

Buddhist Column #2 January, 2019

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(1)

Buddhist Humor

A: You’ve heard that famous Buddhist joke about Buddha and vacuum cleaner, right?

B: I think so, but can you tell me again?

A: Why couldn’t the Buddha vacuum clean under the small space under the sofa?

B: Oh, that’s right. I remember now. The answer is:

It’s because the Buddha had no attachments!

A: Good. Now, I’ve heard a follow up to that.

B: Oh? Tell me.

A: Why, then, did the Buddha ask Shinran Shonin to help him?

B: Mmm ... I don’t know.

A: Well, the Buddha asked Shinran Shonin to do what he could not do because he heard that Shinran had lots of attachment!

*Could this be evidence that there are positive outcomes to acknowledging and facing up to one’s imperfections or *bombu*-ness?

(2)

Shin Buddhist Spirituality of Naturalness:
Hardly a "Christian" Buddhist Path (Part 2 of 3 parts)

By Kenneth Kenshin Tanaka

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(For those who read Part 1 with the previous Buddhist Column #1,
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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 as the program just then started.

Actually, she is not alone in harboring such a perception about Pure Land Buddhism, of which Shin (also Jōdo Shinshū) is a part. For example, some conservative Christians have peddled the view that Pure Land Buddhism had its origins in Nestorian Christianity of 7th century China. However, that opinion can easily be debunked since the Pure Land sutras in Sanskrit date back to the 1st century.

Since Mark Unno did an outstanding job of introducing Shin Buddhism in a recent *Tricycle* article (Winter, 2017), I wish 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 in my book, *Ocean: An Introduction to Jodo-Shinshu Buddhism in America*. Its Japanese translation is now in its 11th 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 a 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 a human being. This, according to 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 (*duḥkha*), 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, to be born a human is to be celebrated for it is considered extremely rare to be born a human. Its chance is likened to a sea turtle, which comes up to the surface once every hundred years and pokes its head through a hole of a circular wood that happened to be floating in the vast ocean. Moreover, we humans have the best chance of attaining Awakening compared to other beings of the Six Destinies. 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

Suddenly without any warning, the ship tilts violently, and the sailor along with his friends are thrown overboard. No one on the ship noticed, so the ship continued 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 suffering. Certainly, Prince Siddhartha encountered them with the loss of his mother at birth 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.

Certainly, life presents its shares of joy and fulfillment as symbolized by the sailors marveling at the magnificent sunset. However, difficulty can descend suddenly and unexpectedly like it did for the sailors. It constituted one of the eight kinds of suffering taught by the Buddha, that of "encountering a situation that one hated."

For me personally, it was the decision by my American-born parents to leave a comfortable life in Japan to return to America. However, for a 10 year old who could not speak any English and 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. I felt as though I was "thrown overboard" like the sailor.

(Part 2 for Buddhist Column #2)



Phase Three: Swimming by Striving

The sailor realizes he cannot stay in the chilly and choppy waters. However, having lost his sense of direction, he is not completely sure if he is heading in the right direction. Nevertheless, being a sailor he is an able swimmer and manages to swim for about an hour. However, the island is nowhere in sight as the fading sunlight gives way to darkness and the water begins to feel even more icy and turbulent.

Soon, with his body exhausted and his lungs gasping for air, the sailor senses that this could be the end. As despair overcomes him, his energy drains from him like sand in an hourglass. He begins to choke on the water slapping his face and can feel his body being dragged under.

Just as the sailor began to swim with all his might to reach the island, Shinran embarked on the Buddhist path to find a resolution to his suffering. He dedicated himself to the rigorous practices of a monk. It included Constantly-walking Samadhi (*jōgyō-zammai*) meditation that called for ninety continuous days of circumambulation, during which one slept standing up! Monks engaged in Pure Land practices in China and Japan prior to and during Shinran's time were no different from Zen practitioners in terms of the rigors of their practices. This is a far cry from the simplistic view that Pure Land Buddhism is an "easy path."

Despite his enormous effort, Shinran began to experience despair in

his realization that he was not making any significant progress toward the realization of Awakening. The more he strove, the more he saw the enormity of his afflictions (or blind passions):

“Oh, how grievous it is that I, ignorant stubble-haired Shinran, am wallowing in the immense ocean of desire and attachments and lost in the vast mountains of fame and advantage.”

This was not the case of Shinran having more afflictions than other monks. Rather he *acknowledged* them fully for he was intensely introspective and brutally honest with himself. This quality, in turn, was spurred on by his downright determination to realize Awakening in this life. As a result, he did not clandestinely have relationships with women like some of his fellow monks or aspire for higher positions in the sacerdotal hierarchy.

As the above admission shows, Shinran realized that he was woefully steeped in the Three Poisons of greed, aversion and ignorance. Whatever he attempted, he saw that his efforts were ultimately ego-centered, which he eventually rejected as “Self Power.” He found that his effort, for example, engendered pride and even haughty attitude of “doing a good thing” and “being a good person.” It was an untenable situation in which a practitioner filled with Three Poisons was trying to overcome the Three Poisons themselves. It was akin to a person pulling himself up by one’s own bootstraps! No wonder an insightful and honest Shinran referred to himself as “ordinary and foolish,” a *bombu*.

Shinran’s recognition of his *bombu* nature is often compared to the Christian notion of sinful human nature. Here again, we find some differences at the fundamental level. *Bombu* nature is what Shinran came to realize as a result of his *inability* to fully overcome the afflictions after making enormous effort to do so. Whereas, according to one definition, Christian sin is the turning away from God since every human has an intrinsic obligation to follow God on the basis of being created by God.

In other words, Shinran’s *bombu* nature emerged from his failure to *achieve* the goal despite his best effort, while Christian sin stems from one’s failure to *even begin to follow* God. This distinction is subtle and confounds even some Shin Buddhists, including myself who when young

sometimes jokingly referred to ourselves as “*Sin* Buddhists”!

In the parable, Shinran’s failure to achieve the goal of Awakening is represented by the sailor who is about to drown.



Phase Four: Letting go and Floating

At this instant he hears a voice from the depths of the ocean, “Let go. Let go of your striving! You’re fine just as you are! Namo Amida Butsu.” In hearing the voice, the sailor ceases his striving, relaxes and turns over on his back with limbs outstretched as if on a backyard hammock on a lazy summer afternoon. Then, to his great surprise, the ocean holds him up as he finds himself floating!

This symbolizes the epitome of Shin soteriological transformative experience called “Shinjin.” It takes place in this life and guarantees Buddhahood upon death. Shinjin is a multivalent term that includes the meanings of realization, entrusting, joy and confidence. Most Shin writers render it “entrusting heart,” but I prefer “awakening” as Shinran speaks of “Shinjin of wisdom” and “Great *Shinjin* is none other than Buddha-nature.” Both wisdom and Buddha-nature entail personal experience of awakening, rather than simply believing in what one has not yet experienced.

As for the content of Shinjin, it involves awakening to two of the principal truths of reality, 1) non-self (anātman) and 2) interconnectedness. Shinran, however, expressed them in distinctively Pure Land terms: non-self as “the depth of his *bombu* nature” and interconnectedness as “being embraced in Amida’s compassion.” His Pure

Land expressions took on deeply personal and mythic language, but they, nonetheless, pointed to the same truths expounded in Mahayana Buddhism.

In this vein, Shinjin awakening for Shinran was not a simple belief in Amida as a divine being, but involved wisdom and insight. It is, therefore, not surprising that Shinran equated Shinjin Awakening with the Stage of Stream Enterer found in early Buddhist texts and with the Stage of Joy of the Ten Bhumi Stages in Mahayana Buddhism. Even though those at these levels have not overcome the deeper levels of mental afflictions, they have achieved the initial levels of Awakening.

Now, in turning to what the ocean symbolizes in Shin Buddhism, the ocean is none other than Amida Buddha. However, unlike the Christian God who is generally seen to dwell *up above*, Amida is often perceived to be the foundation that supports from *underneath, the sides and behind*. Shinran, for example, speaks of "Planting his mind in the *ground* of Amida's universal Vow" and "Amida, the immense ocean into which all the rivers of sentient beings flow." Amida constitutes the foundational reality that was there all along, underneath and around us. We simply had failed to notice because we were too caught up in our effort to reach the island solely on our own power.

Further, Amida is *ultimately* not a divine being dwelling in a paradise billions of Pure Lands to the West. Instead, Amida's essence is beyond form and ineffable. Amida is the provisional manifestation of ultimate reality, expressed in mainstream Mahayana Buddhist terms, such as "suchness" (tathatā) and "Dharma-body" (dharmakāya). Shinran also used a term considered unique to him, *jinen hōni*, which I render "suchness of naturalness."

It was this suchness of naturalness that Shinran had awakened to, just as when the sailor let go of striving to realize that the ocean embraced him. In this Shinjin Awakening, Shinran emerged from Self Power to awaken to the Other Power.*

(Part 3 of 3 parts to follow in next month's Column)

(3)

“Taking refuge”

Quoted with permission

from

Coming Home: Refuge in Pureland Buddhism

by Satyavani Robyn

The beating heart of this book is refuge.

We all take refuge. We take refuge in money, status, chocolate, our homes, our families, people-pleasing, our jobs, alcohol, exercise, controlling people places and things, our health, our looks, coffee and television.

It would be more accurate to say that we attempt to take refuge in these things, as none of them is reliable or permanent. Some of them are healthier than others, but all of them are ultimately doomed to disappoint us.

As Buddhists we are encouraged to take refuge in the only three things we can ultimately rely on – the Buddha, the Dharma, and the sangha. As Pureland Buddhists we add two more to the list: Amida Buddha and the Pure Land.

Amida Buddha is a being of infinite light, life and love. We could substitute any source of unlimited compassion and wisdom.

Shakyamuni Buddha is the great teacher who lived in India two and a half thousand years ago. We could take refuge in any accomplished spiritual teacher.

The Dharma is the teachings of the Buddha and all those who followed him. We might also take refuge in any great spiritual teachings.

The sangha is the community of practitioners who follow the Buddha. It can also be seen as all our companions, from whatever tradition, on the spiritual path.

The Pure Land is the field of merit surrounding Amida Buddha. It is also any place that is made beautiful, peaceful, and supportive of our spiritual wellbeing, through the presence of a great being.

When we begin, we might not know what it means to take refuge in these things, or how we should do it. We give it a try anyway, imagining that we might be able to lean into our new spiritual community, or experimenting with handing over a problem to the Buddha. We take small steps and we see what happens. We feel our way.

We keep eating too much chocolate, and we keep messing up.

When we practice taking refuge, sometimes we feel a result, and sometimes we don't. Over time, however, we begin to notice a firmer kind of ground under our feet. We get a

glimpse of how it might be to live with the freedom of faith. We begin to find our way home.

“Taking refuge in Amida”

Amida, or Amitabha in Sanskrit, is the Buddha of Infinite Light.

Amida is brighter than the sun.

There is a beautiful description of this Buddha in the Larger Pureland Sutra, which lists twelve names as ways of describing the different qualities of this light – The Buddha of Measureless Light, Boundless Light, Unimpeded Light, Incomparable Light, Light of the Monarch of Fires, Pure Light, the Light of Joy, the Light of Wisdom, Continuous Light, Inconceivable Light, Ineffable Light, and The Buddha of the Light Outshining the Sun and the Moon.

This poetry points towards the scope and ferocity of this wholesome energy. How would it be to come into relationship with a power such as this?

Whether or not we think this energy exists, either in the form of Amida Buddha or in a more abstract way, we can experiment with aligning ourselves with it, and allowing ourselves to be influenced by it.

We can know that this energy sees everything, and is stopped by nothing.

We can remember that this light is suffused with joy, which is freely offered to everyone it touches.

We can trust that the light is always there, wherever and whenever we go.

We can take refuge in it.

Just like the sun, we can stop this powerful light with something as insubstantial as the thin skin of our eye-lids. If we close our eyes to her, she respects this and does not penetrate. She waits patiently, and is here as soon as we open our eyes.

Amida is here as soon as we open our hearts.

(Rev. Satyavani Robyn is a priest in the Amida Shu tradition, and she runs the Amida Mandala temple in the United Kingdom with her husband Kasper. She also works as a psychotherapist. Her site is at: www.amidamandala.com)

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Kenneth Tanaka Speaking Schedule (North America and Europe) in 2019:

March 10	Enmanji Buddhist Temple: Morning service
March 17	San Francisco Buddhist Church: Morning service & film show
August 25	San Jose Betsuin Buddhist Temple: Afternoon Seminar
September 6-7	Spokane Buddhist Temple: TBA
September 14	Enmanji Buddhist Temple: Afternoon Seminar
September 15	Sacramento Betsuin Buddhist Temple Ohigan service from 9:30 Seminar from around noon
September 20	San Diego Buddhist Temple, Seminar 7-9PM "An Introduction to Shin Buddhism through Humor: a Path of Naturalness for Greater Happiness and Meaning"
September 21	Orange County Buddhist Church Ohigan seminar from 9 - noon
September 22	Orange County Buddhist Church 10AM Ohigan service talk at Vista Buddhist Temple Ohigan service at 3PM, followed by Mini-seminar for 1-2 hours
September 24	Arizona Buddhist Temple evening
September 25	Chicago Buddhist Temple evening
September 26	Midwest Buddhist Temple evening
September 28-29	Kamloops Buddhist Temple, Canada British Columbia Province Conference
November 22-24	Eko Haus, Dusseldorf, Germany Hoonko Lectures