

Faith and *Inochi* as Infinite Life

HASE SHŌTŌ

Translator's Introduction
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THIS PIECE has been chosen to present another voice from the third generation of Kyoto School philosophers on the issue of life, and the various concepts in Japanese used to understand it—*seimei* 生命, *sei* 生, and *inochi* いのち. While Ueda Shizuteru's piece discusses the intuition of life as *inochi* in relation to the act and posture of sitting meditation, in the following, Hase Shōtō explores its significance in relation to the Pure Land tradition, particularly focusing on that tradition's imagery of Amida as a symbol of infinite life and Shinran's view of the relationship between Amida and suffering beings in faith (*shinjin* 信心).

Hase studied under Takeuchi Yoshinori 武内義範 (1913–2002) at Kyoto University, completing the doctoral course in 1965. Like Ueda, who is eleven years his senior, Hase served on the faculty there for many years and is currently professor emeritus. After retiring from Kyoto University, he went on to serve on the faculty at Otani University. His publications in the past decade have aimed toward a clarification of Shinran's thought, which he undertakes from the broad perspective afforded him by his studies of Western philosophy and religious thought.¹ The contribution below, where Hase weaves references to Spinoza, Pascal, Simone Weil, and Nishida Kitarō into his discussion of the function of faith in Shinran's soteriology, is representative of these recent works.

¹ See, for instance, Hase 2003, 2005, 2010.

The article translated below originally appeared in the work *Inochi ni kan suru itsutsu no rekuchā* いのちに関する5つのレクチャー (Five Lectures on *Inochi*), edited by Jin'ai Daigaku Shūkyō Kyōiku Kenkyū Sentā 仁愛大学宗教教育研究センター (Jin'ai University Center for Research on Religious Education) and is based on a lecture presented by Hase there on 15 November 2003.² This book is the product of a series of public lectures held at the newly founded Jin'ai University on the theme “Why is life to be valued?” It includes four other lectures on this topic by scholars and representatives of the Shin tradition, as well. This lecture series was begun in an attempt to clarify the significance and value of life in light of its apparent devaluation that is bespoken of by a series of atrocious murders within Japan that occurred around this time. In that sense, Hase's piece, although aimed at a general audience, is speaking to a different set of concerns from Ueda's, and so the term *inochi* here rings slightly differently than it does in the preceding piece. In particular, Hase views *inochi* as infinite life to be the point at which the transcendent Amida becomes immanent, or functional, within this world. Therefore, Hase highlights the rejuvenating power of *inochi* that endows one with both resilience in the face of suffering and the capacity to awaken others to that power, while Ueda points up cognizance of the natural flow and interconnection of *inochi* as an alternative standpoint to the “hypertrophic cultural life” that dominates contemporary society. That said, Hase and Ueda clearly share a sense of a need to clarify the religious significance of this term, over against more mundane, biological views of life.

This translation is based on the revised version of the talk that appeared in Hase's recent book, *Jōdo to wa nani ka: Shinran no shisaku to do ni okeru chōetsu* 浄土とは何か：親鸞の思索と土における超越 (What is the Pure Land? Shinran's Thought and Transcendence in Place).³

² The title of that lecture was “Muryōju to shite no inochi to yokushōshin” 無量寿としてのいのちと欲生心 (The Mind That Aspires for Birth and *Inochi* as Infinite Life). The title of the piece translated here is “Muryōju to shite no inochi to shin” 無量寿としてのいのちと信. Jin'ai Daigaku Shūkyō Kyōiku Kenkyū Sentā 2007.

³ Hase 2010, pp. 59–84.

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Infinite Affirmation

What is *seimei*, or what is *inochi*? These are questions that are related to the very core of religion.

We hear statements all the time, like “Let’s respect life” or “Life is to be valued,” that seem to be self-evident, but I sense that these words are being used without a clear grasp as to what it means to “respect life.” Does it mean that, since life is a possession that we have only one of, and will lose when we die, we ought to try to make it last as long as possible? When I hear the phrase “an irreplaceable life,” I get the impression that it includes this sense to some extent. If the phrase has that sort of a meaning, then it seems that questions and challenges would arise right away such as, “Is a life that will completely disappear at death really worth valuing so much?” or “Although you say you value life, is it really possible to treat it as though it were your own possession?”

If we take a step back and consider the connection between “life” and “myself,” we find that that relationship is not a simple one. It might appear that since I am living my life, I am in the role of master, and life is my subordinate, such that I can do what I please with my life. Yet, in that I am born and die within life, it is something that transcends me infinitely and that I can never fashion to my expectations. Rather than me living my life, it is more appropriate to say that I am a recipient of life, so life is in the role of master and I am its subordinate. From that perspective, it becomes impossible to say, “Let’s value life.”

Does that then mean that “valuing life” is pure nonsense? No, life should indeed be respected. However, that is not because life will be lost when one dies, but rather because within a life that ends with death, there lives life that does not die, immeasurable life (*murjōju* 無量寿). Respecting life must entail being cognizant of that immeasurable life.

What, then, is “immeasurable life”? It is that which works in the basis of my living, causing me to live, and can be said to be “the fundamental principle of infinite affirmation.” The reason that life must be respected is that each of us has hidden deep within ourselves this principle for infinite affirmation. That principle is expressing itself within us, seeking its own realization.

Let us turn to the question of what this fundamental principle of infinite affirmation is. It is, paradoxically, that which pushes me to overcome the nar-

rowness of my ego, that which melts away my obsessions with myself and makes me forget myself. We could say that it is something that, by getting in touch with it, enables us to move away from our concern with ourselves and accept the fact that we will die. Although it may seem contradictory to say that at the point when one accepts one's own death, self-affirmation is realized and immortality is achieved, the foundation of religion, or its most essential truth, lies in awakening to this fact and accepting it. What allows each of us to individually accept this fact is immeasurable life as the fundamental principle of infinite affirmation.

We become able to accept our own deaths when our most fundamental desire is fulfilled and realized, when our selves have been truly affirmed and we have arrived at a state of total satisfaction. The principle that makes such an infinite affirmation possible runs through my "life" (*inochi*) and seeks its realization in me. By getting in touch with that sort of affirming principle that works in the depths of our selves, we can move away from the selves and peacefully proceed to our own deaths. To put it another way, by giving oneself over to something that transcends the self, by sacrificing oneself to it, one is able to die. The significance of our lives, the issue to be faced in our living them, is coming into contact with that principle of infinite affirmation and discovering our selves within it. We must understand the significance of "valuing life" from this perspective. There, one can get in touch with something that lets one move away from, or forget, oneself.

We normally think that we can overcome or transcend ourselves through self-denial, having our selves negated. While this might seem like a stern, direct view of the self, it is not the proper way to grasp it. Instead, we must realize that it is by being truly affirmed that we can forget ourselves and move away from our self-centeredness. We have to recognize the profound fact that through being accepted and affirmed, we become able to move past our self-obsession and hence accept our own deaths. The idea of the original vow, or basic desire (*hongan* 本願), in Pure Land Buddhism comes from a penetrating insight into this reality. When one is clinging to one's self, thinking "I can't die with my life like this," it is usually at a time when one feels abandoned and alone. It is a time when one's self is cut off from the eternal life which is at work in its very basis and brings about the realization of infinite self-affirmation. Thus, where we should discover eternal life is the point where we can settle in to the fact of dying, a point that might be called "nothingness-as-love." The Pure Land concept of the original vow arose from the intuition of this truth. Faith in the original vow refers to the recognition that there is immeasurable life that transcends the

self and is at work in the depths of the self. The Pure Land is not a place one goes after dying. The Pure Land is a place where one is capable of accepting one's own death—a place where the self is affirmed and will not be forgotten.

Kaneko Daiei 金子大栄 (1881–1976) has said that if he were asked how someone would express their thoughts at moments of true happiness, he would respond with the statement, “I could die happily right now.” We think “I could die happily” when our selves have been truly affirmed and satisfied, and think “I can't die like this” when we have been torn apart from self-affirmation and encounter misfortune. Simone Weil (1909–1943) wrote that affliction is the state of having one's mind filled with thoughts of “self-loathing” and “self-despising,” which refers to a point at which the principle of self-affirmation has been bankrupted and the self has been utterly alienated from itself such that it is impossible to return to any semblance of self-acceptance. When people lose themselves, they become incapable of letting go of themselves. Weil says that just as a vine will wrap itself around anything that it comes in contact with, this self-attachment appears with awful and ugly force. Thus, we need to realize that only when we have come in contact with the principle of absolute affirmation that works in the depths of our lives and thereby achieve self-affirmation, are we able to move away from self-attachment and become free. The significance of coming into contact with eternal life is that through that experience, one becomes able to move away from the self, to die to the self. Although we might use the phrase “eternal life,” if it is devoid of the power to effect this sort of self-affirmation and self-renunciation, these are just empty words.

Yet, when we say that “eternal life,” which is the principle of infinite affirmation, works within us, is there any evidence of that fact? There certainly is. It lies within the fact that none of us will ever abandon ourselves. Although we easily give up on or abandon things that are not our selves, we will never abandon our own self. While we might say things like “I'm really sick of myself,” or “I'm disgusted with myself,” we do not totally give up on ourselves from the bottom of our hearts. Self-loathing and self-despising are unsurpassably painful because we come to the limit of our capacity for self-acceptance in these emotions. This inability to abandon our selves is often seen as an expression of our irresolvable egoism, or self-attachment, but this understanding is a mistaken view of the self. The reason I do not give up on myself is that there is this principle of infinite affirmation at work within—yet transcendent of—my self, which does not allow me to turn my back on it.

This fact is really quite peculiar, but having a profound understanding of it is the lynchpin of religion. Further, it is also the fount of all philosophical thought that can genuinely liberate people. We can point to Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) as one who has constructed his entire system of thought upon this fact. He discovered that the “drive for self-preservation” (*conatus*) at work within all things does not come from egoism, but wells out of “God’s Nature,” as well as the fact that the expansion and realization of this *conatus* is the path to the attainment of pure happiness.

It is generally thought that the inability to abandon one’s self arises out of egoism, selfishness, self-attachment, and evil passions, while the true realm of religion lies in negating these impulses and becoming selfless. Spinoza’s concept of *conatus* has often been viewed as the underlying principle of egoism. However, Spinoza held that within our very inability to give up on one’s self lay the principle by which one might connect with God and that in the expansion, realization, and fulfillment of these impulses there is an avenue to reach the principle of infinite affirmation. He thought that one could overcome the bounds of narrow egoism and achieve true selflessness and happiness, not by the negation of the self, but by the affirmation of the self. This insight resembles the basic insight of Pure Land Buddhism. “Immeasurable life” as the principle of infinite affirmation comes to work within the very self-love that will not permit us to give up on ourselves and seeks out the fulfillment of its impulse toward self-realization. This is the basis of the idea of the Tathāgata’s original vow, or basic desire. Egoism must be understood as the bud that prepares for the eventual blooming of a flower, protecting its growth within. “Valuing life” is letting go of egoism by extending our thoughts deeply to that principle of infinite affirmation which is at work within us, and making its realization possible.

This principle of affirmation that works within life is seen in Shin Buddhism as “immeasurable life” (*muryōju*), as the original vow of Amida Tathāgata. Further, in Shinshū, “faith” (*shin* 信) has been seen as the actualization and realization within each individual of this infinite life or original vow in the basis of the self. I would like to consider “life” (*inochi*) from this perspective and in order to do so, I want to take a brief look at the way in which *seimei* 生命 and *inochi* are understood today.

The Various Levels of Understanding Life (seimei)

Today, the issue of life (*seimei* or *inochi*) is being approached in a variety of fields in various ways. For instance, in the sciences, medicine, education,

and religion, to name a few, life is being considered and discussed each from a different angle or perspective. And yet, because of this multiplicity, "life" appears to take on a variety of forms, such that it has become difficult to tell which of those should take precedence in understanding life. In religion, the content of the term "life" has become particularly vague. Therefore, in order to clearly understand what "life" means in religion, it is necessary for us now to try to distinguish the various perspectives or levels at which life is considered and clarify the boundaries between these different senses.

First, there is life as it is approached in the fields of the biological sciences and cutting-edge medical research, which today is the subject of much attention and glowing adulation. Here, inquiry into life is pursued from a microscopic perspective. Life is examined through the analysis of the mechanisms of genes, germ cells, brain cells, etc., and some even believe that thereby the mysteries of life can be solved. The development of highly sensitive electron microscopes made these explorations from the microscopic perspective possible. In these pursuits, life is understood by bringing it down to the level of the most minute cells or genes, just as physics clarifies the nature of the physical world at the level of particles and atomic structure. The many wonderful results of research from this angle, as can often be seen today, are enough to amaze anyone.

Contemporary biology and medicine has, through the manipulation of cells with techniques of genetic engineering and cloning, created new life forms that had never before existed in nature, which is analogous to how contemporary physics was able to manipulate the nucleus of an atom to create nuclear energy, which had never before existed on earth. The biological sciences and advanced medicine have achieved these results by using the methods of physics and engineering that were originally applied to matter, and transferring them to the manipulation of life. In this instance, however, we must not forget that, although it may be called "life," the object of study is actually treated as though it were simply matter.

Although there certainly is an aspect of life that can be understood and manipulated as if it were matter, life viewed in that way is no more than an abstraction of just one facet of life, which only applies to life at the physiological, biological level. In this approach, life is observed and manipulated as an object, or as mere matter and therefore, that "life" is in fact dead.

The essence of life must be understood from the perspective that it is actually alive. So, what then can be viewed as the locus of this living? It is the fact that life, while relating to other things, maintains self-identity, that is to

say, a self. The proof that something is alive lies in the fact that it maintains itself within its relationships with other things. That is, life preserves itself within its relationship to its environment. Life does not exist completely isolated and on its own in the world, but instead lives in interaction with the environment, taking in water, air, and food from it. There, as when another animal breathes the air that I had once inhaled and exhaled, each individual life lives together, mutually interconnected through the environment, the air, water, etc. Ecology views life from this sort of a macroscopic perspective.

Understanding life in its relationship to its environment is to view life in the sense of a lived life (*sei* 生) or the process of leading one's life (*seikatsu* 生活). The environment in which humans live is not simply the physical environment of nature. Beyond the natural environment, there is the human environment, which includes the cultural, social, and historical environment. Natural life, cultural life, social and historical life can be distinguished along those lines. If we hold that biological sciences consist in simply seeing life as matter, then the humanities, such as art, religion, ethics, and history, come into being by viewing life as the life which is led, or the activity of living and study that aspect of it. Life, here, is felt within as "emotion" or "heart," and becomes something to be lived. Only then does life take on a subjective significance. Life is referred to as *inochi* when it is experienced interiorly as "emotion" or "heart." What is encountered in literature and the arts, and especially in religion, is this sort of life, called *inochi*.

For human beings, experiencing life in this way, as *inochi* within oneself, is critical. Such life infinitely transcends the level of physiological, biological life that is viewed as an external object, and it appears within our consciousness or our hearts from the infinite depths of our beings. This sort of life (*inochi*) that wells forth into our minds from depths that transcend human cognition is connected to what is referred to as "the life of the Buddha" or "the life of Amida Tathāgata."

What is critical is that this life is something that is felt, reflected upon, and awakened to within our hearts, not an object that is observed existing outside of ourselves. That which has been expressed in religion since ancient times with words such as "peace of mind," "joy," "enlightenment," "salvation," "nirvana," "the Pure Land," "ornaments of the Pure Land" is this very sense or feeling of "immeasurable life" that appears within the heart. In Shin Buddhism, that immeasurable life has been called "Amida Tathāgata," and also, "original vow" and the "mind of the vow." One must not forget that in Shin Buddhism, what is referred to as "life" is first and foremost Amida Tathāgata and therefore "immeasurable life." Faith is seen as entering into the depths

of that immeasurable life; that is, it has been understood to be maintaining an awareness of the “life” of the Tathāgata, or the original vow, deep within the mind.

What is salient in faith is that this sort of contact with immeasurable life brings the person unsurpassable joy, leads to the transcendence of suffering as well as to unlimited serenity. Shin Buddhism understands faith as that contact with the life of Amida Tathāgata, and has held faith as the centerpiece of its teachings.

Before we begin to consider faith as the life of Amida Tathāgata, I would like to further illustrate these various levels of understanding life (*seimei*) by borrowing some ideas from Tamaki Kōshirō 玉城康四郎 (1915–1999). In his considerations, Tamaki divides life into the follow seven levels:

- (1) Life in molecular biology
- (2) Life in cerebrophysiology
- (3) Life in medicine
(These first three are life as an objective phenomenon)
- (4) Life in self-consciousness (this is self-enclosed life)
- (5) Life of the unconscious self
- (6) Life of the physical body with specific personality traits
(These three are life as a subjective phenomenon)
- (7) Life of the liberated self (this is a life open to itself and others)⁴

Tamaki’s scheme for these divisions is a summation of the ideas I have just touched on, so I would like to make another attempt to understand these levels based on his categories.

Levels (1) through (3), those concerned with objective life, are the dimensions of life as understood in the biological sciences and medicine referred to above. The next, levels (4) through (6), which are concerned with subjective life, describe the dimension of life viewed ecologically. In this perspective, life is not considered as an object, but as a subject, as the mind or consciousness. Then, at the basis of this subjective life, Tamaki sees (7) “life of the liberated self” (i.e., an open life), and this is the dimension of religious life. He argues that the ultimate mission of the human being lies in awakening to life on this religious plane.

When we look at these levels as various stages of life from the perspective of the self, they progress from the level farthest from oneself, that of life in molecular biology, gradually coming closer to the self in stages. They

⁴ Tamaki, Go, and Kodama 1983, p. 25.

move from abstract life to concrete life. This can also be seen as a route of deepening progression from superficial, exterior life to profound, internal life.

That is to say, in the first three levels, those of objective life, life is viewed from the outside, as though it were an object. In that perspective, the fact that life is a living individual gets lost to sight. In the next level of viewing life, the subjective life, it becomes a function of the consciousness or mind. However, at the basis of that consciousness, there is hidden a profound life that is sunk deep within the depths of the unconscious, which does not arise in the sphere of our awareness. Life is rooted unconsciously in that life, while also being connected to the entire universe through it, flowing out of an infinite past into this present self and moving toward a boundless future.

Beyond this (5) “life of the unconscious self,” Tamaki sees (6) “life of the physical body with specific personality traits,” which he terms the “body resultant of karma,” or “the physical body born of past karma (*shukugō* 宿業).” This is the body that results from the entirety of the working out of causes and conditions. The life of this body with specific personality is said to take on the entirety of levels (1) through (5)—molecular biology, cerebrophysiology, medicine, self-consciousness, the unconscious—and to appear right here and now, making my present self possible. The self, then, when understood as the totality of that working out of life, comes to be seen as extending throughout the entire universe. Yet, while that life with personality is connected to the whole universe, it is unconsciously closed off from that universe. This connection does not arise to the level of awareness, and as long as that is the case, that life is an isolated one.

Tamaki calls (7) “life of the liberated self” the awakening here within me of the life (*inochi*) that was sleeping unrecognized within level (6)—the life endowed with personality as the karmic body that both takes on all the results of an infinite past and extends throughout the entire universe. At this level, the life that in the preceding levels which had been closed off within itself, now opens out and enters into our field of awareness. Limitlessly freed, this life awakens and leaps forth. Here is “immeasurable life” (marvelous life), life that says “There is real value in your living,” which Tamaki says is the life viewed from the perspective of religion.

Life (inochi) as Immeasurable Life (muryōju)

It has long been said that “life” as intuited in religion, while encompassing the so-called biological life within it, is a life of openness and freedom which is hidden deep within the depths of that biological life, while at the

same time transcending it. This is neither a new discovery nor a unique position. Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism is just such an intuition of immeasurable life, or “marvelous life.” This explanation has definitely not been made up after the fact to legitimate Pure Land Buddhism in modern terms. The original meaning of Amida Buddha, Amitāyus in Sanskrit, is this sort of “marvelous life.”

The reason that Amida Buddha has not traditionally been understood as “marvelous life” is that it has been seen as some sort of an actually existing substance or object. This tendency has also obstructed a proper grasp of the concept of the “faith of Amida Buddha,” because faith has been thought to be the action of the human mind choosing to believe in the existence of a transcendental object, rather than being seen as the working of the mind of the Tathāgata within the mind of the individual.

The *Amidakyō* 阿彌陀經 sings the praises of Amida Buddha and the land of utmost bliss where Amida lives, encouraging beings to aspire to be born there. A Sanskrit original of the *Amidakyō* that was translated by Kumārajīva (344–413) is extant and according to Inazu Kizō 稲津紀三, in that text all the instances that are translated as Amida Buddha appear as “*amita-āyus*.” “*Amita*” means “immeasurable” and “*āyus*” means “life,” so “*Amita-āyus*” refers to “immeasurable life.” Yet when the text was translated into Chinese, the term was first transliterated as “Amitufo” 阿彌陀仏 and then the Chinese adjectives for immeasurable life and immeasurable light were added on to describe the nature of this Buddha. Because of this choice of translation, “*amita-āyus*” was taken to refer to a specific, entirely transcendent personality and the original meaning of the term “Amida Tathāgata,” immeasurable life, or “marvelous life,” was obscured such that immeasurable life came to be seen as an attribute of Amida, alongside immeasurable light.

We should note that *āyus* refers to “marvelous life”—as distinct from *jīva*, biological life—and has the sense of “eternal life” that transcends birth and death. Therefore, it is called “immeasurable life.” The reason that *āyus* is “marvelous life” is that the human mind attains unsurpassable joy and serenity by coming into contact with it. Pure Land Buddhism refers to awakening to the life that abides in the deepest recesses of the heart as “returning to (or taking refuge in, *kimyō* 歸命) immeasurable life” and has found there true peace and a path to leave birth and death behind.

In actuality, we feel a difference in nuance between the phrases, “I take refuge in Amida Buddha” and “I take refuge (or return to) immeasurable life.” When we hear the word “Buddha,” we think of some being towering transcendently outside of us, and feel awe toward that being. That sensi-

bility has been expressed since the distant past in the words, “Although an arhat takes refuge in the Buddha, he remains in awe of him.” The arhat feels awe toward the Buddha, a transcendent being that towers before him, and quakes in fear. The term Amida Buddha somehow conveys the sense of objective, external transcendence. But in the phrase immeasurable life, this objectivity disappears and one instead gets a sense akin to the feeling of a vast ocean opening out infinitely before one’s eyes. One also gets the sense that one’s self is encompassed by that ocean, becoming a single droplet within it. Immeasurable life does not tower before us like Amida Buddha, but instead appears with spatial characteristics, like a great ocean, or the vast sky, that enfolds our selves within it. Shinran calls that immeasurable life “the ocean of the original vow” and the discovery of that life within oneself “the ocean of great faith.” From the fact that Shinran begins his *Shōshinge* 正信偈 with the words “Taking refuge in the Tathāgata of Immeasurable Life,” we can see that he has intuitively grasped these nuances properly. Further, it also clearly shows how Shinran understood what “faith” is.

What is important is not an explanation about immeasurable life, but coming into contact with it, and being able to feel its power within the self. How, then, can we get in touch with that power? There is no specific path to that contact. Considering deeply the unsurpassed joy that we experience in our daily lives is one such path there. But another path is to unflinchingly look upon the various negative experiences encountered in life and reflect profoundly on them. The path Śākyamuni laid out in the Four Noble Truths is of the latter sort.

The Four Noble Truths refers to the four truths of “suffering,” “its cause,” “its elimination,” and “the path to its elimination.” In the *Tenbōrin kyō* 転法輪經 (Sutra on the Turning of the Dharma Wheel), Śākyamuni explains how each of these is an honorable truth in the following way:

This human suffering is a holy truth, an unheard of Dharma, through which I have been given eyes, discernment, wisdom, and light. This holy truth of suffering—an unheard of Dharma, which should be known fully, is already known, and has been known in its entirety—is the source of my eyes, my discernment, my wisdom, and my light.⁵

Here, suffering is said to be a “holy truth,” yet this does not mean simply that suffering is an unavoidable, inevitable fact of the human world. Suffering is a holy truth only because within it there opens up a path to

⁵ Takakusu Hakase Kōseki Kinenkai 1938, p. 19.

overcome suffering itself. Through carefully considering the cause of suffering, something that makes it possible to transcend suffering is born in the human mind. Suffering acts as an intermediary that gives rise to a true life which in turn then melts away suffering, so to say. Suffering functions in the human being to stimulate the welling forth of that true life. Therefore, in the Four Noble Truths, Śākyamuni teaches that suffering is not just something to be rejected or erased, but that one should dig down into its depths. When considered in this way, suffering becomes a signal which leads one to realize that one's self is separated from truth. In other words, suffering is a path that encourages one to move toward the self's true way of being.

The truth that Śākyamuni saw in suffering was also perceived by Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎 (1870–1945) who said, “The motivation for philosophy must not lie in ‘wonder,’ but in the sadness of human life.”⁶ In these famous words, Nishida is remarking that through the sadness of life, true life, the religious mind, wells up in the human heart. He sees this as “a fact of the human spirit.” Nishida says that “There has likely never been a single person who has fallen into extreme unhappiness even once without feeling the so-called religious mind welling forth from the depths of their own heart.”⁷ Here, what he calls the “religious mind” is the true life-force (*inochi*) that wells up from the recesses of a person's heart through tragedy. This true life-force that arises in the basis of the human heart through sadness heals the human heart which has been hurt by that suffering. The anguish of human life has the function of awakening this sort of profound life within our hearts. Nishida himself most strongly felt this anguish of human life in the death of his child.

He speaks of his son's passing thus:

When my son passed away, I could not bear the profound anguish that I experienced. . . . When I think that the constant fact of human life is that young and old necessarily die, that my child is not the only one who has died, there is, in principle, nothing to grieve over. Yet, be they constancies of human life, tragic things are tragic; while thirst and starvation are natural human experiences, thirst and starvation are none other than thirst and starvation. People say that the dead will never return whatever we do, so we should give up, and try to forget, but for a parent this is a torment difficult to stand. It is a gift of nature that time will heal

⁶ NKZ, vol. 6, p. 116.

⁷ NKZ, vol. 11, p. 371.

all wounds, which from one perspective is perhaps important, but from another this phrase reveals the inhumanity of human beings. To not want to forget no matter what, to want to leave behind some sort of memorial, to remember at the very least for my own lifetime: this is parental integrity. I remember back when we read Washington Irving's *The Sketch Book*, knees together at the same desk, it said something like while I wish to forget and be healed of all other wounds, all other suffering, only the wound to my heart caused by losing my beloved son do I hope to keep fresh, always holding on to it, even if I need to hide that pain from those around me. That statement truly expresses my feeling now. When from time to time something brings forth a memory, remembering is the least compensation that I can offer, the expression of my sincerity toward the deceased. This sadness is clearly suffering, but it is suffering that a parent does not wish to be free of.⁸

A parent does not want to forget the sadness of losing a child, because the sadness of the child's absence serves as a pathway to encounter the child. Nishida therefore holds that profound sorrow has the function of compensation, saying, "Sadness that pierces to the marrow is enough to soothe the desolation of death."

This profound truth is not limited just to suffering and anguish. Generally, the evil that people encounter in their lives has the function of calling forth a pure life-force in the depth of the heart which brings about the overcoming of that evil. This is the reason that many sutras describe evil as an expedient means for awakening good. When a living thing is injured, that injury stimulates the working of a greater life-force that will heal it. Through that life-force, the injury is naturally healed. When the injury is one of the heart, that is an even more profound truth. Evil inflicted on a person, which takes the form of an external wound, automatically gives rise to the potential for healing by calling forth an aspiration toward good within that person's heart. Further, in the person whose entire spirit has been rent apart because of this wound, supreme good, unsurpassable good, an entirely pure heart is necessary. The religious mind is the appearance of this "pure," "good," "unsurpassable" thing—in sum, the life of the Tathāgata referred to as "immeasurable life"—in the depths of the heart. This does not arise because one's own mind is pure or unadulterated. Because the mind is injured and ailing, a longing for the pure and unadulterated—a desire to seek them—

⁸ NKZ, vol. 1, pp. 415–17.

arises in the depths of one's heart from a place transcendent of the self in order to heal those injuries.

That pure, unadulterated intention that is born from the depths of the heart has been understood to be Amida Tathāgata as immeasurable life. Therefore, the arising of a mind that seeks religion is an expression of the fact that a deep wound—one that cannot be healed with anything other than true life—has found its way into a person. Immeasurable life does not arise in the human mind unrelated to suffering and sorrow. Because it appears through suffering and sorrow, it has the capacity to heal suffering and sorrow.

The Heart and Its Nourishment: The Faith of Immeasurable Life

What comes to mind when we are profoundly conscious of these facts is that our hearts are supported by the life of the Tathāgata and receive the energy necessary to live from it. Although this fact is self-evident, we do not necessarily always understand it sufficiently. However, becoming profoundly aware of this reality is the essence or the fundamental truth of religion.

In order for boats, cars, and other machines to operate, it is necessary for them to receive energy from outside themselves, through things like coal and oil. Our bodies also require a source of energy, food, in order to function. We all understand this fact quite well. Yet it also holds true for our hearts. The human heart must obtain energy from outside itself in order to work. For some reason, however, we think that the mind is a free actor that can function by its own power, alone, and thus believe that it does not require a supply of external energy. We also see that as the difference between the mind and the body. A fair number of philosophers from the past to the present have understood the human mind in that way. Many religious thinkers have also viewed the mind as a free, independent, self-sustaining entity that does not rely on any other thing.

However, we must say that this is the gravest among all human delusions. Although religion is not always free of this sort of misconception, the mission of religion, or its essence, lies in awakening from this delusion. Since the distant past in the realm of religion, “self power” has been distinguished from “other power” and debates have raged between the two. The source of this conflict is closely related to the question of how to understand the human mind and whether it requires energy from beyond itself.

For instance, when Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) says that “man is a thinking reed,” he is very close to falling into this misconception. He argues that since human beings are no more than hollow reeds, they can be flattened by even the slightest shock from the physical world, but as

thinking reeds, humans are indestructible, self-sufficient entities that are transcendent of that world and not reliant on anything in it. This view, however, is a delusion. Human beings are not reliant on the universe just in terms of their physical bodies, but also in terms of their minds, which cannot withstand even the smallest shock from nature. We can easily see that this is the case if we think that when hit with an insult, the heart turns to lead, while just a single word of encouragement can bring someone to complete some task that would normally be thought impossible. The human heart is clearly not independent of the universe.

In fact, it is not just the body that requires food. The heart does, as well. The starvation experienced by the heart is equally, or sometimes more painful than physical hunger, and needs to be assuaged and satisfied in the same way. We usually do not feel this need simply because our hearts are satisfied by something and we have not reached the point of feeling this deprivation.

Religion starts from the insight that the heart is in greater need of sustenance than the body. If philosophy lies in the understanding that the human mind is indestructible and independent, we could say that religion lies in the awareness that the human mind cannot sustain itself or attain freedom without relying on the assistance of an external power.

Therefore, the fundamental issue in religion is to know what the mind takes as nourishment, where that nourishment is, and how to obtain it. Knowing the answers to these questions is referred to in religion as “wisdom,” or the “knowledge of means.” Understanding the heart’s deprivation and how to assuage it is the central mission of religion, and even if other things are brought to issue in religions, those problems are inessential and secondary from the religious perspective. Possession of religious wisdom is based on profound observation of the self and other human beings, and the facility of mind gained from such observation provides one with the “skill in means” that can assuage the heart’s deprivation.

The heart lives by receiving nourishment from the respect and love of others, encountering beauty, and other such things. The source of that nourishment is none other than “life” (*inochi*) as immeasurable life. People get this sustenance from the immeasurable life in the environments in which they live. Environment here refers to a place where that immeasurable life is flowing, a place which is fostered by that life. In Pure Land Buddhism, that sort of an environment has been seen as the “Pure Land.”

The Pure Land is a place where the life of the Tathāgata is received as sustenance. This nourishment for the mind has been laid out in the words discussing “the virtues adorning the Pure Land.”⁹ The things described there

⁹ This refers to the twenty-nine adornments of the Pure Land described in the *Jōdoron* 淨土論 (T no. 1524) of Vasubandhu (c. 400–480) and discussed in detail by Tanluan 曇鸞 (476–542?) in his commentary on it (T no. 1819).

as the water, atmosphere, and nutriments of the Pure Land are the food the *heart* eats. The significance of calling the Pure Land a “requited land” (*hōdo* 報土) lies here as well. That the Pure Land is a requited land means that it is not an other-worldly place which exists somewhere objectively, but instead is a place where the immeasurable life of the Tathāgata is bestowed upon us as nourishment. A place where we live off the life of Amida Buddha is called a requited land. This is the meaning of Shinran’s statement that the Pure Land is a requited land that was born through the fulfillment and in recompense of the original vow of Amida Tathāgata.¹⁰

The foundation of religion is in knowing that the human heart lives supported by immeasurable life. “Faith” refers to none other than attesting to the action of immeasurable life functioning within our selves as the energy by which we live. This is also what Shinran calls “the fulfillment of the merit transference of the pure vow mind of the Tathāgata.”¹¹ He writes that by being worked upon by the life of the Tathāgata in the Pure Land, we are able to reach a point where we “attain nirvana.”

Although when we hear the word “faith” we tend to think that it means believing in the existence of some uncertain entity called Amida Tathāgata, faith here is not “belief” in that sense. What Shinran calls faith is just about the exact opposite of such belief. Shinran says that faith “has absolutely no admixture of doubt,” which means that the mind of the Tathāgata enters into the human mind reinforcing it like a steel frame. That, then, does not refer to the activity of the human mind believing in the Tathāgata, but instead to the mind of the Tathāgata that has come into the human mind. While the human mind is in constant flux, flowing from one thing to the next without ever being settled, the reason that faith as it appears in such a mind can be called the “adamantine mind” (*kongō shin* 金剛心) is because it is not the human mind, but that of the Tathāgata. In this way, Shinran reveres faith as the mind of Amida Tathāgata which appeared from the depths of his heart. And because faith is the mind of the Tathāgata that emerges within one’s own mind, it has the capacity to serve as the cause which brings about the ultimate result of “attaining great nirvana.”

The Mind that Aspires for Birth as the Fount of Faith

So, in what way does the mind of the Tathāgata function in the human mind? I would like to consider this question in reference to “the mind that aspires for birth,” which is held to be the core of faith.

¹⁰ T no. 2646, 83: 620c13–14; CWS, vol. 1, p. 177.

¹¹ T 83: 603c27–28; CWS, vol. 1, p. 93.

In the *Larger Sutra on Immeasurable Life* (*Daimuryōju kyō* 大無量壽經), the original vow of the Tathāgata is described in forty-eight separate vows, among which the eighteenth is called the “vow of sincere mind and hopeful faith” and is described as clarifying the standpoint of faith. In that vow, faith is broken into three minds, the sincere mind (*shishin* 至心), hopeful faith (*shingyō* 信樂), and the aspiration for birth in the Pure Land (*yokushō* 欲生), and among these three, the mind that aspires for birth is seen as the core of faith. We can call these three minds the form, or image, of the mind of the Tathāgata as it permeates and appears within sentient beings, while the three elements—sincere mind, hopeful faith, and the aspiration for birth—represent the process or stages as the mind of the Tathāgata progressively deepens and grows within them.

The formless Tathāgata takes the form of the “Name” (*myōgō* 名号) and reveals itself before sentient beings. The Tathāgata’s mind of truth, or mind of purity, as shown in the Name is called the “sincere mind.” The point where that sincere mind, becoming the mind of great compassion, penetrates the hearts of sentient beings and reflects itself there is where “hopeful faith” takes shape. When this hopeful faith fills every corner of the minds of sentient beings, it appears from the depths of their hearts as the aspiration to be born in the country of the Tathāgata, the desire to become a Buddha. This is the “mind that aspires for birth” or the “mind that wishes for birth.” This aspiration, however, is not something that arose as the result of faith, but instead was already present in the minds of human beings as the foundation and source of faith. Therefore, the mind that aspires for birth is seen as both the root and branch of faith, that which serves as the ultimate foundation of faith. It is in this aspiration for birth where faith finds both its origin and its peak.

Although this mind that aspires for birth in the country of the Tathāgata is born from the furthest recesses of the hearts of sentient beings, it is ignited by the calling of the Tathāgata in the deepest part of their hearts, and cannot be called forth within them by means of their own effort. Therefore, Shinran sees the Tathāgata as the subject of this mind aspiring for birth and calls it “the inviolable order by which the Tathāgata calls the masses of living beings.”¹² This aspiring mind is not the desire of human beings, but is instead said to be the calling voice of the Tathāgata because human beings have absolutely no capacity to give rise to that desire within themselves. This aspiring mind is therefore said to be the Tathāgata transforming itself and appearing within

¹² T 83: 605c22–23; CWS, vol. 1, p. 103.

sentient beings, and is called the “the realization of the merit transference of the pure mind of the vow” by the Tathāgata. The Tathāgata changing form and manifesting itself in sentient beings is called merit transference. Faith is the expression of the Tathāgata’s mind of merit transference within sentient beings. As something that calls on sentient beings drawing them to the country of the Tathāgata, it is the aspect of merit transference for going forth toward the Pure Land (*ōsō ekō* 往相回向), while as the working that calls out to sentient beings, it is the returning aspect of merit transference (*gensō ekō* 還相回向).

At first glance, it may seem strange and illogical to say that the foundation for the desire that arises from the basis of human existence lies not in the human being, but in the Tathāgata, since this desire clearly comes from within the human being. But the fundamental structure of faith is hidden within this seemingly strange fact.

This fact shows us where we should search for the Tathāgata. The Tathāgata is not existing outside of us, in some unknown place. It exists within the mind that aspires for birth, and must be sought there. The Tathāgata is only actually existent in our desire to become the Tathāgata. Thus, when the desire to be born in the country of the Tathāgata arises within our hearts, the Tathāgata appears and works as that desire. The Tathāgata is within the mind of sentient beings that aspires for birth, and nowhere else. While this may seem bizarre, having a profound grasp of it is the core of faith.

Soga Ryōjin 曾我量深 (1875–1971) explains this unique relationship between the Tathāgata and the aspiring mind by referring to the relationship of the “child calling a parent” and “the responding parent.” In the human world, because parent and child are mutually external to each other, when the child calls, the parent responds. The one who calls and the one who responds are in a corresponding relationship. In the world of religion, however, the situation is different. There, even if the child calls, the parent does not answer. However much the child calls, there is no response from the parent, just the calling voice of the child. The parent is not present. In the world of religion, the relationship between parent and child is not one of correspondence, but of inverse correspondence. There, the child is thrown out into total isolation, as an orphan. Soga says, however, that, “Impossible as it may seem, the very voice with which the child calls its unknown parent turns out to be the calling voice of the parent. When seen in this way, we can discover true gratitude in the depths of our loneliness.”¹³

¹³ SRS, vol. 5, p. 244.

Here, Soga takes note of the distinctive structure of faith. To say that the Tathāgata is present in the voice with which we call the Tathāgata may seem ridiculous and meaningless, as though we were trying to sumo wrestle ourselves. Just listening to one's own voice, as though it were an echo, may appear to be utterly ineffective, but faith is to hear the voice of the Tathāgata within the Tathāgata's silence. The essential truth of faith is to be able to hear, in the basis of our voices that call the Tathāgata, the calling voice of the Tathāgata—which transcends us—while grasping the fact that that voice appears in the form of absence or silence.

Nishida Kitarō calls this peculiar structure of faith “inverse correspondence,” and says that the following words of Daitō Kokushi 大燈国師 (1282–1338) clearly represent this relationship: “Separated for incalculable eons, yet inseparable for even an instant; facing each other constantly, but never meeting for even a second.” Being separated while in contact, touching yet apart: This is the peculiar anatomy of faith. In a space of silence and absence, a state of being connected yet infinitely separated, the mind to recollect the Tathāgata functions such that that silence becomes a space of faith.

The Two Types of Merit Transference as the Result Attained in Faith

As I mentioned before, we are unable to give up on ourselves because the mind of the Tathāgata is present and at work in the foundation of our beings. This mind of the Tathāgata is the principle of infinite affirmation, which appears in the basis of our lives and works seeking out its own realization. The original vow of the Tathāgata is none other than this principle of affirmation. Egoism is the state in which that principle of affirmation is unfulfilled or unrealized. The desire for infinite affirmation is realized through coming into contact with immeasurable life. Herein lie the efficacy or benefits particular to faith. The benefit of faith is that by having the desire for infinite self-affirmation fulfilled, we become able to live in this world while being grounded in a place that transcends our limited egos and the life of this mundane world.

In the distant past, the Pure Land Buddhist patriarch Tanluan thought that in order to study the vast teachings of Buddhism, it would be necessary to attain great longevity, so he collected a variety of “scriptures of the Daoist adepts,” or texts aimed at the realization of longevity and immortality, and performed research on them. But it is said that after he read the *Kanmuryōjukyō* 觀無量壽經 (Sutra on the Contemplation of Immeasurable Life, hereafter, *Contemplation Sutra*), having been encouraged to read it by Bodhiruci (n.d.–527), he burned those Daoist scriptures and became a follower of Pure Land Bud-

dhism. Tanluan chose to burn these scriptures instantly; he did not pore over them, comparing them with the *Contemplation Sutra* and finally deciding that this sutra's content seemed to be more effective for his goals. He burned the Daoist scriptures because in reading the *Contemplation Sutra*, he came in contact with the immeasurable life of the Tathāgata. There he discovered a foundation that transcended the mundane life of this world that he was trying to extend. Getting in touch with eternal life, he gained in the present a "superlative method for longevity and immortality,"¹⁴ and was thus freed from attachment to the life of this world, which is the primary feature of such Daoist works that seek to extend it. Shinran writes in the *Shōshinge* 正信偈 about these circumstances, saying Tanluan "burned his Daoist scriptures and took refuge in the land of bliss."¹⁵

Shinran views faith as getting in touch with immeasurable life in the depths of one's being. By coming into contact with this immeasurable life, one comes to think that one's life in this world is not so important. This immeasurable life fulfills one's ultimate desire, that for total self-affirmation. Shinran also develops a profound discussion concerning the results or benefits that faith brings to human beings. On one hand, faith has the result of bringing the human being to the realization of "unsurpassed nirvana." He calls the function of the mind of the Tathāgata that turns human beings in the direction of nirvana "the going-forth aspect of merit transference." On the other, however, faith also has the function, or virtue (*kudoku* 功德), of endowing those who have come in contact with this immeasurable life with wisdom and the ability to employ expedient means such that they can live grounded in the present reality and turn others toward encountering the same immeasurable life. Shinran calls the mind of the Tathāgata that appears within human beings and acts to cause them to benefit other human beings the "returning aspect of merit transference." In this way, Shinran has deeply considered the benefits of faith, or the results gained from it, and describes the two functions that the single mind of the Tathāgata displays when it works within sentient beings as the "going aspect" and the "returning aspect."

Regarding the returning aspect of merit transference, however, it is possible to say that its function has traditionally been understood in two different ways. From one perspective, it has been viewed as external to the faith of sentient beings, namely as the teachings of their predecessors which

¹⁴ Shinran uses this phrase to describe faith at the beginning of the chapter on faith in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. See T no. 2646, 83: 601a5–6 and CWS, vol. 1, p. 79.

¹⁵ T 83: 600b14.

bring about their faith. In this view, while the going forth aspect of merit transference is taken to be the concrete working of Amida Tathāgata, the returning aspect is viewed in Śākyamuni and the patriarchs of Pure Land Buddhism, in teachers such as Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212) and Shinran.

From another perspective, however, the returning aspect of merit transference has also been understood as the fruit of faith itself. In this case, it has not been seen as preceding the going aspect and serving as the basis for its realization, but instead has been understood as part of the activity of sentient beings, something that they enter into through the working of the going aspect. While the going aspect is the facet that turns sentient beings who have attained faith toward nirvana—the facet of the *bodhicitta* in Pure Land Buddhism that aims toward becoming a Buddha—the returning aspect is seen as the facet that turns sentient beings with faith toward benefiting other sentient beings. That is, this aspect aims toward liberating other suffering beings. In this view, the returning aspect of merit transference is seen as the working of the Tathāgata within sentient beings who have attained faith.

Yet we should keep in mind that although the action of the returning aspect of merit transference is seen within the activity of sentient beings, we must not mistake the subject of the working of merit transference to be those sentient beings themselves. To properly understand the returning aspect of merit transference, we have to avoid confusing the fact that its activity appears within sentient beings with the idea that the subject of that activity is sentient beings. The subject of the returning aspect—the one that transfers merit—is the Tathāgata; sentient beings are nothing more than the place where that activity occurs. It goes without saying that sentient beings do not have the capacity to effect merit transference, to put it into practice. But we must not come to the conclusion that simply because sentient beings lack that ability, the returning aspect never manifests itself in their lives.

Although the subject of merit transference is the Tathāgata, since the Tathāgata cannot act directly upon sentient beings, it must borrow their help. The reason that merit transference is merit transference—that is, a transfer or transformation of the function of the Tathāgata—lies in the fact that the Tathāgata acts upon sentient beings through the activity of other sentient beings. Yet, because the Tathāgata changes its form and appears within sentient beings, they are necessarily unaware of that presence. Thus, the function of the returning aspect of merit transference is said to be “like the harp of the Asura: although no one plays it, music arises of itself.”¹⁶ The fact that the returning aspect of merit transference appears within the lives of sentient

¹⁶ From the *Jingtu lunzhu* 淨土論註 (T no. 1819, 40: 843b29–30), quoted in the *Kyōgyō-shinshō* (T 83: 620b28–29; CWS, vol. 1, p. 174).

beings while they themselves do not practice that transference is similar to the way that Christianity sees the true subject of “love of neighbor”—held to be almost as important “love of God”—to be God, not the human being, and thus says, “let not the left hand know what the right hand is doing.” The working of the Tathāgata as the returning aspect of merit transference appears within sentient beings, but in a way that sentient beings themselves do not recognize.

In any case, in faith, the life of the Tathāgata seeps into the hearts of human beings and by working there leads them on the one hand to the realization of great nirvana, and on the other calls forth what might be called the scent of nirvana within their human relationships whereby that working spreads to other people. Therein lies the religious world referred to as the “realization” (*shō* 証), or fruit, of faith.

ABBREVIATIONS

- CWS *The Collected Works of Shinran*. 2 vols. Trans. Dennis Hirota, Hisao Inagaki, Michio Tokunaga, and Ryushin Uryuzu. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha. 1997.
- NKZ *Nishida Kitarō zenshū* 西田幾多郎全集. 19 vols. Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten. 1947–66.
- SRS *Soga Ryōjin senshū* 曾我量深選集. 12 vols. Ed. Soga Ryōjin Senshū Kankōkai 曾我量深選集刊行会. Tokyo: Yayoi Shobō. 1970–72.
- T *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō* 大正新脩大藏經. 85 vols. Ed. Takakusu Junjirō 高楠順次郎 and Watanabe Kaikyoku 渡辺海旭. Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai. 1924–34.

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