

Shinran's Neglect of Emptiness

JOHN P. KEENAN

THE rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism is most often depicted by scholars as the rise of the doctrine of emptiness, heralded by the early Prajñāpāramitā scriptures with their broad critique of Abhidharma realism. The doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) took direct aim at the Abhidharma idea that things possess truly existent essences (*dharmasvabhāva*), and proclaimed that all things are empty specifically of essence (*svabhāvaśūnyatā*). The development of Mahāyāna doctrine in large part turns upon this critique.

While the eighteen schools of the so-called Hīnayāna branch of Buddhism taught no-self (*ātmaśūnyatā*), Mahāyāna insisted on the emptiness of *all* things (*dharmasūnyatā*). The Prajñāpāramitā scriptures even declared the Buddha to be empty of any fixed essence. Subsequently, the Mādhyamika sage Nāgārjuna developed his “logic of emptiness,” which subjected any and all essentialist claims to emptying refutation. His *Stanzas on the Middle* take aim, chapter by chapter, at a series of Abhidharma affirmations deemed to presuppose the real existence of anything.

It is true that it has been rather difficult to identify exactly which philosophic notions each chapter of *The Stanzas on the Middle* is intended to refute, just who held such notions, and even perhaps just how in particular cases Mādhyamika logic carries the day. Most Mahāyāna scholars, however, both traditional and modern, do not preoccupy themselves with reconstructing Nāgārjuna's original context, but draw upon a relatively small number of passages in *The Stanzas on the Middle*, passages that present Mādhyamika with a more direct impact: primarily those treating emptiness and dependent

co-arising, and the two truths. From this rather meager store, these thinkers then proceed to develop the basic contours of Mahāyāna philosophy, wherein emptiness is taught as coterminous with dependent co-arising, and the two truths of ultimate meaning and worldly convention are described as totally disjunctive.¹

It does appear to be true that, even when clearly identified, the specific ancient Abhidharma notions that Nāgārjuna countered were never widely held, even in the medieval period. Most people never do become philosophers, skilled in the use of any theoretical language. And yet Mādhyamika itself, with its doctrine of emptiness, is so central to Mahāyāna Buddhism that it is never deemed as just of historical import, some relic of an outdated argument. Rather, as the flagship philosophy of Mahāyāna, emptiness refutes the assumption that any viewpoint clung to as the correct truth could possibly capture the core meaning of reality. Mādhyamika claims to have no viewpoint of its own, merely to refute the viewpoint of others, so that, no longer in thrall to ideas and judgments, all people may empty their minds and be awakened. So, even though most people no longer hold the classical viewpoints critiqued by Nāgārjuna, Mādhyamika can still take aim at whatever essentialist notion they may hold.

The place of Nāgārjuna in Buddhist doctrinal history is unparalleled by any other thinker, not just because he refuted false views held long ago, but because in so doing he offered a pattern of philosophic thought that could be and has been adapted to many different contexts. Nāgārjuna is recognized as the patriarch of some eight schools of East Asian Buddhism, and has been employed by western Buddhist thinkers to negate the assumptions of any number of viewpoints—Cartesian, Platonic, Scholastic, Straussian.

As the first of the patriarchs Nāgārjuna is recognized by Shinran in his Pure Land lineage. And yet, curiously, Shinran completely ignores the Prajñāpāramitā and the Mādhyamika doctrine of emptiness. Shinran knows that Nāgārjuna wrote his commentary on the *Mahāprajñāpāramitā-sūtra* (*Ta-chih-tu lun*) to “crush the wrong views of being and nonbeing,”² but he himself never cites Prajñāpāramitā texts directly. He never even mentions Nāgārjuna’s *Stanzas on the Middle*. When he does employ the term “emptiness,” he usually means “unreal,” “useless,” or “vain.” In his *Notes on ‘Es-*

¹ The main theme of Nagao Gadjin’s *The Foundational Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy*. Trans. by John P. Keenan. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

² Hirota et al. 1997 (hereafter CWS) I: 361.

sentials of Faith Alone, he declares that the reason people should not outwardly behave as though wise or good is that “inwardly they are empty and transitory.”³ Similarly, true faith is “free from that which is empty and transitory.”⁴ To be empty here signifies “to be bereft, to be lacking, to feel lost, or at a loss.”

Furthermore, Shinran appears to demote Nāgārjuna from his usual status as a fully awakened bodhisattva. He describes him as having “attained the stage of joy,” merely the initial bodhisattva stage.⁵ According to Shinran, Nāgārjuna did distinguish the difficult from the easy path, but he himself practiced the difficult path, thus reaching only the first stage of the bodhisattva career.

In Shinran’s marginalization of the Prajñāpāramitā teaching of emptiness, I suspect, he parts from the mainstream of the Mahāyāna tradition. He teaches that the reality of the Dharma is centered in the reality of the Primal Vow, the reality of *shinjin*, embodied in the recitation of *nembutsu*. He accepts the teaching of the *Nirvāṇasūtra* that “the Dharma Body is eternity, bliss, self, and purity,”⁶ the four perfections celebrated in the Tathāgatagarbha tradition. That Tathāgatagarbha tradition limits the scope of emptiness to defilements, and refuses to apply it to the reality of the true Buddha mind—in Shinran’s case, the mind of Amida Buddha acting as the Other Power in the lives of faithful practitioners.⁷ The question this raises in my mind is: Why? What are the implications of Shinran’s neglect of the doctrine of emptiness? Why does he marginalize the teaching of emptiness? Why does he interpret emptiness simply to mean “uselessness, inanity”? Why does he limit his reading of Nāgārjuna to the *Jūjūbibasha ron*, which does not thematize emptiness at all? Tendai, Kegon, and the other schools of Japanese Mahāyāna glory in disquisitions on emptiness; the *Lotus Scripture* and the traditions that developed from that scripture focus on the eternal Buddha, but still they profess the “law of emptiness,” the ground for the very central teaching of the Buddha’s skillful *upāya*.⁸ Yet Shinran and Shin Buddhism in general ignore it, to the point where some have wondered if Shin Buddhism merits inclusion as a Mahāyāna school at all. Is it not rather focused on the

³ CWS I: 466.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.451.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.362.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.188.

⁷ And would thus be subject to Matsumoto Shirō’s critique against *dhātuvāda*.

⁸ See *The Lotus Sutra*, Watson trans. 1993, p.49.

denial of self-power, much as the so-called Hīnayāna schools focused single-mindedly on no-self?

The Neglect of Emptiness as Upāya: The Needs of the People Outweigh the Purity of the Teaching

There is a traditional explanation for Shinran's neglect of emptiness: that emptiness is not a skillful teaching for this latter, degenerate age, wherein people are existentially unable to grasp the import of such a subtle teaching. A clear and typical formulation of this explanation is found in Shunjō's biography of Hōnen:

Entering through the gateways of [the Buddha's] teachings, people have, according to their several capacities, found manifold benefits. Among the teachings, that which is called the Holy Path (shōdō) promises enlightenment to people in this sinful world, through the power of their own exertions. But we fear that the present age has become so degenerate, and people's minds so beclouded, that they are no longer able clearly to apprehend the profound truth of the emptiness of self and things, and, in their eagerness for the things of time and sense, they will with difficulty escape from the fires of the three dread evils. There is, however, but one Gate, through which common people, with all their evil passions born of illusion, may enter immediately at death upon the state of deliverance from the fated transmigration, and that is the Pure Land (Jōdo).⁹ [translation modernized here]

Indeed, Nāgārjuna in his *Stanzas on the Middle* presented emptiness with the purpose of refuting the false ideas of those who insisted on the truth of their own views. But the obstacles that obtain in the degenerate age consist more in attachment to objects of sense passion and the deluded quest to control one's entire fate. These are not intellectual viewpoints but rather existential states of entrapped consciousness. Their antidote is not a teaching on the emptiness of false viewpoints, but rather an instruction on the pointlessness of such disordered states of consciousness. Indeed, Nāgārjuna himself was not just a deconstructive thinker, but also a bodhisattva who wrote many other tracts aimed at encouraging devotional practices to liberate people from their attachments.

⁹ Coates and Ishizuka 1925, pp.86–87.

This is the attitude that seems to characterize Shinran, for he does seem unconcerned with intellectuals and their viewpoints, until those viewpoints begin to impinge on Shinshū doctrine itself. Still, he addresses himself to more ordinary people, attempting to inculcate the practice of nembutsu as a counter to the overarching need of people to be in control of their own salvation, their own fate. To abandon oneself to the Other Power of Amida and to accept entrance into the state of the truly settled as a gift freely given—that is the point.

And the chief obstacle to such settlement is not intellectual viewpoints, but self-clinging: the persistent and polymorphous moves of self-aggrandizing calculations (*hakarai*). Such calculations may of course take the guise of philosophical views, but ordinarily and for the most part views are not the danger sensed by Shinran to be most threatening. And thus the founder of Japanese Shin Buddhism did not feel constrained to say very much about emptiness. And he never discoursed on dependent co-arising. Certainly he did not stress the identity between the two. As a result, Pure Land practitioners, with the exception of those who have studied at university, are rarely familiar with these Mahāyāna philosophic insights.¹⁰

In this reading, then, Shinran ignores the teaching of emptiness because it is not relevant to his time and place, not appropriate for this latter, degenerate age. No matter how central to the rise of Mahāyāna, emptiness was not central to Pure Land practice. And Shinran was not alone in making this move. Chinese Pure Land thinker Shan-tao also treats emptiness, the most profound of insights, as unsuited to a broad audience. He repeats the text of the *Kuan Wu-Liang-Shou-Fo Ching*.¹¹ The *Larger Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra* had reported a dialogue between Buddha and Subhūti, in which Buddha identifies emptiness itself as *nirvāṇa*. The passage states:

All dharmas are characterized by equality and are not creations of sravakas and so forth; emptiness itself is nirvana. If bodhisattvas who have newly awakened aspiration hear that all dharmas are ultimately empty and so on, and that even nirvana is illusion, their

¹⁰ Some fifteen years ago, Whalen Lai remarked that his grandmother, a practitioner of Pure Land all her life, had never heard about emptiness and dependent co-arising. It is that remark that reverberates in the back of my mind when I read Shinran.

¹¹ Pas 1995, pp.156–57: “If newly aroused bodhisattvas would hear that all the *dharmas* are ultimately void in their nature and that even *nirvāṇa* is a creation, their minds would be greatly frightened. For their sake the distinction is made: *dharmas* which have a rising-and-ceasing are created; *dharmas* that neither arise nor cease, are not created.”

hearts will be seized with surprise and fear. For the sake of bodhisattvas who have newly awakened aspiration, I deliberately made a distinction, saying that what arises and perishes is illusion, while that which neither arises nor perishes is not illusion.¹²

Indeed, it seems quite clear that Shinran's reason for avoiding emptiness was precisely because it was not a skillful teaching. He quotes Shan-*tao* to the point:

In this way, you should undertake practice in accord with your opportunities and conditions and seek emancipation. Why do you obstruct and confuse me with what is not the essential practice corresponding to my conditions? What I desire is the practice corresponding to *my* conditions; that is not what you seek. What you desire is the practice corresponding to *your* conditions; that is not what *I* seek. Each person's performance of practices in accord with his aspirations unfailingly leads to rapid emancipation.¹³

Shinran focuses on what is existentially central. However, he does not merely treat emptiness as a profound if inaccessible teaching; he hardly treats it at all. The above passage is the only citation from a Prajñāpāramitā text to be found in his *Teaching, Practice, and Realization*. He appears not only to be neglecting emptiness, but to be avoiding it like the plague.

How could Shinran *not* in some way or other have treated this central Mahāyāna doctrine? It is the teaching of emptiness that enables Mahāyāna teachers to employ the very notion and the practice of *upāya*. And even though emptiness might be deemed difficult to understand, other Mahāyāna thinkers who focused on Buddha nature or the pure mind of original awakening did thematize it. Even granting that Shinran's focus was on the existential and not on intellectuals, those who hold views, does it follow that he should fail to treat emptiness so completely?

Perhaps Shinran was so focused upon the true teaching of Pure Land, and so opposed to false Pure Land views, that he found unacceptable the idea that all views are empty. But this defends Shinran only to imply as a consequence that his understanding of Pure Land did, in fact, really reject Mahāyāna understandings after all. A deeper understanding of Shinran is perhaps needed.

¹² CWS I: 199.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.89.

The Canon of Mahāyāna Scripture: The Mythic Language of Authoritative Teaching

We are accustomed to treating the collection of Buddhist texts as the Buddhist canon(s). We translate *Tripitaka* as the “triple canon.” But the Buddhist canon, as a collection of scriptural texts, is so vast and so diverse that it never has functioned in the basic western sense of canon, that is, as a “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*). Rather, various Buddhist traditions select their regulative canons from within that immense collection of canonical scriptures and so focus on a more limited and manageable scriptural authority, one that can serve as a “rule of faith.”

For Pure Land the canon normally consists of the Three Pure Land Sūtras: *The Larger Sūtra*, *The Contemplation Sūtra*, and *the Smaller Sūtra*. For Shinshū Pure Land Buddhism, however, it is the *Larger Sūtra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* that provides the definitive and foundational teaching. This scripture, Shinran teaches, is “the conclusive and ultimate exposition, . . . the true teaching in consummate readiness for the beings of this day.”¹⁴ He makes this crystal clear in the first chapter of *The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization*, a chapter of his work whose extreme brevity may perhaps lead one to miss its significance. At the outset Shinran identifies the doctrinal framework for Shin Buddhist teaching as *The Larger Sūtra*, and although many other sūtras are cited with approval, and even appealed to as authoritative, none of them is “the conclusive and definitive exposition.”

Even among these other texts, few focus upon the doctrine of emptiness. Dennis Hirota’s translations in *The Collected Works of Shinran*, and particularly the notes and appendices in that work, make Shinran’s sources clear. An appendix of authoritative Mahāyāna scriptures cited in *The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization*—in effect, Shinran’s personal collection “canon”—lists some seventy sūtras, only three of which relate to the teaching of emptiness.¹⁵ There are some forty-one commentaries (*śāstra*), only two of which relate to texts that thematize emptiness. With the notable exception of the passage cited above from the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, all of the passages to which Shinran refers are quite brief and not very relevant to the theme of emptiness. There is a brief mention of a passage from the *Vimalakīrtisūtra* and its commentary on the image of the lotus flower, another brief citation from the *Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra Taught by Mañjuśrī* on the practice

¹⁴ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁵ “Names and Titles Cited” in CWS II: 271–93.

of *nembutsu*, and a similarly brief citation on *samādhi* from Nāgārjuna's *Commentary on the Mahāprajñāpāramitā Sūtra*.

Shinran was indeed familiar with the major texts of the tradition. He cited many scriptures: *The Lotus*, *The Nirvana Sūtra*, a host of texts from the *Ratnakūṭa* Collection, *The Awakening of Mahāyāna Faith*, and on and on. Clearly, he is conversant with the texts and knows the tradition. Nevertheless, Shinran was working with a “canon” (rule of faith) that is quite different from that often assumed to be quintessentially Mahāyāna. Its major component was *The Larger Sūtra*, with its mythic narrative of the Buddha Amitābha. This means that Shinran does not privilege the language of emptiness, which in many other Mahāyāna traditions functions as a meta-language that empties all language claims of their final validity, and appeals to the account of the awakening and silence of the historical Buddha Śākyamuni.

Most traditions, western or Buddhist, can look to a diverse scriptural canon. Christians can appeal to a collection of quite varied texts with different theologies and sometimes quite distinctive teachings. Buddhists can appeal to a vast array of early and late scriptures. Thoughtful believers can further lay claim to philosophic models that direct and circumscribe their reading of scripture. Shinran, by contrast, has limited the authoritative and regulative canon (*regula fidei*) to one text, *The Larger Scripture of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life*. No other scripture, not even the other two sūtras of the threefold Pure Land Canon, can impose their understanding over that of *The Larger Sūtra*.

Shinran did not eliminate the teaching of emptiness from his canon; it just never figured prominently there in the first place. One reason for this may lie in the implications of emptiness in regard to Amida Buddha. In the above cited passage Shinran quotes from the *Larger Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra*, where the identification of emptiness with cessation is followed by a description of Amida as an Enjoyment Body Buddha (*buddha-sambhogakāya*). And Shinran, with apparent approval, cites the text of Shan-tao:

Now, through the examination of the sacred teaching, we know for sure that Amida is a *sambhoga-[kāya]*; even if at some time in the future he will enter into nirvāṇa there is no contradiction. All those who possess wisdom should understand.¹⁶

Shan-tao here is responding to the question of what kind of Buddha-body

¹⁶ CWS I: 200.

characterizes Amida Buddha: transformation, enjoyment, or reality.¹⁷ In Indian doctrinal development, emptiness was employed by the classical Buddhist schools of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra to deprive of *any* abiding reality all Buddhas seen in meditative devotion. Asaṅga's explanation is that the Buddha lands and Buddha bodies seen in meditation are "nothing more than constructions flowing from wisdom."¹⁸

The doctrine of emptiness did not present itself innocently as an original teaching of the Buddha. Rather, it came down to Pure Land thinkers in a context of intra-Mahāyāna argumentation, specifically as refuting the abiding reality of Buddha Amitābha and his Sukhāvātī Pure Land. To accept emptiness as the definitive and conclusive exposition would in effect reduce Amida to one of many manifestations of the basic ground of awakening, the Dharma Body. Then the language of emptiness would trump the narrative account of *The Larger Sūtra* and supplant it as the basic teaching and rule of faith. But Shinran proclaims that "all Buddhas and bodhisattvas have dharma-bodies of two dimensions: dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means."¹⁹ So Amida Tathāgata "comes forth from suchness and manifests various bodies—fulfilled, accommodated, and transformed."²⁰ Amida is not merely a derived body of Buddha, manifested as compassionate means, for the two dharma-bodies of suchness and compassionate means are inseparable.

Shinran will not allow the language of emptiness to swallow up the reality of Amida Buddha. He will not admit that the teaching of emptiness constitutes a meta-language in which all other teachings may be expressed and to which they may be reduced. In this, he is but a clear example of the basic stance of religious traditions almost everywhere.

Shinran's canon, I would suggest, served the role played in other Mahāyāna schools by emptiness. This most authoritative of scriptures presents the Buddha Śākyamuni expounding a mythic narrative of the Buddha Amitābha. The events take place beyond this world realm and the actors are not historical persons at all. Rather, the transcendental Bodhisattva Dharmākara, practicing through endless ages in endless world realms beyond the experience of any human, present or past, creates through the Other Power of his Vow the Pure Land of Sukhāvātī.

¹⁷ Pas 1995, pp.153–57.

¹⁸ See Griffiths et al. 1989, pp.32–39.

¹⁹ CWS I: 165.

²⁰ Ibid., p.153.

The very mythic structure of *The Larger Sūtra* insulates it from theoretical attempts to filter its message through any philosophy, even the philosophy of emptiness. Shinran does not allow its teaching to be subordinated to anyone's logic of reduction, or anyone's insistence on a pure Buddha nature. The mythic accounts of the beginnings of religious traditions throughout the world are, I submit, more real than any reputed historical facticity or any metaphysical constructions. Philosophies, not content with nor at ease with mythic narratives, often attempt to superimpose an interpretive language over the narratives. Here they may see the account of Amida Buddha as just another example of skillful means, an "outflow from the mind of wisdom," in Asaṅga's phrase. Amida would then become but one avenue among many to a unified experience of emptiness.

In choosing *The Larger Sūtra* as the definitive teaching, Shinran was, I would argue, emptying all theories indeed, even that of emptiness—a very traditional Mādhyamika move indeed! There was for him simply no philosophical language that could trump the mythic account of *The Larger Sūtra*. No theory of emptiness that could read some other meaning into the account of *The Larger Sūtra* was to be admitted. Shinran insisted on the primacy of *The Larger Sūtra* precisely to favor insight over theory, precisely to avoid subjecting the Dharma to the designs of the philosophers, even the philosophers of emptiness. The framework of that mythic scripture disallows any more inclusive overlay to contextualize the story within its own meta-theory.

If we can understand human understanding to consist in a sequential complex of experience, insight, and judgment, theory functions by passing judgments on the truth or falsity of judgments, themselves based on insights into experience. The refusal of Shinran to subject the Amida narrative to any so-called broader framework is a refusal to subject Dharma to human judgment. It is a recognition that, when treating ultimate things, myth is a truer and a more appropriate vehicle than judgment, precisely because it arrests attention at insight and refuses to filter salvific insight through judgmental theory. Here, knowing, found only at the stage of judgment, cannot reach beyond its limited sphere. The Prajñāpāramitā role of empty silence is in Shinshū taken over by the mythic narrative of Amida, emptying all judgment and rejoicing in the texture of its text. In this sense, to recognize the Amida narrative as myth is not to reduce it or to subject it to a further understanding, but to recognize Shinran's implicit claim that there is no further reading beyond such myth, no realm more pure or more basic than the Pure Land of Sukhāvati.

REFERENCES

- Coates, Harper Havelock and Ishizuka, Ryugaku. trans. 1925. *Hōnen the Buddhist Saint: His Life and Teaching*. Kyoto, Chionin.
- Griffiths, Paul J. et al. 1989. *The Realm of Awakening: Chapter Ten of Asaṅga's Mahāyāna-saṅgraha*. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hirota, Dennis, et al. 1997. *The Collected Works of Shinran. Translated, with introductions, glossaries, and reading aids*. Kyoto: Jōdo Shinshū Hongwanji-ha. 2 vols.
- Nagao, Gadjin. 1989. *The Foundational Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy*. Trans. by John P. Keenan. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Pas, Julian. 1995. *Visions of Sukhāvātī: Shan-Tao's Commentary on the Kuan Wu-Liang-Shou-Fo Ching*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Watson, Burton. trans. 1993. *The Lotus Sutra*. New York: Columbia University Press.