

D. T. Suzuki, Amida Buddha, and the Problem of Karma

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ONE OF THE core principles of Shin 真 Buddhism is that all enlightening power flows from Amida 阿弥陀 Buddha to sentient beings. That is one reason why Shin emphasizes *tariki* 他力, the power of Amida to benefit others, over *jiriki* 自力, the capacity of sentient beings to benefit themselves. Hence, part of Amida's definition, both ontologically and functionally, is to bring all living beings to enlightenment. The actual mechanism by which this occurs, if we follow traditional Mahayana doctrine, is the transfer of merit (Skt. *pariṇāmana*; Jp. *ekō* 廻向) to others. That is, Amida generates and embodies an endless store of merit that is extended to all sentient beings. This would seem to place Amida and Shin Buddhism squarely within the framework of the traditional Buddhist doctrine of karma rather than operating capriciously outside the uniform laws of nature recognized by Buddhism.

D. T. Suzuki (Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō 鈴木大拙貞太郎; 1870–1966), the well-known interpreter of Buddhism in the twentieth century, was hesitant to define the religious path of Buddhism—particularly Mahayana and Shin Buddhism—strictly in terms of karmic cause and effect. This is apparent in Suzuki's attempt to uncouple Amida Buddha from the framework of karma. As Suzuki says, “Amida always stands against karma which works independent of him. Karma is the world of all sentient beings.”¹ This dramatic claim reflects both Suzuki's own struggle, as well as Shin Buddhism's struggle, to reconcile Amida's enlightening power to the conventional doctrine of karma.

This essay explores Suzuki's interpretation of karma and Shin Buddhism, especially as it applies to Amida Buddha and the ideal religious state of Shin Buddhists. Suzuki

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¹ Suzuki 2015, p. 110.

addressed this topic only occasionally in his writings, most prominently in his long essay, “The Shin Sect of Buddhism.”² But to get a comprehensive picture of Suzuki’s views we also need to look at other writings that do not address Shin Buddhism per se. The ideas that Suzuki expressed in them about karma and buddhahood are implicit in his interpretation of karma and Amida in Shin. In order to elucidate Suzuki’s views, I would like to organize my discussion around three ways of interpreting Amida Buddha: Amida within a karma framework, Amida within a two-dimensional karma/akarma framework, and Amida within a nondual karma/akarma framework.

Amida in a Karma Framework

Karma is a pervasive theme in early Buddhism. In a nutshell it refers to the idea that all action—whether physical, verbal, or mental—has outcomes or consequences. Some actions have unfortunate consequences, which lead to suffering in this life or tragic rebirths in the future. One of the goals of Buddhism is to become aware of the effects that certain actions can have and to minimize the unfortunate ones and maximize the wholesome ones. If people can develop a lifestyle in which unfortunate actions are brought to an end and only wholesome ones remain—though without any personal attachment to them—then Buddhist liberation or enlightenment becomes possible. In this state people no longer commit actions that have consequences or that lead to rebirth, and are thus freed from karma and its results, though they may still have to endure residual effects of actions committed prior to enlightenment until they die in this world. This idea of liberation from karma and its consequences is one of the defining characteristics of the arhat in early Buddhism. This same state is attributed to Śākyamuni Buddha in his enlightenment, whereby only a residue of karmic consequences persists until his *parinirvāṇa*, or “nirvana without remainder,” occurring at death. Suzuki fully acknowledged this doctrine of karma to be a core theme in early Buddhism, but he considered it a mechanical and inferior teaching, characteristic of Hinayana Buddhism, which was superseded by Mahayana.³

Mahayana inherited the idea of karma and also recognized that actions can have either meritorious or unfortunate outcomes. But an important corollary arose in Mahayana that was not present in earlier Buddhism: the idea that merit resulting from a good action need not redound only to the benefit of the actor, but could be offered up to other sentient beings as well. This is the famous Mahayana doctrine of the transference of merit. According to it, the benefit resulting from a particular action is not inflexibly tied to the person performing it, as was thought in early Buddhism, but can

² Suzuki 2015, pp. 75–114.

³ For Suzuki’s views on the doctrine of karma in early Buddhism, see Suzuki 1963, pp. 33–35, 181–92, 196–99; and Suzuki 1972, pp. 84–85.

be extended to others who are not the actual authors of the act. Suzuki considered this doctrine to be a watershed idea in the development of Buddhism, for it provided the rationale or logic for the bodhisattva path.⁴ Specifically, the bodhisattva's religious advancement toward enlightenment arises not simply from amassing personal karmic merit from past good deeds, but rather from relinquishing this merit so that others may also advance toward enlightenment. It is this sharing of merit that makes a person a bodhisattva and that makes compassion, or love of others, a parallel virtue to the perfection of wisdom in Mahayana. Suzuki championed the bodhisattva path as the more authentic form of Buddhism, in contrast to the self-benefiting production of karmic merit found in Hinayana.⁵

The character and identity of Amida Buddha in Pure Land and Shin Buddhism is built upon this Mahayana understanding of karma. Amida himself is depicted as having attained buddhahood by way of the archetypal bodhisattva path to enlightenment, spanning ten kalpas of religious practice and resulting in an incalculable store of karmic merit from countless virtuous deeds. This stock of merit, likened by one Buddhist scholar to an actuarial accumulation of karmic capital, is what gives Amida his power, and merit transference is the mechanism that allows him to extend it to sentient beings.⁶ In short, Amida's vast store of merit and virtue is the collateral that stands behind his principal vow (*hongan* 本願) to bring all living beings to enlightenment in his Pure Land. What makes Shin Buddhism distinctive from other Mahayana teachings is the belief that humans do not have the karmic capacity to attain enlightenment on their own. In fact, their overwhelming inclination is to commit evil deeds, thereby locking themselves in a self-perpetuating cycle of unfortunate karmic consequences—suffering in this life and misfortune in future rebirths. Hence, for them to attain enlightenment they must receive Amida's virtue extended unilaterally from his side. For this reason, when the term “merit transference” appears in Pure Land texts, Shin Buddhism uniformly interprets it as a transference from Amida to humans, not from them to others.⁷ As a result, all acts of piety and virtue in Shin Buddhism—for example, aspiration for enlightenment (*bodaishin* 菩提心), *nenbutsu* 念佛, faith (*shingyō* 信樂), sincerity (*shishin* 至心), and the desire to be born in the Pure Land (*yokushō* 欲生)—are considered Amida's virtues transferred to humans rather than their own individual acts. Thus, it is possible to conceptualize Amida and the Shin Buddhist ideal within the framework of the Buddhist doctrine of karma, though admittedly it

⁴ Concerning *ekō*, or the transference of merit, see Suzuki 2015, “The Development of the Pure Land Doctrine in Buddhism,” pp. 17–19, 22–23; Suzuki 2015, “The Shin Sect of Buddhism,” pp. 109–10; and Suzuki 1963, pp. 283–86.

⁵ For Suzuki's account of the bodhisattva, see Suzuki 1963, pp. 277–310.

⁶ Gómez 1983, pp. 75–76.

⁷ Suzuki 2015, pp. 89, 109.

requires a unique interpretation in some places. Suzuki, in speaking of Shin Buddhism, would sometimes use this language of karma.⁸ But largely he resisted it in describing Amida, and sought instead to place him in a different dimension.

Amida in a Two-Dimensional Karma/Akarma Framework

In explaining Amida's relation to people, Suzuki divided the world into two dimensions: the realm of karma, in which humans live, and the realm of akarma, which is identical to Amida himself. The karmic dimension is subject to the laws of cause and effect and operates within the framework of time. It can be comprehended by the human intellect, and humans can structure their lives based on the invariable and predictable nature of its events. The akarmic dimension, by contrast, stands outside the workings of cause and effect. Time does not apply to it, and the human mind finds it incomprehensible. This is the very nature of the Buddha.⁹ Suzuki invoked the distinction between karma and akarma partly to differentiate the Shin understanding of Amida from the Christian conception of God. God, Suzuki argued, operates within the movement of history. He cares how people act and he intervenes to accomplish his will by rewarding the righteous and punishing the sinful. The Christian God is thus immersed in the workings of karma and is the most powerful agent in its operation. Amida, by contrast, does not interfere with the events of the world. He allows karma to take its course and does not pass judgment on who is virtuous and who is wicked. The world thus continues to function according to karma's ruthless predictability, whereas Amida abides in a qualitatively different akarmic dimension. This, Suzuki claimed, is what differentiates the Christian God from the Buddhist Amida.¹⁰

In order to understand Suzuki's conception of Amida, we need to look also at his ideas about *dharmakāya* (Jp. *hosshin* 法身), derived primarily from the *Kegon Sutra*, for Suzuki treated Amida as virtually synonymous with it. *Dharmakāya* is identified as the reality that stands behind this immediate world of flux. It is universal and pure, and it comes from nowhere and goes nowhere. It allows the realm of karma to operate just as it does, but it remains untouched by it. *Dharmakāya* is eternal and can never be annihilated, and at the same time it is serene and unmoving. Though it surpasses all particularity and is boundless, the specific things of the world are all enfolded within it. In short, *dharmakāya* is akarma—without karmic causes and abiding independently from the changes and conditions that characterize the world of karma.¹¹

⁸ See Suzuki 2015, p. 89, where it says "Amida turn[s] over all his accumulated merit toward opening the passage for all beings to his Pure Land."

⁹ Suzuki 2015, pp. 80–81, 97–98.

¹⁰ Suzuki 2015, pp. 96–97, 110–11.

¹¹ Suzuki 1963, pp. 223–24; Suzuki 2015, pp. 80–81.

All the features that Suzuki attributed to *dharmakāya* he also ascribed to Amida Buddha.¹²

Though Suzuki clearly delineated distinct spheres of karma and akarma, he nonetheless acknowledged that there are ways in which the *dharmakāya*, and by extension Amida, impinge on the lived experience of humans. In that sense, Suzuki's Amida may not differ as profoundly from certain definitions of the Christian God as Suzuki claimed. Amida, though complete in himself and unaffected by the karmic contingencies of the world, projects himself into that world through the transfer of his merit to sentient beings. Humans may bear responsibility for the evil actions they commit, but, according to a novel theory seemingly put forth by Suzuki, every meritorious act that they perform originates in the *dharmakāya* and returns to that vast store of merit which benefits all sentient beings.¹³ The most concrete way that Amida's merit and virtue appear in the world is in the form of his principal vow, or *hongan*, to bring all living beings to enlightenment and in the form of his name, the *nenbutsu*, out of which humans can awaken to Amida whenever it is spoken or heard.¹⁴ Thus, it would seem that the worlds of karma and akarma are not as hermetically sealed off from each other as Suzuki would have us believe. Rather, the akarmic virtue of Amida in the form of his vow and name can enter into the karmic framework of human experience and exert an effect on people's thought, word, and action. In short, the karmic and akarmic dimensions posed by Suzuki seem to interpenetrate—an idea that Suzuki himself sought to advance.

Amida in a Nondual Karma/Akarma Framework

For Suzuki, the intersection of karma and akarma is illustrated in the famous “Wild Fox” koan that he frequently cited. According to this, a fox appearing as an old man told the Chan 禪 (Jp. Zen) master Baizhang 百丈 (720–814) that in a previous life he had claimed that an enlightened person is no longer subject to cause and effect, and for this statement he was fated to be reborn as a wild fox. In response Baizhang declared that the enlightened person does not escape cause and effect, and thereupon the man was freed from his incarnation as a fox. Suzuki took the meaning of this koan to be that enlightenment does not separate a person from the workings of causation, so for his mistaken view the old man suffered his unfortunate rebirth. The enlightened person, on the contrary, is fully cognizant of the nature of karma and allows it to take its course. And in doing so, the person transcends karma even while in its midst.¹⁵ For

¹² Suzuki 1963, pp. 240–41.

¹³ Suzuki 1963, pp. 232–33.

¹⁴ Suzuki 2015, pp. 98–99.

¹⁵ Suzuki 1972, pp. 87–88.

Suzuki, this story provides a clear-cut example of the interpenetration of the akarma of enlightenment and the karma of worldly existence.

Analogous to the enlightened person in Zen is the person of faith in Shin Buddhism. In fact, because Shin considers humans mired in evil deeds and snared in a self-perpetuating cycle of wrongdoing, their escape from the mechanisms of cause and effect seems far less likely than that of the enlightened Zen figure. But Suzuki portrayed Shin faith as parallel to Zen enlightenment in the sense that both are the eruption of the unconditioned state of akarma into the conditioned world of karma. In Shin this occurs in the form of the *nenbutsu*—described as the virtue of Amida Buddha transferred to humans—which gives rise to the realization in Shin believers that they are embraced by the Buddha never to be forsaken. Hence, they live in a world where they seem suspended between karma and akarma—or rather fully vested in both. On the one hand, they realize that they cannot elude responsibility for their actions and must live out the consequences of their misdeeds. In that sense they remain creatures of this world. On the other hand, they feel liberated from it because of the miraculous intervention of Amida. In fact, consciousness of their enlightenment in the Pure Land, which is none other than the state of faith, is the true merit transference of Amida to humans. As a result, even while living in the fettered world of causes and effects, they feel that they already reside in the Pure Land, the realm of enlightenment. In this way they embody the interpenetration of karma and akarma.¹⁶

If the Shin person of faith is an example of the intersection between karma and akarma, can we say the same thing of Amida Buddha? Suzuki claimed emphatically that Amida, and by extension the *dharmakāya*, are akarmic in nature. They abide in their own unconditioned state and allow karma to function in its own sphere of influence. But there may be connections between Amida and this world which Suzuki has adumbrated. For sure, the Buddha's name and vow are considered concrete manifestations of him in the world that trigger faith in sentient beings. Moreover, the *dharmakāya* is characterized as the wellspring of all virtuous actions and the reservoir to which they return. In fact, *dharmakāya*, and Amida also, are treated as the very ground, or foundation, on which the world of conditioned and fleeting events operates. Suzuki acknowledged these intersections and treated Amida's name and vow as miraculous occurrences in the world, even while viewing the karmic and the akarmic as diametrically opposed to each other.¹⁷ The two thus exist in a paradoxical relationship: totally different, but at the same time, inseparable.

Suzuki's response to this paradox was his trademark advocacy of mystical intuition, which he saw as the solution to all conundrums in Buddhism. Its obstacle, Suzuki

¹⁶ Suzuki 2015, pp. 98–99, 111.

¹⁷ Suzuki 2015, pp. 97–99, 110–11; Suzuki 1963, pp. 223–24, 232–33, 284.

surmised, is not just ignorance and illusion, but also the human intellect. Its slavish adherence to reason obstructs the reconciliation of opposites and makes Buddhist liberation impossible. The doctrine of karma itself is rooted in such rational analysis—the identification of cause and effect; the differentiation of actor, action, and outcome; and the distinction of past, present, and future. For this reason, Suzuki considered karma insufficient to explain the path of enlightenment and the nature of the Buddha. As an antidote to this rationalism, he propounded instead a direct encounter with, and an affirmation of, the contradictions of the world. Only when opposites are embraced and perceived as nondual—even while recognizing their individuated identities—can contradictions be transcended.¹⁸

The dynamics of this interplay are explicated in greater detail by Suzuki in his 1943 work, *Shūkyō keiken no jijitsu* 宗教経験の事実 (The Reality of Religious Experience). There he compiled a grand list of antithetical pairs—extending well beyond the karma/akarma dichotomy—subsumed under the two categories, the “infinite” and the “finite” (presented here in abbreviated form in table 1 on the following page). Suzuki made clear that the items in the second category are mutually exclusive of, and diametrically opposed to, the ones in the first.¹⁹

Suzuki’s point of departure concerning the link between the two categories is the idea of reflection, or awareness (*hansei* 反省). In reflection, one becomes aware of the finite nature of one’s existence, characterized by category two, and of the gulf that separates it from the infinite, elucidated in category one. Reflection can have an intellectual aspect, which lends itself to philosophy, and an emotive aspect, which tends toward religion. This reflection unfolds in somewhat different (but analogous) ways for the Zen practitioner and the Pure Land adherent, the latter of which is our primary concern here. The Pure Land person experiences category two predominantly in the form of a personal feeling of karmic evil (*zaigōkan* 罪業感). On the opposite side, however, there is a feeling of being bathed in the Buddha’s light of great unconditional compassion (*muen no daihi no hikari ni sesshu* 無縁の大悲の光に摂取). And between the two, there is a sense of absolute contradiction (*zettai mujunsei* 絶対矛盾性). But this contradiction is not resolved by logic or reason. Rather, it gives rise to a realization of the great incomprehensibility (*maka fukashigi* 摩訶不可思議) of one’s state. Thus, what appears as a logical contradiction to the thinker plays out as an unfathomable experience to the person of faith. Suzuki characterized such a person—citing Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834)—as fully aware of a feeling of absolute dependence (*zettai hyōi kan* 絶対憑依感). The logical structure arising from faith is described by Suzuki as the “differentiation of non-differentiation” (*mufunbetsu no funbetsu* 無分別の分別) and the “knowledge

¹⁸ Suzuki 1963, pp. 282–83; Suzuki 2015, pp. 80–82.

¹⁹ Suzuki 1999–2003, vol. 10, pp. 16–18.

Table 1. The “infinite” and the “finite”

Infinite (<i>mugen</i> 無限)	Finite (<i>yūgen</i> 有限)
Unmoving and unchangeable (<i>ugokanu mono</i> 動かぬもの, <i>kawaranu mono</i> 変わらぬもの)	Ever-moving and ever-changing (<i>ugoite yamanu mono</i> 動いて止まぬもの, <i>taezu hen'i suru mono</i> 絶えず変異するもの)
Without counterpart (<i>tai o zessuru mono</i> 対を絶するもの)	Possessing counterpart (<i>tai o motsu mono</i> 対を持つもの)
Great wisdom of <i>prajñā</i> (<i>hannya no daichie</i> 般若の大智慧)	Differentiation (<i>funbetsushiki</i> 分別識)
Nonknowing, nondifferentiation (<i>muchi</i> 無知, <i>mufunbetsu</i> 無分別)	Perception, objective cognition (<i>ken-monkakuchi</i> 見聞覚知, <i>taishōteki ninshiki</i> 对象的認識)
Great unconditional compassion (<i>muen no daihi</i> 無縁の大悲)	Living amid likes and dislikes, the world of ethics and morality (<i>aizō no naka ni ikiru koto</i> 愛憎の中に生きること, <i>rinri dōgi no sekai</i> 倫理道義の世界)
Nirvana (<i>nehan</i> 涅槃)	Samsara (<i>shōji</i> 生死)
Unfettered independence, miraculous non-obstruction (<i>yuge jizai</i> 遊戯自在, <i>jinzū muge</i> 神通無碍)	Action, cause and effect, recompense (<i>gō</i> 業, <i>inga</i> 因果, <i>ōhō</i> 応報)
Buddha, God in the singular (<i>Butsu</i> 仏, <i>Kami tansū</i> 神単数)	Sentient beings, ignorant beings, humans, gods in the plural, Satan (<i>shujō</i> 衆生, <i>bonbu</i> 凡夫, <i>hito</i> 人, <i>kami fukusū</i> 神複数, <i>akuma</i> 悪魔)
Dharmic [perfection of the Buddha] (<i>hō</i> 法)	[Flawed] capacity [of humans] (<i>ki</i> 機)
<i>Dharmakāya</i> Buddha (<i>hosshin butsu</i> 法身仏)	Buddhas and demons (<i>butsuma</i> 仏魔)
Uncreated creator (<i>tsukutte tsukurarenu mono</i> 造って造られぬもの)	Uncreating creature (<i>tsukurarete tsukuranu mono</i> 造られて造られぬもの)
Naturalness, eternalness, Dharmaness (<i>jinen</i> 自然, <i>jōni</i> 常爾, <i>hōni</i> 法爾)	Human fabrication, contrivance (<i>jin'i</i> 人為, <i>hakarai</i> はからい)
Forgiving all (<i>issai o yurusu mono</i> 一切を赦すもの)	Fear of not being forgiven (<i>yurusarezaru o osoreru mono</i> 赦されざるを恐れるもの)

of no knowledge” (*muchi no chi* 無知の知)—paradoxical expressions that he used to highlight its incomprehensibility. In this state, the person is not simply confined to the limitations of category two but simultaneously abides in the openness of category one, for the particularities of category two all repose in the emptiness of category one. Thus, for the Pure Land person, both the doom of hell and the hope of the Pure Land fade away amid the immediacy of *nenbutsu*. In this way the two categories, while divergent, are also experienced as coterminous and melding into each other.²⁰

One other innovative concept that Suzuki propounded to elaborate on this paradox of religious experience is the idea of *sokushi no ronri* 即非の論理, the logic of simultaneous identification and differentiation.²¹ All things are indistinguishable from one another, and hence are akarmic, but at the same time distinguishable, and thus karmic. Understanding this is not a rational process for Suzuki, but a mystical one. And he considered mysticism to lie at the heart of all true religion.²² This, then, is the nature of Shin Buddhist faith for Suzuki. It is an identification with Amida, who lies beyond this world, while retaining one’s own identity within this world. It is to have two opposite natures, karmic and akarmic, bound together in a sense of mystery or incomprehensibility.

Reflections on Suzuki’s Interpretations

Suzuki considered the traditional doctrine of karma insufficient to explain the type of religious experience he recognized. It was too rigid and mechanical, and relied too heavily on rational explanations of religious practice and destiny. With the Mahayana concept of the transference of merit, the idea of karma moved closer to the all-embracing religious path that Suzuki emphasized. But it still fell short of the nondualist, akarmic ideal that he envisioned. Notwithstanding Suzuki’s nondualist preferences, the karmic understanding of the world was too embedded in Buddhism for him to ignore. Thus, he invoked it where it made sense in his arguments and downplayed it where it did not.

Pure Land Buddhism operated for centuries within the framework of Mahayana’s interpretation of karma. It provided a comprehensible account of Amida and Pure Land practice which people found persuasive in their religious life. It was not a perfect explanation, for certain aspects of Amida’s nature and workings were treated as inconceivable. But it was largely successful. The weak points in it, though, were precisely the places where Suzuki could launch his elucidation of Amida as akarmic. To a certain extent, this akarmic portrayal of Amida has won the day in the modern Buddhist

²⁰ Suzuki 1999–2003, vol. 10, pp. 18–40.

²¹ See Suzuki 2015, “Selections from *Japanese Spirituality*,” pp. 115, 123, 253.

²² Suzuki 2016, p. 105.

discourse, and the old karmic model has fallen out of favor. But before we discard it, we might ask whether there is room for both. Each in a way provides a perspective and an understanding of Pure Land Buddhism that is lacking in the other.

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