

Dec. 2, 2018

Dear Ministers and Dharma Friends:

I hope that this will find yourself, your family and Sangha doing well, physically and spiritually.

As you may know, I retired as of this April, so I am able to concentrate on what I really want to do. Part of that is to share my "Buddhist Column," which I will disseminate by email about once a month. These Columns will consist mostly of my short writings and news about Buddhist happenings on the Asia side of the Pacific Ocean, especially of Japan, and my personal activities.

If you wish NOT to receive this, please feel free to inform me.

1) I just returned from a trip to Denver to attend the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and to give some talks at the Denver Buddhist Temple. Allow me to share a **wonderful photo of the cute Dharma school kids.**

2) I would also like to share the first 1/3 of an essay on Shin Buddhism, which I hope will help to better inform the broader English-speaking Buddhist community about Jodo Shinshu. **A different version of this essay has been accepted for the February, 2019 issue of the Tricycle: the Buddhist Review magazine!** The other 2/3 of this essay will follow in the subsequent 2 months of my Buddhist Column.

You are more than welcome to give me any feedback or make comments. (If you know of others, especially ministers whose email I don't have, also wish to receive the Buddhist Column, please have them or yourself contact me; you can also share it with them.)

May we continue to support each other in our efforts to share the Dharma

with all beings!

Best wishes in the Nembutsu,

Ken Tanaka

Dec. 2, 2018

Dear Ministers and Dharma Friends in Hawaii (interacted during summer, 2018):

I trust that you are doing well. It was a pleasure seeing you this summer. I hope to visit Hawaii in the summer of 2020 to share my newest book for young adults, which should be published by then.

Today, I'm sending you my Buddhist Column #1, which I hope to send one out about once a month. The Columns will consist mostly of my writings and news about Buddhist happenings on the Asia side of the Pacific Ocean, especially of Japan, and my personal activities.

If you wish NOT to receive this, please inform me.

1) I just returned from a 10-day trip to Denver to attend the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and to give some talks at the Denver Buddhist Temple. Allow me to share a **wonderful photo of the cute Dharma school kids**.

2) I would like to share the first 1/3 of an essay on Shin Buddhism, which reflects the core of my talks that you heard this summer and autumn. **A different version of this essay has been accepted and should appear in the February, 2019 issue of the Tricycle: the Buddhist Review magazine!** The other 2/3 of this essay will follow in the subsequent 2 months of my Buddhist Column.

Please feel free to ask questions or make any comments. (If your friends also wish to receive my Buddhist Column, please have them or yourself contact me; you can also share it with them.)

I wish you personal happiness and inner peace in your spiritual search. May you share the Dharma with all beings!

Best wishes in the Dharma,

Ken Tanaka

Dec. 2, 2018

Dear Dharma Friends (who signed up to receive the Buddhist Column and resident ministers):

It was a pleasure seeing you this summer/autumn. I trust that you are doing well as you receive the first issue of my “Buddhist Column” as promised.

I hope to send one out about once a month, which will consist mostly of my writings of my thoughts and news about Buddhist happenings on the Asia side of the Pacific Ocean, especially of Japan, and my personal activities.

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I wish you personal happiness and inner peace in your spiritual search.

Best wishes in the Dharma,

Ken Tanaka

Shin Buddhism and the Spirituality of Naturalness:
Hardly a “Christian” Buddhist Path

By Kenneth Kenshin Tanaka
Professor Emeritus, Musashino University, Tokyo

Several years ago, at a gathering of American Buddhists of various schools, I introduced myself as a Shin Buddhist to a Zen Buddhist sitting next to me. Smiling, she responded, “So, you’re the *Christian* Buddhist!” Dumbfounded, I was about to correct her misperception but, unfortunately, lost the chance to explain because the program had just started.

And, she isn’t the only person who thinks that Pure Land Buddhism, of which Shin (also Jōdo Shinshū) is a part, is “Christian.” Some conservative Christians have claimed that Pure Land Buddhism originated in Nestorian Christianity of seventh century China. However, that opinion can easily be debunked, since the Pure Land sutras in Sanskrit date back to the first century.

In order to respond to these misperceptions about Shin Buddhism, I wish in this essay to focus on Shin spirituality centered on its founder, Shinran

(1173-1263). In so doing, I hope to show that Shin is rooted in Mahayana Buddhism, while simultaneously exhibiting its distinct character as a path of naturalness for non-monastic seekers.

This essay is framed within the parable of the “Seven Phases of a Drowning Sailor.” I heard the core elements of this parable in my youth at my temple in California and have since developed it over the years and included it in my book, *Ocean: An Introduction to Jōdo-Shinshū Buddhism in America*. Its Japanese translation is now in its eleventh printing, and despite its American origin the parable has been surprisingly well received in Japan, the “homeland” of the Shin tradition!



Phase One: Boarding the ship

A sailor boards a ship, which departs from the port of a tropical island. After several hours on the high seas, the sailor is on the deck with two of his sailor buddies enjoying the magnificent sunset.

Boarding the ship symbolizes being born as a human being. This, according to the traditional Buddhist view, signifies two things. On one hand, a person is still trapped within the samsaric cycle of birth and death; we are subject to suffering (*dukkha*), such as illness and death. Shinran, who had lost both parents at a young age, captured his acute awareness of the evanescent and unpredictable nature of life on the occasion of his ordination as a monk:

“If you assume there would be tomorrow
The cherry blossoms may have scattered

In a tempest during the night.”

On the other hand, it is considered extremely rare to be born a human. The likelihood of a human birth is likened to the chance that a sea turtle, which surfaces only once every hundred years, would poke its head exactly through a hole in a piece of wood that happens to be floating in the vast ocean. Moreover, we humans have the best chance of attaining Awakening, compared to other beings of the Six Destiniesⁱ. This outlook today serves to inspire Shin Buddhists, who, prior to taking refuge in the Three Treasures, recite:

“Hard is it to be born into human life, but now we are living it. ... If we do not awaken in this life, in which life will we ever be awakened?”



Phase Two: Falling off the ship

Without warning, the ship tilts violently, and the sailor along with his friends are thrown overboard. No one on the ship has noticed, so the ship continues on its course. The sailor finds himself trying frantically to stay afloat in the extremely choppy and chilly water. He looks around, but his buddies are nowhere to be seen.

Falling off the ship is analogous to our personal encounter with *duḥkha*, or suffering. Prior to Awakening, Prince Siddhartha encountered suffering through the loss of his mother after he was born, and later on his sojourn from the castle in the form of a decrepit elderly person, a sick person and a deceased person. Shinran, too, had his share of suffering, for, as previously mentioned, he lost his parents early in life and in his twenties was beset by a gnawing dis-ease about life and fear of his own death.

Our human life presents its shares of joy and fulfilment, symbolized in this

story by the sailors marvelling at the magnificent sunset. However, unexpected upsets and difficulties can appear at any time – in this case, one of the eight kinds of suffering taught by the Buddha: “encountering a situation that one hates.”

For me personally, it was the decision by my American-born parents to leave a comfortable life in Japan to return to America that suddenly changed my life. For a ten-year-old who could not speak any English and was unaccustomed to the American way – compounded by parents who did not get along well – the challenges of making a new life in a strange country came as a psychological shock. Like the sailor, I felt as though I had been “thrown overboard.”

(The rest to be followed in my Buddhist Column in the next two months.)

ⁱ The Six Destinies are the realms of heavenly beings, humans, titans, beasts, hungry ghosts and hellish beings.