar pressures were brought upon Soga Ryōjin and Kaneko Daiei at Otani University for their 'heretical' interpretations of 'birth' and 'the Pure Land'. As successors of Kiyozawa Manshi, who aimed at the reconstruction of the teaching of the Higashi-Hongwanji in order to make it understandable to people who were being brain-washed by Western ways of thinking, Soga's claim was to find Amida at the deepest level of one's existence, in a way which cannot be objectified as something existing over and against us. Kaneko also tried to place the Pure Land within the sphere of the spiritual realm which is not objectifiable unlike the 'orthodox' way of taking it as a concrete world existing somewhere apart from this world. Both Soga and Kaneko developed their understanding by taking over Kiyosawa's firm belief that religious truth is to be subjective and personal, which can be summarized in his words that 'We do not believe in Buddha or God because they actually exist; they exist because we believe in

them'.⁴ It goes without saying that such a claim was a challenge against the traditional and 'orthodox' view that everything concerning the religious life of Shin Buddhists starts from believing in the factual existence of Amida and Pure Land somewhere in the universe and sometime after death.

We have, here, come back to a point that the Pure Land 'is not a real place at all, but basically a symbol for a different state of mind' as Gordon Kaufman criticizes it for not being acceptable to common people. Though Kaufman is suspicious about this, the 'practicer of *shinjin*' in the true sense of Shinran's terminology, neither grasps their 'birth in the Pure Land' as a symbolic psychological matter, nor do they believe in it as a real substantial place which we reach after death. A 'practicer of *shinjin*' overcomes both extremes.

In the above sense, the following description by D. T. Suzuki may sound similar to what Kaufman rejects as the 'symbolic' understanding of Amida and

⁴Kiyosawa Manshi, *Waga Shinnen* ('My Faith') (Chuo Kouronsha, Tokyo, 1970, p. 195).

the Pure Land as only appreciated by ‘sophisticated’ Buddhists:

We don’t go out of this world in order to be born in the Pure Land but we carry the Pure Land all the time. Being born in the Pure Land means discovering the Pure Land in ourselves... My conclusion is that Amida is our inmost self, and when that inmost self is found we are born in the Pure Land. The kind of Pure Land located elsewhere, where we stay, is most undesirable.⁵

This view by Suzuki may be acceptable from the standpoint of a Zen way of thinking which is quite similar to the following claim by Shin’ichi Hisamatsu:

Searching neither for Buddhas or Gods
outside of man, nor for paradise or

⁵D. T. Suzuki, *Shin Buddhism* (Harper & Row, New York, 1970), pp. 40–41.

Pure Lands in other dimensions, Zen advances man as Buddha and actual existence as the Pure Land.⁶

Even if we admitted such an interpretation by Zen thinkers, it would stand opposed to Shinran's lamentation as seen in the *Kyogyoshinsho*:

The monks and laity of this latter age and the religious teachers of these times are floundering in concepts of 'self-nature' and 'mind-only', and they disparage the true realization of enlightenment in the Pure Land way.⁷

It would be sufficient only to say that Shinran's standpoint is based on the actuality of *bombu* ('ordinary unenlightened being') in whom the dichotomy of

⁶Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, 'Zen as the Negation of Holiness' in Franck, ed., *The Buddha Eye* (New York, 1982), p. 173.

⁷Yoshifumi Ueda, ed., *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, Vol. II (Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, 1985), p. 201.

man and Amida and that of this world and the Pure Land is impossible to overcome. Moreover, if such a dichotomy can be overcome as Suzuki and Hisamatsu argue, there would be no room for the salvation of *bombu* through Amida's working.

III

We have, so far, noted that there are roughly two types of thinking regarding 'birth in the Pure Land', one of which is to place it in linear time after death as being 'born' into a place called the 'Pure Land' which is generally conceived as being a substantial entity; the other is to equate Amida and Pure Land with our inmost self and this actual world we are living in, which we can realize through a special religious intuition. Which of the two is correct?

We have to say that both may be accepted and also rejected by Shinran because, for Shinran, 'birth into the Pure Land' never fulfills its true significance without the realization of '*shinjin*', an awakening to the universal compassion working on everyone of us.

In this sense, the concept of 'birth in the Pure

Land' is explicated as something which reveals the resultant state of *shinjin* in order for us, who are living in the world of cause-and-effect, to be led to such an awakening. Therefore, some might well anticipate, through *shinjin*, that they will be born in the Pure Land beautifully adorned as the various sutras describe and, others, that they will go to a world of nothingness. Either may be right if it is spoken of with *shinjin*.

This sort of discussion has been repeated for a long time since the introduction of Western ways of thinking, or even before then, and seems likely to continue as long as the Shin doctrine is comprehended only theoretically. But from the perspective of viewing Shin Buddhism as a Mahayana Bodhisattva path, i.e. on the basis of religious practice, the problem of 'birth in the Pure Land', with the above-mentioned two ways of answering, it would merely have a secondary significance. In other words, the assumption that 'birth in the Pure Land' has its utmost importance as the final goal of Shin practice would only perplex people within and without the tradition.

When we read Shinran carefully, we necessarily find the liberation from the present state in which we find ourselves to be his central concern and thus our future destiny is a secondary one. It is clear that *shinjin* is his central concern and it is this *shinjin* that locates Shin Buddhism right on the Mahayana Bodhisattva path. The issue of ‘birth into the Pure Land’ and when it is realized, whether at the present moment or after death, should be explored within this dimension.

The concept of ‘return to this world’ which is usually conceived of as something we perform after ‘birth in the Pure Land’ upon death, should be reconstructed from the perspective of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path. Needless to say, this concept represents the Pure Land Buddhist version of the Mahayana idea of ‘benefiting others’ along with ‘benefiting oneself’, both of which are necessarily required of a Mahayana Bodhisattva for the fulfillment of their ideal. Shin Buddhism, however, has long been conceived as a Buddhist school associated only with a very personal and individual salvation. Consequently,

shinjin is regarded as a special sort of self-satisfaction; as a matter of course, it tends to confine one to one's inner self and is not opened up to the outside world. This seems to be a natural effect of the aspect of *shinjin* which explores one's true nature from a negative perspective. The negative aspect that one is full of blind passions and bound with evil karma, not having the remotest possibility of reaching enlightenment or being saved, is truly an awakening developed through *shinjin* but it does not necessarily mean the impossibility of the salvation of other people. The concept of 'return to this world' as a Pure Land Buddhist expression of 'benefiting others'—the ideal of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path—should not be considered apart from 'benefiting oneself' expressed as attaining 'birth in the Pure Land'.

In addition to the fulfillment of 'benefiting others', the concept of 'return to this world' can also be regarded as a Pure Land Buddhist version of the Mahayana concept of 'nirvana of no abode' (J. *mujusho-nehan*; Skt. *apratisthita-nirvana*). The notion of Shinran's concept of 'return to this world'

is based on the Twenty-second Vow of Amida described in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, which states:

When I attain Buddhahood, the bodhisattvas of other Buddha-lands who come and are born in my land will ultimately and unfailingly attain [the rank of] ‘succession to the position [of Buddhahood] after one lifetime’—except for those who, in accordance with their own original vows to guide others freely to enlightenment, don the armour of universal vows for the sake of sentient beings, accumulate roots of virtue, emancipate all beings, travel to Buddha-lands to perform bodhisattva practices, make offerings to all the Buddhas and Tathagatas throughout the ten quarters, awaken sentient beings countless as the sands of the Ganges, and bring them to abide firmly in the

unexcelled, right, true way. Such bodhisattvas surpass ordinary ones, manifest the practices of all the bodhisattva stages, and discipline themselves in the virtue of Samantabhadra. Should it not be so, may I not attain the perfect enlightenment.⁸

The intent of this Vow is that Bodhisattvas (Pure Land practitioners) who are born into the Pure Land immediately dwell in the assured state for becoming Buddhas except those who wish to return to this world in order to save others. However, among the names of this Vow called by Shinran ‘the Vow of necessary attainment of the rank next to Buddhahood’, ‘the Vow of attainment of Buddhahood after one lifetime’, and ‘the Vow of directing virtue for our return to this world’—more emphasis was put on ‘the Vow of directing virtue for our return to this world’ than

⁸Yoshifumi Ueda, ed., *The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, Vol. III (Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, 1985), p. 368

the other two. Such an interpretation is based on Vasubandhu's 'fifth gate of emergence':

With great compassion, one observes all sentient beings in pain and affliction, and assuming various transformed bodies to guide them, enters the gardens of birth-and-death and the forests of blind passions; freely sporting there with transcendent powers, one attains the state of teaching and guiding. This is brought about by the directing of virtue through the power of the Primal Vow.⁹

With a detailed comment by T'an-luan on this passage, Shinran developed further the concept of 'return to this world' as Amida's virtue directed in order for us to realize the true significance of *shinjin* in terms of the Mahayana Bodhisattva path. The 'orthodox' interpretation of this, however, is that immediately after attaining 'birth in the Pure Land'

⁹Ibid., p. 365.

upon death, one returns to this world in order to save others who are suffering in this defiled world. The problem is that it, too, is located only in linear time as stated in the above, and is not directly associated with the present moment of realizing *shinjin*.

We cannot but say that in Shinran's thought there is an element which equates *shinjin* (realized at the very present moment) and enlightenment in the Pure Land (generally understood to be attained at the moment of death). In other words, an equation of the present and future time, namely, the one-moment of realizing *shinjin* at the present moment, includes the future. As for this, Nishitani Keiji states as follows:

Simultaneity is defined as a 'unity of time and eternity'. It is an 'atom of eternity' (Kierkegaard) in time, or a moment in which we touch something eternal. 'Present' and 'moment' are that on which such simultaneity is established. A 'moment' is in linear time and

yet beyond it.¹⁰

If we understand *shinjin*, a crucial concept in Shinran's thought, on this basis, the following description will no longer be conceived in terms of linear time only as has been the case in the 'orthodox' view:

As I humbly contemplate the true essence of the Pure Land path, I understand that Amida's directing of virtue (to sentient beings) has two aspects: the aspect for our going forth to the Pure Land and the aspect for our return to this world (to save all other sentient beings).¹¹

Further he praises:

The countless great bodhisattvas of the land of
happiness

¹⁰Nishitani Keiji, *Shinran ni okeru Toki no Mondai (The Problem of 'time' in Shinran's Thought)* Gendaigo-yaku Shinran Zenshu, Vol. 10, Kodansha, Tokyo, 1975, p. 116.

¹¹*Kyogyoshinsho (Chapter on True Teaching)* SSZ, Vol. 11, p. 2.

Have reached 'succession to Buddhahood after
one lifetime';
Entering the compassionate activity of
Samantabhadra,
They unfailingly work to save beings in defiled
worlds.¹²

Those who reach the Pure Land of happiness
Return to this evil world of five defilements,
Where, like the Buddha Shakyamuni
They benefit sentient beings without limit.¹³

And further:

The directing of virtue for our return to this
world is such
That we attain the resultant state of benefiting
and guiding others;
Immediately re-entering the world of beings,

¹²*Hymns of the Pure Land*

(Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, 1991), p. 19.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 21.

We perform the compassionate activity that is
the virtue of Samantabhadra.¹⁴

In these statements and praises by Shinran of the notion of ‘return to this world’, we can find two perspectives; one is a perspective based on linear time, and the other, beyond time. As stated above, the two aspects of ‘birth in the Pure Land’ and ‘return to this world’ have traditionally been taught to be matters pertaining to linear time only. But, if we understand on the basis of Nishitani’s view that *shinjin* includes both the present and future (and consequently the past as well), Amida’s directing of virtue to beings should transcend linear time, and yet embrace it. A ‘practicer of *shinjin*’ lives in linear time when viewed from the perspective of living in this world with a limited physical existence, and, at the same time, transcends it when viewed from the perspective of Amida’s working beyond time.

We have noted already above that in Shinran’s

¹⁴*Hymns of the Pure Land Masters*

(Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto, 1992), p. 29.

thought, there is something inseparable between *shinjin* and enlightenment. Concerning also the concept of ‘return to this world’, we have to take this element into account; namely, a person of *shinjin* is one who is seeking after birth in the Pure Land, but for other people who are acquainted with that person of *shinjin*, he or she may seem as though they are guiding them to the final realization.

For instance, Honen was someone who was aiming at attaining ‘birth in the Pure Land’ for himself through *nembutsu* but, for Shinran, Honen was an incarnation of Amida or a Bodhisattva working for his salvation. Shinran, too, pursued the Pure Land path under Honen’s guidance but, for other people, he may be a Buddha or a Bodhisattva who has returned from the Pure Land in order to enable us to realize true compassion.

This can be said of all the *myokonins* who appeared in the history of Shin Buddhism. Regarding all the predecessors of *shinjin* as Buddhas or Bodhisattvas who have returned from the Pure Land to guide them to enlightenment, a *myokonin* penetrates deep

into their inmost self as one who has no prospect of salvation. And such a *myokonin*, again, is looked up by others as one who has returned from the Pure Land to lead them there.

Suppose a person is going on a way, along which many people must have walked to get to that same destination. In the same way, a person of *shinjin* follows the way guided by many predecessors, which means that right on the way to the final realization there is an encounter of one who is going on to the final realization with one who has returned from there. *Shinjin* is that which enables one to be awakened to such an encounter. The concept of ‘return to this world’, therefore, is to be realized by a person of *shinjin* who, again, is looked on by others as one who has returned from the final destination to guide them. In this sense, we will be able to say that ‘going (to the Pure Land)’ is one with ‘returning (from the Pure Land)’ or, more briefly, ‘going is returning’.

佛陀彌阿無南

The Matheson Trust

For the Study of Comparative Religion