

Extinction into Quiescence is Bliss

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(translated by Robert F. Rhodes)

Before beginning my talk, I would like to thank the Society for the Study of Tales and Legends (Setsuwa denshō gakkai 説話伝承学会) for inviting me to address the annual conference. I understand that the theme for this year's conference is "Folk Legends and Religions." When I agreed to deliver this address, I was asked to speak about death, in particular, the notion of death as it pertains to religious salvation. As my field of research is Shin Buddhism, that is to say, the religious philosophy of Shinran, I found this topic quite intriguing. In my talk, I would like to explore the views Shinran held regarding the notion of death as a form of religious salvation. In other words: *Is it possible for death to hold the meaning of salvation?*

I

As one aspect of death, I would first like to take up one extreme form of death: death caused by the atomic bomb. Though there are now peacetime uses of atomic energy, the fact remains that atomic energy was first used as a weapon of war. Since the atomic bomb is a representative product of modern scientific technology, I believe it possible to say that death by the atomic bomb is highly symbolic of death in our modern, technological age. When death comes in that form, humans are reduced to a mere lump of flesh and loses all dignity as a human being. *That* is death by atomic bomb.

To repeat, the atomic bomb is a case in which atomic energy is used as a weapon. It was produced by modern scientific technology and has come to be a symbol of death for our age. The proper

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role of atomic energy in our society is, of course, a topic worthy of our attention. But let us look at this form of death from a human perspective. From such perspective, it is a kind of death which we Japanese have long called “dying a miserable death” (*bigō no shi* 非業の死).

I was in Hiroshima the morning the atomic bomb was dropped on the city. Fires raged for three days and three nights. On the morning of August 9, the fires had abated enough that I ventured into the city to look for my friends, many of whom had turned up missing after the bomb. I remember wandering aimlessly through the city streets. I walked all day until the sky showed signs of evening’s approach. We had had a number of extremely hot days in a row. Added to the heat of summer, the entire city was burning. So intense was the heat that I was reminded of one of the Buddhist hells called Hell of Scorching Heat (*shōnetsu jigoku* 焦熱地獄).

The two of us, a friend and I, tired from walking all day, ended up at what is now the broad square in front of Hiroshima Station. It must have been about eight p.m. We were just about to head home when a most peculiar sensation overcame us, literally making every hair on our bodies stand on end. It was so unexpected that we stopped in our tracks, and found ourselves gazing at the sky. A thin veil of darkness had begun to spread through the sky that summer evening. But in that clear sky there hung something we could sense more than we could see. It seemed as if a huge typhoon whirlwind was blowing in the sky. Though the sky was completely silent, I had the definite sensation that the whole sky let out a baleful moaning sound. When I instinctively looked back, I heard that soundless moan in the sky. Every hair on my body stood on end.

The friend who had come with me was also standing there transfixed. He too had looked back over his shoulder when I did. When I asked him what was the matter, he told me that he too had experienced something strange—the same thing I have just related. Unexpectedly, we both had had the same experience.

Since olden days, many of us Japanese have believed in spirits of the dead, the so-called vengeful ghosts (*goryō* 御霊). In Kyoto, there is a shrine called the Goryō Jinja enshrining these ghosts. The belief in these ghosts may have arisen from the feeling that people who have died a miserable death are still waiting for an opportunity to exact revenge. I later came to think that these vengeful ghosts

had their origin in experiences similar to the one my friend and I had in Hiroshima.

At any rate, this is an example of one extreme form of death. To reiterate, the idea of the spirits of the dead and vengeful ghosts is rooted in an old, prescientific level of belief. In other words, it is based on the inexplicable fear that humans feel towards people who have died a miserable death.

II

In contrast, there is another kind of death. This is Śākyamuni's death. It was, as many of you know, an unremarkable one. He died on the roadside while traveling, just an old man aged eighty years. It's impossible to romanticize a death like that in any way. However, people who have revered Śākyamuni as the Buddha or the Tathāgata did not say that he had died. Rather, in the Buddhist tradition, it is said that Śākyamuni had entered nirvāṇa.

When the Sanskrit term "*nirvāṇa*" was translated into Chinese, it took on a number of different expressions. One of them, in Japanese reading, was *jakumetsu* 寂滅, "extinction into quiescence." Thus in Śākyamuni's case, his death was interpreted as extinction into quiescence. I believe that Śākyamuni's entry into nirvāṇa is one of those rare cases in which we can properly speak of death as salvation.

As you know, the title of my talk, "Extinction into Quiescence is Bliss," comes from the famous Himalaya verse in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*:

How impermanent are the constituent elements,
Subject to arising and passing away.
Having arisen, they cease.
Their extinction into quiescence is bliss.¹

This verse is said to be the source of the well-known *Iroha uta* いろは歌.

Forms, although beautiful, scatter and fall.
Who in our world lasts forever?

¹ Takakusu Junjirō and Watanabe Kaikyoku, eds., *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*, vol. 12 (Tokyo: Taishō issaikyō kankōkai, 1924-1934): 450a, 451a. And also see *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*, *Dīgha Nikāya*, PTS ed., vol. 1, p. 157.

Let us today cross over the remote mountains of the conditioned world,
And dream no longer nor succumb to drunkenness.

Here the last line, “And dream no longer nor succumb to drunkenness,” corresponds to the final line of the Himalaya verse: “Their extinction into quiescence is bliss.”

In this way, Śākyamuni’s death is understood as “entry into nirvāṇa,” or “the consummation of nirvāṇa” (*parinirvāṇa*). The reason why we can properly identify Śākyamuni’s death with nirvāṇa or the consummation of nirvāṇa, is because he had attained awakening. He was not an ordinary unenlightened being. He was a person who had awakened to the truth.

This experience of truth took place when Śākyamuni was thirty-five. This event has long been called the “present realization of nirvāṇa” (*genpō nehan* 現法涅槃), that is, the awakening to nirvāṇa in the present life. Buddhist texts describe the contents of that awakening in the following words.

Rebirth has been destroyed.
The great practice has been fulfilled.
What has to be done has been accomplished.
After this present life, there is no beyond.²

According to this verse, Śākyamuni had accomplished all that he needed to have done. He had acquired the great practice for leading people to the truth. He had thereby overcome his life of delusion (*ruten* 流転).

III

As we all know, Buddhism has its own unique view of human life. It contends that life is characterized by delusion which arises from our affliction (*kleśa*). Release from a life of delusion: this was what Śākyamuni gained through his awakening.

In the context of the Indian cultural tradition, this life of delusion is called “a life of transmigration and rebirth” (*rinne tenshō* 輪廻転生). I may mention in passing that Shinran hardly ever uses the term “transmigration” in his writings. Shinran consciously avoided using that term and used the word “delusion” instead. Shinran was extremely careful in his choice of words to express his

² *Taishō Shinsbū Daizōkyō*, vol. 1, p. 17b, etc.

thought. We often use the phrase “transmigration along the six paths” (*rokudō rinne* 六道輪廻). The term “transmigration” in this phrase refers to the idea that one is reborn from one world to another along the six paths (the realms of hell-dwellers, hungry ghosts, animals, fighting spirits, humans and heavenly beings). But Shinran deliberately avoided using the term transmigration and instead spoke of his life as one of delusion. That is to say, he understood his life as being rootless, as having no firm foundation. Thus, when discussing Shinran’s understanding of life and death, it would be highly inappropriate to speak of it in terms of transmigration.

In any case, Śākyamuni overcame and (to use the term from his Indian cultural context) gained release from transmigration and rebirth. When released from transmigration, he experienced the extinction of the misery and wretchedness which characterizes of a life of delusion. The attainment of such extinction is the original standpoint and the ultimate goal of Buddhism. This is the goal that all Buddhists seek to reach.

It is only when one experiences the same type of awakening attained by Śākyamuni—that is to say, only when the life of delusion is extinguished and brought to quiescence—that death can hold the meaning of salvation. Unless one gains awakening and experiences the truth during one’s lifetime, the life of delusion continues endlessly. This is the fundamental standpoint of Buddhism. When we overcome this life of delusion in our present lifetime, our lives come to a perfect conclusion. To use a colloquial Japanese expression, this means to “die thoroughly” (*shinikiru* 死に切る). This is what is expressed in the line from the Japanese poem quoted earlier: “And dream no more shallow dreams nor succumb to drunkenness.” If, without having experienced awakening, one remains attached to endless life, such endless life remains nothing but a dream. Thus, in my view, this profound insight is expressed at the very beginning of Buddhism: there will be a time when our life will come to a perfect conclusion.

IV

The Pure Land tradition has inherited and developed this notion that our lives will attain extinction into quiescence. To the question of whether or not death can hold the meaning of salvation, the Pure Land tradition rightly responded with its teaching on birth

in the Pure Land (*ōjō* 往生). It is well known that Hōnen (1133–1212) and Shinran (1173–1262) are the representative figures of Japanese Pure Land Buddhism. Shinran in particular developed his own quite original understanding of birth in the Pure Land. It is often said that, without Hōnen, there would have been no Shinran. This shows how deeply influenced Shinran was by his master Hōnen. However, they do not necessarily share the same interpretation of birth in the Pure Land. To put it succinctly, Shinran understood birth in the Pure Land as the realization of *parinirvāṇa*, the consummation of nirvāṇa achieved by Śākyamuni. He interpreted it in terms of the fundamental standpoint of Buddhism.

The Japanese have traditionally maintained a simple and primitive concept of life and death. This view predates Shinran and continues to dominate the Japanese conception of life and death even today. It holds that there exists, to borrow a rather naive expression used by a certain person, “this world and the other world.” Many Japanese understand the Pure Land in terms of such this world / other world scheme. They naively consider the Pure Land to be an other-worldly paradise and seek to be reborn there. But Shinran would say that it is nothing more than a dream. Even today, the view that birth in the Pure Land means rebirth into an other-worldly paradise is widely accepted among the Japanese. As we enter the final decade of the twentieth century, the Japanese still stubbornly hold on to this quite primitive concept of the other world and interpret birth into the Pure Land in terms of it. But we must say that Shinran rejected and went beyond such understanding.

Shinran sets forth his understanding of birth in the Pure Land in several works. First, there is the *Kyōgyōshinshō* (*Teaching, Practice, Faith and Realization*), his major theoretical work on Pure Land Buddhism. Second, there are his hymns in Japanese (*wasan*). They include the *Jōdo wasan* (*Hymns on the Pure Land*) and the *Kōsō wasan* (*Hymns on the Patriarchs*), both of which were written on the occasion of the thirty-third anniversary of Hōnen’s death. These hymns were medieval ballads or folk songs, composed in the *imayō* 今様 style (a ballad of four lines, with 5, 7, 5 and 7 syllables, respectively). Shinran spent twenty years in the prime of his life in the rural Kantō area and he composed these hymns in order to share the Buddhist teachings with the people of the countryside there. Third, there is the *Yuishinshō mon’i* (*Notes on the Treatise on Faith Only*). This

is a commentary in Japanese on the Chinese verses quoted in Seikaku's (1167–1235) *Yuishinshō* (*A Treatise on Faith Only*), a primer on Hōnen's major work, the *Senjakushū* (*Selection of the Nembutsu of the Primal Vow*). Seikaku, who was slightly older than Shinran, was also Hōnen's disciple. Shinran wrote the *Yuishinshō mon'i* hoping to impart the Pure Land teachings to the unlettered people of the country. In these and other related works, including the *Ichinen tanen mon'i* (*Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling*) and the *Songō shinzō meimon* (*Notes on the Inscription on Sacred Scrolls*), Shinran spelled out his innovative interpretation of birth in the Pure Land.

V

Some time ago, I had an opportunity to talk with an American scholar who was studying the Dōbō Movement. This is a movement for religious reform that has been active for the past thirty years in the Shinshū Ōtani-ha denomination—the denomination with which my Ōtani University is closely associated. After acquainting himself with Shinran's writings, this scholar confided to me, "I get the strong impression that Shinran possessed a mentality significantly different from that of the ordinary Japanese." And then he remarked that in his understanding, Shinran would be best characterized as a "non-traditional Japanese." His observation, I felt, hit the mark. Shinran's religious views are strikingly different from those held by the majority of the Japanese. This is the case also with his understanding of birth in the Pure Land. Through his reflection Shinran had arrived at an understanding of birth in the Pure Land which challenged the common Japanese view that it refers to rebirth into an other-worldly paradise.

Shinran wrote many letters during his lifetime. After his death they were compiled into various collections, one of which is entitled the *Mattōshō* (*Lamp for the Latter Age*). As this title shows, this collection was compiled with the hope that the letters contained therein will become the guiding light for the people living in the Age of the Latter Dharma (*mappō* 末法). In the first letter of that collection, a famous one with which many of you will be familiar, it states,

Practicers of true faith, because of their being embraced and never abandoned, abide in the stage of the properly settled (*shōjōju* 正定聚). There is thus no need to wait until death. Nor

is there need to rely on the coming of Amida Buddha (at the moment of death to take one to the Pure Land; *raigō* 来迎). The moment one's faith is settled, one's birth is settled. There is no need for deathbed rites (*raigō no gishiki* 来迎の儀式). "Proper mindfulness" (*shōnen* 正念) refers to the settling of the faith of the all-embracing Primal Vow. Because one gains this faith, one reaches supreme nirvāṇa without fail.³

This passage begins with the words, "practicers of true faith" (*shinjitsu shinjin no gyōnin* 真実信心の行人). Let me mention in passing that Shinran hardly uses the word "believer" (*shinja* 信者). He almost always uses "practicer" (*gyōja* 行者 or *gyōnin* 行人) or "nembutsu practicer" (*nembutsusha* 念仏者). Thus it is inappropriate to use the term "believer" when discussing Shinran's religious thought. Instead we must use, as Shinran himself does, the terms practicers or nembutsu practicers.

In the passage from the *Mattōshō* quoted above, Shinran mentions the "proper mindfulness." This commonly refers to the composed state of mind on the deathbed. People passionately prayed for such peaceful and composed mental state at the time of death, since it was taken as an auspicious sign that one will be successfully born in the Pure Land. However, Shinran here argues that proper mindfulness does not only refer to the calm and clear state of mind at the moment of death, but more importantly to the moment when one's faith deriving from Amida Buddha's Primal Vow becomes settled. In other words, it refers to the moment that one attains true faith. Furthermore, Shinran continues, "Because one gains this faith, one reaches supreme nirvāṇa without fail." Here Shinran equates birth in the Pure Land with the supreme nirvāṇa which Śākyamuni attained.

VI

We have examined above the opening words of one of the letters which Shinran wrote late in his life. In it, he also uses the phrase "embraced and never abandoned" to explain what salvation means in Pure Land Buddhism. This phrase derives from the well-

³ *Teibon Shinran Shōnin Zenshū*, (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1969) vol. 3, Shokan-hen, *Mattōshō*, pp. 59–60. For an alternate translation, see Ueda Yoshifumi, ed., *Letters of Shinran: A Translation of Mattōshō* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1978): 19–20.

known passage in the *Meditation Sūtra*: “Each and every ray of light illumines all the worlds of the ten directions, embracing beings who practice the nembutsu, never to abandon them.” This passage expresses the realization of the nembutsu practitioner that he or she is standing within the fold of the Buddha’s compassion. Salvation, according to the Pure Land teaching, is to awaken to the fact that one’s life is sustained by the Buddha’s compassion. This is how the term “embraced” (i. e., salvation) was traditionally understood within Pure Land Buddhism.

However, although Shinran was fully aware of this traditional interpretation of the term “embraced,” he developed it in a new direction. For Shinran, to be embraced and never abandoned means that the moment we attain true faith, we immediately assume our place among the properly settled in this very life. This is how Shinran understood the term “embraced” (i. e., salvation). As to the term “stage of the properly settled,” it refers to the stage at which one gains the assurance that one will definitely become a Buddha. That is to say, it refers to those who are sure to attain the enlightenment of supreme nirvāṇa.

I have occasionally heard the term “stage of the properly settled” explained as referring to the the stage at which one becomes destined for birth in the Pure Land. But this is actually a mistake. It does not refer to the fact that one’s birth in the Pure Land has been decided. This is a popular misconception which should not be attributed to Shinran. In the *Mattōshō* passage cited earlier, Shinran says, “Because one gains this faith, one reaches supreme nirvāṇa without fail.” This notion lies at the heart of Shinran’s concept of the “properly settled.”

Let us consider this point more carefully by looking at the first chapter of the *Tannishō*. It begins with the following words.

When the thought arises in your heart to say the nembutsu, believing that your birth in the Pure Land is attained through the inconceivable power of Amida’s Primal Vow, you come to share in the benefit of being embraced and never abandoned.⁴

This passage expresses the essence of Shinshū. As you see, the phrase “embraced and never abandoned” appears here. As Shinran

⁴ Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Collected Writings on Shin Buddhism*, ed., The Eastern Buddhist Society (Kyoto: Shinshū Ōtaniha, 1973): 207. Slightly amended.

uses it here, this phrase means that we assume our place among the properly settled in this present life. I'm sure many of you in the audience have read commentaries on the *Tannishō*, but if your commentary interprets "embraced" in this way, then that commentary is reliable. However, if it only states that it means to be saved by Amida's great compassion, I'm sorry to say that it falls short of being correct. That is to say, to attain the stage of the properly settled in the present life is the positive meaning of salvation, or, in the words of the *Tannishō*, "to be embraced and never abandoned."

The term "properly settled" is one that the Chinese Pure Land thinker T'an-luan (570–643) emphasized in his works. In the *Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life*, as well as in the writings of Nāgārjuna, the term "attainment of non-retrogression" is used instead as the core concept. But what does non-retrogression mean here? The answer in Mahāyāna Buddhism is that one does not retrogress into the ranks of the "Two Vehicles" (śrāvakas ["hearers"] and pratyekabuddhas ["self-enlightened ones"])—that is to say, one does not retrogress into an egotistic form of faith. At the same time, it also means that we do not revert to a life of delusion. It is in this sense that Shinran uses the term "properly settled." One who has reached this stage has vanquished the life of delusion. Hence there is no retrogression to that mode of life. It means that one can now live in accordance with the truth. This is what Shinran means by "embraced." Shinran maintains that being "properly settled" is the positive content of salvation, i.e., "being embraced."

VII

Shinran also says, "The moment one's faith is settled, one's birth is settled." We have to understand these words accurately. Often the words "one's birth is settled" is interpreted to mean that one's birth in the Pure Land at some future point in time (specifically after death) has become certain. However, this is not what Shinran means by this phrase. Shinran does not speak of birth in the Pure Land in this way. To gain birth in the Pure Land is, in the words of the *Larger Sūtra of Immeasurable Life*, to "immediately attain birth in the Pure Land." Or, according to the words of Shan-tao (613–681), it means to "attain birth in the Pure Land without fail," or "definitely attain birth in the Pure Land." But no matter whether the word "immediately," "without fail" or

“definitely” is used, for Shinran, the important point is that “birth *has been attained*.” To attain birth in the Pure Land means that, right now, here, you gain a new life in the Pure Land. To repeat what I have just said, you gain a new mode of life which enables you to live in accordance with the truth. This is how it should be understood. If you understand that the phrase “one’s birth is settled” means to gain the assurance of eventually attaining birth in the Pure Land even though one has yet to achieve that birth, then in my view this is an inappropriate interpretation of Shinran’s thought based on intellectual discrimination.

The fact that this is the correct interpretation of Shinran’s understanding of birth in the Pure Land is revealed by a close reading of Shinran’s *Ichinen tanen mon’i* which I have mentioned above. Let me quote from this text.

When one attains true faith, one is immediately embraced within the heart of the Buddha of Unobstructed Light, never to be abandoned....

When one is embraced, immediately, before any time passes or any day elapses, one ascends to the stage of the properly settled. It is said that this is what is meant by attaining birth.⁵

This passage leaves no room for doubt. Here Shinran states that when we attain true faith, we find ourselves embraced by the Tathāgata’s great compassion. That is to say, at that moment, we are saved. Since this passage states “before any time passes or any day elapses,” this means when we attain faith, immediately, at that very moment, we are saved. As to the phrase, “one ascends to the stage of the properly settled,” the patriarchs expressed this by the words “attain birth in the Pure Land.” Shinran does not say that we *will* attain birth in the Pure Land. He always says that *we have attained* birth in the Pure Land. I think this passage reveals Shinran’s understanding of birth in the Pure Land very clearly.

To reiterate, although our lives are filled with various types of miseries, fears and sorrows, when we attain faith, we assume our place among the properly settled, even while we live amidst our passions. In my understanding, this is what Shinran meant when he

⁵ *Teihon Shinran Shōnin Zenshū*, vol. 3, Wabun-hen, *Ichinen-tanen mon’i*, pp. 127–128. For an alternate translation, see Ueda Yoshifumi ed., *Notes on Once-calling and Many-calling: A Translation of Shinran’s Ichinen-tanen mon’i* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1980): 33.

spoke of having attained birth in the Pure Land. As I see it, through his emphasis on reaching the stage of the properly settled in the present life, Shinran imparted a positive content to the notion of birth in the Pure Land. He never changed his views concerning this notion. Of course, in several of his letters, Shinran writes the following. Let me paraphrase. "I am advancing in years, and I will no doubt be born in the Pure Land before you (i. e., the readers of the letter). When that event comes to pass, I will most definitely await you in the Pure Land." However, in his academic works, that is to say, in the treatises what he actually sat down and wrote, he repeatedly and without exception presents a positive notion of birth in the Pure Land: as assuming our place among those properly settled in the present life. I repeat, without exception. I think this is highly significant.

VIII

Naturally, because Shinran is a follower of the Pure Land teachings, he often speaks of birth in the Pure Land. But the term has many nuances and it has been understood in a number of ways. Thus we have to consider very carefully the various ways in which this term is, and has been, used. In fact, as many of you know, Shinran undertook such an analysis in his writings. There he distinguishes three modes of birth in the Pure Land. Among them, the one that Shinran advocates most highly is the one that reflects his own realization and conviction: birth in the True Fulfilled Land. When Shinran speaks of birth in the True Fulfilled Land, he is talking about assuming our place among the properly settled in the present life. In his view, this represents the genuine form of birth in the Pure Land. There are, however, other modes of birth in the Pure Land, which are nothing more than a dream. Shinran doesn't reject these other modes of birth. However, he holds that such modes of birth is birth into what he calls the Transformed Land of Skillful Means. Such births do not constitute genuine modes of birth into the Pure Land.

To once again review what we have discussed so far, birth in the Pure Land is a very important concept in the Pure Land tradition because it signified salvation. However, there exists a popular misunderstanding of birth in the Pure Land which has persisted from before Shinran's time down to the very present. This

popular interpretation holds that birth in the Pure Land consists of gaining rebirth in a paradise in the west after death. So prevalent is it that whenever people write or talk about birth in the Pure Land in ordinary conversation, it is usually this notion that they have in mind. They hardly ever considered it as a realm of supreme nirvāṇa as Shinran does.

In the sutras, Amida Buddha's Pure Land is often called the Land of Supreme Bliss in the Western Direction (*saihō gokuraku sekai* 西方極樂世界). But except when quoting other works, Shinran almost always refrains from using the words "in the Western Direction" when he uses this expression in his writings. Shinran, I believe, found the usual interpretation of birth in the Pure Land to be nothing more than a pitiable dream and a reflection of our deep-rooted attachment to life. Though it is said that one goes to the other world after death, where is there proof of that? Shinran, I believe, was a kind of person who would ask that question. Birth in the Pure Land is not a form of transmigration. It is not to be understood as an extension of this life. Birth in the Pure Land cannot be understood apart from the notion of extinction into quiescence. To use a term I employed previously, it means to die completely and thoroughly. This is the fundamental insight of Buddhism. It seems to me that Shinran sees himself as directly inheriting this insight.

As long as we understand birth in the Pure Land as rebirth into an other-worldly paradise, we seek desperately to gain some sign that we will actually be reborn there after death. This accounts for the great emphasis which was placed on gaining a vision of the Buddha on the deathbeds or gaining proper mindfulness in the final moments of life. Much value was placed on deathbed rituals which aimed at inducing visions of Amida Buddha at the moment of death, and the visions induced were treated as if they were really of some consequence. These rites of final passage are still practiced today, albeit in a different form. Against this popular conception of the Pure Land teachings, Shinran pioneered, as I have noted previously, a new concept of birth in the Pure Land: to assume our place among the properly settled by gaining true faith. Life comes to hold a totally new meaning for such a person of faith. This, I would contend, was the positive connotation Shinran sought to introduce to the notion of birth in the Pure Land.

Even today, there are some people who find positive meaning

in transmigration, but for us in the Buddhist tradition, transmigration is a life of delusion and is full of sorrow. For instance, Shinran told his wife Eshinni of some of the details of his encounter with Hōnen, which she recorded in a letter. In that letter, Shinran is said to have reported that if he had not met Hōnen, “I would have drifted rootlessly from world to world, life to life.” This “drifting rootlessly from world to world, life to life,” refers to the life of delusion that we have been discussing. For Shinran, this was a grievous mode of life, one that had to be overcome. It is an empty dream indeed to be attached to a life of delusion and to seek to prolong one’s life forever by being reborn in an other-worldly paradise. Shinran, no doubt, possessed this sober-minded insight.

IX

Let me repeat the question I asked at the beginning of this talk: “Is it possible for death to hold the meaning of salvation?” I believe it possible to say that when Śākyamuni attained nirvāṇa in the present life and achieved extinction into quiescence, he showed that the answer is “Yes.” Shinran, who stood within the tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, interpreted the notion of birth in the Pure Land from the standpoint of Śākyamuni’s path to nirvāṇa. That is to say, he understood the new life in the Pure Land as a life leading to consummation of nirvāṇa, a life leading back to nirvāṇa. Eternal life does not mean that one’s afflicted mode of life continues endlessly, but that extinction into quiescence presents itself at the moment of death. At such time, our lives to which we are deeply attached—so deeply attached in fact that we wish to keep on living forever—comes to a perfect end. In terms of traditional Shinshū vocabulary, death becomes the moment when the burdensome results of one’s karma are thoroughly consumed. With such death, our life is consummated in quiescence. Such radical death holds the meaning of perfect salvation.

I am again reminded of the American scholar’s description of Shinran as a non-traditional Japanese. Indeed Shinran’s views on death and salvation have no parallel in the long history of Japanese religions. In fact, it may seem like some sort of anomaly, so different it is from the common Japanese view on these matters. However, Shinran’s unique perspective is of great importance for all of us who wish to engage in serious reflection on religion in the

present age.

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