

Discourses on Birth in Modern Shin Buddhist Studies in Early 20th Century

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It is well known that the teaching of annatta (snk. anatman), or no-self, is one of the three marks of existence in Buddhism.

In early Buddhist texts annatta implied a strategy for viewing the perception of self as conditioned processes instead of seeing it as an entity or an essence. For example, when the Buddha was asked about the existence of a self, he often refused to answer. Instead, he would point out the incorrectness of thinking of it in terms of existence and non-existence, and would then in response expound the teaching of the dependent origination. This means that instead of questioning 'Is there a self?' the Buddha would inquire, "How does the perception of self originate?"

On the other hand, we can often observe the notion of a presupposed self or entity as the subject of awareness and actions in the traditional strata of Western thought. I am not going to discuss how the concept of subjectivity developed in the context of Western socio-cultural and historical strata here. Obviously we can recognize a fundamentally different attitude there as to the matter of existence of self.

Then, is the theme of this conference, 'Subjectivity in the Pure Land

Buddhism” an improper question? The prospectus of this conference defines of the focal point of this conference as follows: Studies of Pure Land Buddhism are often rooted in modern discourses of religious studies that take certain fundamental concepts for granted: individuality, subjectivity, and historicity. But how have the referents of these modern concepts been understood in relation to Pure Land Buddhist doctrine and praxis? How has subjectivity, the answer to the question of who “I” am or who “we” are, been understood across Buddhist cultures and histories?

The content of the prospectus of this conference sounds very problematic from the standpoint of the Buddha’s refusal to answer the question about the existence of self. To be honest, the term “subjectivity” sounds slippery to me not only because it may not fit within the Buddhist development of no-self but also because the term has obviously had multiple meanings in the development of Western philosophy and thought.

However, if we look back on the history of the discourses and controversies regarding Japanese Pure Land Buddhism after mid-nineteen century, it is obvious that these concepts, individuality, subjectivity, and historicity, were the newest key-words to elucidate the doctrine and praxis of Pure Land Buddhism. In other words, without grasping the content of these concepts, it would be difficult for us to understand the implications of various discourses by modern Japanese Pure Land Buddhists. But at the same time, I maintain that these key-words are also foreign to the traditional framework of Buddhist logic as well as Japanese Buddhism at that time. These words were employed to re-interpret Buddhist teaching in the context of modernity. In this sense, we should be

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What foreign and indigenous connotations are embedded in the term “subjectivity” in the modern discourse of Pure Land Buddhism? And what is excluded from that discourse? In my presentation, I would like to analyze the discourses about the idea of birth in the Meiji and Taisho eras and consider the characteristics of the meaning of subjectivity in the discussions. Concretely, I will offer an overview of the modern development of Shin Buddhist studies from the standpoint of its methodology. I will then discuss some modern discourses about Shinran’s idea of birth in order to observe the manner in which the question of subjectivity has operated behind the scenes in those discourses. This is still a very preliminary analysis.

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In the development of Pure Land thought, the concept of birth in Pure Land Buddhism has led to the question of “Who or what is born in the Pure Land?”

The question as to the legitimacy of Pure Land Buddhism within the context of fundamental Buddhist teaching has been raised since early stages of its history. We can find many apologetic discourses that sought to respond to these criticisms in Chinese Pure Land Buddhist writings.

For example, the sixth century Chinese Pure Land master Tanluan (476—542) discusses the issue in his writing as follows:

Question: In the Mahayana sutras and treatises it is frequently

taught that sentient beings are in the final analysis unborn, like empty space. Why does Bodhisattva Vasubandhu express aspiration for “birth”?

Answer: The statement, “Sentient beings are unborn, like empty space,” is open to two interpretations. First, what ordinary people see—such as sentient beings, which they conceive as real, or the acts of being born and dying, which they view as real—is ultimately non-existent, like imaginary “tortoise fur,” or like empty space. Second, since all things are “born” from causal conditions, they are actually unborn; that is, they are non-existent, like empty space. The “birth” to which Bodhisattva Vasubandhu aspires refers to being born through causal conditions. Hence it is provisionally termed “birth.” This does not mean that there are real beings or that being born and dying is real, as ordinary people imagine.

Question: In what sense do you speak of birth in the Pure Land?

Answer: For the provisionally-called “person” in this world who practices the five gates of mindfulness, the preceding thought is the cause of the succeeding thought. The provisionally-called “person” of this defiled world and the provisionally-called “person” of the Pure Land cannot be definitely called the same or definitely called different.

The same is true of preceding thought and succeeding thought. The reason is that if they were one and the same, then there would be no causality; if they were different, there would be no continuity. This principle is the gate of contemplating sameness and difference;

it is discussed in detail in the treatises.¹

Here Tanluan, like many other Pure Land thinkers of the time, applied the Mahayana logic of the non-duality and interpenetration of discriminative and non-discriminative realms to Pure Land concepts such as birth.

I am not going to discuss the topic here, but let me say briefly that two basic standpoints developed based upon such an understanding: First, a meditative tradition that emphasized the elimination of delusional thinking and the apprehension of formless reality, and second, the Pure Land tradition that was attentive to the compassionate working of reality.² In the latter case, the concept of birth in an other-worldly realm after death was emphasized.

In Chinese Pure Land Buddhism this interpretation also raised questions as to the legitimacy of such an idea of birth. This attitude would be later inherited by Japanese Pure Land thinkers, including Shinran. At the same time, it is necessary to place this trend within the context of consciousness of the time in which Shinran lived. Within any given individual thinker these dimensions of thought may sometimes align with one another, while at other times they may remain contradictory with each other.

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In the 1850s, Japanese realized much about the overwhelming threat posed by the economic, military, and technical superiority of the West. Recognizing the risks to the country's independence, the leaders and ideologues in this crisis sought an ideology that would maintain the unity

of Japan as a whole.

The way they chose to unite the diverse forces and opinions was by legitimizing the absolute authority of the emperor. This had a decided impact on the characteristics of the modernization in Japan after the Meiji Restoration. Japanese modernization came to be set upon the framework of a transcendent principal superior to the all other statuses, social rank, and powers. The revival of the ancient idea of the unity of religious ritual and government administration is an eloquent indication of this fact. Later, this rather anachronistic policy had to be abolished because of the widespread criticism of it. But the government was able to proceed with the establishment of a national religious system based on Shinto that legitimized the absolute authority of the emperor.

This elevated the status of Shinto in various social spheres, and jeopardized that of Buddhism. In addition, zealous Shintoists and advocates of National Learning tried to eradicate Buddhism all over Japan. Many Buddhist temples were abolished and a large number of Buddhist statues were destroyed during this time. However, above all, in spite of the harsh oppression to it, Buddhism retained formidable influence over the people's lives throughout the Meiji era, even as it struggled to achieve self-transformation in accord with the new circumstance.

Recent discussions among scholars of modern Japanese history and thought indicate that there is a significant trend to re-evaluate the role of Buddhism in the modernization process after the Meiji restoration. They maintain that the historical analyses of the modernization process of Japan after Meiji have failed to pay sufficient attention to the vital role

Discourses on Birth in Modern Shin Buddhist Studies in Early 20th Century of individual Buddhists and local Buddhist institutions in the modernization process of Japan after Meiji.

I agree that such recent analyses and speculation have great value, and I am keenly aware that it would be important to bring the same perspectives to Shin Buddhist studies today.

After the Meiji restoration, philological reading of and commentary on the sacred texts was the first approach to traditional Shin Buddhist studies among both Nishi and Higashi Honganji scholars. Later, a type of research centered on the established topics for discussions began to be carried out among especially Nishi scholars. After that, an historical study of developments in the Shin Buddhist doctrine was attempted in both schools.

However, in spite of attempts to respond to modern ideas and scholarship in the Meiji era, traditional Shin Buddhist Studies still remained for the most part attached to the old pre-modern research methods for some time.

Kiyozawa Manshi (1863-1903) is said to be the founder of modern Shin Buddhist studies in the Otani branch with his view of modern methodology and his critical view of the traditional research. Concretely, his criticism of the traditional research methods consisted of two points: first, he emphasized a clear distinction between *shūgi* (宗義) and *shūgaku* (宗学), and second stressed the needs for ‘the free study.’ According to Kiyozawa, *shūgi* is the teaching established by Shinran and is fixed and unchangeable. *Shūgaku* is the scholarly investigation of the meaning of *shūgi*. *Shūgi* is a standard to determine whether the *shūgi* is correct or

incorrect. In other words, the absoluteness has to be removed from *shūgaku* and “the free study” is required in *shūgaku*. Kiyozawa emphasized the needs of “the immediate comprehension of *shūgi* grounded in the modern critical spirit” and “the opening and revelation of *shūgi* based upon a dialogue with the ideas of the period.” However, since Kiyozawa died rather early age at 41 years old, his successors like Soga Ryōjin (1875–1971) and Kaneko Daiei (1881–1976) pursued his enterprise.

On the other hand, Maeda Eun (1857–1930) in Nishihonganji branch was, like Kiyozawa, a pioneer in his attempt to set forth a modern methodology in traditional Shin Buddhist studies. Maeda recommended that four new research methods be introduced to modern Shin Buddhist scholarship: (1) philosophical, (2) historical, (3) philosophically historical, and (4) systematic study. Areas 2) and 3) refer to objective, historical study methods, while 1) and 4) refer to more subjective philosophical and systematic study.³

We can recognize two different directions within which modern Shin Buddhist studies could respond to the assimilation of modern thought among the people. Kiyozawa emphasized the importance of subjective understanding. In contrast, Maeda put his emphasis upon the standards of modern methodology in the studies.

It is often said that this distinction has characterized the difference between modern Shin Buddhist studies of Otani and Nishihonganji.

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The State-led modernization achieved remarkable industrial and

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economic development in Japan during the Taisho period. From 1910 to 1930, this brought about the growth of the middle class with its modern life-styles, particularly in metropolitan areas. At the same time, non-conventional, liberal culture and behavior also emerged. However, it did not become engrained in society, since it contradicted conventional pre-modern values and relations such as the paternalistic system in the family, as well as authoritarian relationships within the organization. Instead, militaristic Nationalism later became overwhelming because of those values and relationships. In the Taisho era, Kiyozawa and Maeda's successors such as Kaneko and Soga argued for the modernization of Shin Buddhist studies in this atmosphere.

This can be seen in Kaneko's words, "The basic characteristic of the study of Shin Buddhism is to study and search for the fulfillment of one's own Buddhist path."⁴ Their understanding of Shinran's teaching emphasized the subjective or existential study of teaching. Such an attitude was inherited from Kiyozawa, and led to the development of Shin Buddhist studies in Otani.

On the other hand, influenced by Maeda, Naotaro Nonomura (1870–1945) who was a professor of religious studies at Ryūkoku University and an ordained minister of Nishihonganji, openly criticized the idea of birth in the Pure Land from the view of modern knowledge.

In 1923, he wrote an article titled *Jōdokyō kakushinron* (The Logic of Transformation of Pure Land Buddhism) on Chugai-nippo News paper⁵. Based on that article he published the book, *Jōdokyō hihan* (The Critique of Pure Land Buddhism) in the same year. In this book, he insisted that:

- The idea of birth itself is not that of genuine religion.
- The idea of birth based upon the idea of three lives, the past, the present and the future not only totally differs from the original teaching of the Buddha, but also from modern scholarship.
- It is dangerous for us to try to understand religion by presupposing the existence of life after death⁶.

Nonomura's discourses brought about severe criticism of his understanding by traditional Shin Buddhist scholars and Nishihonganji authorities. As the result, he was expelled from the Nishihonganji clergy, and forced to resign from Ryukoku University in 1923. After this incident, the Nishihonganji established the *Kangakuryo* and *Shugakuin* to control both the free study and heretical beliefs. They also published the Catechism of *Anjin* (faith) and *Kyōgi* and encouraged ministers to learn them. Some professors and students reacted to these measures by calling for the independence and autonomy of scholarship and even dared to leave Ryukoku University in protest.

Nonomura's arguments seem to take a typical modernist point of view based upon a scientific worldview. However, he did not intend merely to negate religious ideas or the Shin Buddhist teaching in particular. Rather what he really sought was the true meaning of religion in the flux of Western thoughts and values in Japan.

For example, while criticizing superstitious worship he asked, "Why is Pure Land Buddhism called religion?" and answered, "It is not because it teaches the idea of birth in the Pure Land.... it is because Pure Land teaching reveals the path of liberation from our attachments." Then he

continued “By trusting in Amida Buddha we are transformed into new existence and liberated from the sufferings that results from our egocentric mind⁷.” His original intention was to write a book that did not merely criticize Pure Land thought, but sought to disseminate its the radical meaning. But the traditional authorities of Nishihonganji did not even try to understand this.

They quickly responded to Nonomura’s discourse in a negative manner. For example, Hocchin Suzuki who was a leader of traditional of Shin Buddhist studies at that time publicly criticized his discourse insisting, “We cannot discuss the Shin Buddhist teaching without the objective existence of Amida Buddha and Pure Land. The Shin Buddhist teaching can never be understood by neglecting Amida Buddha or negating the idea of the life after death.”⁸

Although Nonomura’s understanding of the idea of birth did not reflect the earlier-mentioned developments of Pure Land thinkers’ discourses on birth based on fundamental Mahayana Buddhist logic such as unborn and non-existent, Nonomura intended to remind people of the true meaning of religious experience. He pointed out that we could have “a new principal of unity” through religion and insisted that “the teaching of the two-fold deep mind” expresses the nature of true religious experience in the deepest manner.

He explained that the relationship between the two kinds of deep mind as following:

Shantao’s two kinds of deep mind is like one in which discrimination is itself equality; equality is itself discrimination; falsity is

itself truth; a circle is square; or the darkness of night is itself the dawn. That is, it cannot be understood by our rationality or discriminative thinking.⁹

Nonomura understand that the fundamental meaning of religious experience lies in such contradictory relationship between discrimination and equality, false and truth. Through such religious experience we will be liberated from various attachments and sufferings. For Nonomura, “the destruction of human’s rational thought is the nature of religion.”

In his book entitled, *Yogashukyogaku ni okeru Jodokyo no Chii* published in 1924, he states;

The meaning of “nothingness” stands against “existence”. What we claim here is the word that is beyond the linguistic world; and what is called the mind which is impossible to think of and claim....If it is impossible to think how we can claim it, is there such state of mind or not? If there is, what is the psychological meaning of it? This is my purpose to write book *Shūkyō-gaku-yōron*. It is to explain these issues from scientific approaches.¹⁰

I believe that Nonomura’s attitude must to a certain extent have been influenced by Kiyozawa’s discourse on the philosophical study of religion.

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However, as I mentioned above, Nonomura’s discourse was criticized as heresy and as the result he was expelled from the Nishihonganji. Coincidentally, a similar confrontation occurred in Otani branch several years later. Kaneko and Soga were severely condemned as heretics for

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their existential interpretation of the idea of the Pure Land and Bodhisattva Dharmakara.

Interestingly, on the one hand, Nonomura proposed to negate the idea of existence of the Pure Land, and on the other hand, Kaneko and Soga sought to re-interpret the existential meaning of the Pure Land and Bodhisattva Dharmakara without negating the existence of the Pure Land. They argued against an eternal realm beyond all human conceptualization. But all of them similarly emphasized ‘the idea of twofold deep mind’ as the fundamental experience of Shin Buddhism. Here, we can discern a common perspective of these modern discourses of Pure Land Buddhists, that is, an existential or experiential perspective to truth, and a subjective and epistemological examination of it, in both the Otani and Nishihonganji traditions.

Kiyozawa’s profound existential quest was expressed in the phrase, “What is self? It is the deepest question of life¹¹.” In other words, Kiyozawa cultivated religious spirituality from the perspective of the modern concept of self or subjectivity. However, the modern concept of self in the context of Western thought differs from what Kiyozawa meant to cultivate through his quest. Being aware of that, he might have referred to his quest as experimental. This double-bind or syncretic understanding of Western concepts is seen not only in Kiyozawa’s discourse but also in many other intelligentsia’ in general.

Kaneko, Soga and Nonomura extended this quest, further seeking the genuine meaning of self or subjectivity in Buddhism. In this context, they brought up the idea of birth as the object of analysis

One of the biggest controversial issues relating to the idea of birth was the existence of the Pure Land. The interpretations of these scholars were not well received at the beginning. It was not only because the conservative authorities were stubborn but also the popular view of the Pure Land as a blissful world existing in the West to which one can go after death still remained pervasive among ordinary people at that time.

On the other hand, traditional scholars also sought the answer to the questions through the objective analysis of the sacred texts employing modern philological methods. This created a rather twisted relationship between them, because both of them based their rationale upon the modern perspectives. The former put their legitimacy upon subjectivity or individuality, while the latter place theirs upon the idea of objectivity.

The concept of subjectivity and objectivity in the West is closely related with the issue of dogmatism and skepticism. However, I doubt whether proponents of either standpoint were aware of the danger of falling into dogmatism or arbitrary, or of the way to avoid falling into either of them. Even when those taking traditional standpoints applied the concept of objectivity as apologetics, doubts must be raised as to their legitimacy, since they often took place with presupposed certain conclusions. At the same time, subjective or existential understandings are apt to be stuck into arbitrariness and easily fall into mere idealism.

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One of the characteristics woven in discourses on birth in the Meiji period was a simple acceptance of the conceptual framework of subjectiv-

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ity and objectivity without a real understanding of its historical and philosophical context in the West.

The term 'birth (*ōjō*)' literally means "to go to be born." Traditionally it meant to be born in an environment where one could receive the guidance and influence of a Buddha presiding the realm, attain the non-retrogressive stage, and ultimately realize perfect enlightenment.

However, Shinran interpreted it from multi-dimensional perspectives, that is to say, he discussed birth in present life as the benefit of shinjin, placing its legitimate basis in the phrase "they then attain birth" in the passage on the fulfillment of the Eighteenth Vow. Yet he also, in keeping with the traditions of Pure Land Buddhism, talked of birth in that land in the world to come after death. He elucidated it as "inconceivable birth" (*nanjigi ōjō*).

Birth had been generally understood to be a goal in Pure Land Buddhism before Shinran. However, Shinran understood it as both the benefit of shinjin in this life and the result after death.

How we can understand this two aspects of Shinran's idea of birth? In conventional interpretations Shin Buddhist scholars, especially those of the Nishihonganji, reconcile the meaning of these two modes of birth taught by Shinran by putting the emphasis upon the latter and understanding birth as a benefit of shinjin in the sense that one is assured of gaining birth in the Pure Land after death.

This interpretation may be correct because Shinran deeply conceived the true nature of the self to be full of blind passions and delusions until the moment of death. Nevertheless, does this view really grasp the entire

meaning of Shinran's intention to understand birth to be both the benefit of shinjin in this life and being born in the Pure Land after death?

Concerning Shinran's understanding of this phrase "they then attain birth" in the fulfillment passage of the Eighteen Vow has been considered in various ways in modern Shin Buddhist studies. Two different currents of understanding can be observed there. One current is to interpretation as being settled and assured of eventually attaining birth in the world to come after death. The other current is to understand the phrase as referring to birth in the present life. Those who took former position were such scholars as Senmyo Kagai (1835–1914), Daien Fugen (1903–1975) and Eryu Mikogami (1902–1989), while scholars such as Engetsu Toyo (1818–1902) took the latter view¹².

I am not going to scrutinize those scholars' discourses in Nishihongan-ji here. However, I would like to point out that Shinran's understanding of not only indicates Shinran's definition of birth but also reveals the multi-dimensional meaning of his religious awakening in shinjin. Moreover, it indicates the dynamics of the religious process in the life of person of shinjin, called the "truly settled one." However, traditional studies of Shin Buddhism prior to the Meiji period did not pay much attention to these points.

Thinkers in Shin Buddhist circle like Nonomura, Kaneko, and Soga after Meiji strove to resolve the contradiction resulting from such simplistic attitudes in the process of modernization of Japan. Meanwhile, Nishida Kitaro also struggled with the conceptual framework of the West philosophy. For example, his logic of contradictory unity of self and the idea of

Discourses on Birth in Modern Shin Buddhist Studies in Early 20th Century place provided an alternative framework to the discourses in Shin Buddhist studies in the Showa period. In the 1970s Yoshifumi Ueda (1904-1993) also sought to interpret it as the ultimate development of Mahayana logic of wisdom and compassion in 1970s. However, the similar discussion to Nonomura's case burst among the traditional Shin Buddhist studies.

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- 1 Shinran CWS, 1: 27-28.
- 2 Dennis Hirota, "Japanese Pure Land Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2014 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/japanese-pure-land/>>.
- 3 See Akio Tatsudani, "Shinshugaku Hōhōron Kenkyūgakusetsushi (1) • (2). *Ryūkoku University Graduate School Bulletin*
- 4 Daiei Kaneko, *Shinshūgaku Gairon*, p18.
- 5 Chugai-nippo News paper in January (a series of 21articles).
- 6 Naotara Nonomura *Jodokyo hihan* 1923, p. 57-62.
- 7 Ibid. p. 123.
- 8 Chugai-nippo Newspaper, June 14, 1923.
- 9 Chugai-nippo Newspaper, April 18, 1924.
- 10 Naotaro Nonomura *Yogashukyogaku ni okeru Jodokyo no Chii* 1924, p24.
- 11 Manshi Kiyozawa *Rosenki* in *Kiyozawa Manshi Zenshu* Vol. 8 2003, p. 363.
- 12 See Takamaro Shigaraki *Shinran niokeru shin no kenkyu* in *Shigaraki Takamaro Chosakushu* Vol.3 2007, p. 381-384.