

Reverence and Reality

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Introduction

I BELIEVE that we are still in an era of theorizing which may be called post-modern. A view of the relation between the world's religions that seems quite consistent with the love of diversity and suspicion of grand theories which characterizes post-modernism has been expounded by Abe Masao. Professor Abe's position is that there is no common denominator to the world's religions. In particular, he dismisses unifying principles such as "God or Reality" and "faith," proposed by John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith respectively.¹ Even to claim that all major religions have faith near their core may be to trivialize the distinctiveness of a Buddhist faith and how it contrasts with Muslim faith and traditional Christian faith. Thus, Abe is amongst those who reject the grounding of all religions in faith as too leveling, as insensitive to the vastly different felt qualities of those religions' faiths.

I believe that Tachikawa Musashi's recent analysis of Buddhist practice as cultivating an experience of a realm of the sacred is cogent.² If Tachikawa and others wish to elaborate this point more fully, I believe that they and we must distance a Buddhist sense of the sacred from Christian and Muslim notions, which include an aspect of fear of the Ultimate. What I think we may become able to say is that reverence for that perceived as sacred is a

¹ Abe 1989.

² Tachikawa 2000.

universal aspect of religiosity. Reverence is an attitude of appreciation and profound respect. It is my perception that such reverence for the sacred is a necessary condition for genuine religiosity and a common ground shared by the world's major religions. Nonetheless, profound ontological, phenomenological, emotive and aesthetic differences exist between the experience of the sacred by persons in differing traditions. An obvious and important example is the lack in Buddhist reverence of an aspect of affirming our assertions about the sacred as adequate and as being of importance to all humans. Thus, I would agree with Abe Masao that there is no common denominator for Buddhism and Christianity insofar as it is to be identified at the level of mutually affirmed ontological truth claims.

I am also claiming that my school of Buddhism, Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 (also known as Shin Buddhism), and most types of Mahāyāna Buddhism include a sense of the presence of the sacred. As a key aspect of religious experience in most Buddhist practice, and central to moments of experience that are correlated with insight or increased discernment in our tradition, a sense of presence is crucial.

This also is a point for comparison and contrast between Buddhism and Christianity. The Buddhist sense of presence is always partial and includes an aspect of absence. It appears to me that there is no Buddhist ideal of absolute presence or thorough transcendence of the absence of the sacred. In this regard, Buddhists are not severely challenged by Jacques Derrida's notion that presence must include absence. Rather it is consistent with our principles that any person, place or event will be in part present and in part absent in a moment of experience. All experience is finite and conditioned according to Buddhist principles.

The Buddhist experience of truth is an experience of a partial presence of a dependently co-arising whole which must also be partly absent from our experience of it. Thus, we find no problematic in Derrida's statements such as, "Nothing . . . is anywhere either simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces."³ I suspect that most streams of Christianity look forward to a realm of full presence that transcends the problem of absence. Buddhist thinking would notice that longing for the full presence of that which is sacred is itself a type of thirsting that causes unhappiness. On the other hand, it is the Buddhist tradition that extends reverence and discovers sanctity very broadly. Everything should be revered on

³ Derrida 1981, p. 26.

Buddhist principles. The actual range of persons, places, objects and events that can be experienced as sacred expands with Buddhist practice. Jōdo Shinshū is one of dozens of Buddhist schools that find the utterance of or reflection upon Amida Buddha's name to be the presence of the sacred. Amida Buddha is the Buddha of "Immeasurably great Wisdom-light and Endless Life." The combination of Amida's name with a term meaning "to rely upon" in "Namo Amida Butsu," and its cognates, is the presence of an activity of liberating all suffering and deluded beings. Such phrases, when spoken or thought, are a presence in finite form of a vast commitment to enlighten all beings. This process of recalling Amida Buddha is a way in which that which is sacred becomes accessible to us. Although Christian theology seems to look forward to the full presence of the sacred at some point, this does not mean the presence of the entirety of reality. Some aspects of reality are sacred and some are not proper objects of reverence on Christian principles. On Buddhist principles, the unbroken chain of dependent co-origination (or suchness, emptiness, the Dharma-realm, etc.) is sacred in all of its aspects but present to the conscious experience of any particular subject only partially.

In these two regards—reverence for and felt presence of the sacred—Buddhist and Christian traditions can be seen to share much while each remains utterly distinctive. These categories may prove fruitful for further inter-religious dialogue.

I. Believing, Not-Believing and Truth Claims

The centrality of key ontological truth claims in Christian tradition seems to demand an affirmation of beliefs as a component in Christian faith. It is sometimes hard for our Christian friends to appreciate how detached Buddhist faith is from the commitment to affirm certain beliefs. Buddhist rhetoric may occasionally exaggerate the degree to which we avoid metaphysics, but a more doggedly experientially-based faith is characteristic of Buddhist reverence.

Not-Believing as Ontology

Most Buddhist concepts are recommended for provisional acceptance—"look at it this way if you will." Such beliefs as a conviction in the reality of Amida Buddha's Pure Land and the trustworthy presence of his liberating activity in the saying of his name are recommended for provisional acceptance only. We do not insist that our own members affirm beliefs in such

ideas as facts and certainly do not feel that all humans need such ideas for salvation. All Buddhist schools are, however, founded on the three marks—the impermanence of all things, the non-existence of a uniquely self-same soul, the efficacy of awakening for the resolution of our suffering. By “no soul,” our tradition means to deny the existence of a non-physical, permanent, unchanging, uniquely self-same essence to personal identity. This, it seems to me, is an ontological truth claim. Buddhism rejects any sort of soul that could be considered a uniquely self-same essence to personal identity. This firm refusal to believe in a soul is a metaphysical position, which involves an ontological truth claim.

Not-Believing as Religious Experience

In the Jōdo Shinshū school of Buddhism the experience of saying Amida Buddha’s name as the presence of the sacred contrasts with the unreliability of all of our opinions and truth claims. The classical statement of this realization of the unreliability of opinions comes from the record of Shinran’s oral teachings:

I know nothing at all of good or evil. For if I could know thoroughly, as Amida Tathāgata knows, that an act was good, then I would know good. If I could know thoroughly, as the Tathāgata knows, that an act was evil, then I would know evil. But with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity. The nembutsu alone is true and real.⁴

There is an intellectual humility here that may be obscured by the apparent affirmation of the truth of saying or thinking Amida Buddha’s name (the nembutsu). However, even the affirmation of “Namo Amida Butsu” and its cognates as “true and real” is not made as an assertion of a truth claim. Shinran’s experience of “namanda” and other forms of nembutsu as the presence of something sacred is not correlated with affirming his own beliefs or even the concepts of the tradition as adequate. The experiential nature of this discernment and the absence of asserting truth claims can be seen in the following passage from *Tannishō*:

⁴ Postscript of *Tannishō* 歎異抄 (A Record in Lament of Divergences). Hirota et al. 1997, vol.1, p. 679. Also in Hirota 1982, p. 44.

I have no idea whether the nembutsu is truly the seed for my being born in the Pure Land or whether it is the karmic act for which I must fall into hell. Should I have been deceived by Master Hōnen and, saying the nembutsu, were to fall into hell, even then I would have no regrets.⁵

Shinran's conviction in the reliability of the nembutsu is not correlated with an affirmation of the true existence of Amida Buddha's land nor the reliability of saying the nembutsu for being born there at the moment of death. To borrow the language that Tachikawa has adapted from Rudolph Otto and Mircea Eliade, Shinran's experience of the sacred occurs from within a context of thought and belief that are themselves irremediably *profane*. The experience of the sacred and living a life of reverence is perhaps a central aspect of Jōdo Shinshū with commonalities in Christian tradition and many other religious paths. The refusal to take a further step and "affirm propositions about the world as finally adequate expressions of the truth" is clarified in this passage from the work of Dennis Hirota:

First, the realization of truth is inseparable from the realization of the final inadequacy of all human conceptuality or constructions of reality. This does not mean that one embraces the conviction of falsity or relativism as a further proposition within the field of conceptual life, nor is it a merely linguistic solution to metaphysical perplexities. It involves an existential reorientation grounded in self-awareness of evil. Moreover, the realization of the falsely substantializing and ego-centric nature of human conceptuality is itself an awakening to or manifestation of truth, and it moves one constantly toward "truer," decentered (and compassionate) perspectives and action. Second, the truth that is the opposite face of the self-realization of falsity can take on verbal expression, pervading the conceptual life of the Shin practitioner; this is the role of the nembutsu. On the one hand, then, practitioners do not transcend language and conceptuality (their engagement is not meditation). On the other hand, neither do they accept and affirm propositions about the world as finally adequate expressions of truth (their engagement is not faith in this sense).⁶

⁵ Ibid., p. 662. Also Hirota 1982, p.23.

⁶ Hirota 2000b, p. 178.

This refusal to affirm even one's most cherished notions as adequate is highly Buddhistic and contrasts sharply with both traditional and fundamentalist Christianity.

II. Reverence and Reality

Such reflections as those I have expressed above lead me to the position that reverence for that perceived as real and worthy is of the essence of all religiosity. I am sympathetic to the position of Abe Masao, a rejection of any unifying principle for all religion, which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper. Truly we must honor the vastly different felt qualities of faith and reverence in religions such as Christianity and Buddhism. As a Buddhist, I could not accept "God" as a unifying principle. There is nothing in Shin conceptual vocabulary that closely resembles the monotheistic god of the Judeo-Christian tradition. For this reason, I find the identification of Amida Buddha and Christ in the process Buddhology of John S. Yokota unconvincing.⁷

Reverence is an attitude of profound respect and appreciation felt and expressed for that perceived as sacred. Those who find this unifying principle too leveling or homogenizing may do well to remember that there is nothing like the "fear of god" in Buddhism. That Rudolf Otto and Mircea Eliade both found such awe near the essence of sacredness is a cautionary note.⁸ Is "sacred" the wrong word for what I am talking about? I don't really think so. Others may claim that what I really mean by "reverence" is precisely the faith that Wilfred Cantwell Smith uses to unify what we usually call the world's major religions. But reverence is a bit different than faith. It is both a feeling and a commitment to action. It does not, however, mandate unswerving trust. Some Buddhists believe in life after death, some find this talk within the tradition as mere metaphor. Some Buddhists consider the possession of Buddha-nature a guarantee of enlightenment one day for all, most of us are a bit less optimistic or at least less eschatological in our theorizing.

My own perception of Buddhist tradition is that reverence is first developed for those persons, places and processes which are seen as sacred. But these concrete objects of reverence vary from denomination to denomination and even from person to person. We all respect Śākyamuni, the historical founder of Buddhist tradition, but he may be revered only with a token nod

⁷ See especially Yokota 2000, pp. 205–206.

⁸ See for example Otto 1969, especially pp. 12–19, and Eliade 1959, p. 121.

by some. Amida Buddha is an ultimate object of reverence for all Buddhists in the Pure Land stream of tradition, but he is not revered by Theravadins, followers of Nichiren's teachings, nor by Buddhists of some other schools. Furthermore, what he/it really is varies on the perception of devotees. Thus Amida is, among other things, a person for me, but not so for many. Easily half of my Japan-trained colleagues refer in English to the Buddha whom we rely upon as "*the Amida Buddha*." This grammatically awkward phrase is meant to emphasize that Amida is beyond what we normally understand as a person.

Reverence may be a necessary condition for religiosity, a necessary component to all religions. But the degree to which this is homogenizing might be very slight. There is no set of sufficient conditions for being a religion that I can outline and reverence itself may not be, in some cases, specifically a religious matter. When an atheist-humanist reveres the Bill of Rights, for instance, he or she is not turning democracy into a religion. I believe that all religious persons are reverent toward that perceived as sacred. Yet our concept of what is sacred varies within denominations and within the course of individuals' progress. It is, I believe, typically Buddhist to find the realm of the sacred expanding as one is more and more deeply nurtured by tradition. For myself, it is the saying and thinking of Amida's name in some form like "Namo Amida Butsu" which is the central object of reverence. Yet even this sacramental speech-act, the nembutsu, is not perceived as sacred to the same degree at all times. Sometimes my saying of phrases like "Namandabutsu" is performed with great reverence. At other times my voicing of Amida Buddha's name is almost mechanical. The sphere of what is sacred for me did not include "Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō" in 1989 but it has since the mid-90s. Even so, I did not and do not repeat that phrase in my own Buddhist living. The realm of the sacred does not include the Christian Bible for me. For me sometimes the sunrise is perceived as sacred and sometimes it is not. Handguns are never sacred for me. For a new-age Vedantist, a handgun may be a symbol of or even an embodiment of Shiva or perhaps Kali. Am I less religious for extending the realm of the sacred less broadly?

A highly regarded Zen teacher once remarked that the rings of Saturn may have been caused by a nuclear explosion. Does this mean that catastrophic weapons are also sacred? Speaking for myself, catastrophic weaponry is irredeemably profane. All Buddhists don't have to agree about this. Various persons in various streams of the world's major religions will draw the line between the sacred and the profane differently. It is highly Buddhistic to

aspire for the realm of the sacred to expand and include progressively more of that which was formerly considered profane.

Sanctity and Sacramental Acts

The Jōdo Shinshū school is one movement within the broad stream of Pure Land Buddhism, which centers on the saying of Amida Buddha's name. While the older streams of Mahāyāna tradition take the nembutsu as a practice that requires deliberate focus, effort and near constant oral repetition, Jōdo Shinshū religiosity finds the nembutsu to be the presence of the sacred. There is a similarity in the way devotees feel about "Namo Amida Butsu" and its cognates and the way Catholic and more traditional Christians feel about the receipt of the Eucharist. A Catholic, for example, will consider receiving Communion to be an encounter with the sacred. Even so, Communion will not be received as often as possible. If someone thinks they need to receive Communion at the 6 a.m. mass, the 7 a.m. mass, the 8 a.m. mass, and again that night at an evening service, they are almost surely lacking in both faith and religious experience.

The role of the utterance of Amida Buddha's name in the Pure Land stream of Buddhist tradition might be called sacramental in that the utterance itself is important as an act providing access to the sacred. Language is not here, in its fundamental import, functioning to refer to, or to symbolize something outside of the speech-act. The sanctity of uttering phrases like "Namo Amida Butsu"/"I rely upon Amida Buddha" derives from the Buddha's activity in liberating suffering and deluded beings. Amida accomplishes this through transferring the practice of reverently saying such phrases to them. It is, nonetheless, the finite and somewhat flawed practitioners who say the nembutsu. Unlike Catholic, Orthodox Christian or esoteric Buddhist approaches to ritual, there is no special initiation necessary for one to enact the 'sacrament' of the nembutsu. Mahāyāna Buddhist practices are available to anyone. The nembutsu is perhaps the most accessible and egalitarian of all Buddhist practices.

III. Reverent Practice

To understand the reverent practice of saying Amida's name as our activity empowered by Amida Buddha's activity is to return to the dynamic religiosity evidenced in Shinran's texts. By placing the emphasis on the experience of the sacred along the specific path of saying Amida Buddha's name, I mean to explain how Pure Land Buddhists are given access to this universal reli-

gious experience. In saying or thinking Amida's name, we are empowered to experience the sacred in reverent practice. The emphasis on the nembutsu as the presence of the sacred hopefully provides a link between Pure Land Buddhist religiosity and spirituality in the Christian religion. To emphasize that reverence is a practice is highly Buddhistic and might provide a resource for re-thinking reverence for Buddhists and also for some outside the Buddhist tradition.

Dennis Hirota's Elaboration of Shinran's Practice-centered Transcendence of Practice

A unique perspective that holds possibilities for spiritual renewal can be found in Dennis Hirota's reintegration of Shinran's practice-centric approach to the nembutsu with the transcendence of practice that is so characteristic of Jōdo Shinshū religiosity. In the following passage, he contrasts the significance of *shinjin*—in my terms this is a faith which involves a transformative change in identity and which occurs amidst what is usually referred to as a religious experience—with the faith expounded by Martin Luther, which still involves concerns for justification and righteousness. If we are to understand Shinran's elaboration of *shinjin*, we must "recognize the significance of *shinjin* in terms of the finality of practice in the immediate present."⁹ This point is made also in the following passage:

[Shinran] states that since *shinjin* is not simply given by Amida, but is itself the Buddha's mind, the utterance of the nembutsu that is the concrete manifestation of this mind in one is perfect practice, full of the Buddha's virtues; hence, with realization of *shinjin* one's attainment of enlightenment becomes settled immediately.¹⁰

The settlement of final liberation in the present moment contrasts clearly with the usual Christian perspective on faith, particularly the classic Protestant perspectives such as Luther's. On that sort of view, it is always possible to again become alienated from that which is ultimate and thereby fail to enter the realm of the sacred at death. The settlement of the matter of salvation by practice, such as Dennis Hirota has elaborated it, contrasts both with the usual Christian view of faith and with modern interpreters of Shinran and their interpretations of the experience of *shinjin*. *Shinjin* and the

⁹ Hirota 2000a, p. 39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

practice of saying the nembutsu have been contrasted in a way which resembles the faith-versus-works rhetoric of normative Protestantism.¹¹ This dualistic contrast between a (sacred?) faith-like experience of *shinjin* and a (profane?) activity of saying the nembutsu is inconsistent with Shinran's texts, with his insistence that *shinjin* and the nembutsu are inseparable, and with the actual phenomenology of religious experience in the Pure Land stream of Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition.

Dennis Hirota's comment that *shinjin* should be understood in terms of the finality of practice in the immediate present might be elaborated as follows:

- 1) The completion of practice is the attainment of the heart and the mind of a Buddha.
- 2) *Shinjin* is the heart and mind of Amida Buddha transferred to us in the act of reverently saying or thinking his Name.
- 3) Therefore each moment of faithfully saying his Name, *shinjin*, is a moment which is the finality of practice in the immediate present.

A confusion about the saying of the nembutsu has entered Jōdo Shinshū tradition due to attachment to the rhetoric of abandoning self-power (*jiriki*) and relying on the Buddha's power (*tariki*, literally "Other Power," or more specifically, "*hongan riki*," the power of Amida Buddha's fundamental commitment). The ontological question of where the efficacy of the saying of Amida's name derives from should never have obscured the crucial fact that we say phrases such as "Namo Amida Butsu" and our experience of the world is significantly changed as a result of this practice. Practice can be entirely one's own, entirely that of another, or a shared reality such as the nembutsu. Amida Buddha's vast compassion empowers the nembutsu but it is our sharing in the practice that leads to a transformation in our experience of the world. Embraced by the compassion of the Buddha, practitioners in the Pure Land stream of tradition come, at times, to walk through a realm of wonder with hope and some real degree of kindness in their hearts. Entrusting themselves to the salvific power imploded into the nembutsu, they rediscover again and again the mystery and reliability of living in the light of the nembutsu.

¹¹ For a summary of such a dichotomous interpretation of Shinran's thought and my own critique of its splitting the nembutsu off from *shinjin*, see Gibbs 1997.

Practice, in Buddhist religiosity, is not necessarily engaging in activities that are physically difficult or intellectually demanding. Although practice is only final or complete in attaining the heart and mind of an enlightened person, meaningful practice is widespread amongst the billion or so Buddhists on this planet. Practice is essentially a matter of seeing things differently and behaving a bit better as a result. Whether empowered by Buddhas and Bodhisattvas or not, it is a change in perspective. Practice is essentially a matter of living a different way, coming to walk through a somewhat different world, or perceiving the world you are walking through differently.

The practice of viewing in a renewed way the nembutsu (“true language” as Dennis Hirota puts it), our own opinions (false language), and the world (simultaneously defiled and pure) is possible through empowerment by Amida’s compassionate illumination of our lives. While having no argument against Hongwanji-ha traditionalists so far as the ontological source of the efficacy of the nembutsu—it is the Buddha’s vast compassion that accounts for any change in our viewpoint—some of us feel the need to stress that this is a practice. To obscure our participation in walking the nembutsu path with jargon about “self-power” is to direct others away from the Buddha’s compassion. The very harangue against relying upon our own efforts is the action of the ego as it strives to encompass every aspect of our lives within a small sub-section of its own domain.

What I am referring to as practice and religious experience are points at which inconceivable reality breaks through the hard shell of our ego’s self-aggrandizement. Honoring the profound depths that we encounter in saying phrases such as “Namu Amida Butsu” is a subtle challenge. We might come very close to a correct articulation of Shinran’s guidance and still be reinforcing the tyranny of an ego-dominated portion of the verbal and conceptual aspects of our identity. Dennis Hirota cautions against wrapping Shinran’s vision up into succinct formulas such as to say that the Name of Amida Buddha is the form of the formless:

Thus, true language as the Name is characterized by both conception and inconceivability, form and formlessness. It may be understood in terms of the concepts of Vow and Amida Buddha and, at the same time, it is nondual with suchness or formless true reality. This does not mean that the Name may be comprehended as simply the form of that which is formless, or as a word that refers to Buddha or reality. In such an understanding, the Name as word

becomes an instrument appropriated within our ordinary modes of thought and speech . . .¹²

IV. Brief Ontological Reprise

I have claimed that the role of ontological truth claims is much less central to Buddhist tradition than it is to the Christian religion. Even so, we must have some notion of what it is that we are reverent toward. Although particular schools of Buddhism will emphasize discrete concerns, e.g., Amida and his Name for the Pure Land schools, ultimately we hope to become reverent toward all things. We are here to some extent affirming a non-dualist ontology. When spelled out in philosophical discourse this becomes an assertion that each person, place, object and event—just as it is—is an inseparable aspect of the dependently co-arising whole. In very positive, perhaps somewhat florid terms, I have described this as the fact that everything is part of a “luminous, deathless, utterly free, magically empty non-substantial Oneness.” Abe Masao, whose thought I referred to at the beginning of this paper, would emphasize that this non-dualism is quite different from Monism. I agree, but I think the crucial metaphysical point is that Buddhists are not dualists. We do not find some aspects of reality to be intrinsically good and holy while other aspects are in their essence profane or evil. Neither are we pluralists; we do not see reality as a meaningless plurality of persons, places and events. Rather than praise our focus on reality as dependently co-arising I would prefer to insist that we do not accept a dualistic or a mechanistically pluralist view of reality.

My position is that the key stances of Buddhist metaphysics are to be found in negative statements. Whether many will accept my “luminous, deathless . . .” description or not, all Buddhists will deny dualism. There is no person nor activity that is monochromatically evil from Buddhist perspective. However deluded and destructive persons may be and no matter how dangerous a process may be, we will not view it as irremediably profane. The sacred and the profane are provisionally distinguished for Buddhists. On the Jōdo Shinshū vision of the world our most sacred object of religious concern, the thinking or voicing of Amida’s name in forms such as “Namo Amida Butsu,” is working to encompass the whole of reality within the realm of the sacred.

¹² Hirota 1993, p. 70.

Concluding Remarks

I am accepting our current situation as the last stages of post-modernism. Rather than presuming to move onto something new, I am trying to assess the position of Jōdo Shinshū within this early twenty-first century milieu. Shinran's pre-modernist vision has certain commonalities with post-modernist thinkers. Standing within the tradition that Shinran established, I feel that we can be comfortable with the inclusion of uncertainty and difference. These are the very qualities which the tyranny of reason has tried to exclude.

On the path of the nembutsu, Shinran has taught us to be comfortable with uncertainty (this may be our path to hell, not a heroic career as Buddha through the mediation of Amida's Pure Land). Buddhist tradition emerged in a context of religious plurality and has been propagated in newly encountered cultures where it does not try to suppress differences, where it has not attempted to convert all members of differing religious traditions to its vision.

I am reluctant to go so far as Abe Masao in despairing of some unity to the world's hundreds of thousands of religions. I believe that reverence for that perceived as sacred is of the essence of religiosity. Discerning persons, objects, locations and events to be sacred is a necessary condition for a tradition to be spiritually valid. I have no suggestion as to what a sufficient set of conditions for a tradition to be truly religious might be. I find Tachikawa Musashi's application of the time-honored sacred/profane terminology useful in looking at Buddhist practice as sacralization of the space in which one is living. Standing within the Jōdo Shinshū tradition, I have to grant that the process is quite incomplete in my own life and even in the vision of exemplars of Pure Land Buddhist spirituality such as Shinran. The Buddhist vision of what is sacred is theoretically open to the inclusion of all persons, places and events. In practice, living participants in Shinshū tradition continue to find that some aspects of reality, in particular their own opinions and valuations, are quite profane and unreliable. This perspective of both opening the realm of the sacred to include potentially all aspects of reality while still finding much in fact to be irremediably profane is quite consistent with Shinran's vision. Even so, it is presented in the thought of Dennis Hirota and his long-time colleague the late Professor Ueda Yoshifumi with a clarity often missing in elaborations of the Buddha-way by other scholars. In the following passage, Hirota and Ueda explain that the opposition between *samsāra*—the [profane] round of meaningless birth, death and rebirth—and

Nirvāṇa—the [sacred] realm of truth, purity and genuine self-possession—is a discrimination that is necessary for the unenlightened however false it may be seen to be by Buddhas and world-transcending Bodhisattvas:

In Mahāyāna thought, one goes out from samsara and attains nirvana, but this at the same time means that one breaks through their duality. Thus, the bodhisattva path is characterized by two contradictory elements. On the one hand, samsara and nirvana or blind passions and enlightened wisdom stand in mutually exclusive opposition. As long as one is possessed of blind passions and false discrimination, one is not enlightened, and in order to attain enlightenment, one must rid oneself of them. Nirvana is attained by negating and transcending samsaric existence. On the other hand the nirvana thus attained is nondiscriminative wisdom that no longer views samsara and nirvana dichotomously. The bodhisattva realizes wisdom, and through it returns to life in the world.¹³

The Buddhist pathways are designed to free us of the false discriminations that burden our lives. The fundamental aspect of Buddhist path-traveling is, I believe, experiencing reverence for the ever-expanding realm of the sacred. The realm of the sacred, for Buddhists, is simply all persons, objects and events seen as they are. “Everything is beautiful in its own way” as a pop song once claimed. However, this is a tepid conceit for those of us who still see the world through the glass darkly of our own prejudicial discriminative thought and in the context of our compelling passions.

For those on the path of the nembutsu, saying Amida Buddha’s name in forms like “Namo Amida Butsu” is a touchstone that re-aligns us partially, but in a genuine way, with the realm of the sacred, with the Dharma-realm. We find that there is a long wait between making contact with the sacred and actually coming to live consistently with reverence from moment to moment. We can only wish those well who have more of a quick-fix approach to religiosity. There are no born-again Buddhists. We were born once, and moments when the sacred is powerfully present are followed by times with little felt presence and waning ability to live with reverence. Even so, we do hope to live with progressively more reverence as we mature. We are more interested in sharing this project of reverent living with realistic Christians, fellow Buddhists, and others than dialoging with those who think that blind

¹³ Ueda and Hirota 1989, p. 83.

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passions and delusive ways of thinking can be abandoned all at once. We look forward to sharing the commitment to reverent living with all those who share a conviction in the importance of this way of life.

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