

DIALOGUE

Shinran's World

PART II

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The Original Vow

From Sino-Japanese to Native Japanese

KANEKO: I wonder if the Japanese understand such terms as *hongan* 本願 'Original Vow' and *seigan* 誓願 'vow' in quite the same way as the ancient Chinese did. I think it's reasonable to say that the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, though written in classical Chinese, is basically a native Japanese work. If so, it must be understood in terms of the Japanese language. For example, we have the words *negai* 願い 'wish' and *chikai* 誓い 'vow' in Japanese. I don't know if *negai* conveys exactly the same meaning as the Sino-Japanese *hongan* or if *chikai* corresponds precisely to *seigan*, but I can't help feeling that such native Japanese words, used in their everyday sense, provide the best approach to understanding the true meaning of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*.

Even the title itself, *Kyōgyōshinshō*, would be better understood if rendered into Japanese. The Sino-Japanese *kyō* 教 'teaching' would be

* The present installment is a translation of *Shinran no sekai* (Kyoto: Higashi Honganji, 1964), pp. 23–48. The first installment appeared in *Eastern Buddhist* 18, 1 (Spring 1985).

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read as the native *oshie*, *gyō* 行 'practice' as *okonai* and so on. Shin Buddhism has traditionally interpreted this text in quite an abstruse way, but I wonder if we haven't gone too far in that direction. I would prefer to bring it closer to everyday Japanese. There are many colloquial Japanese expressions, for instance, which convey the same message as passages from the classical Chinese texts, like this one which came up in conversation the other day: "When you've truly grasped something, you're free to express it in any way you like."

NISHITANI: "When you've truly grasped something . . .

KANEKO: . . . you're free to express it any way you like."

SUZUKI: What does it mean?

KANEKO: This means that if one really understands the essence of a concept one can express it any way one likes.

SUZUKI: I see.

KANEKO: I think this Japanese expression means the same as the following line from a Chinese Buddhist work by Chi-ts'ang: "Utterly unrestricted even by the fourfold propositions of logic and the dialectic of the one hundred negations." Both carry the same sense of free, unobstructed action. This is what I am seeking—easily understandable Japanese expressions which convey the sense of the original.

NISHITANI: I find Professor Kaneko's approach to reading the *Kyōgyōshinshō* very appealing. First, the Chinese labored to translate Sanskrit. The Japanese then read the Chinese texts in accordance with the rules of Japanese grammar; instead of reading the Chinese characters in their original order, they rearranged them to fit the Japanese syntax through the use of *kaeri-ten*, or "return-marks." Though a given work may originally have been Chinese, it became half-Japanese by virtue of its adaptation to the linguistic structure of the latter; even though most of the characters have retained their Chinese readings, the Japanese student most likely thinks of these characters in terms of their meanings in his own native language. Thus people generally understand the Chinese character *kyō* 'teaching' in terms of its Japanese reading, *oshie*.

However, we cannot simply change all Sino-Japanese readings into native Japanese readings, as the two readings often have differing connotations. This is what makes a work like the *Kyōgyōshinshō* so complex. For example, the Sino-Japanese readings, *kyō* and *gyō*, carry nuances which are quite different from those conveyed by *oshie* and

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okonai, the native Japanese readings of the same characters. These words have been adopted into the Japanese language, but still retain some of their original Chinese connotations.

KANEKO: I still think that the essential meaning is conveyed by the Japanese reading.

NISHITANI: Then the work becomes completely Japanese.

KANEKO: Yes, and I'm wondering if there isn't a similar method of transmitting these texts to the West. For example, rather than translating *hongan* literally as "Original Vow," wouldn't it be better to look for a term in ordinary English which conveys the same concept, much as *negai* does in Japanese?

NISHITANI: That, finally, is what has to happen. Each word, after all, must be expressed in the language it's being translated into, whether it be English, French, or something else. But let's go back to the problem of the different readings in Japanese. The Sino-Japanese *kyō* does possess the meaning conveyed by the Japanese reading *oshie*, but it also carries a unique nuance when read in its Sino-Japanese form. This is also true of the Sino-Japanese *gyō* 'practice' or 'training', which contains nuances not present in the Japanese *okonai*, 'the actions of daily life'. Each character contains two levels of meaning. It's fascinating, really—the ways of thinking of two peoples have been superimposed in the Chinese ideograms as they are now used in Japan. They are the product of a joint effort.

SUZUKI: The term *shinjitsu* 眞実, which literally means 'true and real', is another interesting word. Both *shin* and *jitsu* have the same reading in Japanese, *makoto*. Here is a case where the indigenous Japanese word encompasses the meaning of more than one Chinese character.

KANEKO: Earlier in the discussion, someone quoted the passage which reads, "*Shinjitsu* is reality." This may adequately define the term as it is used in its original Chinese or Indian context, but is insufficient for conveying the meaning of the Japanese reading, *makoto*. In the third fascicle of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, "Chapter on Faith," there is a passage in which *makoto* is applied to three characters: *Shinnari jitsunari seinari*, 'True, real, sincere'. They express various aspects of *makoto*, and yet point to the same fundamental reality. The first two characters are *shin* and *jitsu* which we have already seen in *shinjitsu*. The third character, the Chinese "sei" 誠, reflects the sense of fidelity

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or sincerity of heart implied in the statement, "He is a sincere person." This doesn't just mean he isn't a liar. There's a positive quality implied.

NISHITANI: I think it's akin to another Japanese word, *magokoro*, which means something like sincerity of heart or earnest devotion.

KANEKO: The concept of *magokoro* is contained in the word *shinjitsu*, 'truth as reality'. In discussions of philosophy or religion these days, people often speak of *shinri* 真理 'ultimate truth' or 'fundamental principle', but frankly speaking I don't really like this word. *Shinjitsu* is much better.

Freely Expressing Oneself

SUZUKI: While I was reflecting on Professor Kaneko's expression, "When you've truly grasped something, you're free to express it any way you like," I recalled an ink drawing by the Zen priest Sengai 仙厓 (1750-1837). The inscription accompanying the drawing reads,

When I see [Reality's] shadow
Thrown into the emptiness of space,
How boldly defined
The moon
Of the autumnal night!¹

Sengai describes the moon here as "boldly defined." "Boldly" is a translation of the Japanese *omoikittaru*, which can be rendered more literally as 'thoughts cut off'—one acts boldly when no longer hindered by extraneous thoughts. Thus one sees the moon boldly, that is, in its full reality, when thoughts are cut off and nothing remains. There is only the brightly shining moon. I feel that this is akin to Professor Kaneko's expression.

Scholars often base their opinions on the words of others, saying, "The Buddha teaches," "Socrates says," "Hegel states," and so forth. I don't agree with this way of thinking. Instead, scholars should express themselves more freely, saying, "My view is as follows, and the Buddha is in agreement with me." This may sound arrogant, but it's

¹ From Daisetz T. Suzuki, *Sengai the Zen Master* (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 1971), p. 107.

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not. Even if you are a student of the teachings of Hegel, Kant, or the Buddha, you must still be able to say, "I feel *this* way," and if you can do that, there is no longer any need for Buddha or Christ. This is the significance of the words Buddha uttered at the time of his birth: "In heaven above and earth below, I alone am the honored one." How about doing things this way? What do you think? [*Laughter*]

NISHITANI: Yes, it's just as you say. But let us remember that it is only after we have grasped something thoroughly, be it the philosophy of Kant or Hegel, that we can express it with complete freedom. There are many quotations from various scriptures in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. Shinran grasped the meaning of these passages, systematized them over time, and then expressed them anew in the form of the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. Would you say this is Shinran's way of freely expressing himself?

SUZUKI: Yes, I think so. Otherwise the *Kyōgyōshinshō* would be meaningless.

KANEKO: I agree. Its meaning lies in the way Shinran uses quotations. He is expressing himself through the words of others.

NISHITANI: So he has to make them his own first. Then, having grasped their meaning, he could use them to represent his own understanding. The sense of "freely expressing oneself" is quite apparent here.

KANEKO: There is yet another aspect to "freely expressing oneself." At times one wishes that someone else would say what one seeks to express oneself. For instance, one can't very well congratulate or praise oneself. It's only if someone else does these things for you that they have any meaning.

This is why Shinran quotes from scriptures. Though his standpoint is no different from that of Shan-tao and Genshin, he continues to express himself through their words because of their deep effect on him. He finds freedom of expression through the words of others. Instead of saying, "My opinion is . . .," he quotes others, saying, "Shan-tao says." We must keep in mind that it is really Shinran himself who is speaking, however—he uses quotations to express his own realization. The error occurs when, paying too much attention to what Shan-tao and Genshin say, we become entangled in the words of their works and lose sight of the *Kyōgyōshinshō* itself.

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The Bestowal of the Buddha's Vow

NISHITANI: Let us return to the discussion of hong'an, Original Vow. Dr. Suzuki traced it to its origins in Emptiness which has just started to move. This was followed by a discussion of prajna-wisdom, and then of T'an-luan's *Commentary on the Treatise on the Pure Land*. Is there anything we should add to the understanding of the Original Vow which emerged in the context of this discussion?

KANEKO: My understanding of the Original Vow begins with the view that humanity is the recipient of the Buddha's earnest and active desire to save all beings. This desire, this ardent movement of will, is what is called "vow." Just as everyone wants a sick person to get well again, and all children are the recipients of their parents' hopes, it is in the nature of human existence to be bestowed with a vow. That which bestows this vow or prayer upon us is what we call the Buddha. But the important thing is to awaken to this vow; what the Buddha is will then become clear of itself.

NISHITANI: In the previous discussion of T'an-luan's *Commentary*, there was a reference made to the phrase quoted by Shinran in the *Kyōgyōshinshō*: "Wisdom is the Pure." It seems to me that this phrase raises the problem of the origin of this prayer or vow which is bestowed upon us.

KANEKO: In his use of words like *shinjitsu* and Original Vow, T'an-luan seeks to clarify the source of the fundamental truth underlying the vow.

SOGA: The two main branches of Indian Mahayana thought are the Madhyamika school founded by Nagarjuna, and the Yogacara schools founded by Asanga and Vasubandhu. The *Treatise on the Pure Land* was authored by Vasubandhu and thus belongs to the latter school. We must keep in mind, however, that T'an-luan's *Commentary* on this work is based on Nagarjuna's Madhyamika school. There are significant differences between the respective systems of thought of these two schools. In the *Tsan Amit'o-fo chieh*, T'an-luan refers to Nagarjuna as one of his "true teachers," but not Vasubandhu. For T'an-luan Nagarjuna represents the orthodox lineage of Mahayana Buddhism, and Vasubandhu an offshoot. This is why he interprets Vasubandhu's work on Pure Land Buddhism in terms of Nagarjuna's thought; for him the

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former is unintelligible without the latter. In order to really understand Vasubandhu, one must study Nagarjuna. This is the basis of T'an-luan's *Commentary*; I feel that his notion of Amida's Other-power is rooted in Nagarjuna as well.

The Inner Mirror is Serene

NISHITANI: What is Shinran's standpoint?

SOGA: I think he felt the same, though he did not say so explicitly. For example, in his *Koso wasan*, Shinran addresses Nagarjuna, T'an-luan, Tao-ch'o, Genshin, and Hōnen as "my true teachers." Vasubandhu and Shan-tao are not referred to in this way. The same holds true for Shinran's *Shōshinge*. There must be some reason for this, though I'm not sure what it is. In any case it is safe to say that the philosophy of Asanga and Vasubandhu constitute something of a departure from the mainstream of the Mahayana. The Prajnaparamita philosophy to which Dr. Suzuki often refers belongs to the line of Nagarjuna's thought.

SUZUKI: Yes.

SOGA: I think one can say that the orthodox lineage of the Mahayana is basically that of Nagarjuna's Madhyamika. This isn't so much Shinran's personal view, but the basic trend throughout the history of Mahayana Buddhism. As I just mentioned, T'an-luan refers to Nagarjuna as his "true teacher" in his *Tsan Amit'o-fo chieh*. However, the differences between Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu should not be exaggerated. Though their standpoints seem to be in conflict, these two great figures are fundamentally of one mind. The T'ien-t'ai master Chih-i commented upon the relationship between them by stating, "The inner mirror is serene."

NISHITANI: Did Shinran feel the same way about the basic unity between the two?

SOGA: Certainly. This was the standard view in Buddhism since long before Shinran's time. Even T'an-luan's eulogy of Nagarjuna presupposes this unity. When he distinguishes between the two, calling Nagarjuna "my true teacher" but not Vasubandhu, it isn't because he didn't respect the latter. Nagarjuna has always occupied a more central position in Chinese Mahayana Buddhism. For example, both the seven and ten-fascicle Chinese translations of the Lankavatara Sutra predict the

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appearance of the Nagarjuna Bodhisattva. Shinran refers to this prediction in his *Kōsō wasan*: “There is to come to Southern India a bhikṣu by the name of Nagarjuna.” This prediction was accepted as historically genuine by all Buddhists, including of course T’an-luan and Shinran. Vasubandhu is accorded much less attention in Shinran’s gathas and hymns. The only mention made of him is that he authored the *Treatise on the Pure Land*. But the basic unity of Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu was never in doubt. It was just that, long before even Shinran, Nagarjuna’s Madhyamika was recognized as the orthodox teaching.

The Place to Which the Vow Returns

NISHITANI: Earlier on Dr. Suzuki explained Original Vow in terms of emptiness.

SOGA: We can refer once again to T’an-luan’s *Commentary*. In the section of the *Treatise* dealing with the “adornments,” or special characteristics of the Pure Land, Vasubandhu states, “In contemplating the power of the Buddha’s Original Vow, those who encounter it but once do not pass their lives in vain, for they are swiftly filled with the great treasure-ocean of virtue.” This is the most important of the Pure Land’s “adornments.” Commenting on this line, T’an-luan expresses the implicit relationship between the Vow and its power: “What gives the Pure land its continual unfailing activity is the establishment of the Forty-eight Vows by Dharmākara Bodhisattva in the past and the freely-working divine power of Amida Buddha in the present. The Power is manifest by virtue of the Vows; the Vows are fulfilled by virtue of the Power.” The Vows generate the Power, and the Power fulfills the Vows. “The Vows are never idle; the Power is always at work. Power and Vow are mutually fulfilling; ultimately there is no difference between them. The actualization of this fact is called the fulfillment of the Vow.”

This, according to T’an-luan, is the meaning of the fulfillment of the Original Vow, and this interpretation is in accord with the views of Nagarjuna. T’an-luan’s exposition is spirited and full of joy. In contrast, I find the works of the Yogacara school rather sad and depressing. When I read them, I start feeling gloomy myself. [*Laughter*]

SUZUKI: What do you mean?

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SOGA: Well, I find myself getting depressed when I read Yogacara works like the *Ch'eng wei-shih lun* or the *Mahayana-samgraha*.

SUZUKI: I know how you feel.

SOGA: Nagarjuna, on the other hand, makes me cheerful.

SUZUKI: Yes, I agree.

KANEKO: I feel that Dr. Suzuki's explanation of Original Vow in terms of emptiness is in accordance with orthodox Mahayana thought. However, I would like to examine Original Vow in relation to suchness (Skt. *tathatā*) as well. In the *An-lo chi*, Tao-ch'o states, "According to the Mahayana, the fundamental source of reality and suchness is none other than emptiness. The truth of this is something we have never grasped." We can talk about such concepts as "suchness" or "reality," but these things are beyond the reach of ordinary beings like us. We must first contemplate Amida Buddha's Original Vow, for it is in the thorough realization of the Vow that we will eventually reach the realm of suchness. My feeling is that the destination lies at the source.

SOGA: The Vow originally arose out of suchness, since Amida Buddha is a Tathagata, "the one who came from suchness." In any case, suchness is the ultimate source.

KANEKO: I think that's basically correct, but I prefer to think of the process as moving in the opposite direction.

NISHITANI: You feel that the realm of suchness lies in the future?

KANEKO: Yes, and that means that eventually we will reach this realm. The place we are going or returning to is nothing but the ground of our existence. Though we talk about returning to it, however, we should realize that this is only possible because it is the place from which we originally came. What Dr. Suzuki was saying about Vow and emptiness is no doubt true, but I can't help feeling that we ordinary beings lack the ability to attain a direct experience of this truth.

NISHITANI: I see. Then what's important is the destination.

KANEKO: Yes, various problems with interpretation remain, but I think that's true regarding the place to which the Vow returns.

NISHITANI: The place to which the Vow returns? Do you mean the place it returns to or the place from which it comes?

KANEKO: We are talking here about the world of *kie* 帰依, where the place to which we return (*ki*) is the same as the place from which our existence originally came (*e*). I think everyone would agree with this understanding of "return."

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SOGA: From the standpoint of ordinary beings, I prefer to see it as the place to which we return. For the Buddha, it is the place from which he emerged. For those of us who have become lost and deluded and are unable to find our way home, it is the place we seek to return to.

KANEKO: That expresses the character of Shin Buddhism very well.

There is Something Interesting about Being Deluded

SUZUKI: About this matter of being deluded . . .

SOGA: If there were no suchness, there would be no delusion.

SUZUKI: Don't you think that there is something interesting about being deluded?

SOGA: You can say that delusion is interesting because you're enlightened, Dr. Suzuki, but to those who are actually deluded, there's nothing interesting about it. [*Laughter*]

SUZUKI: Let's look at it this way. Say something happens, an accident or something similar. Objectively speaking, the facts can't be changed: those who live, live, and those who die, die. But suppose, for example, there's a person who has cancer, and the doctors give him no chance of survival. Still, from my standpoint, I hope something will happen that will enable him to live. This is my earnest hope. Even if it's clear that the patient is going to die, I want him to get better. Again, with the number of people traveling these days, it is inevitable that wrecks and collisions will occur, but my earnest desire is that all travelers reach their destination safely and return home without any of these misfortunes happening. This desire just wells up from within. From the standpoint of reason, this is a kind of delusion, because whatever happens happens. Even so, this deluded thought wells up ceaselessly within my mind. This is what I find interesting, though perhaps the word "interesting" sounds a bit irreverent. What I am trying to say is that in the midst of the grief and suffering of human passion, there's something very warm and embracing as well. This is where delusion becomes interesting.

SOGA: Then it's not simply pain and suffering, but enjoyment in the midst of suffering as well?

SUZUKI: No, it mustn't be called enjoyment. It's all suffering. It's all very painful, but . . .

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SOGA: Unless there's warmth there can't be suffering.

SUZUKI: That's right. Professor Kaneko would say that there's something to be thankful for in that.

KANEKO: Yes.

SUZUKI: That can only be said in light of Amida's teaching. For me it's something interesting rather than something to be thankful for.

SOGA: It's both, I feel.

SUZUKI: Looking at the world around us, I guess we'd have to say that. [*Laughter*]

SOGA: What would we do if nothing interesting ever happened?

The Vow of Dharmākara Bodhisattva

NISHITANI: Dr. Suzuki, you once expressed some very interesting views during a talk you gave on the vows of Dharmākara Bodhisattva, and I was wondering if you would be willing to repeat what you said for our benefit.

SUZUKI: Certainly. I'd be grateful if you would comment on my views. Well, actually, it doesn't really matter whether you do or not. [*Laughter*] At any rate, here is the way I view the matter.

The Larger Sutra of Eternal Life has its start in the vow formulated by Dharmākara. This vow was not something he contemplated for just a year or two, but over kalpas, aeons. Why did he make his vow? What made him do so? I think it must have been a feeling like the one I described concerning the cancer patient: "Nothing can be done; still I can't help but hope for recovery." There's no question that such a thought stirred in the mind of Dharmākara Bodhisattva. As to what gave rise to that thought, I think it was something at the very source of Dharmākara's existence. The vow was not something originated by Dharmākara, but rather, the bodhisattva originated from the Vow. This is why it is called the Original Vow: it is that from which Dharmākara originated. He is the "voice" of the Vow, the conveyer of its message, as it were. So it doesn't matter whether he spent five kalpas or ten kalpas in his religious quest, or what vows he made or which places or teachers he visited. There is no need to limit the Vows to forty-eight, either.

SOGA: At the beginning of the Larger Sutra of Eternal Life, Dharmākara Bodhisattva utters "The Gathas in Praise of Buddha."

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He then addresses the Tathagata Lokeśvararāja: “I vow to attain unexcelled supreme enlightenment and earnestly seek to fulfill this vow. To this end, O Buddha, I solicit thee for thine instruction.” Whereupon Lokeśvararāja replies, “You must know for yourself the contents of the vow you seek to fulfill.” In other words, he’s saying, “You’ve awakened the bodhi-mind, the vow to attain supreme enlightenment. But that vow is rather undefined, and you aren’t really clear about what it entails, are you? You don’t need to ask me. It’s your vow, so you ought to understand what it is.” But that is the nature of a true vow; one doesn’t understand it oneself. It transcends Dharmākara Bodhisattva.

Dharmākara presses Lokeśvararāja further, saying, “Its significance is vast and profound; it is beyond my limits.” “Significance” refers to Dharmākara’s vow, a vow which transcends Dharmākara’s limits as an individual. It is in fact the Tathagata’s vow at the source of Dharmākara’s existence. That’s why he says, “This vow is beyond my limits—I don’t want to fulfill a vow which is restricted by my capacities as an individual. I wish to go beyond myself, attain to the Vow of the Tathagata, and fulfill it with this very body. Although I myself am not the Tathagata, I wish to know and fulfill the vow of the Tathagata, that which transcends myself. Thus, O Tathagata, I earnestly desire that you expound the teachings to me.” This is the meaning of his statement, “Its significance is vast and profound; it is beyond my limits.”

Lokeśvararāja ponders this plea for instruction, then explains the specific causes of the twenty-one billion Pure Lands of the various Buddhas and describes in detail the strengths and weaknesses of the various inhabitants of these lands, both human and divine. He tells Dharmākara of the various Original Vows underlying the numberless Buddha realms. He then manifests these lands before Dharmākara and shows him in detail what they are like. Dharmākara reflects for five kalpas on all he has seen and heard, and then condenses the numberless vows of the Buddhas into forty-eight of his own. Infinity is a concept one can’t really talk about, so he expresses the essence of the numberless vows in the form of these forty-eight. It’s not as though he drew up a specific list of forty-eight from the start.

SUZUKI: In that case, one must see innumerable vows in the forty-eight, and the forty-eight vows in the innumerable. The forty-eight are again divisible into the innumerable.

SOGA: One could put it that way.

Amida's Realization of Buddhahood

SUZUKI: One of Amida's vows was that he would defer the realization of Buddhahood until all sentient beings had attained enlightenment.

SOGA: Well, we don't really know about the original existence of Amida Buddha.

SUZUKI: And whether he existed is not really important.

SOGA: In any case, Dharmākara Bodhisattva pledges to make *Namu Amida Butsu* his Name upon his fulfillment of the Tathagata's vow, the salvation of all sentient beings.² He chooses *Namu Amida Butsu* as his Name in this way in the Seventeenth Vow: "If the Buddhas in all quarters of the universe do not praise my Name [by saying *Namu Amida Butsu*], then I will not attain unexcelled enlightenment." "To praise my Name" means "to praise the Buddha's virtue."

SUZUKI: I see. But don't some people give the following interpretation: When Amida attained enlightenment, that meant everyone else did, too, so there's no need to recite the *nembutsu* (*Namu Amida Butsu*) or to do anything else.

SOGA: That might be the Zen interpretation.

SUZUKI: No, Zen doesn't look at things this way. It's a view held by certain Pure Land believers who say that Amida's enlightenment means there's no need for religious practice or for *Namu Amida Butsu*. This mistaken view is called "presuming upon the Original Vow."

SOGA: Such followers are obviously in error.

SUZUKI: I think so too. It doesn't follow that just because Amida Buddha is enlightened, I am as well. When one realizes that one has attained enlightenment, at that moment Amida also attains enlightenment. Just because Amida attained enlightenment ahead of us does not mean that we too are now enlightened and no longer have to do anything. The moment of my enlightenment is the moment in which

² When Dharmākara Bodhisattva fulfills his Vows, he becomes Amida Buddha. His ultimate concern in becoming Amida Buddha, however, is to make possible the salvation of all beings through the recitation of *Namu Amida Butsu*. Thus *Namu Amida Butsu* is Amida Buddha's true Name, that which enables the salvation of all sentient beings.

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Amida is enlightened, and not only Amida but everything else as well—the mountains, streams, grasses, trees. So when Shinran, upon his attainment of faith, stated that “It was for me, Shinran alone, that Amida went through his aeons of training,” at that moment it was not only Shinran but all sentient beings who attained Buddhahood.

KANEKO: I don't know if I would go that far.

SUZUKI: Well, perhaps I could have expressed the idea a little bit better. [*Laughter*]

SOGA: You're an optimist.

SUZUKI: No, I don't think I'm being overly optimistic.

KANEKO: Both the Tathagata's enlightenment in the past and our enlightenment in the future meet in the present moment—in Shin terminology this experience is called “the assurance of nonretrogression,” the assurance of obtaining birth in the Pure Land during this life. Hence the issue at hand is always the present.

SUZUKI: Professor Kaneko, earlier you described our existence as that which has had the Buddha's vow bestowed upon it. Since our present life unfolds into our future one, all we have to do is to recognize our own present existence as the locus for fulfilling the vow.

KANEKO: Yes.

SUZUKI: We cannot accept ourselves as having been bestowed with the Buddha's vow unless this vow is in some way our own as well. If it belongs completely to someone else, then it has nothing to do with us. We can receive the vow only if we recognize it as something already present in ourselves.

KANEKO: One can think of it in those terms, but I prefer to see it from the opposite standpoint. My feeling is that I who possess nothing am bestowed with the great Vow. That's what moves me.

SUZUKI: I suppose one can look at it in those terms.

SOGA: We have forgotten the vow, though it is there within us. We are in possession of this vow from the beginning, but we have forgotten it.

SUZUKI: You can say we have forgotten it, but the words really don't matter.

SOGA: The teachings are essential. It is through them that we remember the vow.

SUZUKI: Exactly. One can say that the vow is drawn forth from within us by means of the teachings.

Human Idealism and the Tathagata's Vows

KANEKO: I would like to return to the issue of the specific number of Amida's Original Vows. It was previously mentioned that the numberless vows of the Buddha were condensed into forty-eight. In the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, however, Shinran Shōnin speaks of the Five True Vows. My feeling is that, of the forty-eight vows given in the Larger Sutra of Eternal Life, only these five are to be regarded as the pure Vows of the Tathagata Amida; all the others are alloyed with human idealism. Human idealism of course resembles the vows of the Tathagata in that they are an expression of hope and desire. Still, I think it's important to consider whether human idealism is the same as the Tathagata's vow.

The First Vow has attracted much attention from sociologists and others for its utopian aspirations: "If in my land, upon my attainment of Buddhahood, there should be a realm of hellish existence, hungry spirits, or beastly existence, then may I not attain supreme enlightenment." I feel that such vows are concerned with society and humanistic ideals, and may not be the same as the authentic vows of the Tathagata. This matter requires clarification.

SUZUKI: Do you mean that the nature of the Tathagata's vows needs to be clarified?

NISHITANI: I think Professor Kaneko wishes to separate human idealism from the pure Vows of the Tathagata.

SUZUKI: That's what he's just done, isn't it?

NISHITANI: What Professor Kaneko is saying is that only the Forty-eight Vows of Amida are pure, and the rest are merely expressions of human idealism.

KANEKO: Actually, what I said was that human idealism appears even among the Forty-eight Vows.

NISHITANI: Even among the Forty-eight?

KANEKO: Yes. When Shinran compiled the *Kyōgyōshinshō*, he selected only the pure Vows of the Tathagata, eliminating those which were tainted with human idealism.

SUZUKI: Do you mean to say that human ideals and those of the Tathagata are different?

KANEKO: I think one can properly conceive of a difference.

THE ORIGINAL VOW

SUZUKI: That's certainly possible, as long as you view human beings and the Tathagata as separate. However, one must clearly see the unity which precedes this separation.

KANEKO: I suppose one can say that human idealism is included within the Original Vows of the Tathagata, but my feeling is that unless we distinguish them, the teaching of Shin Buddhism loses its clarity of purpose.

SUZUKI: What I'm trying to say is that they should be seen as separate yet not separate. For the time being, we can't help separating them, but this is only due to the limitations implicit in the human way of thinking.

SOGA: The first of the Five True Vows begins with the Eleventh, since it includes the essence of the first ten. These ten all have their source in the Eleventh Vow. From the First Vow, that there be no realms of suffering in Amida's Pure Land, through the successive Vows that all beings attain the six supernatural powers as an aid to the attainment of enlightenment, their essence is expressed in the Eleventh, that all beings are unfailingly assured of attaining Nirvana. Hence, even though the first ten Vows appear to express human ideals, they are fundamentally based upon the Eleventh Vow of the Tathagata.

KANEKO: That's right.

SOGA: The Vows really begin with the Eleventh, and the Twelfth and Thirteenth form a backdrop for this.³

SUZUKI: I just can't help disliking this business of forty-eight. It shouldn't matter whether it's forty-eight, a hundred, or two hundred.

SOGA: Well, it could be two hundred or three hundred, but the Great Vows of the Tathagata are totally contained in these forty-eight. We can go one step further and say that five or eight of the Vows are enough.

³ The Twelfth Vow states: "If, upon my attainment of Buddhahood, the light which issues therefrom should prove to be limited and thus fail to illuminate the ten trillion nayutas of lands of the various Buddhas, then may I not attain supreme enlightenment."

The Thirteenth Vow states: "If, upon my attainment of Buddhahood, the life which extends therefrom should prove to be limited and thus fail to last the ten trillion nayuta kalpas [necessary for liberating all sentient beings], then may I not attain supreme enlightenment."

SHINRAN'S WORLD

SUZUKI: Yes.

KANEKO: Precisely.

SOGA: Shinran himself said that forty-eight is excessive, and suggested that the number be reduced to eight.

SUZUKI: I think one is enough. Having more is too much of a bother.

SOGA: Having one vow, in fact, is the traditional Pure Land standpoint.

SUZUKI: Really? [*Laughter*]

SOGA: Hōnen Shōnin stated that the Eighteenth Vow⁴ alone is sufficient, and in this he stood within the tradition of the Seven Patriarchs of Pure Land Buddhism. He regarded all the other vows as skillful means of liberation. For Shinran, however, this was not enough to clarify the relationship between *ki* and *hō*,⁵ a concept not thoroughly understood even by such great disciples of Hōnen as Seizan and Chinzei. Shinran sought to clarify this by choosing seven other vows from among the forty-eight, and adding them to the Eighteenth to form the eight essential vows. He then used these as the philosophical basis for the *Kyōgyōshinshō*. In any case, forty-eight is far too many.

TRANSLATED BY MARK UNNO
AND THOMAS L. KIRCHNER

⁴ The Eighteenth Vow states: "If, upon my attainment of Buddhahood, the sentient beings in all quarters of the universe desire to be born in my Land, utter the nembutsu even ten times with the mind of true entrusting, and should still fail to attain birth [in my Pure Land], then may I not attain supreme enlightenment."

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the concept of *ki* and *hō*, see the first installment of this dialogue in *Eastern Buddhist* 18, 1 (Spring 1985).