

From the Lotus Sutra to the Sutra of Eternal Life

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Reflections on the process of deliverance in Shinran

IT IS WELL KNOWN that Shinran Shōnin (1173–1262), after studying Tendai philosophy on Mt. Hiei, subsequently converted to a nembutsu practitioner of the Pure Land faith. But what influence did his early studies of Tendai philosophy have on the process of his search for deliverance?

As to the reason why Shinran left Mt. Hiei, could it have been that he despaired over the appalling degeneration of the monks of the monastery? Or could it have been that he was unable to tolerate the fact that philosophical inquiry on Mt. Hiei had turned into empty argumentations and had become a mere shell in which not even the slightest religious sentiment remained? Or was it because he reflected that the Tendai concept of *isshin sangan*¹ was so lofty a method of practice that he felt his own capability inadequate? Opinions may vary. However, his conversion from Mt. Hiei to Kurodani, or from Tendai to nembutsu, was not a gradual development but a dramatic leap, one that no doubt signified his conversion from self-power disciplines to the entrusting mind of Other Power, *tariki shinjin*. Yet can it be said that the Tendai Lotus teaching Shinran was instructed in during his youth was totally irrelevant in guiding the development of his later belief in birth in the Pure Land? Even if we say it is not irrelevant, can we say that its influence was confined only to

¹ From *Hokkekō josetsu* 法華經序説 (Kyoto; Hōzōkan, 1962), pp. 106–113. Footnotes are by the translator.

¹ *Isshin sangan* 一心三觀. Three views in one mind. The perfect fusion in one thought-instant of the mind of the three views 三觀 that all dharmas are immediately identical with emptiness 空, provisional reality 假, and the middle way 中. This represents the culmination of Tendai practice.

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the negation and disavowal of his Tendai background? I hold doubts in regard to this point.

It is true that the Japanese Tendai sect, because of its multifaceted nature which combines both esoteric and exoteric teachings, has come to be markedly different from the original T'ien-t'ai of China. However, it is, after all, no different in that, being based on the Tendai classification of the Buddhist teachings into the Five Periods and Eight Teachings,² it acknowledged the Lotus Sutra as the ultimate and true teaching which reveals the real reason for the Buddha's appearance in this world.

As to why this sutra is the teaching that reveals the real reason for the Buddha's appearance in this world, it is because the Lotus demonstrates that the common aim of all the various Buddhas is to disclose the Buddha-wisdom to sentient beings and lead them to enlightenment, and that all teachings of the Buddha as well as the various Buddha-bodies are for the purpose of accomplishing this goal. Thus in the Chapter on Upāya it is clarified that the distinction made between the three vehicles was an upāya expounded for the realization of this goal, and in the Chapter on the Eternal Life of the Tathāgata, it is explained that the attainment of liberation as well as the nirvana of all Buddhas were also upāya for the realization of the same goal.

For this reason, the attainment of Buddhahood by sentient beings by means of the One Vehicle and the attainment of Buddhahood by Śākya-muni in the remote past are considered the two essential points of this sutra. But it must be emphasized that the spirit which underlies them both is the pervasive character of the great compassion mind of the Buddha. Although it is called the One Vehicle, this does not mean that sentient beings attain enlightenment individually. It is said that the Buddha, in order to cause sentient beings of even the lowest ability to attain to the fruit of Buddhahood identical with his own, taught in various ways through upāya. Thus to attain Buddhahood by the One Vehicle means that, without distinction to wise or foolish, clever or dull, all sentient beings, solely by depending on the Buddha's power, are able to attain Buddhahood.

² *Five Periods and Eight Teachings*. For a more detailed discussion of the Tendai classification of the Buddhist teachings, to which the author makes frequent reference, see Leon Hurvitz, *Chih-I: An Introduction to the Life and Teachings of a Chinese Buddhist Monk*, *Mélanges chinois et bouddhiques* xii (Bruxelles: l'Institut Belge des Hautes Études Chinoises, 1960-1962), pp. 229 ff.

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Furthermore, although it is said that the true Buddha is one enlightened in the remote past, this does not mean that the essence of the Buddha is an unchanging principle. The Buddha is no other than the Mind of the Vow which, having seen with wisdom the true condition of sentient beings as they really are and incessantly striving to bring all sentient beings to attain the same Buddha-wisdom, is from the remote past affectionately thinking upon the sentient beings. The Mind of the Vow is the Buddha-mind and the essence of the Buddha. Since this Mind of the Vow will not cease to exist as long as there are sentient beings, it is for this reason that the Lotus teaches that the true Buddha attained Buddhahood fifty trillion dustmote kalpas ago and that his life is innumerable asamkhya kalpas long. Seen in this way, can it not be said that the Lotus Sutra taught rather the Buddha's limitless compassion which always thinks affectionately upon sentient beings, and not the Dharma of the Holy Path and the Difficult Practices?

When Shinran Shōnin was on Mt. Hiei, he was a hall-monk at the Hall of the Constantly Walking Samādhi.³ Hence, when he recited the Lotus Sutra venerated in the Tendai sect, he must have intensely sought after its profound meaning. Along with this, while practicing the Constantly Walking Samādhi, he must have meditated deeply on what kind of Buddha Amida is. For this reason, I think he could not have helped but perceive that, between the Lotus Sutra and the Sutra of Eternal Life, transcending the distinction of conditional teaching or real teaching, the great compassion mind of the Buddha was being forcefully revealed.

However, in the Tendai school, there is another important sutra given respect equal to that of the Lotus Sutra. This is the Nirvana Sutra. Although only the Lotus can be the sutra with the "genuinely perfect and uniquely wonderful teaching" which exclusively teaches the truth, in the Tendai sect the Nirvana Sutra is critically judged to have a dual significance. On the one hand, this sutra, as far as it possesses content which is perfect and true, is no different from the Lotus and shares with it the same "taste of ghee."⁴ On the other hand, however, it is believed

³ *Constantly Walking Samādhi* 常行三昧 *jōgyō-zammai*. One of four Tendai meditation practices in which the practitioner constantly circumambulates for ninety days a statue of Amida, reciting the name of Amida and contemplating the image of Amida.

⁴ *Daigo mi* 醍醐味. The taste of ghee refers to the category of the true teaching of the Buddha to which belong the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra; it represents the final of five stages in the Tendai classification of Buddhist teachings, to which analogy is made

to include an upāya content which is expounded with a special purpose not found in the Lotus Sutra.

First, in regard to it being equal to the Lotus, while the fundamental thesis of the Nirvana Sutra is that all beings possess Buddha-nature and that the Tathāgata is eternal, these are no different from the two essential points of the Lotus, that the One Vehicle is the true way and that Buddhahood was attained by Śākaymuni in the remote past. They are in spirit completely identical. As all beings possess Buddha-nature, even icchantika, men without faith, can attain Buddhahood; for the purpose of saving sentient beings, the Buddha at times manifests illness or death, yet the Buddha itself does not die and abides eternally. Thus insofar as the Nirvana Sutra also emphasizes the great compassion mind of the Buddha as limitless and pervasively pure, it is no different from the Lotus Sutra.

After all, Buddhism is a religion which aspires to seek the Buddha by means of the Buddha's teachings. This being the case, the problem of what the Buddha is and how mankind can seek the Buddha, are fundamental problems which a follower of the Buddhist teachings must first make clear. The Lotus and the Nirvana Sutra answer this question by saying that the Buddha is the source of the effort to convert beings, incessantly thinking affectionately upon sentient beings and endeavouring to lead them to nirvana. Man himself can become a Buddha only by means of the Buddha's power. Once a man is awakened to the delusion and suffering of this world, and begins to seek after the nirvana of a Buddha, he must reflect in himself and question whether or not he has the ability to become a Buddha. At that time, the grievous fact is that his faith in himself is crushed and he falls into despair. If this is so, then can there be a follower of the Buddhist teaching, even one not a follower of the Tendai sect, who would not be deeply moved by the Lotus and Nirvana Sutra which explain the power of the Buddha and the power of his Vow? As long as Buddhist teachings are an inquiry, not for academic knowledge, but to seek one's own liberation from ignorance and karmic suffering, these two sutras must be called the supreme treasury which opens that path to seekers of the Way.

with the process of maturation of milk to cheese and so on; ghee is the resultant "purified butter."

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II

Above I mentioned that the Nirvana Sutra includes an upāya content which is expounded with a special purpose not found in the Lotus Sutra. What is this special purpose? According to the Tendai sect, the Buddha in the Nirvana Sutra had to preach the teaching of upāya for the sake of those who could not come upon the Lotus Sutra while the Buddha was in the world and for those dull-witted people who were born after the Buddha's demise and cannot believe in the True Law, as a means of drawing these people into the perfect and true teaching. What we cannot fail to notice here is that the Nirvana Sutra directs its attention to the dull-witted people of the age after the demise of the Buddha. Without doubt, this is an age without a Buddha after the demise of Śakyamuni. To look upon the state of the world, the sangha has degenerated and the intellectual currents are in confusion; conditions repeatedly warned against in the Nirvana Sutra have become reality. While Nichiren Shōnin was unable to bear the state of things and stood up in defense of the Dharma in the light of the Nirvana Sutra, Shinran Shōnin as well, seeing the actual state of the world, could not have regarded the admonitions of the Nirvana Sutra without a sense of deep personal concern. The terror of Mappō is described in the Nirvana Sutra as if reflected in a mirror. But is not the terror of Mappō, rather than that of the decay and degeneration of some segment of the world apart from oneself, in reality, that of the essence of humanity concentrated within one's own self? Looking upon the deterioration of the world one comes to be acutely aware of the terror of the evil karma dwelling within oneself from which there is no escape. It is within the Nirvana Sutra, the very sutra which reproves the wickedness of the impenitent breaking of precepts, that one cannot help but turn to in search of some way expounded by which such people can be saved.

Shinran Shōnin, while grieving over the sullied world of Mappō and ashamed of the heavy weight of his evil karma, through an irrepressible wish for liberation, was time and again, as if driven by greed, brought to read the Nirvana Sutra. It is likely that Shinran Shōnin believed that there must undoubtedly be the way to salvation taught in the Nirvana Sutra and pored over it, paying utmost attention to every word and phrase. The fact that this sutra is quoted in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* as many as thirty-three times is proof enough for this statement. When writing the *Kyōgyō-*

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shinshō, Shinran did not quote at random any phrase which happened to come to mind. This is clear even in the passages of his personal commentary which precede or follow the Nirvana Sutra quotations, judging by how filled with emotion they are.

Now if with singleness of mind we read the Nirvana Sutra as the compassionate teaching bequeathed for the sake of the dull-witted of the Latter Age, then it becomes clear that the greatest problem throughout this sutra is how, while acknowledging that "all beings without exception possess Buddha-nature," this can be reconciled with the notion of *icchantika* who are said not to possess faith. That someone without faith can become a Buddha is something that cannot be sanctioned. Faith is the root cause of one's entering the Way, and taking refuge in the Three Treasures is necessarily the first step in seeking the Way. Accordingly, if one without faith can attain Buddhahood, Buddhism is undermined from its very basis.

But is that *icchantika* none other than my own self? Even if one thinks one has faith, it is not a true and real faith. As proof of this, one sees faith as personal effort and will endeavour to arouse oneself to practice with diligence. It is questionable whether this can be called true faith. First of all, when we speak of faith, in what are we to have faith? If it is said to be faith in Buddha, what of the Buddha are we to have faith in? Does it not mean that to have faith in the Buddha, is to have faith in the Mind of the Vow of the Buddha? The Mind of the Vow of the Buddha is none other than that which causes sentient beings to become Buddhas. Seen in this light, since it is stated in the Nirvana Sutra that the Buddha never rests in trying to cause those without faith to attain faith and become Buddhas, although we may say we ourselves have faith in the Buddha, in truth it should be said that the compassion of the Buddha's Mind of the Vow has reached us and has caused those without faith to attain faith. Relying on our own power, no matter what we do, there is not the slightest prospect of our being able to arouse within ourselves a mind of faith. If such a person were to give rise to faith, it could not be that one had faith by oneself, but that one was caused by the Buddha to have faith. This is called faith of the Other Power, or "faith without root." Shinran quotes in detail the story of King Ajātasatru's taking refuge in the Buddha which appears in the Chapter on Good Conducts in the Nirvana Sutra.³ Does not this story in itself indicate the process by which Shinran entered the realm of faith?

³ See Suzuki, *The Kyōgoshūshō* (Kyoto, 1979), p. 150 ff.

III

That the Buddha with his limitless life is trying to save those beings deeply mired in evil karma by causing them to attain faith has been made known through the Lotus and Nirvana Sutra. If this is the case, what is the relationship between these two sutras and the Sutra of Eternal Life? In my opinion, I think it can be said that the Sutra of Eternal Life fully brought forth the spirit of the Lotus and Nirvana Sutra. This is because, in this sutra, the Mind of the Vow of the Tathāgata is meticulously provided for, and is being turned over and bestowed upon sentient beings. In regard to the Sutra of Eternal Life, Shinran Shōnin concluded that its essential theme was the explication of the Original Vow of the Tathāgata. Properly speaking, the Tathāgata's Original Vow should pervade all sutras. However, as the various sutras each have their own particular purpose, this is not elucidated as their essential theme. On the other hand, the Sutra of Eternal Life truly teaches only of the Original Vow of the Tathāgata. Having fulfilled the 48 Vows, Dharmākara Bodhisattva became Amida Buddha. In relating the story of the origin and result of raising the Mind of the Vow, there is no mistake in saying that the Sutra of Eternal Life has as its essential theme the explication of the Tathāgata's Original Vow. Since the attainment of parinirvana by sentient beings is made possible only through the power of Amida's Original Vow, not only is the purport of this sutra identical with that of the Lotus and Nirvana Sutra, in fact the Sutra of Eternal Life must be said to have developed it to its ultimate conclusion. What is more, the Buddha, being eternal in life, in order to rescue the suffering and deluded beings for whom he felt sorrow and pity, raised the Vow and fulfilled his merits. Even though the Lotus Sutra speaks of a Buddha who attained Buddhahood in the remote past and the Nirvana Sutra tells of a Buddha who abides eternally and does not perish, these are references to the Buddha of Eternal Life (Ami-tāyus Buddha); it does not mean that there is another separate Buddha. Seen in this light, the Sutra of Eternal Life is not just one sutra among the many sutras taught by the Buddha; it may correctly be called that which reveals the final destination of the various sutras.

The Lotus Sutra teaches that the real reason for Tathāgata's appearance in the world was to reveal to all sentient beings the Buddha-wisdom and to lead them to enlightenment. The aim of the Tathāgata's appearance in

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the world, whether it be in the Lotus Sutra or in the Sutra of Eternal Life, must be something consistent. Therefore it is stated in the Sutra of Eternal Life, "The Tathāgata, because of his inexhaustibly great compassion, pities the Triple World. The reason for his appearance in the world is because he desired to elucidate and reveal the teaching of the Way, to rescue the multitude of beings, and to bless them with the benefits of the Truth." In truth—this is my conjecture—Shinran Shōnin did not enter the Sutra of Eternal Life by casting aside the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra. Instead he gradually came to respect deeply the Mind of the Vow of Tathāgata through the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra, and ultimately realized that the Sutra of Eternal Life which explicates the Original Vow of the Tathāgata is the true teaching of the Tathāgata.

But here I wish to reflect a moment. The Tathāgata's Original Vow, as stated above, runs through the Lotus Sutra and the Nirvana Sutra and the Sutra of Eternal Life. Not only that, if considered from the original intention of the Mind of the Vow, it must be said that all the teachings of the Buddha, not only these three sutras, are manifestations of the Mind of the Vow. If this is so, it may simply be a matter of the degree of refinement with which the Mind of the Vow is expressed that the teaching of the Sutra of Eternal Life is called the true teaching. But is this really so? In regard to this point, I interpret it in the following way, hoping it accords with Shinran's true intention.

First, as to the Lotus Sutra, it is a fact that this sutra reveals the Tathāgata's Mind of the Vow which wishes all beings to attain to the same enlightenment as that of the Buddha. There is no doubt as to this point. However, the emphasis of the Lotus is on the attainment of Buddhahood by those of the Two Vehicles. Those of the Two Vehicles are, as the Vimalakirti and other sutras state, that group of people who have destroyed both root and seed for the attainment of Buddhahood and who have no hope at all to raise the mind to seek enlightenment. These people are not enlightened to the true intention of the Buddha and, on their own accord, remain at a state of petty understanding. For this reason, the Buddha tries to bring such people back to the correct Great Way of the Buddha, and cause them to progress along the Buddha-way in accord with the Mind of the Vow. Since this is the purport of the Lotus Sutra, within this limit the sutra can be said to have indicated the inconceivable power which makes the impossible possible. Indeed, it is for this reason that the Lotus Sutra is praised as the "secret treasury of the Tathāgata" and

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called the "King of Sutras." But could those of the Two Vehicles be identical with us common people? According to the sutra, they are all arhats who have engaged in Buddhist practices, and are said to have extinguished all their defilements. Even granted that they may be mistaken in their conviction, it is impossible to think that we who have not rid ourselves of even the smallest speck of delusions, indeed, we common men who are in every way filled with delusions, could be equal to such arhats.

Accordingly, the attainment of Buddhahood by saintly figures such as arhats and pratyekabuddhas, cannot guarantee the attainment of Buddhahood by common beings. It may be that the Mind of the Vow of the Buddha reaches saints of the Two Vehicles but does not reach the delusion-ridden common man. It can thus be conjectured that Shinran, who stands on his awareness of being a common man, could not but turn from the Lotus Sutra to the Sutra of Eternal Life in order to find the Buddha's teaching set forth clearly. Furthermore, this does not mean that the Pure Land nembutsu teaching opens its doors to the common man, but closes its doors to the Two Vehicles. As T'an-luan (476-542) states, even the arhat, who is considered one unable to bring forth the sprout for entering the Way of Buddhahood, can, by means of the Buddha's supernatural power, give rise to the thought of seeking enlightenment and be caused to be born in the Pure Land. Thus the Buddha's supernatural power referred to in the Lotus Sutra as the "secret treasury," is not at all lacking in the teaching of the Pure Land.

Next, what about the Nirvana Sutra? In the Nirvana Sutra, although the icchantika, those who lack faith, are scathingly reprimanded as those who have severed the good roots leading to enlightenment, condemned to death and incurable, it is in the end admitted that, by the Buddha's power, they can be made to raise a mind of entrusting faith. Once the mind to have faith in the Buddha has been raised, it is no longer possible not to become a Buddha. For this reason, even we delusion-ridden common men who have no entrusting mind, by riding on the power of the Vow of the Buddha can be enabled to attain Buddhahood—this is elucidated in the Nirvana Sutra beyond all doubt.

However, even if this were the case, when the practical problem of how the power of the Buddha and the power of the Vow appear in concrete form is considered, the answer is not clear. Even though we cannot doubt the Mind of the Vow of the Buddha or his supernatural power, in

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what way should we have faith in it? There is no proof that one who has faith is saved. But is this not the most important problem we are faced with? According to the Sutra of Eternal Life, however, in the 18th Vow⁶ it states, "in sincerity and faith." That it is vowed that one who in sincerity has faith will be caused to be born in the Pure Land and attain Buddhahood is, in other words, none other than the fact that sincerity and faith have been turned over to us from the Buddha's side. Is there any other way as certain as this for the attainment of Buddhahood by the common man? Moreover, is there any other sutra which points this out with such clarity? I believe that from the beginning it was only natural that Shinran should have finally come to reach as his ultimate destination the Sutra of Eternal Life.

Translated by Robert Rhodes

⁶ For Shinran, the 18th vow has special significance for it assures the salvation of all beings, even the worst of men.