

Committee 6  
Life, Death and Eternal Hope

DRAFT--8/5/95  
For Conference Distribution Only



THE PURE LAND FAITH OF THE JAPANESE: THE CASE OF SHINRAN

by

Tetsuo Yamaori  
Emeritus Professor  
International Research Center for Japanese Studies  
Kyoto, JAPAN

The Twenty-first International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences  
Washington, D.C. November 24-30, 1997

© 1997, International Conference on the Unity of the Sciences

# The Pure Land Faith of the Japanese The Case of Shinran

YAMAORI Tetsuo

## 1 Shinran's Experience of Ocean and Mountains

### *Shinran's attachment to the word "ocean"*

A little more than ten years ago, I was invited to the wedding of a former student who lived in Nagaoka, in Echigo. Since I had gone as far as Nagaoka, I took the opportunity to visit Kotahama in Naoetsu (Jōetsu-shi) on my return. This was the place of exile to which Shinran was banished. The shore of Kotahama lies several kilometers westward from Naoetsu station. On the sandy beach stands a monument inscribed with the words, "Site of Shinran Shōnin's Landing." I approached the place and gazed out to sea. It was a clear day in May and the ocean was calm. Shinran had left Kyōto, crossed the Sea of Japan, and landed at this location. Although I was visiting the site in spring, Shinran had probably landed in winter. Perhaps snow was falling, and the ocean waves were turbulent.

At that time, I recalled the word "ocean" that occurs here and there in Shinran's writings. Shinran had a special regard for the word "ocean." When one turns to the first page of *Kyōgyōshinshō*, it leaps to the eye. The same is true in reading his hymns (*wasan*). The word "ocean" appears everywhere. A question I had long pondered arose once more: Why was Shinran so attracted by the word "ocean"? Why was he attached to it?

Let us consider several examples. There is the expression, "ocean of the One Vehicle of the Primal Vow." Amida Buddha established the Vow to liberate sentient beings, and that Vow is likened to an ocean. Shinran also often uses the metaphor, "ocean of Amida's Primal Vow," even in passages where "Amida's Primal Vow" would be sufficient. Why, then, does he add "ocean"? Although "the One Vehicle of the Primal Vow" should be adequate, why does he say "ocean of the One Vehicle of the Primal Vow"?

Further, there is the expression, "vast ocean of desires," again in passages where "desires" alone would suffice. But it appears that Shinran is not satisfied without adopting the image of "ocean."

In addition, there is the "ocean of sentient beings." It is similar to the "ocean

of birth-and-death” or samsaric existence. The uses of “ocean” are remarkably numerous.

*Shinran’s thought expressed by “ocean”*

I had long wondered about the significance of Shinran’s use of the image of the ocean. I believe that it holds various meanings, and that Shinran invested it with various thoughts and feelings.

One involves the image of the ocean as that which brought him into exile as a criminal. Another, by contrast, is the ocean that, with his eventual pardon, bore him to a different heaven and earth, that liberated him; this is the ocean of freedom. In addition, through this image, he developed the image of the ocean of salvation, of being liberated by Amida Buddha. At the same time, however, it is the sea of raging billows, a symbol for our human desires and passions themselves. It is “the vast ocean of desires and greed,” the ocean as expressive of blind passions. Such diverse thoughts and feelings revved within Shinran’s breast and flowed in his body. This problem, therefore, is not a simple one.

Shinran was born in Kyōto. At the age of nine, he left householding life and ascended Mount Hiei, where he led a life of religious practice for twenty years. All that he saw about him was mountain, and only mountain. He could probably look down on the surface of Lake Biwa, but he surely lacked any opportunity for contact with the sea.

Shinran was born in the Kyōto basin region. At the age of twenty-nine, he met Hōnen and became a member of his following, descending from the mountain. Then, for four or five years, he lived a life of nembutsu under the guidance of Hōnen. With the suppression of the nembutsu, however, he was banished to Echigo. While traveling into exile as a criminal, he saw the Sea of Japan for the first time. Surely, for a person who has known only the world of mountains, the impact of encountering the ocean for the first time is immense. It is impossible to approach the mind of young Shinran unless we can imagine this. When we consider the suffering of Shinran’s youth, it becomes an important point. This experience is reflected in his writings.

*The ocean for Ryōkan as part of the landscape*

Approximately seventy kilometers north of Naoetsu lies Izumozaki, where Ryōkan was born and grew up. The Sea of Japan stretches forth directly in view of the house where Ryōkan was born. On clear days, Sado Island is clearly visible. From his

childhood, Ryōkan lived hearing the sound of the surf. His association with the ocean was far longer and deeper than that of Shinran.

Mysteriously, however, in Ryōkan's works the image of the sea does not occur even a single time. He composed numerous *waka*, but in longer poems (*chōka*) as well as *tanka*, and in poems in Chinese also, it does not appear. Letters also survive. But in all his writings, the image of the ocean is almost totally absent. Why is this?

Instead, his works include many references to snow. For example:

Windblown, the snow comes falling;  
Mixed with snow, the wind blows.  
Toward embers buried in the ash, I idly extend my legs,  
Secluded in my grass hut . . . .

Although born and raised in Izumozaki, on growing up Ryōkan realized that he was not suited to succeed to the family occupation of village headman. He did not enter business. Going to a Zen monk of the area, he received guidance in Zen. There a famous Zen monk, Master Kokusen, came. Ryōkan took the tonsure on the spot. Following Master Kokusen in his wandering around the country, he embarked on a journey of practice, and did not return to his home village for more than ten years.

Eventually ending his practice, he returned to Izumozaki, but at that time, already there was no home for him there. He took up life in a hut, moving here and there. His grass hut Gogōan on Mount Kugami is well known. The poem quoted above describes his life during this period, on a winter day. Probably snow was falling and accumulating. There would no longer be much going into the village. At night, he would place firewood in the hearth in his hut and extend his legs. Bending over, he would read the works of Dōgen, whom he regarded with deep veneration. Night after night he would read *Shōbōgenzō*.

Late one night, he was deeply moved as he read and his tears flowed, wetting the text. He composed a poem in Chinese about this experience. For Ryōkan, the snow of winter was indispensable. Alone, he endured the isolation of his life in his hut. It may be said that the snow was his companion. Within the falling snow, he conversed with Dōgen, and he conversed with himself. From the depths of his breast, the scream of his spirit could be heard. In the depths of his body, his life energy began to burn furiously. Of such things he became aware. I think it was in such moments that Ryōkan became himself, and became a true poet. The natural phenomenon of falling snow was not merely an event of the external world. He

grasped it as closely interwoven with his own life. It is for this reason that snow appears repeatedly as a central theme in his works.

For Ryōkan, the ocean appears to have been little more than a feature of the daily landscape. The image of the sea did not directly touch his spirit. Hence, he did not seek to adopt it into his *waka* poems or Chinese verse.

When we consider Shinran in contrast to the way of life of Ryōkan as poet or as man of religion, we find a reversal in this point. In Shinran's writings, the image of snow hardly occurs. The Hokuriku district where Shinran lived is known for its heavy snows. It is an area where people were enclosed by the snows for one third of each year. Although Shinran spent five years in banishment there, the image of snow is almost completely absent from his writings. Instead, what appears is the image of the ocean. This contrast between Shinran and Ryōkan is striking.

*The sacred mountain Pure Land of Nichiren.*

Here, I will change the perspective slightly. In history, Nichiren appears slightly after Shinran. He was born at the southernmost tip of the Bōsō peninsula, at a place on the ocean called Kominato. He also grew up seeing the ocean from morning to night. In this, his life was similar to that of Ryōkan.

On growing up, he entered the priesthood at Kiyosumiyama and departed on a journey of practice to Kyōto. On returning, he began preaching in the streets in Kamakura. He became Nichiren through this preaching at crossroads. With this method of propagation, however, he incurred the displeasure of the bakufu and was banished to Izu. There also he lived surrounded by the ocean. After gaining a pardon, he returned to Kamakura and began once more an aggressive form of propagation through conversion called *shakubuku*. It was impossible for him to desist. This time, he was exiled to Sado, the isolated island surrounded by sea that would lie before the eyes of Ryōkan in Izumozaki. Here once more he experienced the sea to the point of weariness.

In his old age, he was pardoned and returned to Kantō, but he had lost the energy for religious activity. He went to Mount Minobu and lived a life of reclusion. During this period, followers sent various items—rice, miso, vegetables, sake, and seafood—to the mountain top and supported the life of the master. We can sense how deeply Nichiren was moved from the letter of thanks that he wrote at the time. It seems he was fond of sake, which was also probably a help in passing the winters on the mountain. He drank sake every night and took warmth from it, as though generating his own energy. Hence, his followers sent a steady supply. In the deep of

winter, the sake froze. These words of lament appear in his letters. On receiving seafood from Bōsō also, his unforgettable hometown, he was deeply moved and wrote a response.

On reading Nichiren's works and letters, however, we find that he wished to go to "Vulture Peak Pure Land" (*ryōzen jōdo*). Ryōzan, literally, "spirit mountain," actually it refers to the sacred Vulture Peak.

In Indian Buddhist texts, the site Rājagṛha (Āśhājō) often appears. It is located in the middle reaches of the Ganges River. There are five mountains there, one of which is Vulture Peak. It is said that Śākyamuni Buddha preached the *Lotus Sutra* and the *Larger Sutra of the Buddha of Immeasurable Life* on Vulture Peak. Nichiren, then, viewed Vulture Peak as a pure, sacred mountain and aspired to be born there.

I have visited this site. Vulture Peak is three or four hundred meters high, and almost totally bald. There is hardly any green; it is covered with rocks and stones. It appears likely to have been so in Śākyamuni's time also. I first went there about twenty years ago, and although I do not know whether it is true, was astonished to hear that tigers still appeared there.

Nichiren aspired for birth in the Pure Land of Vulture Peak. In a note attached to a representative work, *Kanjinbonzonshō*, he wrote that on death he would go to that Pure Land. Further, in a letter to a woman whose husband had died, he reassured her, stating that her husband had been born on Vulture Peak, and that when he died, he would go there also and be reunited with him.

We must note that Nichiren, who grew up at the seaside near the southernmost point of the Bōsō peninsula, conceived the Pure Land as a mountain. He sought the realm to which he would go after death not across the sea, but on a mountain top, the Pure Land of Vulture Peak.

#### *Why did Shinran choose Inada?*

Our question, then, is: Where did Shinran aspire to go after death? It is generally thought that this was the Pure Land of Amida Buddha. The question, however, is how Shinran imagined this Pure Land. Of course, if it were only a matter of the intellect, one might insist that, as written in texts, it is simply Amida's Pure Land. But is this enough? People now may feel that they can grasp the term "Pure Land" through a conceptual explanation. Such a theoretically pondered Pure Land, however, is always on the verge of disappearing. In Shinran's age, for people who prayed for the afterlife as a matter of life and death, the Pure Land was surely not such a unstable place. They no doubt grasped the Pure Land with more concrete

images. Unless this is clarified, we will be unable to approach the person Shinran.

How did Shinran imagine the Pure Land? This is our original question. As we have noted, Shinran was exiled to Echigo during a persecution of the nembutsu. After being pardoned, he journeyed to Hitachi in the Kantō region seeking a new world. He continued to move from place to place, finally selecting Inada (Kasama city) as his home. Inada lies on the Mito line of the railway. The temple Sainenji lies near the station. How did Shinran select this place? Wondering about this, I made a trip there and stayed at Sainenji. Early in the morning, I took a walk to the temple gate and looked up at the beautiful form of Mount Tsukuba, whose peak, divided in two, rises to a height of nine hundred meters. It is slightly higher than Mount Hiei, but they may be said to be comparable in height.

This is an important point. Between Sainenji temple and Mount Tsukuba lie rice fields. Seeing this beautiful sight, the thought suddenly occurred to me that Shinran chose this place because of the beauty of the mountain. This was my own intuition. I wonder whether, when he saw the mountain, the beautiful image of Mount Hiei was not revived in his mind. Shinran, who was born and raised in the basin area of Kyōto, lived from morning to night surrounded by mountains and hills—Mount Hiei, Higashiyama, Nishiyama, Kitayama. I think that memories of the years of his youth and of his religious practice arose when he saw Mount Tsukuba. When he gazed up at the mountain in the new home of distant Hitachi, he was filled with fond memories.

The same was true of Nichiren. Late in life, he began to aspire for the Pure Land of Vulture Peak. While dwelling on Mount Minobu, he longed for Vulture Peak in distant India, and at the same time, came to hold the conviction that Mount Minobu itself was the Pure Land. For the Japanese, mountains are not merely part of the natural landscape. They work strongly on the spirits of those who see them, and were an important part of the environment.

To consider Shinran once more, after his experience of the sea during his period of exile, he was pardoned and moved to Hitachi, where he was able to engage freely in religious activity. There, under Mount Tsukuba, his earlier experience of mountains was reawakened, and he passed over the ridge of human life. When I reflect on Shinran's interior life, it appears that this period of movement from ocean to mountain, from the Sea of Japan to Mount Tsukuba is extremely important. When we consider the growth of his spirit, his maturation as a human being, this is this an issue that must not be neglected.

## 2 Characteristics of the Faith of the Japanese

### *The faith of the Japanese before the introduction of Buddhism*

Above, I highlighted from Shinran's life his experience of the sea during his younger years and his experience of mountains during his mid-life. The question arises, then, which experience Shinran gave the greater weight to at the end of his life. Did he adopt the image of the mountain in considering his own salvation? Or did he use the image of the sea?

In order to treat this problem, it is necessary to consider the beliefs that the Japanese have held since ancient times. These are particular beliefs held from before the introduction of Buddhism. They are ancient beliefs of the Japanese people.

Shinran's beliefs and thought hold, of course, a universal character, a world that transcends the frames of reference of the Japanese nation, or of Japanese culture and the Japanese people. At the same time, however, in spite of this, Shinran was indisputably a Japanese.

Thus, Japanese culture and ethnicity exerted their influence on Shinran in various ways. We may speak of the special characteristics of Japanese culture. If we do not consider this aspect and instead focus solely on the universality of Shinran, we will tend toward a highly abstract discussion. The result would be that we would not be able to perceive Shinran the person. We would shape an ideal figure with reasoning alone. The image of Shinran since the Meiji period has tended to be such a figure reconstructed upon reasoning. It would be best to destroy such a strained image first.

Shinran's global character or universality must be newly interpreted on the level of his particularity as a Japanese. If we do not undertake such an effort, we will continue to be unable to recover Shinran as a human being. This has been my dissatisfaction for some time. In other words, when Buddhism was transmitted to Japan before Shinran's time, that Buddhism collided with native Japanese beliefs, giving rise to a chemical reaction. Colliding, overlapping, fusing—by this process a unique Japanese Buddhism was formed. Shinran appeared historically within this tradition. Hence, it is necessary first of all to grasp precisely the characteristics of the Japanese beliefs before the introduction of Buddhism.

### *The view of the mountain Pure Land of the Japanese*

What were the traditional beliefs of the Japanese? One important belief was the conception of the fate of human beings after death. When people die, where do they go?



First, the ancient Japanese thought that a world after death existed in the mountains. Second, they believed that the spirit after death goes beyond the sea. These two beliefs formed the pivotal points of their thinking.

In the *Man'yōshū*, there are many poems lamenting the dead. These are the elegies called *banka*. In these poems, in many cases, it is implied that after death the human spirit ascends a mountain. Buddhism was then transmitted to Japan, and among Buddhist teachings, the tradition that most deeply reflected on one's fate after death was of course the Pure Land tradition. Shin Buddhism (Jōdo Shinshū) is one stream of this tradition. In the Pure Land Buddhism of India, the ideal world to which one goes after death existed in the distance in the western direction beyond millions of other lands. The west is the direction in which the sun sets, and came to be seen as the direction of weakening life. Hence, beliefs focusing on the west overlapped with beliefs in the afterlife.

It is difficult to grasp the thinking concerning a world "beyond millions of other lands." It lies at an inconceivable distance. This symbolically distant world was transmitted as an idea to Japan together with the Pure Land teaching. Although this description is given in texts, ordinary Japanese of the period could not conceive of the existence of such a Pure Land lying at a bewildering distance past millions of other lands. The Japanese of the time did not think of the Pure Land as existing in such a place; rather, they conceived of it as lying in the mountains.

The Pure Land is in the mountains. This is the realistic thinking of the Japanese. For this reason, the mountains in Japan, wherever one may go, whether they be widely known or of little repute, whether lofty or low, have a location near the top that is known as Amida-ga-mine (Amida's peak) or Jōdo-ga-mine (Pure Land peak). The mountain top is the Pure Land. Further, when one goes to valley areas, there are sites known as Jigoku-dani (hell valley). In Jigoku-dani, there is the riverbank of Sai (Sai no kawara), where images of Jizō are commonly placed. There is hardly a mountain in Japan that does not have these geographical names of "Pure Land," "hell valley," and Sai riverbank. This is a peculiarity of Japan. Such practices are not found in India or southeast Asia, China or Korea. The concept of the Pure Land in the mountains is a particular feature of the faith of the Japanese.

Let us consider another example. From about the eleventh and twelfth centuries, slightly before the time of Shinran's appearance in history, many Buddhist paintings depicting Amida's coming began to be made. They focused on the theme of Amida Buddha coming from the Pure Land to welcome and receive beings in this world.

These paintings are called "Amida's Coming" (*Amida raigōzu*) and "The Coming

of the Twenty-five Bodhisattvas" (*nijūgo bosatsu raigōzu*). In general, in the center such paintings depict a large mountain. On the left side, there are trailing clouds, upon which Amida Buddha stands. The bodhisattvas Kannon and Seishi stand at his sides, and various other bodhisattvas bearing reed mouth organs (*shō*), flutes, drums and other musical instruments, surround the Buddha as the group descends. At the lower right, a hut is depicted, with a monk on the verandah, his palms together in a gesture of homage to Amida, awaiting his final moments. Such paintings were highly popular in this period. From the medieval to the premodern period, they were widely prized among the ordinary people. We see here that Amida Buddha does not appear from beyond millions of other lands. Rather, the Buddha descends from the mountain top, for the mountain itself is the Pure Land.

#### *Tokoyo no Kuni and the Pure Land of Fudaraku*

As mentioned before, a belief of the Japanese people is that an ideal world lies beyond the sea. The spirit of a person after death crosses the sea into the far distance. Such beliefs are recorded in such writings as *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, which refers to "Tokoyo no Kuni" as such a world. Tokoyo no Kuni is described as an ideal world of constant spring, blessed with gold, silver, and precious treasures, where all is eternally youthful, fresh, and fruitful.

There is a story that the deity Sukunabikonomikoto visited Izumo from Tokoyo no Kuni and, joining with Ookuninushinomikoto, created the land of Japan. Thereafter, Sukunabikonomikoto returned to Tokoyo no Kuni. Tokoyo no Kuni is the archetypal land, an ideal land that existed originally. Japan was formed to resemble that land. It may be said that Ookuninushinomikoto assisted in this. Tokoyo no Kuni is imagined as an ideal, immeasurably brighter world than the one in which we live.

This Tokoyo no Kuni, however, was gradually transformed into Yomi no Kuni, the dark world where the dead go. Tokoyo, originally the "eternal world," came to be understood as *Tokoyami* "eternal darkness" or *Tokoyo* ("eternal night"). There was a transformation in image. Finally, the concept of the land of the dead called "land of the yellow springs" was established. It was a defiled world where the bodies of the dead were piled up.

In the elegies of the *Man'yōshū*, the defiled spirits of the dead go to the mountains. With the passage of time, those spirits gradually become the ancestral spirits. In some cases, with the reception of offerings over a period of time, they become deities of the mountain. At first, the dead in their defiled form dwell in the

mountains, but over time they are purified. The world of the mountains also possesses both a defiled aspect and a purified aspect. In the same way, the ideal world beyond the sea is the ideal world of Tokoyo and also the defiled world to which spirits of the dead go. It possesses these two aspects. That is, it is the same with both mountain and sea.

With the introduction of Buddhism, however, the world of eternal darkness beyond the sea to which the dead go came to be conceived as the Pure Land of Fudaraku, where Kannon dwells. This occurred from the end of the Heian period to the Kamakura period. The sacred place of Kannon came to be imagined as beyond the sea.

For example, from the southernmost point of Kishū, the shore near the present sacred site of Mount Nachi, monks who had awakened to the inevitability of death boarded boats and rowed out toward the south seas. This was the practice of “crossing the sea to Fudaraku” (*Fudaraku tokai*). Believing that the Pure Land of Kannon lay far out across the sea, they went out in boats knowing they would die. Their boats eventually capsized and they vanished in the waters. Or their provisions gradually were depleted and they starved. It was a form of religious suicide. They rowed out to sea, however, with fervent expectations in their desire to be born in the Pure Land of Kannon that lay far across the sea. This belief in Fudaraku was strongly influenced by Buddhism through faith in Kannon, but if we trace the belief regarding the ocean back toward its origins, we find that it is tied to belief in Tokoyo.

Further, there were additional changes in the Edo period. During this period, for example, belief in the seven gods of fortune (*shichi fukujin*) flourished. This was a popular belief that seven deities—Ebisu, Daikokuten, Bishamonten, Benzaiten, Hotei, Fukurokuju, and Jurōjin—came from across the sea. A tale was composed in which deities with origins in India, China, and Japan formed an international team, loaded a ship with gold, silver, and other precious treasure, and visited Japan from far across the sea. It was a Japanese version of the Santa Claus story.

While in Europe Santa Claus comes only once a year, in Japan, an entire group of gift-bearers comes throughout the year. There is a close connection here with the belief that an ideal world lies beyond the sea.

As we have seen, the Japanese have since ancient times carried on their lives believing that after death, spirits ascended into the mountains and became ancestors, or that they crossed the ocean and became ancestral spirits. Such beliefs are intimately related to the characteristics of the Japanese environment, or to the geographical conditions of the Japanese archipelago, surrounded on four sides by ocean. Further,

most of the Japanese islands are covered by forests and mountains.

*Beliefs of the Japanese rooted in the environment*

Some time ago, the advertising firm Dentsū carried out a project to photograph the Japanese archipelago from the elevation of three thousand meters. A plane was chartered and aerial photographs were taken from Yonakuni island of Okinawa in the south, over Kyūshū, Shikoku, Honshū, the Tōhoku region, north to Hokkaidō and as far as the Sōya Straits. These were edited into an hour-long video and shown to specialists in various fields for their comment. I was invited to view the video as a specialist in religion. The islands of Okinawa are surrounded by sea, but over Honshū one looks down on a world of mountain after mountain. I was impressed to see that the Japanese islands are indeed covered by mountains and forests. This geographical condition is probably shared with such countries as Sweden and Canada.

When we consider this, we understand that, from ancient times, the Japanese people have received immeasurable benefits from the ocean and the mountains and were strongly influenced spiritually by these features. In the light of this, the content of the elegies in the *Man'yōshū* seem quite natural. We can also understand the birth of myths relating to Tokoyo no Kuni.

If this is the case, we could not expect that Shinran would not be influenced by such traditional beliefs of the Japanese people. When, considering this, we read Shinran's writings and reflect on the course of his life, many things become apparent.

One example is the frequent appearance of the image of the ocean in Shinran's works. Another is the psychological impact that was probably exerted on him by Mount Tsukuba, which rose before his eyes in Inada after he moved to Hitachi on being pardoned. Such issues arise naturally.

### 3 The Pure Land beyond the Sea of Shinran

*Is Kyōgyōshinshō unfinished?*

The question arises, then: Which was it that informed Shinran's view of the Pure Land and provided the primary concrete image in his thinking, Mount Tsukuba or the sea at Echigo? It is possible that both were important, but I believe that in the end, the image chosen by Shinran was the Pure Land beyond the sea. Rather than the Pure Land in the mountains, it was the image of the Pure Land across the sea that was important for Shinran.

Shinran's major work is *Kyōgyōshinshō, The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization*

*of the Pure Land Way*. It is not clearly known precisely when and how this work was written. Shinran probably decided to attempt this such a work during the period of his banishment to Echigo. Undoubtedly the work of composing notes of his thoughts was repeated numerous times. This period of rewriting continued, and finally a draft was completed. This probably took place in his hut at Inada in Hitachi.

Of course, ninety percent of *Kyōgyōshinshō* consists of quotations. He read the writings of Buddhist masters of India, China, and Japan, made notes of passages that he felt necessary, and quoted them. Further, he added his own interpretations to those quotations. These interpretations are profound. Nevertheless, the crucial question arises whether a writing of so much quotation can be considered an independent work.

Perhaps *Kyōgyōshinshō* should be considered incomplete. It is not simply unfinished as a work. Perhaps it reflects the fact that the world of Shinran's faith was still incomplete at the time of composition. I believe that Shinran's thinking cannot be simply said to have reached conclusion at a particular point. Shinran died at the age of ninety, but to his death his thinking changed and developed. If he had lived to be one hundred years old, his thinking would surely have undergone further change. He constantly reflected on and investigated his own faith and thinking, newly pondering and reinterpreting them. The pattern of such thought, which possesses great adhesive power, is seen in the text of *Kyōgyōshinshō*.

Shinran himself understood his interior changes in this way. He realized that the movements of the human mind cannot be expressed in a single word, as though stopped with a pin. *Kyōgyōshinshō* is not a finished work. For precisely this reason, Shinran's own voice arising from the small number of his own passages is invaluable. It is the bare, minimal voice. Against the long passages of quotation, he thrusts forth his own thinking as though to attack them. One senses such intensity.

#### *The Preface to Kyōgyōshinshō and the image of the sea*

Let us turn to the opening passage of *Kyōgyōshinshō*. It was probably composed from Shinran's fifties to his sixties in Inada, with its view of Mount Tsukuba.

On the first page of *Kyōgyōshinshō*, in the first passage, known as the Preface, we find the following:

I reflect within myself: The universal Vow difficult to fathom is indeed a great vessel bearing us across the ocean difficult to cross. The unhindered light is the sun of wisdom dispersing the darkness of our ignorance.

It is stated here that Amida Buddha's Vow is a great ship that carries us across the ocean, however turbulent it may be. Amida vowed to save all sentient beings, and the Buddha's resolve is called "the universal Vow difficult to fathom." Amida Buddha is "a great vessel bearing us across the ocean difficult to cross." The "ocean difficult to cross" is wild and clamorous with a great tempest.

Thus, at the beginning of the Preface to *Kyōgyōshinshō*, we find a powerful image of the ocean. These are not merely metaphoric words. Shinran's confession of faith naturally called forth the image of the sea.

This is related to the issue I raised at the beginning. When I saw the ocean in spring from the shore of Kotahama in Naoetsu, I felt that this was for Shinran the sea of blind passions, the sea of this world, and at the same time the ocean of Amida Buddha. He surely viewed it as the path of freedom that would bring liberation. For Shinran, the Sea of Japan was the irreplaceable ocean that symbolized the salvation of Amida Buddha. This image of the sea gave rise to a meaning that had violently penetrated his physical being. When I considered this, I found that the opening passage of *Kyōgyōshinshō* truly emerged vivid and alive. This is no accident. It is not a mere play of the brush. Shinran wrote these words of the Preface imparting them profound thought.

After a brief number of lines, the preface ends, and "Chapter on Teaching" begins with the following passage:

Reverently contemplating the true essence of the Pure Land way, I see that Amida's directing of virtue to sentient beings has two aspects: the aspect for our going forth to the Pure Land and the aspect for our return to this world.

With these words, the fundamental nature of *Kyōgyōshinshō* is wholly stated.

What, then, are the aspect for going to the Pure Land and the aspect for returning to this world? This is the crucial point regarding Shinran's view of the Pure Land. Simply stated, the former signifies going from this world to the Pure Land, and the latter, returning to this world from the Pure Land. These concepts appear at the very opening of the first chapter of *Kyōgyōshinshō*. One goes to the Pure Land, and then returns.

This is a difficult concept. The idea of going to the Pure Land is perhaps not difficult to grasp. In contemporary language, perhaps we would simply speak of death. We might also speak of dying and being reborn in the Pure Land. Of course,

“birth in the Pure Land” is also a euphemism for death. As a matter of actuality, to be born in the Pure Land is essentially nothing other than to die. Apart from death, there is no birth in the Pure Land. In this sense, dying and going to the Pure Land is not difficult to understand.

What is difficult is understanding how the person who has died is able to return to this world. This is the most difficult thing to explain to students. The simplest method is to explain going and returning by introducing the concept of the spirit. When a person dies, the physical body is destroyed, but the spirit goes to the Pure Land. In the same way that, as believed by earlier Japanese, the spirits of the dead ascended mountains or crossed beyond the sea, it may be said that the spirit is born in the Pure Land. Further, that spirit then returns once more to this world. The spirit is invisible, and for this reason is able to go and return. People of old thought in this way.

*Buddhism does not discuss the existence or nonexistence of spirits*

There is, however, a difficulty here. In Buddhism, whether or not spirits exist is considered a matter not to be discussed. This has been common sense in the tradition since ancient times, beginning in India. Hence Buddhists in Japan, just as Buddhists in China, do not take up the question of the existence or nonexistence of spirits in their major works. This is true of Kūkai, and also of Genshin. In their main writings, this question is not treated at all.

In such writings as prayers written for memorial services or the principles for forming groups of nembutsu practitioners, however, we find that, despite the general rule in Buddhism, the question of spirits does emerge. Kūkai, on the occasion of a memorial service for an acquaintance, wrote a set of vows in which he touches on the spirit of the dead and prays for its repose. Further, Genshin, in his *Nijūgo-zammai Kishō*, states that after the rites for the dead, the spirit is born in the Pure Land. In principle, they accord with Buddhist tradition and do not discuss the existence of spirits. In actuality, however, they believed in the existence of spirits. This sensibility is not restricted to Kūkai and Genshin. This has been the true stance of Buddhists in Japan, whether specialists or ordinary people. This is a major characteristic of the Buddhism of the Japanese.

Shinran, likewise, does not directly treat the problem of spirits. It does not occur in *Kyōgyōshinshō* or in his hymns. Thus, if we consider the theme of going to the Pure Land and returning to this world superficially, the question of whether the spirit exists or not does not arise. It was not discussed, and to discuss it has been

considered heterodox and heretical.

In this case, however, the explanation to young people today of the aspects of going and returning becomes impossible. Without employing special terms or philosophical concepts, it is impossible to explain them to people lacking knowledge of religion. It may be said with only slight exaggeration that there is little power to convince most Japanese. The question is how this dilemma is to be broken through.

*To go to the Pure Land while living*

There is one alternative explanation. Namely, going to the Pure Land does not occur after death; rather, it occurs with the awakening of faith, or when faith is established in the saving power of Amida Buddha. When one has entered the faith of Shin Buddhism, that is the moment of going to the Pure Land. While still alive, one has already been born in the Pure Land. If one takes this stance, then one's life thereafter is the life of returning. The point up to the attainment of faith is the aspect of going to the Pure Land, and life after this attainment belongs to the aspect of return. This is quite sensible and may even be called a modern way of thinking. For people today, it is easy to grasp.

If we consider this closely, however, we find it a Christian way of thinking. In actuality, I believe it reflects the influence of Christianity. In Shin Buddhist tradition, it has been called "birth in this life." According to it, the moment one attains faith is birth in the Pure Land. It may be called the conviction of birth. If one adopts this interpretation, one can understand the aspects of going and returning. Those unfamiliar with religious studies can accept this explanation, as can young students.

By contrast, if it is asserted that birth in the Pure Land can only be realized after death, the discussion becomes complicated. The concept of birth in the Pure Land after death is not simple. This is because the question of what it is that goes to the Pure Land arises. What goes to the Pure Land, and what returns to this world? In order to treat this dilemma, the issue of the spirit is introduced. If it is said that the spirit goes and returns, explanation becomes easy, for this concept fuses with the traditional beliefs of the Japanese.

Most contemporary Japanese have received religious education in which it is stated that spirits do not exist. Both the education in traditional Buddhist temples and that in modern schools have followed this route. It is assumed that spirits do not exist, and this has been the path of modern Buddhism. The spirit cannot be perceived by telescope or microscope; it therefore is not recognized by modern science. Japanese Buddhism and Japanese Buddhists have been influenced by this scientific mentality.



If we consider the matter carefully, however, to assert that that which cannot be detected by microscope or telescope does not exist is pseudo-scientific. Genuine scientific thinking is not so. Rather, when existence or nonexistence is not known, it would recognize that it is not known.

*Reflecting in relation to traditional thought*

Concerning the problem of the aspects of going to the Pure Land and returning, I have stated that there are two ways of considering the matter. These are the conceptions of birth while alive and birth after death. If the former is followed, the matter may be understood without introducing the concept of spirit. If the latter is followed, however, explanation is difficult without the concept of the spirit. The question become, which position did Shinran adopt? This is a critical question, one I do not know the answer to.

It is important, in considering this question, to seek to investigate Shinran's thinking in relation to the traditional beliefs of the Japanese people. Of course, it is useful to perceive matters from the perspective of modern philosophy and science, but it is also important to take into consideration the traditions of the ancient faith of the Japanese. In treating the theme of the two aspects of going to the Pure Land and returning to this world, it is necessary to consider it in relation to traditional thought. In this case, the problem of the existence or nonexistence of the spirit, and of the functioning of spirits, will probably emerge into prominence. Then, the views that the Pure Land lies on a mountain and that it lies beyond the sea will necessarily emerge. The issue here is the relationship between the beliefs of the ancient Japanese and the faith of Shinran.

When we consider matters in this way, the words of the opening line of the preface to *Kyōgyōshinshō* give a vivid image and rise before our eyes. These are the words, "The universal Vow difficult to fathom is indeed a great vessel bearing us across the ocean difficult to cross." Is it not stated here that, beyond the sea, the image of the ideal Pure Land is seen shining brilliantly? For Shinran, the Pure Land at some point appeared in the image of "the Pure Land beyond the sea." This is not a matter of doctrinal reasoning. We must consider not conceptual reasoning in the head alone, but the image of the Pure Land felt deep within one's physical existence. This is a question of the image of the Pure Land perceived by Shinran the person with his entire body.

Considered in this way, the image of the ocean that appears frequently in *Kyōgyōshinshō* and Shinran's other writings appears to hold special significance. The

large words recorded in the preface strongly call attention to the image of the Pure Land beyond the sea. If we investigate this image, perhaps we will be able to approach more closely the world of Shinran.