

Soteriology in Shin Buddhism and its Modern Significance*

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IT is generally thought that Buddhism teaches man 'to attain Enlightenment'. This is very often expressed as *jōbutsu*—'to become a Buddha' or 'to attain Buddhahood'. Attaining Buddhahood does not mean that a man acquires some super-human quality from outside, but that he simply resumes or recovers the original quality inherent in him, i.e. Buddhahood, which had become beclouded by defilement (Skt. Vega).

In the so-called Holy Path (for example in Zen and Shingon Buddhism) Buddhahood is supposed to be attained in this life, while in the so-called Path of Pure Land, as exemplified by Jodo and Jodo Shin Buddhism, Buddhahood is supposed to be attained as soon as this earthly existence ceases. How then is Buddhahood conceived of and what is its actual significance in Pure Land Buddhism? Unlike Shōdōmon, or the Holy Path, the Pure Land tradition teaches that Buddhahood is to be attained after this earthly life is exhausted simply because we can never hope to detach ourselves completely from defilement as long as we are flesh, and that as long as there is defilement there can be no enlightenment or Buddhahood.

The Pure Land conception of Buddhahood, which obviously belongs to the realm of the absolute, is by no means unrelated to the phenomenal world; on the contrary, the latter's existence is invisibly yet continually sustained by the former. Shinran's conception of Buddhahood is clearly manifested in his words: "The supreme Buddha is formless. Since this has no form, it is termed *jinen* (suchness or as-it-is-ness). When it manifests itself, it can no longer be termed 'supreme *nirvana*' (or *dharmakāya*). I have been told (by my master Honen) that it is called 'Amida Buddha' so that its formlessness might be brought home to us. Amida (Buddha of Infinite Light) is a means through which 'suchness' can be fully realized by men". (*Mattō-shō*: 5).

According to this view, Buddhahood means 'the supreme Buddha', and since it is formless and thus beyond our knowledge, it is simply called *jinen* (suchness). Therefore we are only given the name of 'Amida Buddha' (Buddha of Infinite Light and Eternal Life—*amita* in Skt. meaning 'immeasurable') so that we may be aware of 'suchness' beyond phenomena. It is thereby implied that the name 'Amida' in itself is an *upāya* (skilful means), through which we are enabled to know suchness. *Upāya* in Buddhism is not to be identified with falsehood, but is a dynamic aspect of truth, which might be termed the 'relative form of the absolute truth'. Besides, the name of Amida is not simply a possession or a part of truth, but is in essence truth itself.

It is usually said that out of great compassion for sentient beings Buddha has given us the name of Amida, yet the name of Amida is none other than that compassion. Thus it is clear that, for Shinran, Buddhahood was conceived of as Amida (*sambhogakāya*), and not as the supreme Buddha, which is merely a cold conception of Buddha as law (*dharmakāya*).

In Shinran's Pure Land teaching, therefore, there is no absolute Buddhahood apart from Amida or the manifestation in the name of Amida of the supreme Buddhahood. That is to say, Amida, without losing that absolute nature, has become part of the phenomenal world, through manifesting his Name. It is only at the moment of manifesting his name that Amida comes to acquire a relative and personal nature. It is also here that for the first time this has come down to the level capable of being objectified while remaining absolute. Amida's characteristic lies in the fact that his Buddhahood belongs to both the absolute and the relative worlds. Thus it is to be noted that in Shinran's thought Buddha is always spoken of in terms of Amida.

Contrary to this way of viewing Buddha, it is the practice of the other Buddhist schools belonging to the Path of the Holy to conceive of Buddhahood in terms of *dharmakāya* without recourse to *saṃbhogakāya* or Amida. Among the numerous hymns Shinran composed in praise of Amida's virtues is the following: "He is called Amida because he beholds the sentient beings who invoke the name of the Buddha, living in countless worlds in ten directions, and embraces them all forsaking none". It is clear from this hymn that Shinran was looking at the working, and not the entity, of the compassionate Buddha in his name. He understood that Amida is so called because of his function of 'embracing all and forsaking none' and not because of his existence as such. Embracing all and forsaking none is Amida. There is no Amida apart from this fact or the experience of it. A static name is only a name. In the case of Amida it is the dynamic function that really matters.

It was Honen (1133-1212) who established Jodo-shu (the Pure Land sect), thereby achieving the independence of a Pure Land teaching theretofore regarded by the mainstream of the Buddhist tradition as subsidiary. His teaching consists in recommending people to invoke Amida's Name—*Namu Amida Butsu*—with sincerity of heart in expectation of attaining Buddhahood in afterlife. For him, attaining Buddhahood (*jōbutsu*) and Birth in the Pure Land (*ōjō*) were more or less identical. However, Shinran (1173-1262), who succeeded Honen, sharply distinguished between *ōjō* and *jōbutsu*. Shinran taught to the effect that man attains *ōjō* in this life, and *jōbutsu* in afterlife. In the *Tannishō* (A Tract Deploring Heresies) he says: "At the very moment when the desire to call the Nembutsu (Namu Amida Butsu) is awakened in us in the firm faith that we can attain birth in the Pure Land through the saving grace of the Inconceivable Grand Vow (Amida's Will for universal salvation), the all-embracing, none-forsaking virtue of Amida is conferred on us". (Section I).

Birth in the Pure Land may be said to correspond (with due regard to differences in the respective traditional perspectives) to the Christian conception of salvation (dying unto Adam and living in Christ). Shinran's position may be compared to that eschatological view which places man's *eschaton* (the moment of the end) at man's existential awakening of faith here and now; while Honen's position corresponds to the view which places man's *eschaton* at some moment in the future, namely at the end of his earthly life. Thus, *ōjō* or "birth" may be said to correspond to the Christian notion of "salvation" as realizable both "in the next world" and "in this world".¹

The difference regarding *ōjō* as between Honen and Shinran may best be illustrated by the ways in which they read the same lines in the *Larger Sukhāvātī-vyūha-sūtra*. The lines in question in the Chinese translation appear at the beginning of the second volume of this sutra. Honen read them in the traditional way and understood them to mean: "If sentient beings are born in that land (Amida's Pure Land), they will without exception be placed in the Right Assured State". Shinran's reading was thus: "Sentient beings who are going to be born in that

land have (in this world) all been placed in the Right Assured State".

With Honen, birth in the Pure Land does not necessarily take place upon the acquiring of faith, but occurs at some indefinite time in the future, namely, at death. On the other hand, for Shinran birth in the Pure Land was clearly within this life, an event coinciding with the moment of faith. One of the natural consequences of Honen's teaching was a sense of uncertainty as to the assurance of salvation persisting until the moment of death. Hence the practice, during the Heian Period, in which Pure Land aspirants frantically recited the Name on their death-bed with a string held in their hand leading to the hand of Amida as depicted on a Pure Land *māṇḍala*. Such being the case, Honen's disciples saw merit in great numbers of Nembutsu repetitions—as many as possible during one's life-time. For them calling Amida's Name was a means to an end, a means for attaining the fruit of birth in the Pure Land, coupled with the assurance of salvation. In Shinran's Nembutsu the means and the end were one. For him each calling of Nembutsu was self-contained and final, thus giving the devotees the assurance of salvation then and there, at the establishment of faith, with serene and joyous sentiment, leaving no room for a sense of uncertainty. This is because Honen's Nembutsu still contained a residue of self-effort; that is, uttering the Nembutsu was the meritorious act performed by the devotee. Whereas for Shinran, Nembutsu was not the act of the devotee, but was motivated by Amida. Therefore invoking Nembutsu was a merit ascribable to Amida and not to the devotee. Shinran thus called his Nembutsu 'neither man's practice nor man's good' (*Tannishō*, Chapter 8). He regarded it rather as an expression of the devotee's thankfulness to Amida. Nembutsu was for him not only an expression of thankfulness, but a confession of the devotee's own wretchedness and a voice praising the virtues of Amida Buddha as well.

Regarding man's natural inclination to 'possess' the merit of religious practices, we are reminded of the late Sawaki Kodo Roshi, an eminent expounder of Soto Zen Buddhism who, asked by his students why he practiced *Zazen* (sitting in meditation), replied, "For no reason at all. The Buddha practices *Zazen* in me, not I. Man in *Zazen* is the Buddha practicing the Buddha's work. Just sit in meditation and you are a Buddha, whether or not you may believe it true". It is said that upon hearing his reply of 'Zazen of no merit' more students followed than left him.

Thus it may be said that Shinran's Nembutsu was the Nembutsu of no merit. The merit in man's calling of Nembutsu is totally surrendered to Amida, and no merit is counted on the part of the devotee. Where Nembutsu of no merit is recited, there is no selfhood. Therefore Nembutsu itself is an act of selflessness which clearly implies the presence of 'purity of heart'. Where this purity of heart prevails, there is the Pure Land, for in Buddhism 'pure' means the absence of selfhood.

The late Father Thomas Merton (1915-1969) wrote: "Paradise is not 'heaven'. Paradise is a state, or indeed a place, on earth. Paradise belongs more properly to the present than to the future life. In some sense it belongs to both. It is the state in which man was originally created to live on earth. It is also conceived as a kind of antechamber to heaven after death—as for instance at the end of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Christ, dying on the cross, said to the good thief at his side: 'This day thou shalt be with me *in Paradise*', and it was clear that this did not mean, and could not have meant, heaven. We must not imagine Paradise as a place of ease and sensual pleasure. It is a state of peace and rest, by all means". (The Recovery of Paradise, in "Wisdom of Emptiness", *New Directions*, 17 New York, 1961, pp. 81-82). Rennyo Shōnin (1415-1499) says to the same effect: "Those who aspire to be born in the Pure Land with a view to regale themselves there

shall never be successful". Rev. Ryojin Soga (1875—) says, "When we find ourselves in Namu Amida Butsu, then Pure Land is revealed to us, that is, then the Pure Land is given us". Perhaps what is to be learned from these statements is that 'Paradise' in Christianity and 'Pure Land' in Buddhism may be in fact pointing to the same state of mind, which, of course, includes our whole existence. The term 'Pure Land' was coined to express the state of enlightenment or *nirvana* reflecting itself upon this world by the Chinese, who are highly practical and down to earth people with a concrete way of thinking, in contrast with the highly abstract and metaphysical Indian way of thinking. So concrete and substantial an expression is the term 'Pure Land' that we are apt to overlook its true significance, that is, purity of heart or absence of selfhood, and to be misled by its seemingly material expression.

To caution against the materialistic interpretation of 'Pure Land', Tan-luan (476-542) used the term 'birth of no-birth' and 'going of no-going' for the 'birth in the Pure Land'. When we hear the term *ō* (going) or *jō* (being born), we are apt to presuppose a man and his moving to some actual place. But Tan-luan, in saying that what is really meant by *ōjō* is 'birth of no-birth' and 'going of no-going,' thereby implies that what actually counts here is, in fact, a 'conversion'.

We have made it clear in the above that in Shinran's thought the traditional Buddhist doctrine *jōbutsu* (realizing Buddhahood) was superseded by his teaching of *ōjō* (birth in the Pure Land or attaining the Right Assured State) in this life through the act of Nembutsu, since *ōjō* belongs to this world, and *jōbutsu* to the afterlife. Thus Shinran saw *jōbutsu* already contained in CO, just in the same way that the fruit is potentially contained in the seed. In other words, *jōbutsu* is transcendently or potentially contained in *ōjō*. In the case of the seed, the fruit is completely invisible, but in the case of *ōjō*, the fruit is experientially discernible in various manifestations: for example, a man who has attained *ōjō* is described by Shinran in his *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō* (The Teaching, Practice, Faith and Enlightenment) thus: "His heart is filled with joy; he has the virtue of turning evil into good (or accepting adversity as Amida's *upāya*); he is always protected by the invisible Buddhas and Bodhisattvas; he is held in praise and regard by the Buddhas; he is always filled with the sentiment of gratitude and of repaying his indebtedness to all; he is ever performing great compassionate deeds etc.". Of all the virtues mentioned above, the last one is regarded as the most important, for it is concerned with the Bodhisattva's activity to enlighten his brethren still immersed in ignorance and suffering. Shinran refers to Tanluan's thought as to the Bodhisattva's virtue of enlightening others. Tan-luan says in his *Commentary on Vasubandhu's Treatise on the Pure Land*: "The Bodhisattva (above the eighth stage) views all sentient beings as ultimately void (without substance). He enlightens innumerable sentient beings and yet sees no sentient being attain enlightenment. His way of enlightening others is performed as if he were playing (in the garden).—It is as if *Asura's* (one of the deities protecting the Buddha) harp produces sound of its own accord without a player". This statement is quoted in the Chapter on Enlightenment in Shinran's *Kyō-gyō-shin-shō*. Shinran clearly meant by quoting Tan-luan's statement in his main work, (1) that an enlightened man (a Bodhisattva above the eighth stage) performs acts of enlightening others freely without any conscious effort on his part, and (2) that he is meanwhile not conscious of saving others; in other words, he is completely free from object-consciousness. For a Bodhisattva, the moment of his own enlightenment and that of others are identified without conflict. Tan-luan's teaching on the Bodhisattva's activity of enlightening others suggests that the work of enlightening others is ultimately not a matter of man's conscious effort (although it may be motivated by one's conscious will); being thus beyond this world it belongs to the realm of the Buddhas. Traditionally, until Honen's time the work of enlightening others had been regarded as belonging to the afterlife, that is, it could only be done when man is

identified completely with supreme enlightenment after death. But according to Shinran's view, one who has experienced *ōjō* in this life is qualified for this activity. Shinran came to replace the notion of 'future' life by a 'present' life that is nevertheless beyond one's self-consciousness. In this sense, Shinran may well be called a religious character of truly existential orientation.

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¹ With Shinran's view cp. the teaching of the Hesychast contemplatives in Eastern Christianity according to which the Saints are enabled already in this life to obtain vision of the "Light of Mount Tabor", the uncreated light that shone in the faces of the Apostles at Christ's transfiguration. In both the cases referred to, it is evident that the salvation as envisaged reaches far beyond the limits of an individual finality. (*Editorial note*).