

The Mahayana Structure of Shinran's Thought

PART I

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ALL FORMS OF Buddhism take as their foundation going out from this world of suffering (samsara) and attaining the transcendent (nirvana). This is often assumed to entail a renunciation of ordinary life, an idea reinforced by the figure of Śākyamuni, whose abandonment of family and throne presents a thoroughgoing repudiation of the values of secular life. During Śākyamuni's lifetime, however, there were strong bonds between the disciples who had renounced homelife and the laity that remained in the secular world, and in the person of the Buddha, who embodied the transcendent, both his mendicant disciples and his lay followers were able to find salvation. Still, the negative aspect of Buddhism—that of transcending the mundane world—is strong in Śākyamuni's teaching, and after Śākyamuni's death the distinction between lay and monk solidified.

Mahayana Buddhism arose as a movement to reunite the laity and the monks and nuns by overcoming the distinction between lay and monk, the world of ordinary life and the world of nirvana. Mahayana saw the earlier Buddhism as one that sought nirvana by abandoning the

* This is a translation of Prof. Ueda's widely-read article, "Shinran no ōjō no shisō," in *Dōbō gaku* 18–19 (February 1968), pp. 335–383, and reprinted with minor revisions in *Shinran kyōgaku* 13 (November 1968), pp. 97–117, and 14 (June 1969), pp. 105–128. Material has been incorporated from a number of Prof. Ueda's other books and articles; these are identified in footnotes. Many of the quotations from Shinran are from the Shin Buddhism Translation Series (Hongwanji International Center, Kyoto; distributed by Asian Humanities Press, Berkeley) edited by Prof. Ueda: *Letters of Shinran: Mattōshō* (1978; hereafter as *Letters*); *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone': Yuishinshō mon-i* (1979, *Essentials*); *Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling: Ichinen-tanen mon'i* (1980, *Once-calling*); and *Notes on the Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls: Songō shinzō meimon* (1981, *Inscriptions*); portions have been adapted. For definitions of Shin terms, see the glossaries to these volumes.

world of samsara and thus knew nothing of benefiting others, that is, leading the laity to enlightenment. It therefore labeled such Buddhism "Hinayana," the small vehicle, while proclaiming itself the great vehicle.

Mahayana does not teach abandonment of samsara. It considers it an error to seek the transcendent apart from the secular world, and is established at the point where the dualistic thinking of Hinayana is broken through. The true transcendent realm also transcends the distinction between samsara and nirvana, and is attained not through renouncing everyday life but through transforming it at its roots. To borrow Dōgen's words, "Realize that samsara is none other than the life of Buddha" (*Shōbōgenzō shōji*). Living ordinary life is itself the life of Buddha. In attaining this mode of existence lies the fundamental character of Mahayana.¹

That samsara is not abandoned must not be understood superficially, for one does indeed go out from samsara. But while the person who simply dwells in samsara is attached to it and does not seek nirvana, the one who has abandoned samsara to dwell in nirvana (Hinayana sage) is attached to nirvana. The true transcendent realm is free of all forms of attachment. Moreover, the person who has realized nirvana experiences the sameness (*samatā*) of sentient beings in samsara and himself, that is, the fact that the minds of sentient beings and his own mind are one. When the mind thus awakened turns towards sentient beings in samsara, it is called great compassion. One goes out from samsara and reaches nirvana, but without abiding in nirvana compassionately re-enters the world of samsara. Since the awakened one abides neither in samsara nor nirvana, there is nowhere that he abides. Hence, the Mahayana concept of nirvana is "nirvana of no abiding place" (*apratiṣṭhita-nirvāna*).

In order to reach the transcendent, Mahayana Buddhists practiced the "three learnings" (precepts, meditation, wisdom). In other words, they walked the path of renunciation of secular life. This did not mean that one could not reach the transcendent unless one entered a life of monastic discipline and practice; renouncing homelife was significant only as a tested method for transforming the world of ordinary life and grounding it in the transcendent. Monastic life is unnecessary if one is able to attain the

¹ For a discussion of the concept of transformation in Buddhist tradition, see Ueda Yoshifumi, "Bukkyō ni okeru tenkan no shisō," *Dōbō bukkyō* 4 (November 1972), pp. 53-72.

transcendent while living in the mundane world. This is the Mahayana spirit, typically expressed in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, in which layman Vimalakīrti is depicted as superior to bodhisattvas who have renounced the world. But even though the distinction between monk and lay was erased in spirit, it was not until the Pure Land Buddhism of twelfth century Japan that a reliable method to replace the three learnings was established. Hōnen (1133–1212), the central figure in this development, states:

Although Buddhism is vast, in essence it is composed of no more than the three learnings. . . . But as for precepts, I myself do not keep a single one. In meditation, I have not attained even one. In wisdom, I have not attained the right wisdom of cutting off discriminative thinking and realizing the fruit.

Nevertheless:

Without distinguishing between wise and foolish, the upholding of precepts and the breaking of them, Amida Buddha comes to welcome us.²

It is in Hōnen's disciple Shinran (1173–1262), however, that we see the full development of the Mahayana position, for in marrying, Shinran completely transcended the distinction between monk and lay that originated in Śākyamuni's day.

Evidence that a foolish person (*bombu*) can become a buddha without observing precepts and performing meditative practices is afforded by the appearance of many *myōkōnin*, "wondrously excellent people," often uneducated, who have attained a wisdom beyond the reach of ordinary learning. There is no question of the greatness of Zen Buddhism, but the history of Zen affords no example of bringing to "the sage wisdom of awakening to self"³ a person like Asahara Saichi (1850–1932), a geta-maker, *while he was carrying on his day-to-day life in his work*. There are, of course, stories in Zen of common laborers without special education at-

² Words addressed to Kenkō-bō, *Hōnen shōnin zenshū*, (Kyoto: Heirakuji shoten, 1955), p. 569.

³ *Jikaku shōchi* 自覺聖智; *pratyātmāryajñāna*. D. T. Suzuki states: "Saichi always emerges forth from the 'sage wisdom of self-realization.' Whatever Saichi is ultimately expressing, it is always one with Amida's perfect enlightenment" (Foreword to *Myōkōnin Asahara Saichi-shū*, Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1967, p. 19). The term *pratyātmāryajñāna* occurs often in the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*; Suzuki equates it with satori.

taining satori, but in such cases, they attained wisdom by observing precepts and practicing meditation, so in fact they walked the path of a monk. Shinran, however, states:

Not choosing the learned or those of pure precepts,
Nor rejecting the violators of precepts or those of karmic evil:
With that person who simply says the Name,
It is as though rubble were transformed into gold.⁴

Such a statement is impossible from the standpoint of Zen. The path of Hōnen and Shinran is not that of abandoning homelife. Neither is it a lay Buddhism distinguished from the path of monks. Shinran's self-description as "neither monk nor lay" sweeps away this distinction. The person who can "hear" the teaching can actualize it—whether he has abandoned homelife or not, whether wise or foolish, whatever his character or livelihood.⁵

Pure Land Buddhism is often seen as a future-oriented religion of salvation that offers a path from this defiled world to the world of purity, to be attained at physical death. The compassion that forms the foundation of Pure Land Buddhism, however, is but another name for the wisdom that lies at the heart of all Mahayana; thus, as a form of Mahayana, Pure Land Buddhism must share the character of transformation and not consist merely of a linear progress in which this world is negated and the future world is affirmed. In fact, it is in the teaching of Shinran that we see the complex structure of transformation common to all Mahayana Buddhism clearly manifest in Pure Land thought. Shinran

⁴ Tamon jōkai erabarezu / hakai zaigō kirawarezu / tada yoku nenzuru hito nomi zo / garyaku mo kon to henjikeru (*Jōgai wasan*); see Murakami edition, *Shinshū seiten* (Kyoto: Nagata, 1956), p. 590.

⁵ Shinran himself was well aware of the monumental significance of this. He states that the Pure Land teaching leads all beings to the attainment of the One Vehicle, which is supreme bodhi, and further that the One Vehicle signifies the Vow only. All other paths exist only to bring beings to enter the One Vehicle: "The One Vehicle is the great vehicle. The great vehicle is the buddha vehicle. To attain the One Vehicle is to attain highest perfect enlightenment. Highest perfect enlightenment is the realm of nirvana. . . . In the great vehicle there are no 'two vehicles' or 'three vehicles.' The two vehicles and three vehicles lead one to enter the One Vehicle. The One Vehicle is the vehicle of highest truth. There is no One Vehicle other than the one buddha-vehicle of the Vow" (*Kyōgyōshinshō*, "Chapter on Practice," *Shinshū shōgyō zensho* II [hereafter as SSZ], Kyoto: Ōyagi Kōbundō, 1941, p. 38).

brought the Pure Land tradition, which up to his day had been nothing more than a side current in Mahayana thought, into the mainstream of the Mahayana tradition by adopting this structure of transformation as the core of his teaching. Even in traditional Shin scholarship, however, important facets of Shinran's thought have been neglected or misunderstood because of a superficial understanding of this general Mahayana concept in his thought. Below, I will consider the structure of transformation in Mahayana tradition and then delineate its place in Shinran's Buddhism.

TRANSFORMATION

In Mahayana thought, a person goes out from samsara and attains nirvana, and this at the same time means that he transcends the distinction of samsara and nirvana. Thus, attainment of nirvana must, on the one hand, imply the negation or transcendence of samsara, and on the other hand, it must be nondual with samsara. In that the bodhisattva has eradicated discriminative thinking and feeling, he has attained nirvana, but since for him there is no distinction between samsara and nirvana, he does not abandon samsara (he is in samsara). This is expressed as "not dwelling in nirvana." Since he is in samsara, he "gives rise to discrimination," but though he does so, he does not part from nirvana (nondiscrimination, suchness). In this sense, he does not dwell in samsara.⁶ This world of nondiscriminative wisdom (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*) is and is not samsara, it is and is not nirvana. "Samsara is itself nirvana" is also "neither samsara nor nirvana," and at the same time each of these phrases implies the radical transformation by which one transcends samsara and realizes nirvana. Moreover, these two contradictory aspects—the identity of samsara and nirvana and the change or transformation by which samsara, through being negated, becomes nirvana—are united throughout the various stages of practice.

Śākyamuni was able to transform ordinary life by perceiving the four noble truths and dependent co-origination, that is, by seeing all things—the self and the world that surrounds it—just as they are. To see things as they truly are means having cast off all self-centered, discriminative thinking. Such seeing is not mere seeing but at the same time a kind of practice,

⁶ *Shōdaijōronshaku*, T31, 247b.

and the wisdom established through this seeing-practice is called supreme bodhi, or emancipation, signifying liberation from the bonds of samsara, or nirvana, meaning that suffering has been extinguished.

Historically, the earliest Mahayana concept of the wisdom established through seeing-practice is *prajñāpāramitā* (lit. wisdom that has gone to the other shore). It is described in the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras, which are considered the foundation of all Mahayana thought, as the seeing-practice of "not seeing" any objects. Not to see any objects means to cut off the dichotomous thinking (*vikalpa*) that takes all things as objects in relation to self, and this means at the same time that all things that become objects of thought do not really exist. For the bodhisattva practicing *prajñāpāramitā*, there is nothing, whether material or mental, to become the object of any act of perception, thought, or imagination; thus, "all things are empty" (*śūnya*) or non-existent. "Empty" is used with regard to things seen and "not seeing" with regard to perception of them. That things do not really exist and that the bodhisattva's perception does not see or discriminate them are one and the same. This means that there is no object apart from the subject: seer and seen are one. The wisdom that functions when object and perception have thus become one is *prajñāpāramitā* or nondiscriminative wisdom; emptiness and *prajñāpāramitā* are different terms for the same thing.

In *prajñāpāramitā*, the term emptiness means that there are no objects. It does not, however, mean simply that the absence of objects is wisdom; the nonexistence of the object of illusory discrimination is at the same time no-discrimination or no-seeing. When no seeing of any kind of object is established, that is, when nondiscriminative wisdom has arisen, the bodhisattva perceives things as they really are. The seeing of nondiscriminative wisdom is, therefore, seeing of no-seeing. By practicing *prajñāpāramitā*, the bodhisattva reaches the fundamental reality of all things, the true world of existence just as it is. This means that he "sees suchness (*tathatā*)."¹ Hence, emptiness is also synonymous with suchness or true reality. The mental faculties of a person lacking wisdom perceive objects that are not really existent and may be labeled illusory discrimination (*vikalpa*); the mental faculties of the person of wisdom that arise where all such discrimination is eradicated and all objects have vanished is called nondiscriminative wisdom or *prajñāpāramitā*. The objects of discrimination include all things—forms, sensations, thoughts, feelings, consciousness; the object of nondiscriminative wisdom is the

emptiness of all things. This emptiness is things as they truly are.⁷

The Identity of Opposites

In the Prajñāpāramitā sutras, the transformation in which the world of ordinary life (samsara) is completely uprooted and at the same time unfolded as the transcendent realm (true existence, *tattva*)—is implied in the expression, “Form is itself emptiness.” “Is” (*soku*, which literally indicates identity) is not the mere equation of form and emptiness; it implies the process by which form (ordinary life) becomes established on the foundation of true existence by passing through a complete negation. Form (self and all things) sinks into emptiness (no objects and no seeing), and at the same time emptiness (reality or suchness), limiting itself as form, becomes the seen; here, prajñāpāramitā as not-seeing and at the same time seeing (things as they are) is established. Because emptiness is not mere nonexistence but also true reality, “Form is itself emptiness” is reversed: “Emptiness is itself form.” All things of the world of samsara, which are indicated by the term form, are pervaded by emptiness; all things are like phantasms or mirages. In the formulation of the *Diamond Sutra*, “A is not A, and therefore it is A”; this signifies that A is negated and at the same time affirmed by emptiness. A is penetrated by emptiness, and it is this A that is true reality or suchness. This structure of prajñāpāramitā has been termed by D. T. Suzuki “the logic of *soku-hi*” (identity-mutual negation).⁸

The self-identity of opposites realized in the transcendence of discriminative thinking is also expressed, “Samsara is itself nirvana.” Nāgārjuna states: “Samsara is without any distinction from nirvana; nirvana is also without any distinction from samsara” (*Madhyamaka-kārikā* XXV, 19). Here, samsara and nirvana are brought into a relationship of nonduality

⁷ For a more detailed discussion of prajñā, see Ueda Yoshifumi, *Daijō bukkyō no shisō* (Tokyo, 1977), pp. 9–24.

⁸ The self-contradiction embodied in *soku*, indicating the identity of two elements that stand in a relation of mutual negation, is not merely a logical contradiction; it is an expression of the simultaneous negation and affirmation practiced as nondiscriminative wisdom. Here, the self-contradiction seen in “form is emptiness” or “samsara is nirvana” cannot be resolved by any logical thought, and to understand it as not self-contradictory cannot be a correct understanding of the thought it expresses. See Ueda Yoshifumi, “Ui Hakuju to Suzuki Daisetz,” *Suzuki Daisetz zenshū geppō* 21 (June 1982), pp. 1–5, and 22 (July 1982), pp. 1–10.

through the negation of each with reference to the other. In Nāgārjuna's thought, the identity of samsara and nirvana holds two aspects. One is dual negation; as mentioned above, "Samsara is nirvana," as the identity of opposites, is also "neither samsara nor nirvana." This stance is possible, however, only through the religious experience in which nirvana is established through the eradication of samsara. The second aspect, then, is the turning of samsara into nirvana. Although the Prajñāpāramitā sutras formulate the structure of prajñāpāramitā as the nondiscrimination of opposites (*soku*), they do not fully articulate the transformation implied in the realization of such wisdom. In order to clarify the practice of prajñāpāramitā, Nāgārjuna teaches the process of thoroughgoing negation by which form (samsara) is eradicated and made empty (nirvana), for example, in his exposition of the eighteen types of emptiness in *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-śāstra*.

Since Nāgārjuna takes the Prajñāpāramitā sutras as his fundamental standpoint, however, the ontological aspect expressed in the concepts of existence (form; self and all things) and nonexistence (emptiness) constitutes the basis of his thought, and explanation from the epistemological side is weak. The early Yogācāra thinkers—Maitreya, Asaṅga, and Vasubandhu—opened up a new field in Mahayana thought by analyzing the practice of nondiscriminative wisdom as "seeing only" (*viññapti-mātratā*). Before Yogācāra, the basic issues in Buddhism were organized around contrasting terms: sentient being and buddha, blind passions and enlightenment, samsara and nirvana, all dharmas and thusness. Yogācāra, however, in order to treat the working of the mind, divided "samsara" or "all things" into the seer and the seen, developing the theory of three natures (*tri-svabhāva*).

The seer (discriminative mind, *vikalpa*) is termed "other-dependent nature" (*paratantra-svabhāva*), for it arises from causes and conditions. The seen is termed discriminated nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*), since it is that which is differentiated and conceptualized by the seer as its object. For the unenlightened being, the objects perceived with defiled discrimination arising from the seeds (*bija*) of karma and blind passions are thought to be real. For the bodhisattva or tathāgata who has attained nonobjectifying, nondiscriminative wisdom, however, all things that are the objects of discriminative perception are "always nonexistent" (*nityam asat*) or "not existent" (*na vidyate*). Further, since there is no object to be grasped, neither can there be discriminative perception that grasps. In

other words, both the seer and the seen are empty. Since there is no seer, the term no-mind (*acitta*) is used, and since there is no seen, it is said that there is "no object to be perceived" (*amupalambha*).⁹ As stated above, the seen (discriminated nature) is always nonexistent; hence the seer must also always be nonexistent. That is, discriminative mind exists (*sat*) in that, as other-dependent nature, it arises from causes and conditions, but since its object (the seen), as discriminated nature, is always nonexistent, it is nonexistent. This is stated: "Other-dependent nature, through discriminated nature, is empty (*śūnya*)."¹⁰ This emptiness of all things (both seer and seen) is consummated nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*). It is nondiscriminative wisdom, suchness, emptiness, dharmakāya, or nirvana. It is things as they truly are.

Nāgārjuna states simply that all things arise from causes and conditions and therefore are empty. In Yogācāra thought, however, the seer (other-dependent nature, which itself constitutes samsara or all dharmas), since it arises from conditions, exists, and at the same time, through the nothingness of all objects, it is empty or nonexistent. This emptiness of both the seer and the seen is, as stated above, consummated nature or nirvana. In other words, the pure nondiscriminative wisdom of the bodhisattva includes within it defiled discrimination (*vikalpa*). D. T. Suzuki therefore

⁹ "Always nonexistent" (*Madhyāntavibhāga karika* III, 3); "not existent" (*Triṃśikā*, verse 20); "no-mind," "no object to be perceived" (*Triṃśikā*, verse 29, and Sthiramati's commentary to it).

¹⁰ Sthiramati's commentary to *Triṃśikā*, verse 22. That the nonexistence of both seer and seen is consummated nature is taught in *Madhyāntavibhāga* I, 5. Further, Sthiramati's commentary to *Triṃśikā*, verse 24, states: "Consummated nature takes nothingness as its nature."

There is a slightly different definition of consummated nature in *Triṃśikā* 21: "In other-dependent nature, there is always separation from what precedes (i.e., discriminated nature); this is consummated nature." This does not mean that other-dependent nature is separated from discriminated nature so that they become two, but rather that in other-dependent nature (the seeing mind), there is no object. Other-dependent nature and discriminated nature together as a whole make up consummated nature.

When it is said that the nonexistence of the seer and the seen is consummated nature, the existence of other-dependent nature, which arises from conditions, is not excluded, for the nothingness that is consummated nature is absolute and harbors other-dependent nature within itself. Since consummated nature is nondiscriminative wisdom or suchness, it holds within it the discriminative mind (*vikalpa*), which is not true or real.

states, "Karma is no-Karma and no-Karma is Karma." (*The Essence of Buddhism*). In this way, other-dependent nature is both existent and nonexistent, and the theory of three natures, while indicating the content of "Form is itself emptiness, emptiness is itself form" or "Samsara is itself nirvana," at the same time illuminates the relationship between the seer and the seen that occurs in nondiscriminative wisdom.

The Logical Structure of Transformation

In order to probe further how such nondiscriminative wisdom is possible, the theory of three natures was developed in a new direction by Asaṅga in *Mahāyānasamgraha-sāstra*. In addition to the three natures described above, Asaṅga proposed a version based not on the dichotomy of seer and seen, but on the relationship of the impure and the pure. This second version of the three natures constitutes a unique exposition of the concept of change or transformation underlying the structure of Mahayana thought and provides perhaps the most fully articulated model of it.

According to this second theory, other-dependent nature signifies the "mutual dependence" of samsara and nirvana or defiled and pure. The relationships of these two aspects, which are unified in "mutually other-dependent nature," are explained on the basis of passages from two sutras, with each passage clarifying one face of the relationship. First:

The *Brahmapariṣcchā Sūtra* declares: "With what meaning does the World-honored one say, 'The Tathāgata does not see samsara, does not see nirvana'?" In other-dependent nature (*paratantra-svabhāva*), through its discriminated nature (*parikalpita-svabhāva*) and its consummated nature (*pariniṣpanna-svabhāva*), samsara is nirvana; this follows from their non-difference. The reason is that other-dependent nature, through its aspect of discriminated nature, gives rise to samsara, and through its aspect of consummated nature, establishes nirvana.¹¹

Asaṅga states that the identity of samsara and nirvana arises from their non-difference, which is expressed, "Tathāgata does not see samsara, does not see nirvana." In his nondiscriminative wisdom, the bodhisattva perceives no distinction between samsara and nirvana. This is the same

¹¹ *Mahāyānasamgraha-sāstra*. See Ueda Yoshifumi, *Shōdai jōron kōdoku*, (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1981), p. 265.

concept as in Nāgārjuna's verse quoted above. The two opposing aspects of mutually other-dependent nature are nondual in their basis, and at the same time, each is negated by the other. These relationships of identity and dual negation express the nature of nirvana of no abiding place, but like the formulations of the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras, they fail to provide a basis for explaining the dynamics of awakening. In order to clarify the structure of transcending samsara and attaining nirvana, Asaṅga, based on the *Abhidharma Sūtra*, identifies discriminated, consummated, and other-dependent nature as defiled, pure, and defiled-pure,¹² and then introduces the concept of transformation (*āśrayaparāvṛtti*, lit. "transformation of the basis" of the unenlightened person into that of an enlightened one):

The nirvana of no abiding place has as its characteristic (*lakṣaṇa*) the transformation of the two kinds of basis, parting from discriminative thinking (samsara) and not parting from samsara. In this, samsara takes as its essence the impure aspect of other-dependent nature, nirvana the pure aspect. The fundamental basis is other-dependent nature that possesses the two aspects of pure and impure. Concerning transformation: When remedy occurs, this other-dependent nature, in its impure aspect, changes forever its fundamental nature, and in accord with its pure aspect, its fundamental nature is established forever.¹³

Here, Asaṅga states that the nirvana of no abiding place, in which both samsara and nirvana are negated, is characterized by transformation or "remedy (*taiji*)."¹⁴ Remedy refers to the three learnings, by which blind passions are eradicated. If the time when it occurs is taken as a boundary line, then the two aspects of other-dependent nature—the impure aspect (samsara) and the pure aspect (nirvana)—are in a relation such that the establishment of one side implies the nullification of the other. When remedy occurs, the impure aspect disappears, and dependent nature is

¹² "In the *Abhidharma Sūtra* the Buddha, the World-honored one, teaches, 'There are three kinds of dharmas: 1) the defiled, 2) the pure, 3) the defiled-pure.' What is the meaning of teaching these three? Within dependent nature, the discriminated nature forms the defiled, the consummated nature forms the pure, and the other-dependent nature itself forms the defiled-pure. With this meaning the three are taught"; T31, p. 121a; see also *Shōdaijōron kōdoku*, p. 268.

¹³ T31, p. 121a-b; see *Shōdaijōron kōdoku*, p. 208.

established as that which is pure, nirvana or buddha-body. Since the impure is eradicated, and through this eradication the pure is consummated, the impure and the pure are unified by passing through an absolute negation. This is the structure of transformation.

The *Brahmapariṣcchā Sūtra* states that in other-dependent nature samsara and nirvana are nondual, while the quotation concerning transformation indicates that all things (discrimination) are transformed and become emptiness or suchness. Thus, other-dependent nature holds two different meanings: first, samsara and nirvana are in a relationship of nonduality founded upon a dual negation, and second, they are in a mutually exclusive relationship such that when one is established the other is nullified. In this way, the aspects of other-dependent nature indicated in the two sutra passages also stand in a contradictory relationship: that samsara and nirvana are completely without distinction and that they are such that at all times only one or the other is established cannot both be logically affirmed simultaneously. Hence, other-dependent nature cannot be considered a simple combination of discriminated nature and consummated nature. It is a totality of complex structure such that two elements, in spite of the fact that their interrelationship or mutual connection has been completely sundered through absolute negation, make up a single whole. This is the logical structure of the attainment of nirvana.¹⁴ The structure of the path to Buddhahood is clearly indicated by this transformation.

¹⁴ "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" in the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras corresponds to the concept "samsara is nirvana" in the *Brahmapariṣcchā Sūtra*; it must also be seen to imply, therefore, the transformation by which "form disappears and becomes emptiness," which is expressed in the *Abhidharma Sūtra* as going from samsara to nirvana. In the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras, however, only the identity of form and emptiness is emphasized. Nāgārjuna teaches both the identity of form and emptiness and the process by which form is eradicated. Nāgārjuna's disciple Āryadeva inherited this thought that emptiness breaks through all things and makes them empty, and brings the practitioner to reach the inconceivability of all things. This thought was adopted by Chi-ts'ang and became the basis of the Sanlun school in China. In this tradition, the identity of form and emptiness, which is the original concept of the *Prajñāpāramitā* sutras, was weak. Both aspects of negation and identity together were developed in China in T'ien-t'ai and Hua-yen thought, but the latter, because it emphasized identity and was weak in practical negation, was absorbed into Ch'an. In these forms of Chinese Buddhism, the concept of transformation developed by Asaṅga and Vasubandhu approximately two centuries after Nāgārjuna was not incorporated at all.

The Process of Practice

The phrases "Form is itself emptiness" and "Samsara is itself nirvana" have two aspects, reflecting the two sides—identity and transformation—of the attainment of emptiness or nirvana. One is that the phrases can be reversed: "Form is itself emptiness, emptiness is itself form," "Samsara is itself nirvana, nirvana is itself samsara." Simultaneously, however, these phrases imply a single direction, a movement "toward emptiness through eradicating form," "toward nirvana through freeing oneself from samsara." The reversible aspect of emptiness is clearly expressed in the Prajñāpāramitā sutras: "It is not that form is emptied through emptiness; the self-nature of form is emptiness." The irreversible aspect is seen in Nāgārjuna: "Form is broken through and made empty." The irreversible aspect, as the dynamic application of the double negation of "neither being nor emptiness" or "neither samsara nor nirvana," expresses the deepening of the practice of nondiscrimination that continues to eradicate discrimination and blind passions. This constantly moves toward the ultimate stage of tathāgata. The reversible aspect signifies that this practice of absolute negation, through the realization of suchness with each step, reaches the ultimate at every stage of advance, and that the direction of the former aspect is eliminated so that all things become established in their true form. This is the meaning of Nāgārjuna's statement, "Because of emptiness, all things become established." The directional aspect, through its conformity with the non-directional aspect, constantly loses its directionality, and going from samsara to nirvana is actually to return to samsara—or rather, it is never to go anywhere from the very beginning. At the same time, the non-directional aspect, through its conformity with the directional aspect, signifies the movement of deepening and purifying ever more the nirvana or absolute nothingness that forms the basis of samsara or being. The practice of these mutually contradictory aspects together is prajñāpāramitā or non-discriminative wisdom.

The transformation I have outlined above is not an experience that occurs suddenly only once, but involves a long process, from first hearing the teaching and undertaking practice to the final attainment of the stage of tathāgata. Since it is a process, the negation or transcendence of ordinary life through the perfection of no-seeing occurs gradually; nevertheless, at some point the eradication of blind passions becomes thoroughgoing,

so that complete liberation from samsara is accomplished and one enters the true transcendent realm. This point is called attainment of the stage of non-retrogression and forms the core of transformation. Here one realizes nondiscriminative wisdom, or the seeing of no-seeing. Non-retrogression means that one who has attained the true transcendent realm, upon once entering, never falls back.

In Mahayana thought in general, even after entering the stage of non-retrogression one continues practice, and the entire process of practice until one attains the rank of ultimate buddhahood is called transformation. Through the nondiscriminative wisdom attained with non-retrogression in the first of the ten bodhisattva stages, one eliminates all attachments and sees suchness; hence, the bodhisattva there realizes dharmakāya and attains the three bodies of tathāgata, and nondiscriminative wisdom reaches its consummation. However, a residue from blind passions still remains, so absolute negation (nondiscrimination, practice of eradicating the traces of discrimination) continues to deepen. This is represented by the ten stages, from the second stage to the stage of tathāgata. In each of these stages, not only the stage of tathāgata, it is said that the bodhisattva reaches the ultimate, for the bodhisattva sees suchness at each stage, and the suchness thus seen is always identical, without any distinctions whatever. Since the true transcendent realm is beyond all speech and thought, after one has entered, one emerges again into the world of words and thoughts, but again re-enters the realm in which thought is eradicated: this is repeated over and over. By repeatedly entering the realm beyond thought, the deep root of samsara and blind passions is gradually cut through. In all of this, the stage of non-retrogression is the first seeing of suchness; hence it is termed *kendō* (the path of seeing). After this, the seeing of suchness is repeated a number of times; this is called *shudō* (the path of practice). *Shu* (*bhāvanā*) means to practice repeatedly.

In Shinran, the attainment of the stage of non-retrogression occurs at the moment of realizing shinjin. Shinjin 信心 is the mind of Amida Buddha given to and realized in a person. Shinran interprets *shin* 信 to mean "truth, reality, sincerity,"¹⁵ and also states, "Sentient beings, who are filled with blind passions, lack a mind true and real" (*Inscriptions*, p. 33). When shinjin is realized, the mind of Buddha and the mind of blind passions become one. This is a oneness of the pure and the impure

¹⁵ *Kyōgyōshinshō*, "Chapter on Shinjin," SSZ II, p. 59.

together; further, since the impure becomes the pure, it has the complex structure of transformation outlined above. For a sentient being to realize shinjin is for his mind of blind passions to be transformed (*tenzu*) into the mind of Buddha while remaining as it is. Shinran states: "Transform means that the mind of evil becomes good." The mind of evil here is the entire human mind, including the moral consciousness that seeks to avoid evil and to do good; "good" refers to great wisdom-compassion. Since a person's mind becomes the mind of Buddha, to realize shinjin has the significance of becoming Buddha; hence, for Shinran, it signifies attainment of non-retrogression. He also calls it "immediate attainment of birth."

THE TWO MEANINGS OF BIRTH IN SHINRAN

The presence of the structure of transformation in Shinran's thought is revealed in his concept of birth (*ōjō*). In its traditional usage beginning with Indian scriptures, birth meant to be born in the other world (Pure Land) at the end of life in this world (the defiled world). In the Pure Land, one attains the stage of non-retrogression through performing practices, and thereafter continues to practice until attainment of the supreme Buddhahood. In Shinran, however, birth came to signify attaining supreme Buddhahood. At the moment life in this world ends, one becomes supreme Buddha. To express this, Shinran states that the person of shinjin is the same as Maitreya:

Truly we know that the mahasattva Maitreya has realized the diamond-like mind of the stage of equal enlightenment, and therefore will attain the supreme enlightenment. . . . Beings of the nembutsu, because they have attained the diamond-like mind of the crosswise leap, will attain great nirvana at the moment of death. Hence it is said that they are the same. (Chapter on Shinjin, SSZ II, p. 79)

This change in the meaning of birth in Shinran is inseparably connected with his teaching that the attainment of the stage of non-retrogression occurs not in the Pure Land after death, as traditionally taught, but at the moment a person realizes shinjin. Since one already dwells in the stage of non-retrogression in the present life, the Pure Land as a place for practice is no longer necessary. The practitioner of shinjin is said to have

attained the equal of perfect enlightenment and to have reached the same level as Maitreya; at the end of life in this world, he will attain supreme Buddhahood. Concerning the relationship between non-retrogression and birth, Shinran states:

When we are grasped by Amida, immediately—without a moment or a day elapsing—we ascend to and become established in the stage of the truly settled¹⁶; this is the meaning of *attain birth*. (*Once-calling*, p. 32)

To dwell in the stage of non-retrogression is to become established in the stage of the truly settled. This is also called the attainment of the equal of perfect enlightenment. Such is the meaning of *they then attain birth*. (*Essentials*, p. 35)

Thus, to realize shinjin and dwell in the stage of non-retrogression is to attain birth. Further, as stated above, to realize great nirvana at the end of life is also attaining birth. The term "birth" in the following passages, since it is attained after shinjin has become settled and one has entered the stage of non-retrogression, signifies the realization of great nirvana at the time of death:

Since one dwells in the stage of non-retrogression until being born into the Pure Land, one is said to be in the stage of the truly settled. (*Letters*, p. 42)

The person of true shinjin abides in the stage of the truly settled, for he has already been grasped, never to be abandoned. There is no

¹⁶ The "truly settled," in Mahayana tradition, refers to bodhisattvas who have reached the stage where supreme enlightenment will be attained without fail. In the Pure Land tradition prior to Shinran, it refers to those born in the Pure Land, who will attain enlightenment through religious practices in the ideal environment there. Shinran uses the term for people who have realized shinjin in the present. Shinran's position with regard to the tradition may be seen in his understanding of T'an-luan's passage: "If a man simply hears of the purity and happiness of the Pure Land and earnestly desires to be born there, he shall obtain birth and thereupon enter the stage of the truly settled." Shinran, asserting that one immediately becomes truly settled on attaining shinjin, interprets T'an-luan to read: "The man who, simply hearing of the purity and happiness of that land, earnestly desires to be born there *and* the one who attains birth immediately enter the stage of the truly settled" (*Once-calling*, pp. 35–36).

need to wait in anticipation for the moment of death, no need to rely on Amida's coming. At the time shinjin becomes settled, birth too becomes settled. (*Letters*, pp. 19–20)

Shinran's first usage of birth is uniquely his own, and is not found even in Hōnen.

In Shinran's writings, the same word—"to be born" (*ōjō suru*)—is used to indicate two different attainments: birth in the Pure Land at death (which signifies for Shinran realization of supreme enlightenment)¹⁷ and attainment of the stage of the truly settled in the present. To realize enlightenment and to attain the stage of the truly settled through realizing shinjin are related as result and cause. Although cause and result are clearly different, a binding relationship exists between them. Nevertheless, for birth to refer to both means that it harbors a self-contradiction. If one takes both meanings of birth together, then the person who has been born (one who dwells in the stage of the truly settled) has not been born (has not reached nirvana, the result). Or, the person who has already been born (the person in the stage of the truly settled) will be born in the future (unfailingly attain nirvana).

Because of this self-contradiction, sectarian scholars sometimes argue that birth in the Pure Land is the true meaning, while Shinran's second usage does not really mean "to be born," but rather that one's birth has become certain.¹⁸ In other words, birth has only one meaning, realizing nirvana. Shinran, however, bases his understanding on the passage from the *Larger Sutra* that teaches that the Eighteenth Vow has been fulfilled:

Sentient beings, as they hear the Name, realize even one thought-moment of shinjin and joy, which is directed to them out of Amida's sincere mind, and aspiring to be born in that land, they then attain

¹⁷ Prior to Shinran, birth in the Pure Land did not signify immediate realization of nirvana, and although the concept of attainment of enlightenment upon birth seen in Shinran is not entirely absent in Shan-tao and Hōnen, it was not developed. The distinction between *sokuben ōjō* 即便往生 and *tōtoku ōjō* 当得往生 made by Shōkū (1177–1247), founder of the Seizan branch of the Pure Land school, bears some similarity with Shinran's two usages, but what is noteworthy in Shinran is his assertion that non-retrogression is attained with realization of shinjin.

¹⁸ This is asserted in spite of the fact that, as the quotation above shows, Shinran is perfectly familiar with the expression "birth becomes settled," or in other words, that he distinguishes between "birth becomes settled" and "attains birth."

birth and dwell in the stage of non-retrogression.¹⁹

Shinran explains the phrase “they then attain birth” (*soku toku ōjō*):

Then (soku) means immediately, without any time elapsing, without a day passing. *Soku* also means to ascend to and become established in a certain rank. *Attain (toku)* means to have attained what one shall attain. (*Once-calling*, p. 33)

Shinran points out that the word *soku* has two meanings, which taken together signify “immediately becoming established in a rank.” *Toku* means “to have attained what one shall attain,” that is, having already attained birth. The meaning of “they then attain birth” becomes:

When one realizes true and real shinjin, one is immediately grasped and held within the heart of the Buddha of unhindered light. . . . When we are grasped by Amida, immediately—without a moment or a day elapsing—we ascend to and become established in the stage of the truly settled; this is the meaning of *attain birth*. (*Once-calling*, p. 33)

As long as one takes “birth” to mean being born into the Pure Land at the end of life in this world, it is impossible to state that entering the stage of the truly settled is “to attain birth.” In this passage of the sutra, however, the Buddha refers to reaching the stage of the truly settled as “they then attain birth,” and Shinran takes note of this.

Shinran was not forced into the statement that reaching the stage of the truly settled is attaining birth out of some necessity to interpret the words of the sutra, however; rather, he is positive in his belief. This is clear from the fact that passages in the sutras or the writings of the Pure Land masters that may be interpreted as teaching that attainment of the stage of the truly settled is birth are consistently so interpreted by Shinran. For example, there are the following passages from Shan-tao: “The foolish being, when he thinks on Amida, is immediately brought to the attainment of birth,”²⁰ and “In the preceding thought-moment life ends, in the

¹⁹ T12, 272b. This passage was traditionally interpreted, “When sentient beings hear the Name, say it even once in trust and joy, sincerely direct their merits toward attainment of birth, and aspire to be born in that land, then they shall attain birth and dwell in the stage of non-retrogression.”

²⁰ From *Fa-shih-tsan* 法事讚, j. *Hōjisan*; discussed in *Once-calling*, pp. 46–47.

succeeding thought-moment one is born."²¹ In both of these passages, Shan-tao intended the term "birth" to mean birth in the Pure Land at the end of life. Shinran, however, based on the Buddha's statement in the *Larger Sutra*, found in these passages the teaching that to reach the stage of the truly settled is to attain birth. That is, birth in these passages is attained upon realization of shinjin in the present.

If the importance of this idea were not great, surely Shinran would not have felt the need to repeat it as often as he does.²² In fact, it represents an epochal development in the history of Pure Land Buddhist thought. It might even be said that the core of Shinran's thought is manifest in it. No one before Shinran, whether in India, China, or Japan, including even Hōnen, had asserted that one attains birth in the present, while carrying on one's life in this world. But it is precisely this that Shinran boldly and persistently declares.

Suchness

The line of thought expressed in the two meanings of birth is also taught in other terms. For example, Shinran asserts that both shinjin (cause) and nirvana (result) are suchness:

Great shinjin. . . . is the ocean of entrusting that is suchness or true reality. (*Kyōgyōshinshō*, "Chapter on Shinjin," SSZ II, p. 48)

This shinjin is Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is dharmakāya (i.e., suchness). (*Essentials*, p. 42)

True and real enlightenment . . . is the ultimate fruit, supreme nirvana. . . . Supreme nirvana is the uncreated . . . dharmakāya . . .

²¹ From *Wang-sheng-li-tsan* 往生礼讚, j. *Ōjōraisan*. Shinran's interpretation is made clear in *Gutoku-shō*, where the sutra passage on the fulfillment of the Vow is divided into "hear [the Name] and realize even one thought-moment of shinjin" and "they then attain birth," and "In the preceding thought-moment life ends" is matched with the first part, "in the succeeding thought-moment one is born" with the second.

²² In *Once-calling*, *Essentials*, and other works. *Once-calling* is dated the second month of Kōgen 2 (1257), when Shinran was eighty-five; *Essentials* was written in the eighth month of the same year (a variant text is dated the first month). Even though Shinran wrote these works around the same time, he not only gives a detailed exposition of the passage on the fulfillment of the Vow in the first, but repeats himself in abbreviated form in the second, even though the passage does not occur in the work to which he is providing commentary.

suchness . . . oneness. (*Kyōgyōshinshō*, “Chapter on Enlightenment,” SSZ II, p. 103)

From the standpoint of suchness, there is no distinction between sentient being and buddha. When things are known just as they are (being such, *nyo*), both the wisdom that knows and all things thus known, including the self, are true and real. That sentient being and buddha are not different means that there is no distinction between cause and result. It is also true, however, that this perspective of suchness is arrived at through performing practices. In other words, there are those who have awakened to suchness and those who have not. Maitreya discusses this in *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra-sāstra*:

In suchness, all beings are nondifferentiated; nevertheless, one who has attained purity (i.e., suchness) is a tathāgata. For this reason, all sentient beings are beings as tathāgata-garbha (“tathāgata embryo”).²³

From the perspective of suchness, all things are nondifferentiated; buddha and sentient beings are one. In spite of this, there exists a distinction between “one who has attained purity” (*tathatā-gata*, “has arrived at suchness”) and one who is still impure (sentient beings), that is, between tathāgata and potential tathāgata or tathāgata-garbha. These two may be viewed as result and cause. Where this distinction stands, there is a basis for practice aimed at attaining purity. In suchness, however, where cause and result are nondifferent, practice has no basis. According to the Mahayana teaching, although a person is originally a buddha, through performing practices he becomes a buddha, and when he has reached the absolute, then for the first time he returns to his true self.

Shinran’s idea that both cause (*shinjin*) and result (enlightenment) are suchness is fundamentally the same as Maitreya’s expressed above. Traditional Shin exegesis, however, ignores the nondifference and sees only differentiation. It claims that although both cause (*shinjin*) and result (enlightenment) are labeled “suchness,” there is a distinction between suchness in the causal stage and suchness in the stage of realization. In order to express this distinction, the term “inner virtue” or “working” (*naitoku*) has been introduced. The suchness of the causal stage

²³ Sarvesām aviśiṣṭāpi tathatā śuddhim āgatā tathāgatatvaṃ tasmāc ca tad-garbhāḥ sarva-dehināḥ (IX. 37).

is said to be the virtue residing within the Name. This virtue manifests itself simultaneously with birth in the Pure Land and becomes the realization of enlightenment. To ignore nondifference in this way, however, fails to arrive at a true understanding of the concept of suchness, and of course this distinction regarding suchness cannot be found in Shinran.

Enlightenment

Shinran's understanding of enlightenment or realization (*shō*) provides a third example of the structure of his thought. In explaining that enlightenment "is the ultimate fruit, supreme nirvana," he states:

When a sentient being realizes the mind (*shinjin*) and practice directed to him for his going forth, he immediately enters the group of the truly settled. Because he dwells in the stage of the truly settled, he necessarily attains nirvana. To necessarily attain nirvana is eternal bliss. Eternal bliss is tranquility . . . supreme nirvana . . . dharma-kāya . . . true reality . . . dharma-nature . . . suchness . . . oneness. (SSZ II, p. 103)

When Shinran states here that enlightenment is "the ultimate fruit, supreme nirvana," he is speaking of the result. When, in further clarifying this result, he states that "to necessarily attain nirvana is eternal bliss," he is explaining that the result is already present in the cause.

What is expressed in the two meanings of the term birth is also expounded as the view that both *shinjin* and enlightenment are suchness, and that enlightenment is nirvana (result), and at the same time this nirvana is nondual with the stage of the truly settled (cause). In short, result differs from its cause, and does not differ. This self-contradiction inevitably appears when one attempts to read Shinran's words literally. We find that one who has been born has not been born, or that one who has in the present already been born will be born in the future.

This self-contradictory thought was inherited by Rennyo (1415–1499). A record of Rennyo's words states:

When asked whether one should say the nembutsu out of gratitude for having been saved or out of gratitude because one will be saved, Rennyo said: "Both are good. From the standpoint of the stage of the truly settled, one rejoices at having been saved; from the standpoint of the enlightenment of nirvana, one feels gratitude be-

cause one will be saved. In both cases, one rejoices at becoming a buddha, which is good."²⁴

"To say the nembutsu out of gratitude for having been saved" and "to say the nembutsu out of gratitude because one will be saved" are both to "rejoice at becoming a buddha"; hence, both are affirmed. "Becoming a buddha" is the simultaneous establishment of "having been saved" and "will be saved." When one becomes a person who "has been saved"—one who has already reached the stage of the truly settled—then for the first time one can rejoice that one "will be saved." In other words, the person who can rejoice that he will be saved—will "necessarily attain nirvana"—must be one who already "has been saved"—has attained the stage of non-retrogression. Without having already been saved (dwelling in the stage of non-retrogression), it is impossible that one "will be saved" (necessarily attain nirvana). If we substitute "attain birth" for "be saved," then without already having attained birth in the present, it is impossible that one necessarily "will attain birth" in the future. The person who necessarily "will attain birth" (realize nirvana) is one who in the present has attained birth (reached the stage of the truly settled). We see, then, that Shinran's thought as indicated by the two meanings of birth is taught by Rennyō using the words "being saved." In both cases the content is "to become a buddha"; hence, it is characterized by the self-contradictory structure of simultaneous identity and transformation.

TRANSLATED BY DENNIS HIROTA

²⁴ *Goichidaiki kikigaki* 19; SSZ III, p. 537.