

THE PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN PURE LAND BUDDHISM¹

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Introduction

The complexity of today's environmental crisis is closely related not only to the economic, political, and social activity of human beings, but it is also conditioned by our moral and spiritual attitude toward the environment. What we choose to do about the environment is deeply connected to how we understand ourselves in relation to the environment. It follows that each of us needs to undergo a fundamental change in our style of life and way of thinking. Questions remain, however, as to what sort of alternative lifestyles and styles of thought might be adopted, and how we might go about finding them.

Buddhist thought may well provide an important and useful standpoint from which to understand the structure and causes of environmental problems. However, at the same time, we should be very careful about arriving at quick and easy conclusions about the link between Buddhism and the environment, since the tendency to regard Buddhist doctrines as identical with the ecological conception of the environment could potentially distort the original purpose of the Buddhist teachings. Moreover, as we try to resolve today's environmental problems, that tendency is often tied to a failure on our part to recognize that the essence of the problem lies in the structure of the modern age itself. As Lewis Lancaster has observed, "We may seek only to find expressions and practices in Budd-

hism that can be interpreted as supportive of ethical norms and values established in our modern and postmodern era.”²

With these thoughts in mind, I shall present some aspects of Pure Land Buddhist spirituality, paying particular attention to the teachings of Shinran (1173-1262), who in thirteenth century Japan forged a Buddhist path that is accessible to all in daily life. It is my hope that this approach will provide some useful perspectives to our consideration of today’s environmental problems.

Pure Land Buddhism and the Environment

The set of beliefs and practices surrounding Amida Buddha and his Pure Land is usually broadly referred to as Pure Land Buddhism. In Buddhist history there are many sūtras and discourses that refer to the idea of Amida Buddha or the Pure Land, but the most important Indian textual sources for Pure Land Buddhism are the Larger Sūtra (the Larger Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra) and the Smaller Sūtra (the Smaller Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra), which are said to have been compiled in Northwest India around 100 C.E. Pure Land Buddhism was transmitted to China through Central Asia as early as the middle of the second century and then underwent further development until it reached its philosophical and cultural culmination in the seventh century.³ In China, along with the Larger Sūtra and the Smaller Sūtra the Contemplation Sūtra also became very popular. Appealing as it did to both ordinary lay people and clerics, Pure Land Buddhism spread widely throughout East Asia, including Japan.

However, in comparison with Zen Buddhism, which also grew up in the same region around the same period, Pure Land Buddhism has not received extensive attention in the West.⁴ Moreover, since much of the Western literature on East Asian Buddhism has accepted Zen apologetics uncritically, a general perception that Pure Land Buddhism is somehow a less sophisticated, and perhaps even less authentic, form of Buddhism has

been created. This does not, however, mean that Pure Land Buddhism had less cultural, societal, or philosophical influence in East Asia than did Zen Buddhism. In fact, it might be said that Pure Land Buddhism was more substantially influential upon the peoples and societies of East Asia.

Much, if not all, of the early Western interest in Buddhism was derived from books written by Westerners whose concerns lay in the doctrines of canonical Buddhist scriptures or the speculations of Buddhist thinkers and meditating yogis. A recent shift in focus among some groups towards the teachings of living Zen or Tibetan Buddhist teachers seems to have redirected that earlier tendency to a certain extent. Even then, however, people in the West tend to be drawn to those forms of Buddhism that emphasize self-cultivation and which are usually connected with some sort of cognitive, personal and empowering experience. But for many Buddhists in East Asia, this image represents only a part of the Buddhist belief system, which as a whole comprises more than just meditation or mental cultivation.⁵

For instance, Pure Land Buddhists have valued Amida Buddha's Vows as the source of their religious guidance and aspiration. Although closely connected with the self-cultivation of believers, Pure Land Buddhism shifts the focus of its teaching from self-cultivation to the realization of a self-transcendental relationship of practitioners with Amida Buddha's Vows. The belief systems of Zen Buddhism and Pure Land Buddhism seem to sharply contrast with one another. But what they hold in common is the Buddhist path of seeking to achieve nirvana or enlightenment. The external differences between the two reflect the different kinds of people to whom the respective teachings are directed, that is, practitioners in the monastery or ordinary lay people, as well as differences in the method of attaining enlightenment.

What perspective might Pure Land Buddhism be able to contribute to the resolution of today's environmental problems? Although such discussions among Pure Land Buddhists have been increasing in recent years,

they remain insufficient both in numbers and the range of their discussions. But, in considering Buddhist models for an ecological world, frequently attention is drawn to the concept of the Pure Land.

The Pure Land is often taken to be a place similar to the Christian God's Heaven or the land of Utopia. Nevertheless, the Pure Land is not the product of God's creation; nor is it the place of simple human imagination. Rather, as mentioned above, it represents the manifestation of the Buddha's enlightenment. Intrinsic reality and external appearances find inseparable expression in the Pure Land. Further, the intrinsic reality of the Pure Land has its foundation in the Mahāyāna concept of *sunyata* or emptiness. Although the Larger Sūtra⁶ depicts a variety of glorious forms of the Pure Land, it also explains over and over again that the Land is established through practicing the dharma of emptiness, desirelessness, and signlessness by the Bodhisattava Dharmakara, who attains buddhahood and becomes Amida Buddha. It states

Holding the great ornament of virtue, possessed of all the practices, he made all living beings gain possession of merit and virtue. He [Bodhisattva Dharmakara] remained firm in his awareness of the reality of emptiness, firm in his detachment from distinctions and preferences, and free from desire. Not construction or giving rise to any conceptualizations, he had insight into the fact that all things are like a magical illusion.⁷

In other words, the essential meaning of the Pure Land does not lie in the physical existence of the land, but rather in the exhibition of the state of enlightenment or the reality of emptiness, desirelessness, and signlessness. In this context, the Treatise on the Pure Land attributed to Vasubandhu, a great Indian Mahāyāna master of the Yogācāra (Jpn. *Yugagyō ha*, also Skt. *Cittamātra*, "Consciousness Only") school, asserts that "The Pure Land is the realm of purity above various states of existence in the three

worlds of *saṃsāra*.”⁸ And Tanluan, a Chinese master of the Pure Land school, explains in his *Commentary on the Treatise on the Pure Land* that “Because it is formless, it can take all forms,”⁹ Further, Shandao, another Chinese master of the Pure Land school, declares that “The land of bliss is the realm of nirvana, the uncreated.”¹⁰ These descriptions and interpretations of the Pure Land are all based in Mahāyāna logic, and clearly point to the essential difference between the Pure Land and God’s heaven or the land of Utopia.

On the other hand, it is also true that the idea of the Pure Land is sometimes taught in a dichotomous manner, which portrays sharp contrasts between the Pure Land and this world. It is taught that this deluded world (*sahā*) is to be abandoned and the Pure Land as the land of bliss is to be sought after. There can be no doubt that this explanation became a useful vehicle for spreading the Pure Land teaching, especially among ordinary people.

In addition, when the idea of the Pure Land was introduced to countries in East Asia, the Pure Land was comprehended in ways conditioned by indigenous religious thinking. This sometimes makes it difficult to understand the Pure Land Buddhism in the larger context of Mahāyāna logic.

In Sui and early Tang China, many Buddhist masters also suggested ways to resolve these inconsistencies. Some masters insisted that there were limitations to the Pure Land itself, while others emphasized the equality of enlightenment realized in the Pure Land. The former, including such masters as Huiyuan of Jingying, Jizang and Kuiji, understood the Pure Land in more conceptual and philosophical scheme, whereas the latter, including such masters as Daozhuo and Shandao, viewed the Pure Land in more practical or soteriological schemes.

In the early stages of Japanese Buddhism, from the seventh through the eighth centuries, this contradiction was apparently acknowledged in a rather simplistic manner without understanding of Mahāyāna logic. Here

the concept of the Pure Land was utilized to explicate indigenous religious notions such as unseen deities (Jpn. kami) and their world. By the ninth century, the Pure Land teachings were systematically introduced to Japan and flourished all over Japan after that. However, the Pure Land was basically comprehended as that place where one would be born after death. In any event, this approach did not pay heed to the contradictory aspects of the idea of the Pure Land, which has its basis in Mahāyāna logic. It rarely examined the significance of the tension between this world of delusion and the Pure Land, which is the manifestation of enlightenment. Nor did it explore the significance of the idea of a Pure Land in which even an evil person can be born.

On the other hand, as we shall see later, Shinran seems to have grasped the radical meaning of this tension with his deep insight into the Pure Land. But before turning to his understanding of the Pure Land, let us examine a bit more the way in which the idea of the Pure Land is explicated in the Pure Land Sūtras, while adopting the notion of the environment as a central concern.

The ecological perspectives seen in the idea of the Pure Land

According to the Smaller Sūtra, the Pure Land is the place where Amida Buddha presently resides and expounds the teaching. Amida's Pure Land is also called "the Land of Supreme Bliss," because "the living beings in that realm are free from all forms of suffering and they only experience all forms of happiness."¹¹ The Smaller Sūtra describes the sphere of the Land of Bliss in the following way:

Furthermore, Shariputra, all around this Land of Supreme Bliss, there are seven tiers of railings, seven rows of netting, and seven rows of trees. They are all made of four precious substances.... In the Land of Supreme Bliss there are bathing pools made of the seven precious

THE PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN PURE LAND BUDDHISM

substances. They are filled with the best water, endowed with eight good qualities: their water is always limpid, cool, sweet-tasting, light, soft, placid, healthy, and thirst-quenching.... Above, there are towered pavilions, adorned with gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, crystal, coral, red pearls, and agate.¹²

Further the Sūtra mentions the inhabitants of the Pure Land in this way:

Furthermore, Shariputra, in this buddha-field celestial music is constantly heard. And the ground is made of gold. Four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night, mandara flowers rain down from heaven. Early every morning, each living being in this land picks some of those exquisite flowers, place them in the hem of his robe, and travels to worship with these flowers a hundred billion buddhas in other worlds in the regions of the universe. Immediately thereafter, each of these persons returns, in time for forenoon meal, to this, his meal and afternoon stroll.¹³

The Sūtra depicts a splendid image of the Pure Land full of symbols of the glory and happiness. The glorious form of the Pure Land, described with all kinds of detailed and figurative expressions, such as jeweled trees, jeweled nets, jeweled ponds, jeweled towered pavilions, heavenly music and flowers fascinates the readers. The Pure Land is described as the ideal place in which to live and enjoy supreme bliss.

But these symbolic physical descriptions are not meant to gratify our sensuous desires. It is a manifestation of the Buddha's enlightenment or of the dharma. The Smaller Sūtra further states:

Shariputra, in that Buddha-land, a subtle breeze blows, swaying the rows of jeweled trees and the jeweled nets, so that they emit an exquisite sound, like that of hundreds of thousands of diverse kinds of

musical instruments playing together at the same time. All those who hear this sound enjoy spontaneously and immediately thoughts of Buddha, of the Dharma, and his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly, bringing to mind the Buddha, bringing to mind his Dharma, bringing to mind his Order.¹⁴

We are impressed with the skillful imagination of the Sūtra in the way that it connects the physical existence of the land with spiritual meaning. Every existence in the Pure Land represents the enlightenment of Amida Buddha and the inhabitants of the Pure Land naturally enjoy the Buddha dharma and attain supreme enlightenment. Therefore, many Pure Land masters have explained that we cannot be born in the Pure Land for the purpose of satisfying one's desires.

Further, the image of the Pure Land fully embodies the ideas of inter-connectivity and harmony in diversity. For example, the sūtras explain that the Pure Land is covered by Indra's jeweled net, which also appears in the Avatamsaka Sūtra.

Nets studded with countless gems are stretched all over this Buddhaland. These ornaments (Indra's nets)¹⁵ extend everywhere unto four corners of that land, with jeweled bells, perfumes, and bright colors shining splendidly, in the most charming way.¹⁶

Indra's jeweled net have been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions of Indra's heaven. The artificer has hung a single glittering jewel at every node of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. If we arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the

other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite.¹⁷ This idea of Indra's jeweled net symbolizes the dependent co-arising of all events and the inter-connectedness of all existences in the universe. Therefore, it can be said that the Pure Land is also symbolized by these ideas of inter-connectivity and harmony in diversity.

At the same time, the idea of inter-connectivity and harmony in diversity of the Pure Land does not nullify the characteristic of each individual existence in that land. For instance, in the Smaller Sūtra, it states:

On the surface of the pools, there are lotus blossoms as large as cart wheels. These are blue colored, with a blue sheen; yellow colored, with yellow sheen; red colored, with a red sheen; white colored, with a white sheen; they are delicate and fragrant.¹⁸

Each lotus flower in the Pure Land adorns the land with its own individual color. Strange as it may sound as it repeats these simple refrains, this passage in fact points to the uniqueness of characteristic of each existence. As to this point, the Larger Sūtra gives more glorious and detailed explanation:

Moreover, many jewel lotuses fill this world system. Each jewel blossom has a hundred thousand million petals. The radiant light emanating from their petals is of countless different colors.... From every flower issue thirty-six hundred thousand million rays of light. From each one of these rays issue thirty six hundred thousand million buddhas.¹⁹

The Pure Land is filled with lotuses of countless colors and millions of rays of light. And from each ray of light a buddha appears. The color of each flower petal and each ray of light is neither mixed with nor hindered by others, meaning that each buddha or bodhisattva in the Pure Land is

completely unique, even as they enjoy the same supreme enlightenment. This idea of harmony in diversity may suggest another ecological perspective of Pure Land Buddhism.

The ideas of inter-connectivity and harmony in diversity, seen in the idea of the Pure Land, provide us with an alternative view that may help us to understand the global expansiveness of the world in which today's environmental problems arise. Having been born from individual causes, environmental problems now expand limitlessly. Yet, although this perspective may seem quite natural, our understanding it in this way and our being able to solve those problems are really separate issues. Our understanding of environmental problems from the viewpoint of inter-connectivity and harmony in diversity and the resolution of those problems are not unrelated. Yet, they are still not the same thing. In order to solve the problems it will be necessary to develop a connection between that method of thought and concrete norms of behavior in this modern age.

Shinran's radical understanding of the Pure Land and the Environment

Norms of behavior for Buddhist followers are based in the precepts. In that sense, it is possible that the point of view taken by one who upholds the precepts might suggest a basic attitude that would allow one to come to grips with the idea of the environment from the perspective of the Buddhist teachings. Precepts, for instance, were enacted in order to preserve the community. More specifically, the purpose was to accomplish the perfection of an individual's practice. The intent of the precepts was not to preserve the environment or nature per se. Rather, the goal was the preservation of the environment of practice so that practice might be perfected. But when it comes to practice, precepts often involve a tension between the ideal and the actual. Hence, the Buddha also taught, as the practical aspect of the rule, that it is important to control one's desires.²⁰

In the history of Japanese Buddhism, Shinran grasped this tension, which underlies Pure Land thought, through his deep insight into Amida Buddha and the idea of the Pure Land. The Pure Land teaching was introduced to Japan in the late sixth century, at the early stage of Buddhist history in Japan. Pure Land Buddhism was incorporated into other mainstream Buddhist schools, such as Sanron-shū, Tendai-shū and Shingon-shū, and practices focusing on Amida Buddha were performed as a part of their own programs of practice. However, the Pure Land teaching of nenbutsu attracted many ordinary lay people who were not able to pursue such monastic practices and who hoped to be born in the Pure Land. In the thirteenth century, Hōnen (1133-1212) declared the independence of the Pure Land school in his work, *Senchaku-hongan-nenbutsu-shū*, based on the teaching of the exclusive practice of the nenbutsu. Hōnen insisted that Amida Buddha's vows made no distinction between people intelligent and ignorant, noble and lowly, or good and bad; they were all alike as ordinary human beings. According to Amida Buddha's compassionate vows, all who simply said the nenbutsu would attain birth in the Pure Land.

Inheriting Hōnen's nenbutsu teaching, Shinran made a radical paradigm shift in Pure Land teaching based upon Mahāyāna logic. Here I would like to examine why and how he did so. For example, Shinran states in his "Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling,"

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.²¹

THE PERSPECTIVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN PURE LAND BUDDHISM

Shinran says that oneness, which has neither color nor form and thus cannot be grasped by the mind or described by words, takes form as Bodhisattva Dharmakara, who has fulfilled the unhindered Vow and becomes Amida Buddha. In other words, form, such as Bodhisattva Dharmakara or Amida Buddha, is founded upon the ultimate truth of reality or supreme Buddha which is formless. Thus, he also states in his letter, "Amida Buddha fulfills the purpose of making us know the significance of jinen."²² Shinran interprets the term, jinen, as "being made so from the very beginning," or "Supreme Buddha is formless, because of being formless is called jinen."²³ In this sense, Shinran understands Amida Buddha and the Pure Land to be the dynamic working of ultimate truth.

Shinran explains another aspect of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land in the following passage:

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.²⁴

Here we need to pay attention to the fact that Shinran describes Amida Buddha and the Pure Land as "true fulfilled Buddha and land." This means that both Amida Buddha and the Pure Land exist for the sake of all sentient beings. Shinran does not comprehend Amida and the Pure Land as some kind of metaphysical reality or as something with a kind of actual, essential existence. He realizes that they are the ultimate point of reference that approaches this deluded world. In his "Hymns of the Pure Land," he states:

Each feature and mark release, throughout the ten quarters,
A hundred thousand beams of light;

Thus the Buddhas (light) constantly teach and spread the excellent dharma And lead beings into the Buddha's path.²⁵

Shinran's reference to the innumerable beams of light of the Pure Land approach this world and lead all sentient being to the Buddha's path, shows that he understands the existence of the Pure Land in the connection with the working of true dharma in this world of suffering. The Pure Land and this world are viewed as opposites, standing in contrast to each other; and yet, as the "Other Shore," the Pure Land transcends that opposition and is actively working on "this shore," the world of delusion. Shinran understands it to be a world that illuminates this world of delusion, revealing it to be a world of delusion. In this sense, Shinran's radical understanding of the Pure Land transcends the traditional framework of Pure Land Buddhist faith, in which one desires to be born in that land in the life-to-come. The principle of his approach is one that is critical of both this world and this age.

Therefore, Shinran is describing the settlement of the practitioner of true shinjin to realize enlightenment here and now when he states that "there is no need to wait in anticipation for the moment of death, no need to rely on Amida's coming."²⁶

How do we realize the working of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land in this present world? Shinran explains that we encounter Amida Buddha and the Pure Land through the nenbutsu. Through the nenbutsu, we deeply come to realize the true meaning of Amida Buddha and the Pure Land here and now. Through our experience of the tension between this deluded world and the Pure Land-the actual and the ideal-within the nenbutsu, we truly realize the real state of ourselves and the world. It is obvious that we cannot resolve environmental problems by saying nenbutsu or doing religious practices alone. But in Shinran's radical understanding of the Pure Land, we can find a Pure Land Buddhist spirituality that might provide some useful perspectives to our consideration of the environmen-

tal problems today.

Notes

- 1 This paper is consisted of the abstract from the paper which I published in under the title of “Pure Land Buddhism and Its Perspective on the Environment.” The paper takes up Pure Land thought elucidated in three Pure Land Sutras that Prof. Ohta is academically specialized in.
- 2 Lewis Lancaster, “Buddhism and Ecology: Collective Cultural Perceptions,” in *Buddhism and Ecology: The Interconnection of Dharma and Deeds*, ed. Mary Evelyn Tucker and Duncan Ryuken Williams (Cambridge: Harvard Center for World Religions, 1997), 4.
- 3 For an illuminating account of the development of Pure Land Buddhist thought, see Kenneth Tanaka, *The Dawn of Chinese Pure Land Buddhist Doctrine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 1-19.
- 4 For an extensive discussion of the neglect of Pure Land Buddhism in modern accounts of Buddhism and Japan’s cultural heritage in the West, see Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997). James C. Dobbins, a historian of Medieval Japanese Buddhism, points out that, “Superficial comparisons to Christianity have not helped the attempt to present Pure Land Buddhism as part of Buddhism’s mainstream.” (*Jodo Shinshu: Shin Buddhism in Medieval Japan*, Preface [Reprint. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2002], ix).
- 5 Luis O. Gomez, *Land of Bliss—the Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), 11-12.
- 6 Luis O. Gomez calls this sūtra the “Shorter Sūtra,” though traditionally it has been called the “Smaller Sūtra.” He asserts that the term “shorter” is more idiomatic. Although I use Gomez’s translation, I refer it as the Smaller Sūtra in this paper, not because I am positively against his position, but because the title of the Smaller Sūtra is still used conventionally in many English books.
- 7 Luis O. Gomez, *Land of Bliss—the Paradise of the Buddha of Measureless Light* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1996), 174
- 8 Vasubandhu, *Jingtu lun* (The Treatise on the Pure Land, Jpn. Jodoron) [Taisho-shinshu-daizokyo (Tokyo: Daizokyo-shuppankai, 1914-22)], vol. 26, 230c.
- 9 Tan-luan, *Jingtu lunzhu*, Commentary on the Treatise on the Pure Land

- (Jpn. Jodoronchu) T., vol. 40, no. 826.
- 10 Shandao, *Wuhui fashi zan*, (Jpn. Goehojisan) T., vol. 47, 481a-882a.
 - 11 Gomez, *Land of Bliss*, 146
 - 12 Ibid., 146
 - 13 Ibid., 146-147
 - 14 Ibid., 147
 - 15 This parenthesis is an author's note. Chinese version of the Larger Sūtra literally calls this net "Indra's nets."
 - 16 Gomez, *Land of Bliss*, 185
 - 17 See Francis H. Cook, *The Hua-Yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Press, 1977), 197
 - 18 Gomez, *Land of Bliss*, 146
 - 19 Ibid., 186
 - 20 Refer to Shin Buddhist Ecology: Grounded upon Tension between the Actual and the Ideal
 - 21 Shinran, "Notes on Once-Calling and Many-Calling" (Ichinen tanen mon' i), *The Collected Works of Shinran* (CWS) 2 vols. (Kyoto: Jodo Shinshu Hongwanji-ha, 1997), I.486
 - 22 Shinran, "Mattōshō" (Lamp for the Latter Ages), CWS, I.530
 - 23 Ibid. The Japanese term *shizen*, which usually refers to "nature" today, did not exist prior to the importation of the concept of nature from the West during the process of the modernization of Japan in the nineteenth century. In addition, the term was originally not read as *shizen*, but as *jinen*. As a Buddhist term, *jinen* implies "naturally," which refers to "things-as-they-are" or "suchness." Shinran further understood it to be the "mode of non-dichotomous thinking," which arises as the working of Amida's Vow that enables all sentient beings to realize the attainment of birth in the Pure Land. It would be interesting to consider why the Japanese began to use this term as a translation for the concept of nature in the nineteenth century. However, I would like to devote our present discussion on Shinran's thought to a search for the norms of our behavior.
 - 24 Shinran, "The True Teaching, Practice and Realization of the Pure Land Way" (Ken jōdo shinjitsu kyōgyōshō monrui), CWS, I.177.
 - 25 Shinran, "Hymns of the Pure Land" (Jōdo Wasan), CWS, I.335.
 - 26 Shinran, "Lamp for the Latter Ages", CSW, 523.