Shinran's View of Buddhist History

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Lecture I: What is a True History of Buddhism?

To all gathered here to celebrate my sixtieth birthday by these three days of lectures, my heartfelt thanks. [. . . .]

In case you are wondering what I meant by affixing the title "Shinran's View of Buddhist History" to these lectures, it has something to do with the founding of our Jōdo Shinshū. Most people consider it only common sense to say that Shinran (1173–1262) is its founder, that Shinran started Jōdo Shinshū. Still, there are people nowadays who doubt whether Shinran ever had the intention of founding Jōdo Shinshū. They ask whether Shinran himself ever expressed that intention, and argue that Shinran always said that he wanted nothing but to follow and believe the doctrine of his master Hōnen (1133–1212), and that therefore it is rather Hōnen who is the founder of Jōdo Shinshū. We must confess that these arguments sound reasonable enough. However, to discuss this question sensibly, we should first investigate what it means to establish Jōdo Shinshū and therefore what Jōdo Shinshū is all about, what its concrete content is....

Recently, while studying the *Kyōgyōshinshō*,[1] I came face to face with that very problem: What is this Jōdo Shinshū? Suddenly then I got the insight or inspiration: the thing called "Jōdo Shinshū" is the new view of Buddhist history experienced by Shinran, Shinran's grasp and clarification of what constitutes the true history of the Buddhist tradition, the true spirit of the Buddhist path. Thus, what goes by the name of "Jōdo Shinshū"

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[1] *Kyōgyōshinshō* (*The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way*), the most important text of the Shin Sect, written by Shinran (1173–1262). Consisting of six volumes on the true teaching, practice, faith, realization, the true Buddha and his land (*shinbutsudo*), and the transformed Buddha and his land (*keshindo*), based on the *Larger Sutra*.

represents the history of Buddhism as sensed by Shinran.

Shinran received the doctrine of the Nembutsu of the Primal Vow from Master Hōnen. From that time onwards this Primal Vow served him, be it only vaguely, as a principle for viewing Buddhist history, or as what could be called the basic spirit of the history of Buddhism. . . . By way of Hōnen, then, by way of the Buddhist path that flowed through Hōnen's personality and the doctrinal tradition he represented, Shinran quietly traced back far and deep to the background and root-source of that tradition. He traced back two thousand years looking for the trunk or core of the long history of Buddhism. There he discovered Buddhist history with its profusion of forms, all vying with the others in beauty. What could be considered to be the trunk line in that 2000 year long development of Buddhism? Through the beginningless interplay of factors by which the Dharma flourishes and benefits living beings, Shinran was finally afforded an insight into the unifying factor of that history; that is, his spiritual eye was made to open so that he could inwardly discern the main line of Buddhist history. This very view of Buddhist history is precisely what is called Jōdo Shinshū. [. . . .]

Modern Buddhist Studies, which have become influential in Japan in the last sixty years, tend to present the history of Buddhism as follows: first, there was the pure basic Buddhism as preached by Sakyamuni the Teacher; after his passing, his disciples compiled the *Tripitaka* (a compendium of his teachings) and developed the so-called Hinayana, an individualistic subjective Buddhism, that fell apart into many sects; then, to offset this trend, a kind of unitary revivalist movement of "Return to Sakyamuni," known as Mahayana Buddhism, occurred. At the beginning, this movement was motivated by a desire to see the future savior of this world, Maitreya Buddha, appear on earth; next, belief in birth in the Eastern Pure Land of Aksobhya Buddha came into vogue; finally, then, there arose the faith in the Western Pure Land of Utmost Bliss of Amida Buddha. Therein, the aspirations of the Mahayana movement would have found their completion. . . .

This is, indeed, one possible way of presenting the history of Buddhism, but I submit that it is a Buddhist history seen from the viewpoint of historical materialism, a materialism that negates the very spirit of Buddhism and leaves no room for any unified

body of Buddhist truth, for any spirit pervading the whole of Buddhist history. [. . . .] Moreover, in this view of Buddhist history, the truth that Buddhism teaches is thought not to have existed at all prior to Sakyamuni. Sakyamuni would then have been the absolute founder of Buddhism, who for the first time and all of a sudden discovered this truth. In a sense, of course, I have no gripes with this position: Sakyamuni was indeed the founder and patriarch of Buddhism, and in a way, Buddhism could be called "Sakyamuni-ism." In this sense, "Buddha" means simply Sakyamuni Buddha, and "Buddhism" means the doctrine taught by Sakyamuni.

However, in Shinran's view, Buddhism is not simply the doctrine which Sakyamuni realized and preached. For Shinran, Buddhism is the doctrine directed at the attainment of buddhahood, the doctrine that teaches about the Buddha, the doctrine that teaches that which makes a Buddha truly into a Buddha and thus aims at making all sentient beings into buddhas. It is the doctrine of the Buddha, both as subjective genitive (Buddha as subject) and objective genitive (Buddha as object). Buddhist scholars nowadays concentrate on the former with total neglect of the latter: the nature of a Buddha and the way to become a Buddha. In their study of Buddhist doctrine, they are therefore only interested in whether something has been really taught by the Buddha or not. They have thus eyes only for the doctrine and forget about the matter of practice whereby buddhahood is realized. . . .

Still, true Buddhism is precisely the path to become a Buddha; it is nothing but a doctrine wherein the unfolding of the Buddha path forms the silver thread. It is all about Sakyamuni Buddha, in the sense that it was Sakyamuni who, by his insight into how he himself became a Buddha, made clear the path whereby all sentient beings can equally become Buddhas. [. . . .]

Present Buddhist Studies apply to the history of Buddhism the law of evolution: human thought develops from the simple to the complicated. Sakyamuni would thus have preached a sharp but simple path of inward practice, a simple and clear, practical and moral path, free from all theory and mysticism, and with which everybody who heard it could not but agree. This message was gradually turned into philosophy and mysticism, and so Mahayana Buddhism originated. In this view, there is no

perspective of sentient beings becoming Buddhas; this idea would have been absent from the beginning. Here, Buddhist history is treated as a "thing," without any regard for the concrete nature and meaning of the thing. We are offered here a superficial and abstract picture; it is like beer that lost its fizzle. [. . .]

The Buddhist path sought by Shinran, the history of the path as lived by the ancestors, was something completely different. It was the historical testimony of sentient beings, lost in delusion, staking their lives on the quest for the Buddha and finally finding him; it was history as the hall of Buddhist practice wherein our ancestors single-mindedly searched for the path and walked it with their entire being. It is far from a Buddhist history as a process of evolutionary development, as people are presenting it today, from a basic Buddhism to Hinayana, to Mahayana, and finally to Ekayana,[2] or from self-power Buddhism to other-power Buddhism. Such a history is not a history of Buddhism, but in its true sense a history of the negation of Buddhism. The true history of Buddhism is precisely the historical process of sentient beings becoming buddhas, and thus of bringing the Buddhist path to realization; the historical path walked for more than 2000 years by buddhas and bodhisattvas since Sakyamuni. Of this there can be no doubt. . . .

There is "Buddhist history" only where there is Buddhist reality. Where Buddhism has been reduced to nothing, "Buddhist history" is merely a subjective notion, a dream. After all, of what significance could it possibly be to construct a history of Buddhism, when one has done away with the fact of Buddhist experience? The method of approach to the history of Buddhism must grow out of the object: Buddhism as living in the experience of our ancestors, in the practice of peoples. In other words, Buddhism as the object and Buddhist history as the method must be one. The same phenomenon, which transcends time while caught in the flow of time, is called "Buddhist history," when viewed in its temporal aspect, and is called "Buddhism," when considered as transcending time. They are two only by the difference of viewpoint. [. . .]

When speaking of Buddhist history, the presupposition has

[2] *Ekayāna* ("One Vehicle") refers to a single vehicle. The ultimate Buddhist teaching in which all sentient beings become buddhas. This concept is explained in various Buddhist texts such as the *Lotus Sutra*.

mostly been that Buddhism began with Sakyamuni. In my view, however, the position accorded Sakyamuni should be like that of Emperor Jimmu[3] in Japanese history. The history of Japan is often said to have begun with Emperor Jimmu's ascension to the throne, but in fact the real beginnings of Japan go far back in time beyond that point. If we want to truly understand Buddhism, we must look for Sakyamuni's background. The important problem is: what made Sakyamuni truly into Sakyamuni Buddha; what is the ground upon which the Tathagata was not simply the man Sakyamuni but the man Sakyamuni was made to become Sakyamuni Buddha; what is the ground upon which innumerable living souls in front of Sakyamuni could not but call out in reverence: "Namu Butsu!" (Homage to the Buddha!). . . .

Of the time before Sakyamuni's decisive appearance into the world, we have as the first "chronicles," *jatakas* (birth stories), about the previous lives of Sakyamuni. Are these purely fictive tales, such as bedside stories for children, or is there more to them? I think that we should quietly reflect on the significance they might possibly have. In later sutras, then, we find similar elements. In the *Garland Sutra*, we encounter the legend of Sudhana's spiritual search. What would be the meaning of the various spiritual teachers he meets in the course of his quest? In the *Lotus Sutra*, there is the episode of the "groundswelling bodhisattvas": the great earth splits open and out of it there springs an uncountable number of bodhisattvas. Again, what significance could this have? And in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, we have the story of Amida Buddha working towards the fruit of buddhahood, kalpas ago, under the name of Dharmakara Bodhisattva. What does this story tell us? It might be worth our while to give these questions some serious attention. . . .

However this may be, while it is correct to say that the history of Buddhism begins with Sakyamuni, it is also true that Buddhism has roots that go back to long before the history of

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[3]Emperor Jimmu, the legendary first sovereign of Japan according to ancient chronicles such as *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon Shoki* (720). During the time of Soga's lecture, the idea of an "emperor-centered historiography" was emphasized in Japan. Incorporating this idea, Soga analogized Sakyamuni's position in Buddhist history to that of Jimmu's in Japanese history and criticized that the tendency in Japanese academia to relegate Sakyamuni to a mere historical figure.

Buddhism. To come back a moment to the earlier mentioned stories in the sutras, in their case we may have to distinguish between their form and content. In their written form they certainly originated after Sakyamuni's death, but what about their contents? Could it be, for instance, that the vast collection of *jatakas* was created in just a few hundred years after the Buddha's passing? Or do they represent a tradition handed down from several thousands of years before the Buddha's birth? [. . . .]

Lecture II: Sakyamuni Buddha and His Background

Frankly speaking, my view about the origin or wellspring of Buddhism is that Buddhism is certainly not something simply begun by Sakyamuni. It is not easy to express this thing in a straightforward way, but let me say that, in my view, the Tathagata Sakyamuni was born out of a legendary tradition that was already in place when he appeared. Such traditions have their roots in a long experience and practice of a people or, again, in the pure aspirations or feelings that lie at the bottom of such a practice. While originating out of that long and profound tradition, Sakyamuni selected from it and unified it, so as to make out of it a clear guideline to follow for us sentient beings in the future. Would not that be what Sakyamuni realized, the true position he occupied, the very meaning of his coming into the world?[4]

The truth of Buddhism is not something produced by Sakyamuni; it is a truth without beginning or end. It existed long before Sakyamuni and is forever the same, not dependent at all on Sakyamuni's coming into the world. However, this truth had been molded into symbols from various viewpoints and had found expression in a rich confusion of legends. Sakyamuni's profound realization and mission consisted in making a judicious choice among, and steering in a right direction, these legends that symbolize and adorn the Buddhist path, in gathering them into a synthesis and thus pointing out the direction to be

[4] *Shusse hongai* ("the very meaning of his coming into the world") points to the real reason that Sakyamuni Buddha appeared in this world. The *Lotus Sutra* is most known for explaining this idea. However, in *Kyōgyōshinshō*, Shinran defines the *Larger Sutra* as the central text that clarifies this concept and explains that Sakyamuni came into this world to save all sentient beings.

followed in the future.

Would this realization of Sakyamuni have found its true expression in the doctrines ascribed to him, such as the Four Holy Truths and the Chain of Dependent Co-origination? [. . .] It seems to me that with these doctrines alone the path to become a Buddha does not truly come into relief. For these doctrines to become truly fitting to the Buddhist path, to constitute the bodhisattva path as the true gateway to buddhahood, they must be illuminated by and set within the background of Sakyamuni. Only then do they come to life.

Consequently, Mahayana Buddhism, far from being a Buddhism that originated centuries after Sakyamuni's passing—so-called as a result of a theorizing and philosophizing, or idealizing and mystifying of Sakyamuni's original message—rather represents the spatially and temporally boundless background that made Sakyamuni's self-realization into an authentic self-realization. It is only with this background in mind that we can truly speak of the Buddhist path. It was this background that was meant, I think, when the tradition spoke of "Buddha Lands," and it is there that we must first look when we reflect on the matter of Amida's "Pure Land."

When we restrict our view to Sakyamuni's self-awareness in the present, we must say that in that state he saw before him (in the future) only emptiness of emptiness: an empty, sign-less and desire-less world[5]. But, when we consider Sakyamuni's inner background, the womb of the past that gave birth to him as a Buddha, we encounter the experiential world of all buddhas and bodhisattvas amassing merit and acquiring virtue. In that world there beats the pulse of an immensely wide and profound Primal Vow, as attested to by the ancestors, who offered their lives for it and truly found eternal life in it. Sakyamuni arose with that immeasurable experience of the ancestors as his mother earth and took a stand on it as on his ultimate ground. Thus, he was able to adorn the empty, sign-less, desire-less world, to make it concrete, to symbolize it, and to set it on a preordained course for thousands of years to come. [. . .]

Buddhism is not something that Sakyamuni etched out in

[5] *Sangedatsumon*, literally, the "three gates of liberation," refers to the three types of meditation in which to enter these gates. It appears in the *Larger Sutra* as one of the practices of Dharmākara Bodhisattva.

his head; it is an historical praxis that Sakyamuni sensed. It is precisely in the history of Buddhism that the true path resides. This history forever preaches the Dharma in the present. Sakyamuni as an individual human being with a life span of eighty years, no matter how outstanding he was, is and stays only a human being. [. . . .] It is not imaginable that, in the fifty years of his public life, Sakyamuni would have preached that whole rich array of the Mahayana sutras. On this point, modern Buddhist Studies appear to be of the same opinion. But would it even be possible for those grandiose scriptures to have originated in the few hundred years after Sakyamuni's passing, as the same Buddhist scholars dogmatically maintain? This is a question we must pay sufficient attention to. [. . . .]

What, then, is the foundation or basis upon which Mahayana Buddhism came to life? This foundation is the earth, and that pure, unsoiled, and objective earth is what is called the Pure Land. Where is that Pure Land, by which Mahayana Buddhism is brought to life, to be found? If we read the scriptures carefully, we can find it in the *jataka* stories, these "chronicles" of Sakyamuni's former lives. These stories speak in symbols, but symbols that offer true meaning, "symbols" in the sense the scriptures themselves use the word: symbols that "adorn," or give form to, the Pure Land[6]. To "adorn the Pure Land" means, basically, to give form to what lies in front by way of Sakyamuni's past background; and to further adorn the past by way of what lies in front, by way of the future as illuminated by the past. It is to mirror the forms of the past in the future, to mirror the forms of the future in the past, and to unify past and future in the present. That is how I think we must conceive of it. [. . . .]

My talk today was not well-structured and may have sounded like the report of a dream, but I have not the slightest doubt about its basic idea: that the root of Buddhism lies in the history

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[6]Soga's view on the concepts of "symbol" (*shōchō*) and "adornment" (*shōgon*). Originally, "adornment" referred to lavishly decorate oneself and one's land. However, Soga redefined this concept using the word, "symbol." He explained that to express and give form to a spirituality, which has no form or shape, refers to adornment, and thus, means symbol. As a concrete example to illustrate this, Soga points to the forty-eighth vow of Dharmākara Bodhisattva in the *Larger Sutra* and the twenty-nine adornments in the *Treatise on the Pure Land*. (On Sōga's distinctive use of the concepts of "symbol" and "adornment," see his "Hongan no Butchi" ["The Buddha Land of the Original Vow"], *The Sellected Works of Soga Ryōjin*, Vol. 5).

of Buddhism, which is the foundation that made Sakyamuni into Sakyamuni Buddha; it lies in the pre-history of Sakyamuni that formed the self-awareness of Sakyamuni. [. . . .]

When viewed in this way, the 2000 years of Buddhist history appear in a different horizon. . . . People nowadays tend to propound a discontinuous view of Buddhist history. The different schools Buddhism has developed in its history under the influence of karmic circumstances—such as Huayan (J. Kegon) Buddhism, Tiantai (Tendai) Buddhism, and Chan (Zen) Buddhism—then appear to have originated each by itself. . . . Is there not a way for present Buddhism to go beyond these divisions, and for Buddhist history to turn into a unified history of something that is free from such divisions? I think that Shinran's view of Buddhist history precisely offers us such a way. . . .

Lecture III: The *Larger Sutra* as the Unifying Thread of Buddhist History

The history of Buddhism, as found in modern Buddhist Studies, presents an evolution from early Buddhism to Hinayana, and from Hinayana to Mahayana. I am not going to deny that, factually, Mahayana developed from Hinayana. However, the so-called evolution as presented there is in fact only a stitching together of different historical fragments that appear to be unrelated to one another. Indeed, to present a development without asking for its unity and sense, is to fall into a materialist view of Buddhist history. That presentation amounts only to the explanation of an empty shell, the mere outward appearance of Buddhism; the inwardly experienced reality of Buddhism, wherein its essence could appear, is not revealed therein. [. . . .]

How about, for instance, the origin of the Mahayana sutras? Could these immensely profound oceans of wisdom have been arbitrarily thought out by a single person or even a small group of persons? Let us think, for a moment, of the vast and infinite Dharma-world depicted in the *Garland Sutra*; the profound and mysterious state of wisdom developed in the *Sutras of Perfect Wisdom*; the unfolding of the true essence of the Buddha that illuminates the age-old darkness, as found in the *Lotus Sutra* and, finally, the story of the fulfillment of the Vow by Dharmakara Bodhisattva—which is central to the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*—whereby the non-discriminating nature of

suchness descends into a great compassion that embraces all equally. . . . Would all these be only disparate tales, arbitrarily thought out by some individuals? For common sense, it is only conceivable that the contents of these sutras had been transmitted and believed in for a long time by a people, and finally one or more redactors brought order into the tale, removed the contradictions from it, and rounded it off. [. . . .]

Suggestive on this point may be the above-mentioned episode in the *Lotus Sutra*, whereby all of a sudden an innumerable host of bodhisattvas emerge from this very earth. These bodhisattvas are said to belong to Sakyamuni's past; they had never been seen before and are young, vigorous, even "savage," as it were, without genealogy or tradition, but the light they radiate puts the individual venerable elders of Sakyamuni's assembly in the shadow. Indeed, the contents of the Mahayana sutras must have been transmitted for centuries, from before Sakyamuni's time. Against the background and out of the depths of that lofty and profound tradition Sakyamuni saw the light. [. . . .] Only in this perspective can we, people of common sense, in all simplicity accept what is written in these sutras. . . .

Let us go back now to Shinran's view of the 2000 years of Buddhist history. In a word, for Shinran the root and stem of Buddhist history is to be found in the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*; the history of Buddhism is the history of the dissemination of the *Larger Sutra*. With this sutra as its root and stem, the Buddha's path, Buddhism's step by step historical development, has progressed. And by this process humankind has found self-awareness and salvation or liberation from samsara. Within this history, with it as their "earth" and haven, sentient beings have been joyfully born and have died in peace. . . . This is how the story of Buddhism sounded in Shinran's ears, I am sure.

What, then, about the myriad forms Buddhism has taken in its history? They are all branches and flowers on that trunk of the *Larger Sutra*. They have bloomed in wild profusion and will continue to do so, precisely because the life-giving trunk is there. [. . . .]

To think that Buddhism possessed no unity at all during the centuries of so-called Sectarian Buddhism[7] is a superficial view. At that time, Hinayana Buddhism may or may not have been

divided into more than twenty different schools, but even then all Buddhism had the one taste of Mahayana. In fact, that one Mahayana taste has pervaded all Buddhism since Sakyamuni's time, and it is certainly not true that, through great masters such as Nagarjuna, Mahayana Buddhism flourished, and Buddhism was brought to unity, for the first time. What they accomplished was only a renewed clarification, over against the divisions and struggles of Sectarian Buddhism, of the principle of Buddhist unity. . . . From its very beginning onwards, Buddhism has flowed in one unified stream. The outward divisions notwithstanding, the history of this unified Buddhist path has flowed quietly with the pace of an elephant king, while forever developing inwardly.

Where do we find the proof of this? Shinran found the testimony to this unity in the *Larger Sutra*, considered by him as the true teaching, the true explanation of Sakyamuni's coming into the world, and the final expression of the One Vehicle. Why did he consider the *Larger Sutra* to be the true teaching? Because this sutra opens and reveals the history of the one path of Jōdo Shinshū, while itself standing in the midst of that history. It is not so that the history of the *Larger Sutra* began only after a sutra, later called *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* originated. It is proper to the *Larger Sutra* that it originated in the midst of the history of its path and clarifies that path. The *Larger Sutra* exists with the history of its path as a presupposition.

As he writes in the chapter on Teaching of his *Kyōgyō-shinshō*, Shinran discovered the central purport of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life* within the sutra itself, in the words:

> Amida, by establishing the incomparable Vows, has opened wide the dharma-storehouse, and full of compassion for small, foolish beings, selects and bestows the treasure of virtues. [The sutra further reveals that] Sakyamuni appeared in this world and expounded the teachings of the way to enlightenment, seeking to save the multitudes of living beings by blessing them with this

[7] *Buha Bukkyō* ("Sectarian Buddhism") refers to a development in Buddhist history in which commentaries and critical analysis of the teachings of the historical Buddha began to appear. From 200 BC on, Buddhism divided into over twenty schools. This period of Buddhist history is often called the age of Sectarian Buddhism in Japanese scholarship.

benefit that is true and real.[8]

Here, the sutra itself cries out its intent, and Shinran listened to that voice, without adding any personal views. In other words, in this sutra the path itself expresses the path with absolute authority, and utters the name of the path. It is an absolute command, a teaching in the imperative mode. [. . . .]

Shinran discovered the concrete and real principle of Buddhism in the Primal Vow of Dharmakara Bodhisattva, as it is revealed in the *Larger Sutra*. The history of the *Larger Sutra* is precisely the history of the disclosure of the Primal Vow. It is this Primal Vow that proves that the *Larger Sutra* is the true teaching. [. . . .] Seen in the framework of Buddhist history, the fact that there are people who rejected this Primal Vow shows that for the greater part the history of Buddhism has been a history of doubt and disparagement of the Primal Vow. Outwardly it is a history of doubt and slander, but inwardly it is a history of faith in and compliance with the Primal Vow. The more doubt and disparagement befall it on the outside, the more faith and entrusting in it deepen inwardly. And the more reliance on the Primal Vow deepens, the louder grows the chorus of doubt and slander. [. . . .]

Lecture IV: The *Larger Sutra* as rooted in history, in the Great Earth

It will be said that my views run counter to the common sense or accepted opinions of the academic world. True enough, but what counts as common sense in the academic world is far removed from the common sense of the people, and I consider the common sense of the people as the true common sense. . . . Scholars only explain; rather than explaining, I witness. I walk the path of witnessing, not by myself alone—that would be "self-nature and mind-only"—but together with and through all of you I witness first of all to myself. [. . . .]

The tradition of the *Larger Sutra*—with the legend of Amida's Primal Vow and practice in his causal state as Dharmakara Bodhisattva—appears as one among the many intermingling Buddhist traditions, but, in fact, it is the wellspring and

[8] *The Collected Works of Shinran*, Vol. I, Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha, Shin Buddhist Translation Series, p. 7.

mainstream of all these legends and traditions. [. . . .] Among these traditions some, as for instance that of the seven buddhas of the past, may go back to Sakyamuni himself and may have been transmitted in the Sakya clan, while others, as for instance the many legends found in the *Lotus Sutra*, may have originated later. . . . But, it is not a question of which tradition came first and which came later; the question is which one is the concrete expression of the true and unadulterated religious aspirations of human beings. [. . . .]

The real greatness of Sakyamuni lies in the greatness of his background. When you take this background away from him, Sakyamuni becomes nothing more than an outstanding scholar of the Way, and his attainment merely an eminent example of "self-nature and mind-only." Buddhism would then be nothing but a kind of moral doctrine, something not too different from, for example, Laozi's *Daode jing* (*Tao-te Ching*). If you consider Sakyamuni's thought to consist only of tenets like the Four Noble Truths, it becomes something very abstract and nothing but a sort of idealism. . . . One then gets the picture of an arhat, and not that of a buddha or tathagata.

Let me take the noble truth of suffering as an example. The tenet that human life is suffering cannot be simply based on Sakyamuni's personal experience of hardships; there must be an inner basis by which it is self-attested. Wherein, then, does this real basis lie? It lies precisely in the historical background interiorized in Sakyamuni. It is this historical background that testifies to the noble truth of suffering. [. . . .]

The Four Noble Truths, the Twelvefold Dependent Co-origination, and so on are all historical realities. It is the historical reality that made Sakyamuni speak out. Sakyamuni did not speak in an autocratic way; he spoke because he could not but speak. In the fact that he was made to speak out his words became self-testifying. If it were only that Sakyamuni proffered these tenets as he formed them in his mind, we would have explanation, and all explanation is after all dogmatic. But, in the fact that he was made to speak out, the power itself of the truth that made him speak out was present, and thus his words became self-attesting. In that way, the past was authoritatively present, and a present thus backed by the past will never perish.

In my understanding, the tradition of Dharmakara Bodhi-

sattva was, for Shinran, the pure background that gave rise to Sakyamuni. . . . The tradition in Sakyamuni's background, this true and unadulterated tradition, must have its origin in Amida Buddha. The Buddha called Amida is ultimately the ancestor that embraces Sakyamuni; Sakyamuni is a descendant bathing in the light of Amida Buddha. Furthermore, Amida Buddha is also the ancestor of our people throughout history, and we ourselves are descendants taken up in the ocean of his light. . . .

The various other traditions that have developed out of Sakyamuni's message have all had their time; they came and went, blown by the winds of impermanence. At certain times, various buddhas have appeared, such as Maitreya, Aksobhya, Mahavairocana, the Healing Buddha, and so forth; but they have all disappeared from the mainstream of Buddhist history. Their names are preserved as characters on the pages of classical texts but they are not alive any longer. [. . . .] However, all these buddhas obtain new and undying life by being taken up and unified in the history of Amida's eternal Vow. Is not that one aspect of the 17th Vow that speaks of all buddhas praising Amida Buddha's Name? For this Vow precisely says:

> If, when I attain Buddhahood, the countless Buddhas throughout the worlds in the ten quarters do not all praise and say my Name, may I not attain the supreme Enlightenment.[9]

On hearing these bold words, I have long contemplated this glorification of Amida by all the buddhas as happening in high heaven. In me, however, this evoked only a kind of mystical feeling without the voices of these buddhas becoming a roar to shake heaven and earth. No, the buddhas of the ten directions that praise Amida's Name are not abstract notions situated in a celestial sphere; they are buddhas as great activities precisely on this very earth, buddhas that order the history of this earth and are walking this earth in the present. After long years of meditation on the 17th Vow, as presented by Shinran, I came to see that Shinran had a clear vision of this. [. . . .]

Many people before Shinran have envisaged that this 17th Vow—and, in general, all 48 Vows of Amida—was speaking about a mystical world in the remote past. For Shinran, on the

[9] *Ibid*, p. 13.

contrary, these Vows tell us precisely about present history on this very earth. Indeed, all things on this earth are in the present. . . . Without this earth, there is no present. By having its feet firmly on this earth, each moment is eternal present. . . . In Shinran's view of the Nembutsu, all the events in the true history of Buddhism must relate to the "Great Earth;" there must be footprints left where they walked. [. . . .]

The Mahayana sutras precisely evince this; they are not simply describing fantasies in the sky. If they can speak with great freedom about realities in the heavens, it is because they have a solid relationship with things on earth, because they have truly viewed on the Great Earth the flesh and blood of the heavenly ideals. A heaven unrelated to this earth has no meaning; a true heaven appears only after one has opened one's eyes to earth. Heaven, namely, is the future that is present in the now, and earth is the past that is present in the now. [. . . .]

There has been endless discussion on the question whether or not the Pure Land has form and whether or not it is located in a certain direction. And one speaks of a formless Pure Land and a Pure Land with form, but there are, of course, no two Pure Lands. The formless Pure Land and the Pure Land with form[10] are one and the same. This, however, cannot be explained; it can only be attested to by our praxis, our demeanor in the present. Therefore, we should think of Dharmakara Bodhisattva's praxis as a praxis on this earth. . . .

The light of Amida Buddha as such is not visible to the eye, but, embraced by that light, our ancestors have kept on walking step by step their long journey of human experience. When we hear the traditional expression about "a Pure Land lying billions of lands to the West," we may feel that this has nothing to do with the life of our people, but, as somebody who deeply feels his rootedness in the tradition of the ancestors, I am convinced that this must have a profound historical basis here on earth, as a chronicle of the experiences of the ancestors. It is only when we open our eyes to that earthly basis that we can boldly speak of heavenly reality.

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[10]Regarding the speculations on the Pure Land with form and the Pure Land without form, the former, like Amida's Pure Land in the west, is given form through its direction and its lavish descriptions; the latter is suchness itself, beyond all distinction. Soga did not regard these two Pure Lands as separate.

It is because the pure and formless ideal world is symbolized on earth in these pure forms that this earth becomes formless and the heavens take on form; and that, thus, heaven and earth are after all one. Heaven is fashioned after the earth, and the earth is fashioned after heaven. It is in such a perspective that expressions such as "a Pure Land lying billions of lands to the West" originate.

We should not determine that the world itself is bad simply on the basis of abstract speculation. The world as impermanence and a "burning house"[11] exists through defiled common mortals. Do we not often speak simply of the world as a burning house, while forgetting our own passions? It is, of course, also wrong, while equally forgetting our own passions, to view this world as the Pure Land in a complete affirmation of this world. On the other hand, some, who simply determine that this world is a burning house and is absolutely bad, go on with this as the only reason to postulate a Pure Land existing somewhere far away and to believe that they will attain buddhahood there. Such people think of becoming a Buddha completely apart from actual reality. What do they then become a Buddha for? Does not the very spirit of the Buddha die in such a quest for buddhahood? All this may convince us that we must give the question of the Pure Land serious attention. . . .

I may seem to be speaking in riddles, but I am thinking here of the ancestors. The historical course walked by the ancestors is, after all, something material; a course is a thing. But, precisely through things, the supra-sensible takes form; through things the spiritual is symbolized. Things are symbols, forms, concrete expressions of the mind. The spiritual does not exist as an entity apart from and contrary to things; the mind exists only as in-formed by things. Still, even as in-formed by things, the spiritual is essentially forever formless, going beyond things in a negation. But, precisely by the fact of always being formless and beyond things, the spiritual has the capacity of taking form in things. It is only in things with form that the formless mind is truly expressed and given to us. . . . It is in this sense that I see the Pure Land as the history of the Pure Land.

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[11]Here, Soga quotes Shinran from *Tannishō*. A "burning house," a well-known reference from the *Lotus Sutra*, symbolizes a world full of chaos and anxiety like a house wrapped in flames.

Let me summarize once what I wanted to convey in my rather confused talk today. Sakyamuni Buddha exists only by the grace of Amida Buddha's Primal Vow. The core of the question is not whether that single great personality Sakyamuni has existed or not. That there has existed a Buddha called Sakyamuni is a question of the historical background that made Sakyamuni a Buddha. The problem does not reside in Sakyamuni as a mere human person, but in the Buddhist path that brought the person of Sakyamuni Buddha into being. The true history of Buddhism, the history of Amida's Vows, lies in the point that Sakyamuni was made to be a true Buddha, an authentic Tathagata. It is in the midst of the history of the Buddhist path that Sakyamuni was born and the attainment of buddhahood became a reality. In other words, Sakyamuni, while being a real existent, was a manifestation body of Amida Buddha. The great mission for the sake of which Sakyamuni came into this world is to be found only in his being a manifestation body of Amida's Primal Vow.

Meditative readings of the *Larger Sutra* made it dawn on me that the roots of Buddhism are deep and solid, and the origins of Buddhism go back far and wide. In the midst of that historical path of profound self-awakening, the one who brought this whole to unity was Sakyamuni. Thus, through Sakyamuni, the world before Sakyamuni came to bathe in bright light. But, the eternally pure world brought to light by Sakyamuni is, in fact, the world of eternal light that brought Sakyamuni himself to light. In this way, the explicit history of Buddhism opened up for the first time. Since there are no direct reports from his time, we cannot even imagine what of all this was present in Sakyamuni's self-awareness or transpired in his words. Was there or was there not anything in the form of the 48 Vows? We do not know, and it does not really matter whether such things were there or not. What counts is that for a very long time this primitive and pristine tradition lived on. [. . . .]

In a nutshell, the more than 2000 year long history of Buddhism is the history of the growth and transmission of the *Larger Sutra of Immeasurable Life*, and this is the history of the spreading of the Nembutsu. Within this history of the Nembutsu, the *Larger Sutra* has gradually taken shape. The *Larger Sutra* marks the history of the Nembutsu; the Nembutsu

is more fundamental than the *Larger Sutra*. In the beginning was the Name: before the *Larger Sutra* existed, the Primal Vow of the Tathagata was, and before the Primal Vow existed, the Name was. . . . The *Larger Sutra* did not originate all of a sudden; it came to be perfected in the history of Vow and Nembutsu. The *Larger Sutra* grew out of history; what developed in the midst of history was the *Larger Sutra*. . . .

Having already existed as spoken word and legend from the very beginning of the beginningless history of the Buddhist path, the *Larger Sutra* gradually took shape and, and at a point of completion, was finally written down. . . . The *Larger Sutra* is a growing thing. Today, the letter of the *Larger Sutra* is already fixed but its content is in an infinite process of inner deepening. It is not that we go on deepening it; it deepens by itself. We are only occasions or chances for the *Larger Sutra* to deepen itself.

It is within this history of the Vow and the Nembutsu that we come into the world, live, breathe, and finally return to the earth as dry bones. [. . . .]

Lecture V: We Ourselves in the History of the Nembutsu — By Way of the Patriarchs

[. . . .] What, then, about the different periods that have traditionally been distinguished in the history of Buddhism? From of old, Buddhists themselves have been speaking of a gradual decline of Buddhism over three periods: True Dharma, Semblance Dharma, and Latter Dharma;[12] and modern Buddhist Studies divide the history of Buddhism, for example, into Early Buddhism, Abhidharma Buddhism, and Mahayana Buddhism. These periodizations are not mistaken, on condition that one perceives that, with these as occasions and moments, the Great Spirit of Buddhism has continued as one pure whole, and has gradually developed in depth. . . . Throughout all the historical vicissitudes—such as, for example, the struggles among the many Abhidharma sects—the spirit of the Buddhist path has lived on

[12]This Buddhist view of history holds that the world goes through three distinct periods after the demise of Sakyamuni. In the first period of the True Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, its practice and realization all exist. In the second period of the Semblance Dharma, the teaching and practice remain, but the realization disappears. In the third period of the Latter Dharma, only the teaching remains.

in the breast of people, and has pervaded the soil they stood on, their very feet, their actions and lives. [. . . .]

Current historiography of Buddhism speaks of a development of Buddhist doctrine. There is no doubt that such a development took place, but at the back of the doctrine there always was practice and a history of the practice. It is in the development of the practice that the development of the doctrine had its basis and content; it is therein that it finds its witness. It is only through this witness that the development of doctrine occurred; without it we cannot speak of history in the so-called development of doctrine. Speaking of a development of doctrine may sound good, but without that background and foundation in the actualization of practice-faith, this so-called development is nothing but a design on a piece of paper. [. . . .]

Shinran clarified the explicit history of the Nembutsu in terms of the Seven Patriarchs of the Three Countries.[13] [. . . .] In *Kyōgyōshinshō*, he quotes many texts from the sutras. However, instead of taking these texts directly from the sutras, he takes them from the commentaries by the Patriarchs. . . . What does this mean? We can see herein how much he valued the transmission of the path in history, and how highly he evaluated the fact that in the Patriarchs, the doctrine of the sutras is accompanied by practice. . . . Shinran, for example, quoted Danluan's Commentary on Vasubandhu's *Discourse on the Pure Land* (*Jōdo ron*), attributing the quotation to the *Discourse* itself. This does not mean that he made a mistake, mixing up these two different texts. Shinran deliberately did this because he considered that the very spirit of Vasubandhu had been transmitted to Danluan. In that case, it is only natural to come truly into contact with the life of Vasubandhu's words through Danluan. At that point, practice comes into the picture. If it were only a question of Vasubandhu's doctrine or reasoning, that could be grasped without passing through Danluan. . . .

Shinran finally found the wellspring of the history of the Name in the 17th Vow. It is in the chapter on Practice of *Kyōgyōshinshō* that he clarified the Jōdo Shinshū tradition by

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[13]The Seven Patriarchs of the Three Countries refers to the lineage of Pure Land patriarchs as designated by Shinran. They include Nāgārjuna and Vasubhandu from India, Danluan (T'an-luan), Daocho, and Shandao from China, and Genshin and Genkū (Hōnen) in Japan.

this "Vow of Praise of Amida's Name by all the Buddhas."[14] This vow is, indeed, the real principle behind the history of the Pure Land Path, the real principle of all Buddhist history. Shinran's view of Buddhist history is characterized first of all by the fact that he takes the 17th Vow as its principle. As to the "innumerable Buddhas in the lands of the ten directions" of which the Vow speaks, we are inclined to imagine them as constellations in the sky, but Shinran thinks of them as the real wellspring of the tradition that runs through Sakyamuni and the Seven Patriarchs, as the origin of the continuous stream of the Nembutsu practice here on earth. [. . . .]

We should also not forget that these patriarchs did not stand by themselves; they had the spirit and thought patterns of their age in their background, and in accordance with this, they promoted Amida Buddha's Primal Vow. "To promote" here means: to further clarify the spirit of the Name and then to hold the Name aloft to the people. Their destiny was, inwardly, to bring the Name to life and, outwardly, to widely spread the Name for the benefit of the deluded common mortals of their age. The patriarchs are only seven in number, but each of them is backed by innumerable people of his age. The Patriarchs stand as representatives of these masses. The tradition of the Seven Patriarchs, the history of the Nembutsu: it is the process whereby, in the "Namu Amida Butsu," the Primal Vow inwardly realizes itself and outwardly goes on embracing its true recipients, all sentient beings. By outwardly saving sentient beings it realizes itself, and by inwardly realizing itself it saves sentient beings.

In that perspective, "All the Buddhas" means first of all the Seven Buddhas of the past, of whom tradition speaks. But, for Shinran, the Seven Buddhas of the past are the Seven Patriarchs. Just like Sakyamuni, Shinran had his own Seven Buddhas of the past. . . . Here, we must reflect anew on what a Buddha really is. A Buddha is someone born from the development of the Primal Vow, a human being who entered into the stream of that history. [. . . .]

In his *Shōshinge*, Shinran calls the totality of the history of the Nembutsu simply "Nembutsu." "Namu Amida Butsu" does not originate for the first time by our reciting it. In Shinran's

[14]This is the name which Shinran gave to the 17th Vow.

view, the totality of Buddhist history is "Namu Amida Butsu." The Nembutsu is not simply the Nembutsu as recited by us. Nembutsu is the history of the Primal Vow. Shinran calls the Nembutsu practice of an individual who disregards that history "self-power Nembutsu." The true Nembutsu of the Primal Vow is the Nembutsu in the midst of history, the Nembutsu that flows through history, the Nembutsu that constitutes the unity of history. [. . . .]

In the chapter on Practice, Shinran explored the historical events of the disclosure of the Name. In these historical events, however, he also saw the stages of his own living faith, the process whereby he himself realized his faith. That is what he shows, I believe, in his chapter on Faith. According to him, namely, our true self-realization of the Buddhist path lies within the history of the Nembutsu and consists in our participation in that course of events. . . . Shinran discovered the "Namu Amida Butsu" of the pure and unadulterated Vow-Mind in the midst of the Nembutsu as the fulfillment of symbol and adornment. And in the midst of the history of the Dharma of "Namu Amida Butsu," he found the Nembutsu as the personal and trans-historical faith of his own heart.

True faith in the Nembutsu means to be born from the history of the Nembutsu tradition, and—transcending the history of the Nembutsu, while standing in the very world of the Nembutsu—to participate in the making of that Nembutsu history, and to attest to the undying light of that history. It does not mean, as happens in the Nembutsu of the Samadhi of Visualization of Amida,[15] to simply praise the perfected Name, without reference to the historical fulfillment of the Vow.

Truly, by the calling voice of Amida Buddha, which summons us to put our trust in the Name, we are carried beyond the history of the ongoing and deepening Nembutsu tradition and, in a naturalness that negates history, we are made to take our stand in the initial moment wherein Dharmakara Bodhisattva made his Vow. Therein precisely a new and true history of the Nembutsu begins.

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[15]In this passage, the usage of the concept *kanbutsu zanmai* (Buddha-Contemplation Samādhi) refers to the practice of calling the Buddha's Name with the aim of entering a state of meditation by contemplating the form and virtues of Amida and gaining a vision of this Buddha (*hanju zanmai*).