

Wisdom and Compassion, Exposure and Embrace:

A Shin Buddhist Sense of Transcendent Immanence

〈in English〉

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Abstract

An inter-religious, theological conversation about wisdom and compassion should draw upon shared reflections on transcendence and immanence within each participant's tradition.

The Shin Buddhist path is grounded on Mahāyāna teachings that offer insight into the nature of the finite self and infinite Buddha, including the bidirectionality of tathāgata, bodhisattvas' practice of nondiscriminative wisdom, the trikāya doctrine, and Tanluan's two-fold dharma-body theory.

The true Buddha and land manifest the activity of fundamental nondiscriminative wisdom and its compassionate unfolding as subsequently-attained wisdom. They are, moreover, nirvana, which transcends understanding or explication, and yet works immanently to bring all beings to enlightenment.

In the arising of shinjin wisdom is experienced, not simply by the enlightened subject, but also by its object – the unenlightened sentient being. Wisdom arises when our false claims to independence and omnipotence are exposed and emptied within the Wisdom-Light, giving rise for the first time to the possibility of knowing ourselves and living genuine lives. Shin Buddhism thus offers a soteriology of transcendent immanence. Amida as Absolute Other exposes and embraces the finitude and particularity of each being as other; Amida as Other becomes Absolute within the other's being exposed as finite and evil and thus embraced by the Other.

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Introduction - Transcendence and Immanence in Theological Reflection

The question of transcendence and immanence in religious and philosophical thought has been addressed in academies, churches and assemblies for many centuries across a vast range of worldviews, scholarly considerations and religious concerns. Discourses have considered whether transcendence signifies an independent, ontological divinity above and beyond all existences, or indicates a reality that is beyond our conception, expression or explanation. They have considered whether the idea of immanence describes a divine essence that permeates the universe or depicts the working of the divine in this imperfect world.¹

It is not be my intention to offer here a thorough study of the question of transcendence and immanence. I simply suggest that any conversation about wisdom and compassion in Christian, Islamic and Buddhist traditions would benefit from shared reflections on the meaning and implications of transcendence and immanence within each participant's own tradition. Allow me to suggest also that a deep-reaching and fruitful inter-religious conversation about wisdom and compassion might well be facilitated by a willingness to consider certain fundamental questions raised within the age-old discourses on transcendence and immanence. For instance,

1. Must a transcendent (existence, reality, truth) by its very nature be beyond the realm of being(s)?
2. Is the transcendent prior to the existence of being(s) or in response to the state of

¹ There is an abundance of helpful references on this topic. Among them are: Louis Dupre, "Transcendence and Immanence as Theological Categories," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America*, 31, 2012. Retrieved from: <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/2842>; Chin-tai Kim, "Transcendence and Immanence." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55, no. 3, 1987, 537-49. Accessed February 28, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1464069>; David R. Loy, "Beyond Transcendence? A Buddhist Perspective on the Axial Age." Philip Wexler & Jonathan Garb, eds. (New York: Peter Garb, 2012), 155-172. Retrieved from: http://www.davidloy.org/downloads/Loy_Beyond_Transcendence.pdf.

that existence?

3. Does transcendence know? feel? love? Can it be known? felt? loved?
4. Might we identify a middle ground (a Middle Way!) between monistic or dualistic perceptions of immanence and transcendence? What might be the features and implications of a nondualistic apprehension of finitude and the infinite, the measurable and immeasurability, or conditioned existence and the unconditioned?
5. Can an Absolute Other expose and embrace the (relative, finite, particular) other? Could it be that the Other becomes Absolute within the other's experience of being exposed as finite, imperfect, and evil and thus be embraced by the Other?

Transcendence and Immanence from a Buddhist Perspective

Buddhism is the path of enlightenment—the path that enables an unenlightened being to attain Buddhahood. It is a path that originated in teachings attributed to the historical Gautama Buddha (463–383 BCE), also known as Śākyamuni Buddha, who lived in ancient India. It could be said that the starting point of the path lies in our own samsaric state of existence. Samsaric existence is characterized by endless repetitions of pain and suffering from birth to death to rebirth, which are driven by deluded passions and craving, and arise out of a fundamental attachment to the self. Stated in another way, lying at the bottom of our bondage to samsara is our distorted view of reality in which we see a world centered around (the desires of) our self and which apprehends a dichotomy between this self (the subject which sees) and the world (the object which is seen).² Perhaps it might be more precise to say then that the Buddhist path begins with a sentient being's encounter with one's own finitude, limitations, foolishness and false consciousness. The Mahāyāna path of teaching, practice and realization is the vehicle upon which one seeks to break through ignorance and craving and root out self-centered and dichotomous thinking.

The ideal practitioner on the Mahāyāna Buddhist path is the bodhisattva, the person in search of enlightenment. The bodhisattva's engagement of the path involves the awakening of mind aspiring for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) for oneself and all other beings, aspirations that find expression in the bodhisattva's vows. Upon declaring those vows, the bodhisattva undertakes over great innumerable kalpas of time the practice of *prajñāpāramitā*, or nondiscriminative wisdom. The “goal” of the Buddhist path is Buddhahood, the realization of complete enlightenment. Also expressed as supreme nirvana, this reality is referred to as ultimate, for it represents the complete transcendence of our own finitude, limitations, foolishness and false consciousness.

² Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota, *Shinran: An Introduction to his Thought* (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1989), 56-90.

The dynamic nature of the path of enlightenment is given further clarity with an examination of the Indian word, “*Tathāgata*,” which is a synonym for Buddha. *Tathāgata* represents a two-fold combination of ideas. *Tathā* (如 *nyo*) refers to supreme nirvana, true reality, suchness, and thusness. *Gata* (去 *ko*) indicates “has gone,” the past-perfect tense of the verb “to go.” *Āgata* (来 *rai*) is its opposite; hence, “has come.” In other words, *Tathāgata* (*tathā + gata*) as the “thus gone” (*nyoko*) means that Buddhas is “one who has gone to suchness.” At the same time, Buddha is *Tathāgata* (*tathā + āgata*), the “thus come” (*nyorai*) or the “one who has come from suchness.”

In other words, the path of enlightenment is framed with this complex sense of directionality: (1) the bodhisattva encounters the finitude of one’s samsaric existence and, attaining nondiscriminative wisdom, ultimately “goes to suchness,” which completely transcends all aspects of one’s existence, and (2) the awakened one “comes from suchness” to work actively, compassionately, and immanently in samsaric existence for the sake of unenlightened beings.

Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota’s thorough explication of the fundamentals of Mahāyāna teachings³ offers us many expressions intended to bring us to realize insight into the nature of the finite self and infinite Buddha. “Samsara is nirvana” is well-known, of course, but more relevant to our discussion here is the phrase, “Form is not different from emptiness; emptiness is not different from form. Form is itself emptiness; emptiness is itself form.”⁴ “Empty” signifies two aspects of a single reality. First, it refers to *prajñā* (non-dichotomous wisdom) or the cutting off of dichotomous thought (*vikalpa*). This is the bodhisattva’s contemplative practice of “not seeing.” Second, it indicates emptiness (*śūnya*), or that is, the non-existence of all things discriminated by the ego-centered mind. Stated in another way, non-discriminative wisdom (not seeing) arises when dichotomous thinking ceases, and the subject (the seer) and object (the seen) become one. Thus, the bodhisattva is able to see all things just as they are, in their absolute particularity, and also in their non-difference from all other things (which are empty of all inherent self-nature).⁵

Vijñapti-mātrata (consciousness-only, or, subjectivity-only, also known as *Yogācāra*) thought of Maitreya, Asaṅga and Vasubandhu (c. 4th C. CE) describes the practical implications of the idea that “form is emptiness.” In particular, Asaṅga’s *Mahāyānasamgraha*⁶ sets forth the *Yogācārin* perspective that three kinds of

³ Ueda and Hirota, *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought*, 56-90.

⁴ A famous phrase from the *Prajñāpāramitā in Twenty-five Thousand Lines*, cited in Ueda and Hirota, *Shinran: an introduction to his thought*, 63.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Asaṅga, *Summary of the Great Vehicle (Mahāyāna samgraha)*. John P. Keenan, trans. (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research 2003), dbet PDF version, 2014, retrieved from: <https://web.archive.org/web/20140821120318/http://www.bdk.or.jp/pdf/bdk/digital>

nondiscriminative wisdom are realized on the bodhisattva path.⁷ They are:

1. Preparatory nondiscriminative wisdom (S. *prāyogika-jñāna*, J. 加行智 *kegyōchi*). Wisdom realized at the preparatory stages of practice in the mundane world, where one hears the teaching, yet still makes it an object of discriminative thought. In contrast to ordinary deluded thought, such wisdom deepens through practice
2. Fundamental nondiscriminative wisdom (S. *nirvikalpa-jñāna*, J. 根本無分別智 *konpon mufunbetchi*). All discriminative thinking is eradicated, and the opposition of seer and seen is broken through. The bodhisattva “touches” suchness and will hereafter never fall back into the bondage of samsara. Still, however, residues of deluded passions remain to be eliminated through the practice of *prajñāpāramitā*.
3. Subsequently-attained nondiscriminative wisdom (S. *tat-prṣṭhalabdha-jñāna*, J. 後得智 *gotokuchi*). The bodhisattva engages in discriminative thinking in order to perceive beings and make distinctions between them. However, this is purified mundane wisdom, in which the bodhisattva knows, based on fundamental wisdom, that such discriminatory thinking is false and that both the subject and objects of perception are non-existent.

Nagao Gadjin describes the first type of wisdom as occurring in ascent (aiming toward fundamental wisdom), whereas the third type of wisdom takes place in the direction of descent from the dharma realm to this mundane realm where the bodhisattvas engage in salvific activity of teaching and guiding ignorant sentient beings.⁸

Ueda and Hirota go on the state that the bodhisattva that attains these aspects of wisdom corresponds to “subjectivity only with no object.” That is, the bodhisattva realizes wisdom in which all objects are seen as false and non-existent. Thus, the subject-object dichotomy has been eradicated and both seer and seen are empty. And yet at the same time, since the bodhisattva’s mental activity (perception and cognition) sees that all objects are false and non-existent, that subjectivity, which perceives and discriminates between objects, must be said to exist provisionally. The objects (beings that are seen) of the bodhisattva’s mental activity are referred to as “subjectivity that has appeared as form.” This has two meanings: (1) the bodhisattva that practices and realizes *prajñāpāramitā* is

dl/dBET_T1593_GreatVehicleSummary_2003.pdf.

⁷ Gadjin M. Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra: A Study of Mahayana Philosophies*, Leslie Kawamura, trans. (Albany: State University of New York, 1991), 223-225.

⁸ Nagao, *Mādhyamika and Yogācāra*, 224-225.

able to know things by becoming them (the seer vanishes into identity with the seen), and (2) so the bodhisattva knows itself without falsely objectifying itself (subjectivity-only without an object).⁹

There are two consequences to this discussion. The first is that non-dichotomous wisdom comes to manifest itself as form that accommodates itself to the capacities of ignorant beings, in order to lead them to enlightenment. Here wisdom manifests itself as compassionate activity. This construct is also seen in the central teaching of Mahāyāna, known as the three Buddha-body (*trikāya*) theory, which reveals that “Buddha” is a multi-dimensional construct. The three bodies are:

- (1) “Dharma-body” (*dharmakāya*) (法身 *hosshin*). True, formless reality itself, suchness or dharma-nature. This is the fundamental dimension of enlightenment, of reality perceived by (and identical with) non-discriminative wisdom, which transcends all concepts of subject, object, space or time.
- (2) “Enjoyment body” (*sambhoga-kāya*) (報身 *hōjin*) The “fulfilled,” “recompensed,” or “reward” Buddha-body. It arises as the result of the bodhisattva’s practice and fulfillment of the bodhisattva vows. In a sense, this body is said to “enjoy” the fulfillment of those vows and practices, thereby being adorned with special features of the vows. The Buddha establishes a Buddha land in which to act to help brings beings to realize nirvana.

Here, we see an interface of time and timelessness, of form and formlessness. The Buddha embodies timeless and formless true reality, which also has a temporal beginning in the bodhisattva vows. It also exhibits form with a temporal sphere, although inconceivable by ignorant beings. Traditionally, it was held that this dimension of the Buddha can be seen by beings only through contemplative or other practices; and it is capable of influencing and helping only those who can realize a direct perception of it.

- (3) “Transformed body or bodies” (*nirmana-kāya*) (化身 *keshin*) of the Buddha. Sometimes called the “accommodated” or “provisional body” (応身 *ōjin*), this is the form taken by the Buddha when dwelling in samsaric existence within historical time. As such it has a beginning and an end within the birth and death of that historical figure. A temporary or impermanent existence, *nirmana-kāya* at the same time embodies timeless and formless true reality. True reality enters into history as the body of transformation in a manner that is accommodated to the capacities of ignorant beings so as to lead them to enlightenment.

⁹ Ueda and Hirota, *Shinran: an introduction to his thought*, 72-75.

In other words, body of true reality or suchness (*dharma-kāya*) provisionally manifests form as recompensed body (*sambhoga-kāya*) and transformed body (*nirmana-kāya*) within samsara in order to perceive unenlightened beings (which it knows to be empty and non-existent) and guide them (knowing them by becoming them) to enlightenment.

A second consequence of *Yogācāra* thought is that there is no true reality apart from falsity. Wisdom is absolute and always holds within itself the existence of false thinking. Yet, this false thinking is in reality non-existent, since the objects of such thinking do not exist. Thus, according to paradoxical logic Mahāyāna, it really exists. That is to say, subjectivity exists through not existing. It is both true and real, and at the same time it is empty, false and unreal.¹⁰

This paradoxical structure of wisdom will ground the Shin Buddhist perspective on shinjin. As I will attempt to explain, what makes the Shin Buddhist view unique is the fact that wisdom is experienced, not from the perspective of the bodhisattva, the subject of perception, but from the perspective of the object of perception – the unenlightened sentient being.

Wisdom and Compassion in Shin Buddhism

Pure Land Buddhist Path

Over two hundred and ten Mahāyāna sutras make some mention of Buddha *Amitāyus* and/or the Buddha *Amitābha* and that Buddha's land of utmost bliss (*Sukhāvatī*). Each of these Pure Land scriptures describes the sublime and ideal beauty of that land and of that Buddha and the bodhisattvas of that land. Among those scriptures, the three Pure Land sutras provide detailed descriptions of and focus on Amida Buddha and that Buddha's land of utmost bliss.

For instance, the *Larger Sukhāvatī Sutra* describes the land in this way,

Further, the halls, living quarters, palaces and storied pavilions, all adorned with the seven precious substances, appear miraculously of themselves. Covering them is a jewel-canopy composed of pearls, moon-radiant mani-jewels, and various other gems. Everywhere about the buildings, both inside and out, there are ponds for bathing ten yojanas, or twenty or thirty, up to one hundred thousand yojanas across. Each is of dimensions—in length, breadth, and depth—of perfect symmetry.

They are brimming with pure and fragrant waters possessed of the eight excellent

¹⁰ Ueda and Hirota, *Shinran: an introduction to his thought*, 75-83.

qualities and have the taste of nectar.¹¹

The *Contemplation Sutra* instructs practitioners to engage in a range of contemplations on Amida Buddha and his land. Among them is the ninth contemplation, which states in part,

[N]ext envision the physical characteristics and the light of Amitāyus. Ananda, you should realize that his body is as glorious as a thousand million kotis of nuggets of gold from the Jambu River of the Yama Heaven and that his height is six hundred thousand kotis of nayutas of yojanas multiplied by the number of the sands of the Ganges. The white tuft of hair curling to the right between his eyebrows is five times as big as Mount Sumeru. His eyes are clear and as broad as the four great oceans; their blue irises and white are distinct. His aureole is as broad as a hundred kotis of universes, each containing a thousand million worlds....¹²

Among the many descriptions of Amida's land in the *Amida Sutra* are these,

Sariputra, why is that land called 'Utmost Bliss'? Because beings there suffer no pain but only enjoy pleasures of various kinds. Again, Sariputra, in the Land of Utmost Bliss there are seven rows of balustrades, seven rows of decorative nets, and seven rows of trees. They are all made of four kinds of jewels and extend over the whole land, and so it is called 'Utmost Bliss.' ...

For what reason, Sariputra, do you think that Buddha is called 'Amitābha?' Sariputra, the Buddha's light shines boundlessly and without hindrance over all the worlds in the ten directions. It is for this reason that he is called 'Amitābha.' Again, Sariputra, the lives of the Buddha and the people of his land last for innumerable, unlimited and incalculable kalpas. It is for this reason that the Buddha is called 'Amitāyus.'¹³

Amida's Buddha-land, in other words, was conventionally considered to be an ideal place—in contrast to this world—for hearing the Buddha's teaching and practicing the

¹¹ In Shinran, *Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, Chapter on Transformed Buddha-bodies and Lands, trans. Dennis Hirota, et al, in Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji Shuppan, 1997), 208-9.

¹² Hisao Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras: A study and translation* (Kyoto: Nagata Bunshodo, 1994), 332-333.

¹³ Inagaki, *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, 353-355.

bodhisattva path of enlightenment.

Shinran's Reformulation of the Pure Land Path

Shinran (1173-1263) states that the “true Buddha” is the “Tathāgata of inconceivable light,” while the “true land” is the “land of immeasurable light.”

Reverently contemplating the true Buddha and the true land, I find that the Buddha is the Tathagata of inconceivable light and the land also is the land of immeasurable light. Because they have arisen through the fulfillment of Vows of great compassion, they are called true fulfilled Buddha and land. There are relevant Vows that were made: the Vows of light and life.¹⁴

Amida Buddha and the Buddha's Pure Land are viewed respectively as inconceivable and immeasurable light, which is the form taken by (and symbolic of) wisdom and compassion. In addition, Shinran affirms that both Buddha and land are *sambhoga-kāya*, the fulfilled Buddha-body, for they have come about through, or represent the compassionate activity of, the bodhisattva vows of Dharmākara, fulfilled through the perfection of bodhisattva practices. This Buddha's enlightened activity has taken this form of inconceivable and immeasurable light (Amida Buddha and the Pure Land) because of the bodhisattva's Twelfth and Thirteenth Vows.

Note should be made that Shinran makes no distinction between the true Buddha and land. In other words, Shinran does not adopt the classic Pure Land Buddhist approach that seemed to attribute physical features to Amida Buddha and that Buddha's land. Neither, one might also say, does he seem to take Amida to be a personified expression and the Pure Land to be an environmental expression of enlightenment. Rather, both are significant as inconceivable light and emerge as the dynamic compassionate activity of ultimate reality.

The modifiers “inconceivable” and “immeasurable” indicate that both the true Buddha and land transcend all false, discriminative thinking. They represent the activity of fundamental nondiscriminative wisdom and its arising as subsequently-attained nondiscriminative wisdom. Immeasurable light points to spatial infinity—that which transcends all spatial conceptualizing. Immeasurable life, in contrast, represents temporal infinity—that which transcends all temporal conceptualization. The true Buddha and land transcend all dimensions of space and time and are thus inconceivable for they cannot be grasped by our conventional thought, which seeks to substantialize all existence within

¹⁴ Shinran, *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Chapter on the True Buddha and Land, 177.

the limits of our discriminative consciousness.

And yet, although they comprise both immeasurable light and life, it is the light of the true Buddha and land that is emphasized by Shinran. He cites numerous sutra passages that extol the twelve-fold light of the Buddha, a light that is boundless, unhindered, incomparable, blazing, pure, joyful, wisdom, uninterrupted, inconceivable, inexpressible and surpasses the sun and moon. The Buddha's light, he says is exalted and supreme; it is boundlessly excellent.

In order to arrive at this conclusion, Shinran offers a formulation unique within prevailing Pure Land thought. His view of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land is based not only on the general Mahāyāna notion of the three bodies of the Buddha. That is, he clearly adopts another, somewhat related perspective on the dharma-body, which is found in the *Commentary on Vasubandhu's Treatise* by Tanluan (476-542). According to that theory, the dharma-body is two-fold.

The following quotation of a passage from Tanluan is found in the Chapter on True Realization of Shinran's *Teaching, Practice and Realization*.

Concerning the phrase, Reflect on this, we should reflect that these three types of fulfilled adornments were originally accomplished by the adorning activity of the pure Vow-mind expressed as the Forty-eight Vows; hence, because the cause is pure, the fruition is also pure. It is not that there is no cause or that there is some other cause.

It is because, stated in brief, they enter into the phrase "one-dharma."

The preceding seventeen phrases on the land's adornments, eight phrases on the Tathagata's adornments, and four phrases on the bodhisattvas' adornments are "extensive." That they enter into the phrase "one-dharma" is termed in brief. Why is it explained that extensive and brief interpenetrate? Because all Buddhas and bodhisattvas have dharma-bodies of two dimensions: dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as compassionate means arises from dharma-body as suchness, and dharma-body as suchness emerges out of dharma-body as compassionate means. Those two dimensions of dharma-body differ but are not separable; they are one but cannot be regarded as identical. Thus, extensive and brief interpenetrate, and together are termed "dharma." If bodhisattvas do not realize that extensive and brief interpenetrate, they are incapable of self-benefit and benefiting others.¹⁵

¹⁵ Shinran, *Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Chapter on True Realization, 165.

Tanluan's *Commentary* presents the notion of the two kinds of dharma-body (dharma-kāya): (1) dharma-body as suchness (法性法身 *hosshō hosshin*, literally "dharma-nature dharma-body") and (2) dharma-body as compassionate means (方便法身 *hōben hosshin*, literally "*upāya* dharma-body"). Traditional Shin Buddhist studies generally assert that this theory represents an explanation of Tanluan's Buddha-body theory, and, accordingly, his perspective that Amida Buddha is the dharma-body as compassionate means.

Mochizuki Shinkō notes, however, that Tanluan does not refer to the kinds of Buddha-bodies, such *sambhoga-kāya* or *nirmana-kāya* here. Surmising that this text may have preceded the full development of the *trikāya* doctrine in Chinese Pure Land Buddhism, Mochizuki concludes that Tanluan's introduction of the two-fold dharma-body theory is not made in the context of the concept of the three Buddha-bodies.¹⁶ Instead, he suggests, Tanluan draws upon texts such as the *Wangshengglun* and *Dazhidulun* to confirm that the Pure Land of Amitābha transcends the three realms of desire, form, and formlessness.

Yamada Yukio maintains that Tanluan actually presents the two-fold dharma-body notion in order to clarify Mahāyāna perspectives on the activity of ultimate reality (S. *paramārtha-satya*, J. 第一義諦 *daiichigitai*) and more specifically, the meaning of entering into the phrase "one-dharma" (入一法句 *nyūippōku*) that is presented in the *Treatise*. Ultimate reality is the sphere of the Buddha's karmic activity. Here, Tanluan's primary focus is to demonstrate the interpenetration or nonduality of the brief or condensed (略 *ryaku*) aspect of ultimate reality (dharma-nature of suchness, 真如法性 *shinnyo hosshō*) and its extensive or manifested (廣 *kō*) aspects (the 29 adorned dharmic-virtues of the Buddha-realm – 17 of the Land, 8 of the Buddha, and 4 of the bodhisattvas).

Because all Buddhas and bodhisattvas have dharma-bodies of two dimensions, the extensive and brief aspects of ultimate reality interpenetrate (廣略相入 *kōryaku sōnyū*). The dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means arise mutually from each other; they differ but are not separable; they are one but not the same. Thus, the two dharma-bodies arise in simultaneous immediacy in a horizontal relationship and not through a step-by-step or vertical relationship.¹⁷

Roger Corless suggests that Tanluan presents the two-fold dharma-body theory in

¹⁶ Shinkō Mochizuki, "Pure Land in China: A Doctrinal History. Chapter Seven: T'an-luan." Leo M. Pruden, trans. Richard K. Payne, ed. *The Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*. Third Series, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 164.

¹⁷ Yukio Yamada, "T'an-luan's Theory of Two Kinds of Dharma-body as Found in Shinran's Wago Writings," *The Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*. Third Series, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 100-101.

order to propose a solution to the dilemma posed by two dualistic polarities:

1. If the realm of liberation from suffering is the same as or continuous with the realm of suffering, then there is no true liberation from suffering.
2. If the realm of liberation from suffering is different from this realm of suffering, then there is no way to get from here to there, and there is no liberation from suffering.

Tanluan was thoroughly versed in Mādhyamikan thought. His major commentarial sources include the *Dazhidulun* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā śāstra*) and *Zhaolun* (*Treatises of [Seng]zhao*, 378-413). Thus, maintains Corless, Tanluan declares that the realms of suffering and liberation are nondual; they are connected, while at the same time separate.¹⁸

It is important to note that Shinran follows this line of thought in his *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, but not in his Japanese writings. That is evident by the fact that he quotes Tanluan's passage on the two-fold dharma-bodies in the Chapter on True Realization and not in Chapter on the True Buddha and Land of his major text.

In the Chapter on True Realization, Shinran states that true realization is both the wondrous state attained through Amida's perfect benefiting of others (利他圓滿之妙位 *rita enman no myōi*) and the ultimate fruition of supreme nirvana (无上涅槃之極果 *mujōnehan no gokuka*). That is, true realization is not simply a matter of one's own realization of wisdom; it is also the culmination of Amida Buddha's perfect directing of virtue (the mind of self-benefit and benefiting others).

This implies, moreover, that true realization does not merely arise in a single direction. The true Pure Land path comprehends a movement from samsara to nirvana and also a movement (a return) from nirvana to samsara. This two-fold directionalism is based in the fundamental Mahāyāna approach to Buddhahood: The enlightened one has "gone to thusness" (*Tathā + gata, nyoko*) and "comes from thusness" (*Tathā + āgata, nyorai*). A Shin Buddhist sense of the bi-directional nature of enlightened activity can be seen in the two aspects of Amida Buddha's directing of virtue (to beings): (1) the aspect of going to be born in the Pure Land (*ōsō ekō* 往相回向), which comprises true teaching, practice, *shinjin*, and realization, and (2) the aspect of returning from the Pure Land (*gensō ekō* 還相回向). Shinran's stance regarding true realization results from his radical re-interpretation of traditional notions pertaining to Amida Buddha and the Buddha's

¹⁸ Roger Corless, "The Enduring Significance of T'an-luan," *The Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*. Third Series, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 4-6.

Land of Bliss. Buddhahood and enlightenment give expression to a reality that is dynamic and active. True realization represents the nonduality of (1) the “necessary attainment of nirvana” (by beings) and (2) “great nirvana” itself.

Further, one might say that Shinran presents a uniquely Shin Buddhist slant on the Mahāyāna notion of the mind aspiring for enlightenment (*bodhicitta* 菩提心 *bodaishin*). In general, the bodhisattva’s aspiration for enlightenment has two inseparable aspects: (1) the wish to attain enlightenment for oneself (自利 *jiri* self-benefit) and (2) the desire to save sentient beings (利他 *rita* benefiting-others). Here, in contrast, Amida’s directing of virtue to beings in both aspects of going to and returning from the Pure Land could be symbolic of two ways in which ordinary beings come to experience that true aspiration. That is, Amida Buddha is presented as the subject that directs virtue (the actor that transfers merit), and we sentient beings are positioned as the objects toward which virtue is directed (the recipients of such merit). In other words, we are being benefited by the Other in going forth to the Pure Land and we are receiving Amida’s benefiting of others in the return to the *saha* world.¹⁹ “This,” says Shinran, “is the benefit we receive.” He clearly states that being able to “return to this world” upon the attainment of birth and realization of supreme nirvana in the Pure Land is also a benefit that we receive – the state of benefiting and guiding others” (利他教化地の益 *rita kyōkeji no yaku*).

Since Tanluan takes up Vasubandhu’s declaration that all of the pure adornments of the land, the Buddha and the bodhisattvas originated in the “Vow-mind,” Shinran finds that the adorned virtues of the land (which are manifested forms of enlightenment) are interpenetrated by formless, uncreated dharma-body. Here, the “interpenetration of the extensive and brief” (廣略相入 *kōryaku sōnyū*) implies that (1) extensive phenomena arise out of the singular, pure Vow-mind, thereby manifesting that noumenal reality and (2) the unfolding of purity into the adornments of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land becomes the foundation for saving ignorant beings in samsara. Dharma-body as suchness and dharma-body as compassionate means are revealed to be in a complex, dynamic relationship in which the latter arises from the former, even as the former emerges as the latter. In Tanluan’s words, they differ but are not separable; they are one but are not identical.

I would suggest that this interpenetration of dharma-bodies is also representative of the relationship between fundamental nondiscriminative wisdom and subsequently-attained nondiscriminative wisdom as compassionate activity. This perspective is more

¹⁹ A more detailed examination of Shinran’s perspective on Other’s benefiting and benefiting others can be seen in Jitsuen Kakehashi, “Shinran’s View of Other Power: On “the Profound Significance of Other’s Benefiting and Benefiting Others,” *The Pacific World: Journal of the Institute of Buddhist Studies*. Third Series, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 61-98.

evident in Shinran's Japanese writings, in which there is a slight difference in the approach taken to the two-fold dharma-body theory by Shinran. In his text, *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'*, Shinran interprets Tanluan's idea in this manner,

Since it is with this heart and mind of all sentient beings that they entrust themselves to the Vow of the dharma-body as compassionate means, this shinjin is none other than Buddha-nature. This Buddha-nature is dharma-nature. Dharma-nature is dharma-body. For this reason there are two kinds of dharma-body with regard to the Buddha. The first is called dharma-body as suchness and the second, dharma-body as compassionate means. Dharma-body as suchness has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it. From this oneness was manifested form, called dharma-body as compassionate means.

Taking this form, The Buddha announced the name Bhikṣu Dharmākara and established the Forty-eight great Vows that surpass conceptual understanding. Among these Vows are the Primal Vow of immeasurable light and the universal Vow of immeasurable life, and to the form manifesting these two Vows Bodhisattva Vasubandhu gave the title, "Tathagata of unhindered light filling the ten quarters." This Tathagata has fulfilled the Vows, which are the cause of that Buddhahood, and thus is called "Tathagata of the fulfilled body." This is none other than Amida Tathagata.²⁰

Dharma-body as suchness is true reality itself, perceived through non-discriminative wisdom, within the absolute non-duality of subject and object, in which all existences are emptied of conceptualized substance or self-nature. Therefore, Shinran says, it "has neither color nor form; thus, the mind cannot grasp it nor words describe it." As a result, it becomes active as subsequently-attained non-discriminative wisdom, taking form so that it might be grasped and described with words, and thereby guides ignorant beings to enlightenment. This form, says Shinran, is called "dharma-body as compassionate means" (literally, *upāya-dharmakāya*)

In effect, Shinran is carefully weaving through the interrelated nuances in the so-called three-Buddha bodies and two-fold dharma-body theories, which can be found in the description of this dharma-body as compassionate means.

"Fulfilled" means that the cause for enlightenment has been fulfilled. From the

²⁰ Shinran, *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* Dennis Hirota, et al, trans., in Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), CWS, 461.

fulfilled body innumerable personified and accommodated bodies are manifested, radiating the unhindered light of wisdom throughout the countless worlds. Thus appearing in the form of light called “Tathagata of unhindered light filling the ten quarters,” it is without color and without form; that is, it is identical with the dharma-body as suchness, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and unobstructed by karmic evil. For this reason it is called “unhindered light.” “Unhindered” means that it is not obstructed by the karmic evil and blind passions of beings. Know, therefore, that Amida Buddha is light, and that light is the form taken by wisdom.²¹

According to Shinran, the dharma-body as compassionate means clearly refers to *sambhoga-kāya*, for he calls it “*Tathāgata* of the fulfilled body.” Yet, it seems to be much more complex than simply that. In his view, Amida Buddha as fulfilled body or immeasurable light manifests “innumerable personified and accommodated bodies.” It would appear, that is, to embody *nirmana-kāya* as well. Furthermore, these personified bodies also radiate unhindered light. In one sense, this means that they are identical with dharma-body as suchness. In another sense, it means that they actively work to save beings, dispelling ignorance without any hindrance.

This Japanese text thus presents the multi-faceted and dynamic notion of the true Buddha and land in Shinran’s thought. Amida Buddha and the Pure Land are not static entities. Instead, they are described as dharma-body as suchness giving rise to dharma-body of compassionate means. Formlessness gives rise to form, which is the manifestation of formlessness. By taking the form of the “Tathāgata of unhindered light filling the ten quarters,” Amida Buddha remains identical with suchness even while it is active in the world of beings, dispelling the darkness of ignorance and unobstructed by karmic evil. The dharma-body as suchness is formless. Therefore, it fulfills its true nature by taking form as dharma-body as compassionate means.

This compassionate reality, in which non-duality arises as duality, represents, as it were, a dichotomy of non-dichotomy. True Buddha sees ignorant beings as false and empty, and yet also sees them as non-different from self. Thus, it arises within samsara to awaken beings and take them into itself, thereby directing them to the attainment of Buddhahood. Shinran describes this “formlessness as form” in greater detail in another Japanese text, *Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling*,

True reality-suchness is the supreme great nirvana. Nirvana is dharma-nature.

²¹ Shinran, *Notes on ‘Essentials of Faith Alone,’* 461-2.

Dharma- nature is Tathagata. With the words, “treasure ocean,” the Buddha’s nondiscriminating, unobstructed, and nonexclusive guidance to all sentient beings is likened to the all-embracing ocean waters of the great ocean.

From this treasure ocean of oneness form was manifested, taking the name of Bodhisattva Dharmākara, who, through establishing the unhindered Vow as the cause, became Amida Buddha. For this reason Amida is the “Tathagata of fulfilled body.” Amida has been called “Buddha of unhindered light filling the ten quarters.” This Tathagata is also known as *Namu-fukashigikō-butsu* (Namu-Buddha of inconceivable light) and is the “dharma-body as compassionate means.” “Compassionate means” refers to manifesting form, revealing a name, and making itself known to sentient beings. It refers to Amida Buddha. This Tathagata is light. Light is none other than wisdom; wisdom is the form of light. Wisdom is, in addition, formless; hence this Tathagata is the Buddha of inconceivable light. This Tathagata fills the countless worlds in the ten quarters, and so is called “Buddha of boundless light.” Further, Bodhisattva Vasubandhu has given the name, “Tathagata of unhindered light filling the ten quarters.”²²

Wisdom-compassion takes the form of light (Amida Buddha) and reveals a Name (*Namu Amidabutsu*) in order to make itself known to sentient beings mired in samsaric existence. At the same time, it is formless wisdom (suchness) arising unobstructed in the midst of darkness to awaken beings to itself. Because suchness manifests form and reveals a name, all beings who see Amida's light and hear Amida's Name are able to realize freedom from birth-and-death. As an earlier version of the *Larger Sutra* states, “Among all beings and even insects that leap and worms that crawl, there is none that does not see Amida Buddha’s light.”²³ In other words, for Shinran, the true Buddha and land represent light that cuts through all limitations. Moreover, it transforms all who see it.

Among those in the realms of hell, beasts, hungry ghosts, or asuras, where they suffer pain and affliction, there is none who, upon seeing Amida Buddha’s light, does not gain respite and, although not acquiring remedy, obtain emancipation from sorrow and pain after death. Amida Buddha makes that light and Name heard throughout the boundless, unlimited, countless lands of the Buddhas in the eight quarters, the zenith and the nadir. There is none among devas and human beings

²² Shinran, *Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling*, trans. Dennis Hirota, et al, in Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 486-7 (emphasis added)

²³ Cited by Shinran in *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, 180.

who does not hear and know them. Of those who hear and know them, none fails to attain emancipation.²⁴

It is not insignificant that Shinran here cites an earlier version of the *Larger Sutra*, for in it we see an early connection between the Buddha's light and the Buddha's Name. Throughout his thought both light and Name are connected; they represent the form and activity taken by non-discriminative wisdom or true reality as it compassionately works to bring ignorant beings to enlightenment.

It is interesting to note that in the Chapter on the True Buddha and Land of his principal text Shinran never describes the nature of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land using traditional Pure Land terminology or symbols. Instead of positive, concrete expressions of the Buddha's countenance, lotus pedestal, jeweled pavilions or the like, Shinran often employs negative expressions ("nonexistent" or "impermanent," for example), which are grounded in Mahāyāna notions of non-dichotomous emptiness.

It is from the perspective of Mahāyāna thought that Shinran states that the true Buddha and land are none other than emancipation, for they represent true, eternal, and unhindered life. He also equates *Tathāgata* and emancipation with nothingness, here not signifying a void, but rather emptiness or the transcendence of all ego-centered, discriminatory thinking. He also declares that true Buddha and land are not non-arising, non-perishing, un-aging and undying, for as nirvana they are the eternal Buddha. Here, eternity is used in the sense of "uncreated." Highest enlightenment is not the product of karmic action; it is not an entity brought about by ever-changing connections between causes and conditions. Because of this, true Buddha and land are not "impermanent;" they are "eternal."

Shinran also states that the true Buddha and land possess the virtue of Buddha nature. They manifest the potential for Buddhahood, the fundamental reality of Buddhahood, and the process for its attainment. When sentient beings, who lack the wisdom eye, see wisdom through practice, therein the bodhisattva attains enlightenment. Dharmākara becomes Amida and the Pure Land becomes the place of attaining enlightenment. The following passage is a well-known.

The land of bliss is the realm of nirvana, the uncreated. ...

The realm of nirvana refers to the place where one overturns the delusion of ignorance and realizes the supreme enlightenment. *Realm* means "place"; know it as the place of attaining enlightenment.

²⁴ Cited by Shinran in *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, 180.

Nirvana has innumerable names. It is impossible to give them in details. I will list only a few. Nirvana is called extinction of passions, the uncreated, peaceful happiness, eternal bliss, true reality, dharma-body, dharma-nature, suchness, oneness, and Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is none other than Tathagata. This Tathagata pervades the countless worlds; it fills the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus, plants, trees, and land all attain Buddhahood.²⁵

According to Shinran, the true Buddha and land also have the virtue of bliss or pleasure. Instead of pleasure in the conventional sense, they possess the four aspects of true pleasure: eradication of pleasure (and pain), great quiescence, all-knowing-wisdom, and a body that is undecaying. The land is also possessed of the virtue of purity. Because it is great nirvana, it bears the four aspects of purity and severs twenty-five forms of existence. Shinran draws upon Tanluan's *Commentary*, which states,

Concerning "the fulfillment of the adornment of the virtue of purity," the gatha states:

Contemplating the features of that world,

I see that it transcends the three realms.

Why is this inconceivable? When foolish beings possessed of blind passions attain birth in the Pure Land, they are not bound by the karmic fetters of the three realms. That is, without severing blind passions, they realize nirvana itself. How can this be conceived?²⁶

The true Buddha and land are pure; their nature is that of the *tathāgata*, or compassionate, salvific activity unfolding from wisdom. Because of this, it is said, *tathāgatas* do not actually enter ultimate nirvana and are termed "bodhisattvas." This is inconceivable to ignorant beings. In the same way, the paradoxical nature of Buddha-nature cannot truly be grasped by beings. Buddha-nature transcends conventional concepts of time, such past-present-future, and yet, for beings mired in samsara, it is to be realized in the future. Although buddha nature is possessed by all sentient beings, it does not exist in the present in ignorant beings; it only exists in the future. Stated differently, those lacking the good roots or seeds of Buddhahood (*icchantika*) have no possibility of attaining enlightenment, and yet, since all beings have Buddha nature and

²⁵ Shinran, *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'*, 460-1.

²⁶ Tanluan, *Commentary on Vasubandhu's Treatise*, cited by Shinran in *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Chapter on True Buddha and Land, 191.

no fixed nature, all will attain enlightenment. Hence, “it should not be taught that those lacking the seed of Buddhahood fall into hell.”²⁷

The Buddha teaches, from the perspective of wisdom-compassion, that all beings have Buddha nature, and yet “because it is covered over by blind passions,” sentient beings “cannot see it.” Even bodhisattvas of the highest stage only see Buddha nature “a little.” However, they can “see through hearing”—they can know the *tathāgata*’s mind and know that they will attain enlightenment.

Shinran concludes,

Thus, we clearly know from the Tathagata’s true teaching and the commentaries of the masters that the Pure Land of peace is the true fulfilled land. Delusional and defiled sentient beings cannot, here, see [Buddha-]nature, for it is covered over by blind passions. The [*Nirvana*] *Sutra* states, “I have taught that bodhisattvas of the tenth stage see a little of Buddha-nature.” Hence we know that when we reach the Buddha-land of happiness, we unfailingly disclose Buddha-nature. This is through the directing of virtue by the Power of the Primal Vow. Further, the [*Nirvana*] *Sutra* states, “Sentient beings will, in the future, possess a body of purity adorned with virtues and be able to see Buddha-nature.”²⁸

The significance of true Buddha and land, for Shinran, is that the person of *shinjin* is the “same as Maitreya” (a bodhisattva of the highest stage). As such, she can hear and know the Name —“perceive and know the *tathāgata*’s mind”—and know that the Vow carries those who cannot attain Buddhahood to enlightenment. The salvific activity of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land arises from the great compassion of true enlightenment of equality. The true Buddha and land possess the inconceivable power of the fulfillment of virtues of self-benefit and benefiting-others. In Tanluan’s words, “The Vow gives rise to the power; the power fulfills the Vow.”²⁹

Reflections: Wisdom and Compassion, Exposure and Embrace: a Shin Buddhist Sense of Transcendent Immanence

Amida Buddha and the Pure Land Are the Activity of Wisdom Unfolding as Compassion.

²⁷ The *Nirvana Sutra*, cited by Shinran in *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Chapter on True Buddha and Land, 186.

²⁸ Shinran, *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Chapter on True Buddha and Land, 202.

²⁹ Tanluan, *Commentary*, cited by Shinran in *True Teaching, Practice and Realization*, Chapter on True Buddha and Land, 194.

My understanding of Shinran's insight is that Amida Buddha and the Pure Land are activity. I draw from his declaration that "[T]he Buddha is the *Tathāgata* of inconceivable light and the land also is the land of immeasurable light"³⁰ his heart-felt realization that Amida Buddha is the activity of wisdom unfolding as compassion within this realm of samsara. I receive this sense even more so in his words, "Formless Buddha manifests form, revealing a name, and making itself known to sentient beings. It refers to Amida Buddha. This *Tathāgata* is light. Light is none other than wisdom; wisdom is the form of light."³¹

Transcendence and immanence in Shin Buddhism

Supreme Nirvana—transcendent enlightenment, Buddha in all of its simultaneously multiple dimensions—is active. It reveals a name, making itself known to us—beings of finitude, ignorance and deluded thinking. Even as we call out the Name of the Buddha, perhaps searching for peace, happiness, or just the end of pain, gradually, step-by-step, we come to realize that we are "hearing" that Name, which is searching for us. Buddha-as-Name reveals itself to us, allowing us to know the significance of enlightenment.

The famous nembutsu follower, Asahara Saichi (1850-1932), expresses this realization in verse.

Where is the *Tathāgata*?
 The *Tathāgata* is here.
 It fills Saichi's heart.
 As I say "Namu Amida Butsu" it is here.

Saichi! Yes?
 Who is saying the nembutsu right now? Hmm?
 It is Saichi.
 No, that can't be! It is the direct teaching of Amida.
 The oneness of being and Buddha.

"Namu Amida Butsu".
 Oya's calling voice!
 The child's response.

³⁰ Shinran, *True Teaching, Practice and Realization* Chapter on True Buddha and Land, 177.

³¹ Shinran, *Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling*, 486.

“Namu Amida Butsu. Namu Amida Butsu.”

Amida Buddha is activity. It is Name. More specifically, it is the activity of naming – the taking of a name to make itself known to those whom it knows cannot know on our own. It is a calling, a calling voice. It calls us to dare to choose – to walk out onto the single white path of the power of the Vow.

Amida Buddha is also called the Tathāgata of Wisdom-Light. As Shinran says, This Tathagata is called the Buddha of light surpassing conceptual understanding and is the form of wisdom. Know that Amida pervades the lands countless as particles throughout the ten quarters.³²

The Pure Land, explains Shinran, is nirvana, which has many names. It is called dharma-body, suchness, oneness, Buddha nature and *tathāgata*, among other things. It is transcendent reality that is beyond understanding or explication, and yet (and because of that) it is immanent and ubiquitous, actively working to bring all beings to enlightenment.

Buddha-nature is none other than Tathagata. This Tathagata pervades the countless worlds; it fills the hearts and minds of the ocean of all beings. Thus, plants, trees, and land all attain Buddhahood.³³

This transcendent realm is not silent; it echoes with the sound of enlightenment. I sense that Shinran might have drawn from the words from the *Larger Sutra*, “The great sound of enlightenment / reverberates throughout the worlds of the ten directions!” when he wrote these hymns of praise,

Pure winds blow in the jewel-trees,
Producing the five tones of the scale.
As those sounds are harmonious and spontaneous,
Pay homage to Amida, the one imbued with purity.³⁴

³² Shinran, *Notes on Inscriptions on Sacred Scrolls*, trans. Dennis Hirota, et al, in Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 501.

³³ Shinran, *Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone,'* 461.

³⁴ Shinran, *Hymns of the Pure Land*, 41, trans. Dennis Hirota, et al, in Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 335.

The delicate, wondrous sounds of jewel-trees in the jewel-forests
 Are a naturally pure and harmonious music,
 Unexcelled in subtlety and elegance,
 So take refuge in Amida, the music of purity.

sounds: the branches of the trees, the waters of the ponds, and the things that work and move - these all, without exception, produce the sound of dharma.

pure and harmonious: the softness of the sounds of the notes, *kung*, *shang*, *chiao*, *cheng*, and *yu* [of the ancient Chinese scale].³⁵

“[T]he branches of the trees, the waters of the ponds, and the things that work and move - these all, without exception, produce the sound of dharma.”

Coda One. The Great Compassionate Heart of the Buddha.

The Institute of Buddhist Studies has been operating at the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley, California since 2006. Early on, Rev. Kodo Umezu (now the Bishop of the Buddhist Churches of America) and I were given the task of selecting a motto or Buddhist passage that could capture the spirit of the center’s educational programs. After some deliberation, we chose the words of the Chinese Pure Land Master, Shandao, “学佛大悲心 (*gakubutsu daihishin*), which we translated as “learning the great compassionate heart of the Buddha.”³⁶ The motto never really gained much popularity and it was never official adopted. At the tenth anniversary celebration for the JSC, I decided to bring up Shandao’s words again, this time giving it an ungrammatical spin, “We are able to learn *within* the great compassionate heart of the Buddha,” in order to suggest the following notion.

As we reflect upon the myriad of activity—the dreams, support, work, study and learning of the Buddha-dharma that goes on constantly, we become aware of the wisdom and compassion of all the Buddhas and bodhisattvas throughout time and space whose wish to guide all beings to enlightenment represent the living heart – the life blood – that sustains this ever-widening world of faith and practice that we call Buddhism. Might we acknowledge that that myriad of activity, support, maintenance and learning is an ongoing manifestation of great wisdom and compassion in this world? Would it be too much to suggest that all of that activity is in reality – and effect – Buddha activity, immeasurable light and life at work within our lives – here and now? Or that the Buddha-mind – that

³⁵ Shinran, *Hymns of the Pure Land*, 39, 334.

³⁶ Shandao, “Hymn of Taking Refuge in the Three Treasures,” (Kisanbōge) in the *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*.

activity of enlightenment – supports, grounds, enables our individual and communal lives of seeking to take the Buddha’s Vows as our own and practice compassion with a deep sense of interconnectedness and gratitude for all existences?

Exposure and Embrace – a Shin Buddhist Sense of Transcendent Immanence

We have suggested above that Shinran was a Pure Land Buddhist and a Mahāyānist, and that his reformulation of the Pure Land path of enlightenment was grounded upon his Mahāyānist understanding. We drew on Yoshifumi Ueda and Dennis Hirota’s writings to examine in particular the *Yogācāra* underpinnings of Shinran’s Pure Land perspective on wisdom and compassion.

We briefly discussed the bodhisattva’s practice and attainment of three aspects of nondiscriminative wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) and how they correspond to the notion of “subjectivity only with no object.” The bodhisattva realizes wisdom in which all objects are seen as false and non-existent. The subject-object dichotomy is eradicated and both seer and seen are “empty.” And yet at the same time, the bodhisattva’s perception and cognition, while grounded in fundamental nondiscriminative wisdom, perceives and discriminates between beings and objects in samsaric existence. Those objects (beings that are seen) of the bodhisattva’s mental activity “subjectivity that has appeared as form.” It means: (1) the bodhisattva that practices and realizes *prajñāpāramitā* is able to know things by becoming them (the seer vanishes into identity with the seen), and (2) so the bodhisattva knows itself without falsely objectifying itself.

Wisdom unfolding as compassion means that: (1) non-dichotomous wisdom comes to manifest itself as form that accommodates itself to the capacities of ignorant beings, in order to lead them to enlightenment, and (2) there is no true reality apart from falsity. Compassionate wisdom is absolute and always holds within itself the provisional existence of ignorance, delusion and false thinking. For this reason, according to Tanluan, formlessness gives rise to form, which is the manifestation of formlessness. This is the “dharma-body as suchness” giving rise to the “dharma-body as compassionate means.” Transcendent suchness, which surpasses our human finitude and understanding, fills our emptied hearts and those of all sentient beings.

In Shinran’s words,

“Compassionate means” refers to manifesting form, revealing a name, and making itself known to sentient beings. It refers to Amida Buddha. This Tathagata is light. Light is none other than wisdom; wisdom is the form of light. Wisdom is, in

addition, formless; hence this Tathagata is the Buddha of inconceivable light.”³⁷

Transcendent suchness manifests the form of light, which exposes our emptiness and falsity within its illumination, and reveals a name, making itself known to us as it comes to know us by becoming us. I interpret Shinran’s perspective in this way: Although Shinran inherits the perspective, topic and subject of this discursive narrative from Vasubandhu and Tanluan, he shifts the focus of the narrative from the subject, bodhisattva/practitioner, to the object, foolish beings (“us”) who, in the experience of *shinjin*, find ourselves exposed and embraced by wisdom arising as compassion.

The experiences of exposure and embrace are referenced, I believe, in Shandao’s teaching of the two kinds of profound realization (*nishu jinshin*),

Deep mind is the deeply entrusting mind. There are two aspects. One is to believe deeply and decidedly that you are a foolish being of karmic evil caught in birth-and-death, ever sinking and ever wandering in transmigration from innumerable kalpas in the past, with never a condition that would lead to emancipation. The second is to believe deeply and decidedly that Amida Buddha’s Forty-eight Vows grasp sentient beings, and that allowing yourself to be carried by the power of the Vow without any doubt or apprehension, you will attain birth.³⁸

Deep mind, for Shandao, this is a two-fold belief that (1) one is a foolish being of karmic evil forever caught in birth and death without any condition leading to emancipation, and (2) Amida’s Forty-eight Vows grasp beings and carry beings without doubt or apprehension to birth in the Pure Land. Shinran considers deep mind to be the content of *shinjin* itself. Its two aspects — the fundamental impossibility for one to attain nirvana and the absolute certainty of attainment through the Vow — form the content of a single realization. Neither is the pre-requisite for the other. Rather, they arise together, in a mutual inter-relationship.

The realization of *shinjin*, says Shinran, is none other than the arising of wisdom.

Know that since Amida’s Vow is wisdom, the emergence of the mind of entrusting

³⁷ Shinran, *Notes on Once-Calling and Many- Calling*, 486-7

³⁸ Shandao, *Commentary on the Contemplation Sutra*, cited by Shinran in *True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way*, trans. Dennis Hirota, et al, in *Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 85.

oneself to it is the arising of wisdom.³⁹

This is a counter-intuitive sense of wisdom. It is wisdom that arises when we profoundly realize our finitude, falsity and emptiness. Even this sense of wisdom is beyond our capability, however. It is Buddha-wisdom that unfolds as compassion. Even as we seek to know ourselves and the Buddha – as we learn, read and hear the Buddha’s voice – we come to realize that the Buddha really knows us by becoming us, entering into our hearts as *shinjin*.

We come to know the Buddha when we find ourselves illumined by the Wisdom-Light. We are exposed by the light, emptied within the light. Our false claims to independence, agency, and omnipotence are exposed and emptied within the light. It is exactly in that emptying that there arises for the first time the possibility of being able to know ourselves and live genuine lives. We awaken to the reality of wisdom and compassion in all existences and find ourselves able to be participants in the activity of wisdom and compassion in our lives.

Coda Two. Shinran and Transcendent Immanence

As much as I revere Shinran, I also have great respect for Dōgen Zenji. Not long ago, my colleague at the Institute of Buddhist Studies, Rev. Daijaku Kinst, a Sōtō Zen priest, and I were engaged in one of our many conversations about Zen and Shin Buddhism. In particular, we were discussing this well-known passage from Dōgen.

To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.⁴⁰

My conversations with Daijaku Kinst are usually rambling, speculative and highly entertaining. We recognize, of course, that Dōgen and Shinran had very different perspectives on practice, enlightenment and Buddha. But, to the extent that they were more-or-less contemporary thinkers grounded in Mahāyāna Buddhism, we are fascinated

³⁹ Shinran, *Hymns of the Dharma-Ages*, trans. Dennis Hirota, et al, in Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 407.

⁴⁰ Dōgen, “*Genjōkōan*” (Actualizing the Fundamental Point), in *Shōbōgenzō* (“Treasury of the True Dharma Eye”), translated by Robert Aitken and Kazuaki Tanahashi, and revised at the San Francisco Zen Center. Retrieved from: http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Dogen_Teachings/GenjoKoan_Aitken.htm.

by their approaches to common religious concerns. On this particular occasion, we were discussing the passage above, and I offered this rather shallow (and provisional) suggestion: Might not Dōgen's and Shinran's thoughts on studying or learning the Buddhist path be expressed, respectively, in the following way?

For Dōgen, Buddha-nature is revealed when the self, actualized by myriad things, sees that it is empty. Here, the focus would be on one's encounter with the nondual nature of reality within this realm of duality. Perhaps this might also offer an insight on the idea of immanent transcendence. In other words, "That which is beyond the self is revealed within none other than the self itself."

In contrast, my sense on Shinran could be expressed in this way: Myriad things are actualized when the self is exposed by emptiness/Buddha-nature. This perspective might be focusing on the exposure of our dualistic apprehension of reality within compassionate activity that unfolds from nondual wisdom. In that sense, it could be thought of in the sense of transcendent immanence. Perhaps a Shin Buddhist expression might be, "None other than this very self is exposed by that which is beyond the self."

I am also reminded of a Dharma talk given by a Zen priest, who offered this example: Imagine yourself sitting in a pitch-black room; no light has entered that room for eons of time. Suddenly, a curtain parts, allowing a single ray of light to pierce the darkness. We might ordinarily say that the light has entered the room and illuminated the darkness, and thus we see the light. But what does that mean? In actuality, we are not really seeing the rays of light themselves. What we are seeing is the light reflecting off of dust floating in the room. Isn't this always the case for us, in our *samsaric* existence? We might say, "Because of the dust, we can see the light." Might this be a Zen understanding?

In contrast, might Shinran be teaching us this? "Because of the light, we can see the dust." I would like to suggest that Shin Buddhism offers a focus on a soteriology of transcendent immanence. Formless Dharma-body as suchness gives rise to Dharma-body as compassionate means. It manifests the form of light, which exposes us in its wisdom-illumination, and takes a name—*Namu amidabutsu*—making itself known to us, enabling us to know ourselves and live authentic lives.

Moreover, it also seems to me, that Shinran, the realist, might now ask an age-old question, a question posed by Hamlet in this way:

What [a] piece of work is a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in form and moving, how express and admirable in action, how like an Angel in apprehension, how like a God! The beauty of the world! the paragon of animals – and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me – nor Woman

neither, though by your smiling you seem to say so.”⁴¹

With these words from his monologue in Act Two, Scene 2 of Shakespeare’s play, Hamlet laments to his old friends over the wide disparity between the nobility that people believe themselves to possess and the base reality of the human heart and behavior. “[H]ow like a God! ... Hamlet cries, “And yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?” What does it mean to be a sentient being? Exposed within the illumination of Wisdom-Light do we simply recognize ourselves as dust, albeit the fifth-level element within our base and evil world? Is that all there is to Shinran’s message to unenlightened beings? Or, might he be suggesting paradoxically transformative and empowering? Does Shinran perhaps reveal that Amida Buddha as Absolute Other exposes and embraces the finitude and particularity of each being as other, and in that way Amida as Other becomes Absolute within the other’s experience of being exposed as finite, imperfect, and evil and thus embraced by the Other? Perhaps within the activity of wisdom unfolding as compassion it is not just that we can see the light because of the dust or see the dust because of the light. Perhaps Shinran offers that we can see it in both ways.

In this well-known passage in the postscript of *Tannishō*, the individual sentient being Shinran cries out from the particularity of his own experience of shame and gratitude for the compassionate activity of Amida’s Vow-mind:

When I consider deeply the Vow of Amida, which arose from five kalpas of profound thought, I realize that it was entirely for the sake of myself alone! Then how I am filled with gratitude for the Primal Vow, in which Amida resolved to save me, though I am burdened with such heavy karma.⁴²

The Buddha’s Vow mind is not true because we know it, but because it exposes us; it knows us and becomes us. It is not real because we seek and find it, but because it embraces us; it seeks and finds us just as we are. Emptied of our false claims to independence, agency, and omnipotence, we are (in Shinshū-esque terms) “embraced and never abandoned” by the Wisdom-Light, and are now able to live genuinely, as unique individuals within a universe of genuine, unique individuals. The Buddha’s Vow mind—

⁴¹ Shakespeare, William. “Hamlet (Quarto 2, 1604),” *Internet Shakespeare Editions*, (University of Victoria, NaN undefined NaN. Web. 28 Feb. 2021). Retrieved from: https://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/doc/Ham_Q2/index.html.

⁴² *A Record in Lament of Divergences*, trans. Dennis Hirota, et al, in Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha. *The Collected Works of Shinran*, vol 1. (Kyoto: Hongwanji International Center, 1997), 679.

that activity of wisdom unfolding as compassion—exposes and empties us, and yet at the same time, it grounds and enables our individual and communal lives so that we may seek to take the Buddha's Vows as our own and practice compassion with a deep sense of interconnectedness and gratitude for all existences.

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