

D. T. Suzuki and Pure Land Buddhism

BANDŌ SHŌJUN

DR. D. T. SUZUKI (1870–1966) was born in the province of Kaga (the present Ishikawa Prefecture) in the north-western part of Japan, a famous stronghold of Shin Buddhism. As a child, he is said to have often accompanied his mother to hear sermons at Shin Buddhist temples. This exposure to ardent Nembutsu devotees through his mother's intermediation must have left its imprint on the young Suzuki, for he was later to turn with increasing frequency to deal with Pure Land, and particularly Shin, Buddhist themes, especially that of the Myōkōnin.

The Myōkōnins were paragons of devotion in Pure Land Buddhist history about whom biographies developed into a genre of literature inspiring faith in a life of Nembutsu devotion. The term, "myōkōnin," is derived originally from the Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Patriarch Shan-tao's (613–681) commentary on the *Meditation Sutra*. In one passage of this sutra the Buddha tells Ānanda:

They who practice the Nembutsu shall be known as the blooming white lotus (*puṇḍarīka*) among human beings.

Shan-tao interprets this passage in his *Commentary on the Meditation Sutra* (*Kuan wu liang shou ching su*) as follows:

How rare are those who constantly devote themselves to the Nembutsu. So rare are they that to them there is nothing comparable. For this reason, a simile is sought among the *puṇḍarīka* of human beings. The *puṇḍarīka* is a rare flower. Thus are these devotees to be called the most wonderful flowers of humanity. In China these flowers are traditionally associated with the sacred tortoise. The Nembutsu devotees are really the finest specimens of humanity (*nin*, people); they are wondrously good (*myōkō*); they are the best of the best; they are the rarest; they are the most excellent of people.

During the Edo period (1603–1868) in Japan, a number of biographies of Myōkōnin were compiled. Because of the political pressure imposed by the feudal government at the time, most of these accounts depicted them to be

illiterate people of little means who were subservient to the feudal system. While portrayed as warm-hearted and compassionate people steadfast in their Nembutsu faith, they were at the same time cast in the role of strictly observing the Confucian ethics of the feudal society, such as maintaining loyalty to the feudal lord (*shōgun*) and obeying their parents and elders.

Dr. Suzuki recognized that the Myōkōnins had a "deep significance in the general field of religious experience" and applied himself to a study of this matter. In the 1924 issue of *The Eastern Buddhist*, he translates the sayings of the Shin teacher and Myōkōnin Shichiri Gōjun (1835–1900) under the title, "Sayings of a Tariki Mystic" (*EB* os II. 2, July–September 1924, pp. 93–116). While touching on the subject in *Jōdokei Shisōron* (Studies in Pure Land Thought, 1942), he deals at length with the Myōkōnins Shōma (1799–1871) of Sanuki (present Kagawa Prefecture on the island of Shikoku) and Monodane Kichibei (1803–1880). In *Nihonteki Reisei* (Japanese Spirituality, 1944), he deals with the early Myōkōnin Dōshū (d. 1501) of Akao (present Toyama Prefecture) and Asahara Saichi (d. 1933). The latter, "one of the most remarkable modern examples," is taken up again in the book, *Myōkōnin* (1948). In "The Myōkōnin" chapter of *A Miscellany on the Shin Teaching of Buddhism* (1949), he discusses the woman Myōkōnin Mrs. Hina Mori (n.d.) as well as Saichi. The latter he again discusses in *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (1957) and in his posthumously published edition of *Myōkōnin Asahara Saichi-shū* (1967).

In his numerous writings and lectures, Dr. Suzuki often referred to Shin Buddhism, especially in his later years. For example, in his preface to *Myōkōnin Monodane Kichibei* (Kyō Kusunoki, ed., 1948), Dr. Suzuki at the age of seventy-eight remarks: "Religious devotion of a solely passive nature considerably reflects the color of feudalism. Although it may well have been appropriate for the time, if it means conformity to each and every thing, it is not in accord with the present-day social condition. We must positively initiate a movement toward eliminating detrimental factors in the political and social welfare spheres. Shin Buddhists in the future, while pursuing a spiritual life embodying Other Power, must affirm what might be called Self Power within Other Power."

In another passage he states: "Under the feudal political system, the Great Compassion worked in the individuals alone. It was no more than an isolated faculty without organization. With regard to this, deep reflection is required of those devoted to Other Power."

In the *Myōkōnin* he continues: "Their (Myōkōnins') lives are consistently characterized by feelings expressed as 'Thank Amida!' 'What a blessing!' and 'I am more than grateful!' Not only is their way of life characterized by non-resistance and ahimsā (non-violence), we might even say that this attitude was for them a source of great delight. Though certainly demonstrating a certain level of spiritual maturity in a personal context, how much more would we

appreciate this attitude in the context of the life of the whole community? This may well merit room for further reflection."

In this connection he also has this to say: "I cannot help wishing that they (Nembutsu devotees) take the step from mere passivity to constructive and general activity to deliver sentient beings. . . . My special wishes go to those people devoted to Other Power that they may enter the 'Samādhi of the Lion's Invincible Charge' (*simhaviṣṭambhito nāma samādhi*)." At this point, Dr. Suzuki appears to be observing that of the polarities of "self-benefiting" and "other-benefiting" or "self" and "society," Myōkōnins and Nembutsu devotees in general are inclined to be "self-benefiting" and oriented to the self rather than to society. He does not, however, fail to elaborate: "The two directions from the world of *mayoi* (delusion) to the world of *satori* (Enlightenment), and from the world of *satori* to the world of *mayoi*, should not be regarded as distinct from each other. The deliverance of myself, as it is, is the deliverance of others. If so, "to commiserate with, to share sufferings with, and to care for sentient beings" which characterizes the Compassion of the Path of the Sages should be regarded as no different from the Compassion of the Path of the Pure Land."

His remarks considered in total, it becomes apparent that he never made issue of the priority of either of the two polarities of self and other. Rather were his observations of duality based upon non-duality. That is to say, while it is true that he cautioned Myōkōnin and Nembutsu devotees against settling at ease in self-benefiting activity, he did not indiscriminately attempt to inculcate a positive attitude toward other-benefiting activity at the expense of the self-benefiting aspect.

Dr. Suzuki's non-dualistic perspective of Myōkōnins has been expressed in a number of lectures and writings in both his home country as well as abroad. I am reminded of a public lecture he gave during the Fourth East-West Philosophers' Conference held at the University of Hawaii in 1964. He was ninety-four at this, his third occasion to participate in the Conference. The title of his lecture was "The Person in Zen Buddhism," and though not addressed directly in regard to Myōkōnins, a passage he quoted in the lecture strikes me as typifying Dr. Suzuki's ultimate view regarding them. The passage comes from *The Eternal Smile*, a novel by Per Lagerqvist, a Nobel Prize winner in the field of literature. The passage in summary is as follows:

When a group of people who had renounced the world congregated one day discussing various topics, the question was raised, "For what reason did God create the world with such an amount of suffering and inequality?" As there was none among them who could properly answer the question, they all agreed to go on a journey to seek God that he might answer the question in person. After walking on and on a great

distance, they saw in front of them a bright, open space, a clearing in the woods. There they saw an old woodcutter with a white, saintly beard, silently at work. Seeing him, the children in the party immediately approached him and started to clamber about him out of friendliness. Everyone instantly recognized him as God himself. When they addressed their important question to Him, He simply said, "I have done my best," and continued his work in silence. It was not long before an unaccountable transformation took place in their minds. Their long-cherished doubt had completely dissipated they knew not when. Being satisfied with the answer of no-answer, and full of indescribable joy, they took to their return journey with peaceful minds, infused with an unfathomable sense of solidarity.

I cannot help but think that in this passage is couched the essence of Dr. Suzuki's view of Myōkōnins, for it clearly reveals the Bodhisattva state of the "Samādhi of Genuine Play," in which benefiting the self and benefiting others are harmoniously merged. In this way was it beautifully expressed that the true other-benefiting activity is performed beyond words and self-consciousness. Ultimately, Dr. Suzuki's view of Myōkōnins regards their self-benefiting activity, as it is, as benefiting others, that their seemingly personal life of joy and happiness in the Dharma has a far-reaching, though invisible, social extension, and that this activity is none other than the actual expression of the ever-functioning Great Compassion of Amida Buddha.

Especially because he is generally thought of as an expounder of Mahayana Buddhist thought, Zen and Kegon philosophy in particular, Dr. Suzuki's writings on Pure Land Buddhism published in juxtaposition with other seemingly incongruous themes have perplexed not a small number of people. For example, Mr. Christmas Humphreys, President of the London Buddhist Society, once frankly told me that among Dr. Suzuki's writings, those on Pure Land Buddhist themes were beyond his understanding. The reason for this may have been that Amida Buddha who has an aspect of personality (technically it is called Dharmakāya in Upāya, or skillful means) possibly reminds people of the Christian God. Dr. Suzuki, however, repeatedly emphasized that while Amida can be regarded as a dear parent ("Oyasama"), in this respect Amida is different in nature from God the Father in Christianity. The heart of Pure Land Buddhism thus appears to be beyond the comprehension of those, especially Westerners, who are accustomed to thinking in terms of theism and atheism, favoring one to the exclusion of the other. There is a persistent inclination in the Western mind to identify Amida Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism with God in Christianity, thereby regarding Pure Land Buddhism as a kind of theism. This leads to their dismissing this form of Buddhism as alien to authentic Bud-

dhist thought which is "nontheistic" in nature. For this reason, the nature of Amida Buddha as "Dharmakāya as skillful means" is a unique feature of Mahayana Buddhism which needs to be clarified all the more in the future for a better understanding of Pure Land Buddhism.

Dr. Suzuki often admired Shinran Shōnin's (1173–1262) *Kyōgyōshinshō* ("Teaching, Living, Faith, and Realization"), the chapter on Realization in particular. I presume he felt a special familiarity with what is expressed in this chapter, since all passages contained therein are dominated by T'an-luan's (476-542) thought which emphasizes the non-duality of Dharmakāya in its Suchness and in its manifested form. This chapter is concluded by the following quotation: "It is like the Harp of Asura. There is nobody playing it; yet the melody comes out of it in the way of just-so-ness." He also loved to recite the passage preceding it: "The Bodhisattva sees all beings as if they were ultimately non-existent. He liberates an innumerable number of beings; yet in reality there are no beings who attain liberation. The Bodhisattva liberates all beings as if he were engaged in play." It is said that the Bodhisattvas of pure heart who show advanced levels of attainment have no consciousness of saving anyone while in actuality saving numberless beings; they are like children absorbed in playing in the garden. There is no doubt that Dr. Suzuki saw the essence of the "true man of no rank" in Zen Buddhism and of the Myōkōnins of Pure Land Buddhism as attaining this state of genuine play. Nor is there any doubt that Dr. Suzuki, who never tired of admiring this quality throughout his life, was himself already an embodiment of it.