

Shinran's Thought from the Perspective of Ecocriticism

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(Summary)

The purpose of this paper is to consider the thought and life of Shinran (1173-1262), the founder of Shin Buddhism in the context of ecocriticism. He described his ideal realm, the Pure Land, as 'daishinkai' (the Ocean of the Vow) and all sentient beings to be saved by the Amida Buddha as 'gunmō' (buds and sprouts) in his main book, *Kyogyōshinshō*. This view of life can be compared with the way John Ruskin portrayed the preciousness of life as 'the wild flower by the wayside' and 'wayward trebles of childhood' in *Unto This Last* (1862). Just as Ruskin's affinity with nature was based on the Bible, Shinran's compassion towards small things was rooted in a religious sentiment derived from Mahayana sutras which teach that all sentient beings, including vermin, are under the protection of the Amida Buddha. This idea shares values with the ecocriticism defined by ASLE-JAPAN (The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment in Japan) as an approach that adopts an ecological stance towards literature stemming from a sense of crisis concerning the destruction of nature. In this way, through an eco-critical interpretation of Shinran's thoughts, we can not only understand more clearly the circumstances of his time but learn how the Buddhist framework of his writing can be applied to present times.

(和文要旨)

「環境批評からみた親鸞の思想」

本稿の目的は、親鸞(1173-1262)の思想と生涯を環境批評の文脈で考察することにある。親鸞は主著『教行信証』で浄土を「大信海」に譬え、また、弥陀に救済される衆生を「群萌」と表現した。この生命観は John Ruskin が *Unto This Last* (1862) で路傍の野花や子供の歓声に生命の愛おしさを認めた感性と比較できるだろう。恰も Ruskin の自然との親近感が聖書に依拠したように、親鸞の小さきものへの慈悲の心は卑小な虫ですら仏の庇護のもとにあるという大乘経典に由来する宗教心に根差している。これは、文学・環境学会の定義する

「地球環境の破壊に対する危機意識」と「生物学における諸概念」を含む環境批評の問題意識と合致する。このようにして、環境批評から親鸞思想を解釈することで当時の時代状況をより明確に理解できるだけでなく、いかに親鸞の著述の教学的枠組みが現代に適用されるかを学ぶことができる。

Introduction

The theologian Kohara Katsuhiko divided historical eras into three phases at a conference after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. The first is the Middle Ages when people regarded natural disaster as a celestial punishment in either a Christian or superstitious way. The second is the Age of Enlightenment represented by *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* (1759), which took an agnostic attitude to religious orthodoxy. The third is the age of technology characterized by uncertainty. There is concern over human-centered development which does not necessarily promote human welfare.

The writing style of literature varies from era to era. Works of the Middle Ages which includes Shinran's writings, contain more mythical elements than those of today. Yet, people today are attracted by a mythical understanding of the world. One example is the fact that nuclear technology has been often likened to the fire stolen by Prometheus. Another example is shown in the descriptions of the Pure Land, by which Shinran was influenced. It is not occupied by humans exclusively, but is also a pleasant resort for animals. In the following quotation from the fifth-century *Amida Sutra*, it is believed that all the six chosen birds, especially the last two imaginary birds, have exquisite voices to entertain guests. '[There are] many kinds of wondrously rare and beautiful birds of various colors, such as white swans, peacocks, parrots, sarikas, kalavinkas, and jivam-jivakas'.¹ The birds are so important in Asian cultures that their images were drawn on the ceiling and printed on cloth as ornaments to please temple visitors. This shows a harmony of human and birds representing the voice of nature.

¹ Nagao, Gadjin. *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, vol.1, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, 2003, p.6. Some birds are indigenous to India and sing a song at the last moment after a long silence. The other are mythical birds which cry before they hatch.

On the other hand, there are more stoic responses to disaster. Ryokan, a poet monk in the late Edo period experienced a big earthquake and wrote to a friend, 'When you encounter disaster, just accept it as it is. It is the best way'.

In contrast to literature, rituals are a more fixed way to maintain traditions and hand them down to future generation. In Shin Buddhism, monks celebrate the statue of Amida Buddha in a ritual called 'Sangeraku' or merit of scattering flowers. After the priests make three invocations (the Amida, Sakya and all the Buddhas), paper-made flowers are scattered before the main statue, the Amida Buddha, in the hall. It is actualization of the Pure Land, and even novices feel as if they will be born into the Pure Land in the ritual.

While the Jodo Shu and the Higashi Honganji refrained from holding jubilees just after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, the Nishi Hongwanji temple foundation decided to hold the ceremony as scheduled, employing the slogan 'From Tying Bonds to Great Encounters'. It means we should not cling to relationships that restrict freedom, but cherish chance meetings. In fact, many monks extended their condolence to the bereaved families in the Tōhoku region, regardless of their Buddhist sect. 'Toburafu' (訪/弔) in old Japanese is the term which identifies an action to pay a visit to mourn the dead. Shinran quoted a passage with the term as the postscript of his book. '[T]hose who have been born first guide those who come later, and those who are born later join those who were born before'.² Thus, the collaborative funeral made it come true.

This paper explains from the perspective of ecocriticism the natural metaphors that Shinran used, covering works like *Dhammapada*, an Early Buddhist text. Above all, it is interesting to compare Shinran and John Ruskin, as the religious leader in medieval Japan and the aesthetic theorist in England were early precursors of the ecological worldview that would emerge in the last century. Though Shinran's ethical viewpoint on the destruction of nature is not explicitly stated in his writings, ecocriticism makes it possible to interpret his unwritten thoughts.

² The Collected Works of Shinran, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, 1997, p.291. Hereafter, CWS.

Ecocriticism

This section is a survey of environmental attitudes, which will help to outline the significance of Shinran's thinking. John Ruskin, one of the Victorian intellectuals, expressed a concern over the harmful effect of pollution on holy water for baptizing babies in his series of letters *Fors Clavigera* (1871). Recently, the British scholar Jonathan Bate was appreciative of his sensibility and listed him with other Victorian poets such as Wordsworth in *Romantic Ecology* (1991) from the viewpoint of ecocriticism.

Though the ecologies of Wordsworth, of Ruskin and of Morris, of Ellen Swallow, are by no means identical to our own, are very much of the nineteenth century, the core of their thinking, so much of which is summed up in the fifth letter of *Fors*, is familiar and is modern. *Romantic Ecology*³

Bate called those people above 'fathers and mothers of our environmental tradition' and suggested modern people can share the same feeling despite their different situations. Ruskin states the necessity of pure water, air and earth for a richer life, not material acquisition. He puts forth the significance of life and dignity rather than calculating the profit aspect. Since Ruskin was attuned to the environment, he mentioned what agreeable sounds are like in nature after citing the *Proverbs*.

No air is sweet that is silent; it is only sweet when full of low currents of under sound—triplets of birds, and murmur and chirp of insects, and deep-toned words of men, and wayward trebles of childhood. *Unto This Last*⁴

Hearing such simple sounds makes one feel poignant all the better for its ingenuousness, but silence is ominous. The American marine biologist Rachel Carson (1907-1964) was

³ Bate, Jonathan. *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition*, Routledge, 1991, p.60.

⁴ Ruskin, John. *Unto This Last & Other Essays on Art and Political Economy*, Dent, 1920, p.190.

also troubled by the stillness of nature in the same tone as Ruskin.

On the morning that had once throbbled with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound: only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh. *Silent Spring*⁵

While Ruskin cited various kinds of agreeable sounds, Carson enumerated the names which usually signalled the coming of spring. The joy of life lies in the sounds uttered by birds, insects and innocent creatures. The French historical novel, *Les Misérables* (1862) testified how an innocent girl can be a beautiful part of nature. '[N]othing is so adorable as a dazzling and innocent creature who [Cosette] walks along, holding in her hand the key to paradise without being conscious of it.'⁶

Females are sometimes more sensitive to nature than males, partly because they are fertile in order to bear children. For instance, Ellen Swallow (1842-1911) was the first female scholar who engaged in ecology with a scientific approach. Another example is the Kenyan political leader Wangari Muta Maathai (1940- 2011), who in a green costume launched the Mottainai campaign to protect the environment after visiting a conference held in Kyoto in 2005. She persuaded Africans not to produce and use plastic bags so much, and influenced the president of Rwanda. 'Mottainai' colloquially means 'What a waste' in modern Japanese, but originally contains a key notion of Buddhism, emptiness.

Willa Cather (1873-1947) is an American national writer whose works suggest that people should be grounded on the earth to be happy.⁷ She accused modern buildings of their baneful influence on life, just as Ruskin resented the Crystal Palace during the Great Exhibition in 1851. '[T]hey [modern factories] built you in from the earth itself,

⁵ Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2018, p.2.

⁶ Hugo, Victor. *Les Misérables*, Translated by Isabel Hapgood, Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1887, p.71.

⁷ Hase, Shoto. *Yokubo no Tetsugaku*, Hozokan, 2003, pp.28-33.

Hase questioned the two notions 'déracinement' and 'frivolity' in which modern people are trapped. They were originally advocated by the French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943) and the Japanese philosopher Nishitani Keiji (1900-1990) respectively.

cemented you away from any contact with the ground. You lived in an unnatural world, like the fish in an aquarium, who were probably much more comfortable than they ever were in the sea'.⁸

The Japanese poet Omine Akira (1929-2018) suggested that one should make friends with the moon instead of analyzing its beauty and it is essential to have sensibilities to appreciate the value of nature.⁹ Communing with nature has been so important in Japanese literature that many poets have addressed the moon, and it was once considered an ideal place where rabbits were hopping around.

Bioethics and environmental ethics were also imported from foreign countries into Japan as ecocriticism. While bioethics has addressed the problems of how to use medical technology to enhance the quality of life, environmental ethics has considered coexistence with nature.¹⁰ The philosopher, Kato Hisatake realized the value of sustainability rather than progress in terms of ethics.¹¹

Through ecocriticism, many works of literature have been interpreted as early ecological tracts. The works of Ishimure Michiko (1927-2018) are examples showing the relationship of Minamata disease with the environment. Her approach was not like covering social events or reportage, but her honest attitude made the patients open their hearts and speak frankly.¹²

⁸ Cather, Willa. *Obscure Destinies & Literary Encounters*, Rinsen, 1973, p.29.

⁹ Omine, Akira. "Prayer and Modernity", *Shukyo to Rinri*, vol. 8, 2009, pp.3-15. See also Omine, Akira. *Kagetsu no Shino: Tozai Shino no Taiwa no tameni*, Koyo Shobo, 1989.

¹⁰ The Buddhist monk, Shiio Benkyo firstly used the term 'Tomoiki'. It literally means 'cohabitation', and is called 'symbiosis' in a biological sense. The sociological term, 'convivialité' conveys an image of a friendly feast, people coming from different backgrounds.

See Kohara, Katsuhiko. "Ethics of the Absent: Towards the Critique of Science and Technology from the Viewpoint of Religious Ethics", *Shukyo to Rinri*, vol.16, 2016, pp.3-17. See also Iwasaki, Yoko. "Co-eating and sympathy: Through analysis of the novel", *Bungeigaku Kenkyu*, vol.13, 2009, pp.1-21.

¹¹ Kato, Hisatake. "Does Ecology have something to do with Religion?" *Shukyo to Rinri*, Separate vol.1, 2001, pp.4-17.

¹² Sato, Hiroo. "*Kami Shisya Hito—Nippon-retto niokeru Shukyo-kyodotaino Kako to Genzai*", *Shukyo to Rinri*, vol.15, 2015, pp.3-34. On page 20, Sato described Ishimure's sense of nature as Shamanistic.

Just like on land, you can always tell the seasons, spring, summer, winter and fall down there in the sea. I believe there really is a palace at the bottom of the ocean, too, just like they say in the fairytales. I bet it's beautiful as a dream. I could never get enough of it ...the sea. *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*¹³

Paradoxically, the beautiful ocean was perceived through the eyes of a Minamata disease patient. Ishimure describes the patients who reminisced how beautiful the ocean used to be before contamination.

The idea of environmental criticism was advocated by an American scholar Lawrence Buell in *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (2005). He developed ecocriticism further and categorized it into two types as follows: One emphasizes nature's superiority over humans, and often appears to be anti-civilization.¹⁴ The other emphasizes the maintenance of harmony between nature and humans. It praises human efforts to accomplish sustainable development.

As an example of the former, the spiritual leader Ippen in mid-Kamakura period perceived supernatural power directly in nature, and left a poem 'Among all living things – mountains and rivers, grasses and trees, even the sounds of blowing winds and rising waves – there is nothing that is not the Nembutsu'.¹⁵ Besides, Ryokan a poet monk in mid-Edo period was so pure and naïve that he earnestly played with children all day long. His kindness was shown to fleas, maggots, and even thieves. Moreover he accompanied a flea for a stroll and let it sunbathe, shared leftovers in a pot with maggots, and turned over in his sleep to let a thief steal goods easily.¹⁶

¹³ Ishimure, Michiko. *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow*. Translated by Livia Monnet, Michigan Classics in Japanese Studies, 2003, p.157.

¹⁴ Young people in the 1990s were familiar with the idea of anti-civilization through popular culture. Examples are *Kiseijū (Parasite)*, a science fiction cartoon and *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, an early Ghibli work.

¹⁵ Hirota, Dennis. *No Abode: The Record of Ippen*, University of Hawai'i Press, 1997. See also *Shinran: An Introduction to His Thought*, Hongwanji International Center, 1989.

¹⁶ Kito, Yoko. "Animal Ethics in a Religious Context" *Shukyo to Rinri*, vol. 15, 2015, pp.35-50. She referred to *Eating Meat and Eating People* written by Cora Diamond. She mentioned that 'vermin' means one excluded from an in-group, and whether it is 'vermin' or not has been prescribed by human values.

The latter approach emphasizing the maintenance of harmony can be seen in the writings of the American poet and activist Gary Snyder who stayed on the Amami Islands (semi-tropical islands in Kagoshima) during the 1960s. He reported in *Earth House Hold* (1969) that some vegetarians from the main island were urged to eat fish to survive in the wild. Snyder advocated eating fish is not always against cohabitation with nature from the perspective of bioregionalism. Matsuoka Shinya, a researcher of American literature, categorized some of the seasonal poems as environmental literature that reflects Snyder's animistic sympathy with animals.¹⁷

More recently, the Japanese novelist, Aoki Shinmon states how vermin are captured through compassionate eyes:

As I was sweeping them [maggots] together, I got a better look at the maggots as individual existences. I noticed some were trying to crawl up the pillars to get away. A maggot is just another life form. And just when I was thinking that, I was sure I saw one of them glow with light. *Coffinman*¹⁸

People are apt to detest unfavorable things just out of concept or by custom. However, from the perspective of the Buddha's eyes, there is no distinction and everything is precious to him. Even a maggot is shining brightly. Thus Shinran was free from prejudice and realized from an ancient sutra that even insects can attain enlightenment. "There will be none among devas, human beings, and even insects that fly, crawl, or creep, who, upon hearing my Name, fails to awaken a heart of compassion".¹⁹ He quoted it in his main book and incorporated this into his own teaching.

In real life, Shinran showed great generosity in his fifties in welcoming an angry man even when threatened with a weapon. He never retaliated against an enemy. Such

¹⁷ Matsuoka, Shinya. "Kagaku to Shizen no Jizokukanousei" *Bungaku to Science*, Eichosya Phoenix, 2010. The works of aforementioned Cather are also categorized as regionalism.

¹⁸ Aoki, Shinmon. *Nokanfu Nikki*. Translated by Yokoyama, Wayne. *Coffinman: the Journal of a Buddhist Mortician*, Buddhist Education Center, 2002, p.44.

¹⁹ CWS, p.15.

was his open-minded and magnanimous nature that he calmed the hearts of angry men. His tolerance is like the ocean that embraces all.

To feel a sense of the seasons, flowers may be the best aid. Ruskin mentioned in his lecture the implication of strewing flowers in front of a person to be blessed by her steps.

So surely as they believe that, they will have, instead, to walk on bitter herbs and thorns; and the only softness to their feet will be of snow. But it is not thus intended they should believe; there is a better meaning in that old custom. The path of a good woman is indeed strewn with flowers; but they rise behind her steps, not before them. 'Her feet have touched the meadows, and left the daisies rosy'. *Sesame and Lilies*²⁰

This notion is so mythological for modern people that it is difficult to believe such a change from homely flowers to queenly ones. Offering flowers is mentioned in the descriptions of the ancient sutra, *The Larger Sutra (Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra)*. It states how celestial flowers in the Pure Land appear and disappear at will.

Further, when the breezes blow, flowers are scattered all over the Buddha-land. They naturally group themselves according to color and do not become mixed up...When the flowers have served their purpose, the ground opens up and they disappear, leaving no trace on the clean ground.

*The Larger Sutra*²¹

The sutra refers to the Pure Land of Amida. Where he steps, a peaceful atmosphere prevails just like in Ruskin's example. In the sutra the earth is restored to a pristine state after the Buddha has walked on it, similar to the way that in Ruskin's example the daisies are beautified after the young maiden has walked across the meadows.

²⁰ Ruskin, John. *Sesame and Lilies*, Routledge, London, 1907, p.113.

²¹ Inagaki, Hisao. *The Three Pure Land Sutras*, vol.2, Shin Buddhism Translation Series, 2009, p.49.

「又風吹散華 [徧滿佛土 隨色次第 而不雜亂 柔輒光澤 馨香芬烈 足履其上 陷下四寸 隨舉足已 還復如故] 華用已訖 地輒開裂」 Taisho, vol.12, p.271.

Wherever the Buddha travels, be it country, province, town, or village, there is no place which does not benefit from his virtue. Peace and harmony reign throughout the land. The sun and the moon shine brightly, the wind and rain are timely, and no disaster or disease ever occurs. The land is prosperous and the people live in peace, so there is no need to use soldiers and weapons. People respect virtue, cultivate benevolence, and diligently observe propriety and humility. *The Larger Sutra*²²

There is no intention of harm in the Pure Land, similarly in people's hearts. They don't bear hatred or hostility. One of the Early Buddhist texts, *Dhammapada* describes in verse 49 how Sakyamuni Buddha traveled from town to town to preach to local people like a butterfly without damaging flowers.²³

The Metaphorical Expressions of Natural Phenomena

Shinran lived close to nature when he was exiled to Echigo (now Niigata Prefecture). In his writings, he often used the image of the ocean which transforms defilement into purity. Other metaphors such as water from melted ice and light which dispels darkness are important, but the ocean expresses the most dynamic aspect of his teaching about Amida's Pure Land. He used 'ocean' to represent the Pure Land.

Many poets and novelists have been aware of the significance of 'ocean' as a metaphor, because it represents fertility and maternity in literature. The German poet Goethe described how sweet it is to indulge oneself by being permeated with vernal

²² Ibid., p.93.

「佛所遊履 國邑丘聚 靡不蒙化 天下和順 日月清明 風雨以時 災厲不起 國豐民安 兵戈無用 崇德興仁 務修禮讓」 Taisho, vol.12, p.277.

²³ 'yathāpi bhamaro pupphaṃ vaṇṇagandhaṃ aheṭhayaṃ paleti rasam ādāya evaṃ gāme munī care'. *Dhammapada*, edited by O.von Hinuber and K.R. Norman, Pali Text Society, 2014. p.11.

'As a bee takes nectar and goes away without hurting the colour or the smell of a flower, so should a sage wander in a village.' *The Word of the Doctrine (Dhammapada)*. Translated by K.R. Norman, Pali Text Society, 2004, p.8.

fragrance. His epistolary novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) confesses, 'Every tree, every bush, is full of flowers; and one might wish himself transformed into a butterfly, to float about in this ocean of perfume, and find his whole existence in it'.²⁴

The Sea of Fertility by Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) is known as his last work. He shows existence in terms of Buddhist consciousness. Furthermore, the poet Miyoshi Tatsuji (1900-1964), was so excited to find the correlation between mother (mère) and ocean (mer) that he made a poem. People call Lake Biwa 'Mother Lake' (Haha naru umi) in apposition.

In the Pure Land tradition, *Tan-luan's Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land*, one of the most theoretical commentaries in the sixth century cites 'unalterable' as one virtue of the ocean.

[The essential nature of the Pure Land is] like the nature of the ocean, which has one taste; upon flowing into it, all the river water 'necessarily' acquires that one taste, and the taste of the oceans is not 'not alter' by that of the river-water.²⁵

Shinran was influenced by this commentary, and he thought the Pure Land is like the ocean which is unaffected by the rivers which feed into it. Therefore, regardless of one's quality, one will be immersed in the 'unalterable ocean' when one entrusts oneself to the stream of life to become an awakened one.

This process is not like conquering the peak of a mountain, but a pleasant voyage which brings one to the other shore effortlessly. An ancient Indian philosopher Nāgārjuna noticed the merit of Nembutsu as 'the pleasure on the waterway of easy practice'.

Since the Pure Land is not affected by extraneous interference, Shinran in *Tannisho*, the memoir of Shinran recorded by his disciple concluded that even sinners are embraced by Amida and welcomed to the country. It eloquently tells us 'Even a good person attains

²⁴ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang. *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*. Translated by R.D. Boylan.

²⁵ Inagaki, Hisao. *Tan-luan's Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land*, Nagata Bunshodo, 1998, p.143.

birth in the Pure Land, so it goes without saying that an evil person will'.²⁶ *Shoshinge*, a text of daily recitation for Shin Buddhists relates:

When ignorant and wise, even grave offenders and slanders of the dharma,
all alike turn about and enter shinjin,
They are like waters that, on entering the ocean, become one in taste with it.²⁷

In the Pure Land, there is no evil and distinction between the beautiful and ugly as the Vow no. 1 and 4 suggest. The Vow no.1 says '[T]here should be hell, the realm of hungry spirits, or the realm of animals in my land, may I not attain the perfect enlightenment.' The Vow no.4 says '[T]he humans and devas in my land should not all be of the same appearance and should be either beautiful or ugly, may I not attain the perfect enlightenment'.²⁸ *Tannisho* in Chapter 5 further expresses a sense of equality and brotherhood according to Buddhist cosmology.

As for me, Shinran, I have never said the Nembutsu even once for the repose of my departed father and mother. For all sentient beings, without exception, have been our parents and brothers and sisters in the course of countless lives in the many states of existence. On attaining Buddhahood after this present life, we can save every one of them. *Tannisho*²⁹

Here, Shinran denies accumulating religious merits nor gaining worldly profits through calling the sacred name. Nembutsu is not practiced to get profit, but one directed from Buddha to us is so supramundane that human wishes including filial piety are not so important. Decisions made by humans are easily overturned on occasion, but the Vows

²⁶ CWS, p.663.

²⁷ CWS, p.70. 'Shinjin' literally means faith. Some put it into 'entrusting heart' in order to avoid Christian connotation. Others prefer 'awakening' to relate it to Early Buddhist teaching.

²⁸ Ibid., p.20.

²⁹ CWS, p.664.

accomplished by Buddha are undoubtedly reliable and constant.

As well as the ocean, Shinran used light and water to indicate the working of Amida's power. While light represents vitalizing warmth and fostering energy for life, water, especially when thawed from ice, indicates how stubbornness melts into kindness.

Speaking of light, even in a room that has remained dark for a thousand years, the darkness would not fail to leave once a torch is lit. This metaphor is originally from *Kāśyapa-parivarta*, a psychological text expounding human consciousness, so it indicates the religious experience in which blind impulse was dispersed by wisdom light.

Shinran introduced Amida's incessant working of the light to protect me all the time in *Shishinge*, 'Passions obstruct my eyes and I cannot see him; Nevertheless, great compassion is untiring and illumines me always'.³⁰ In contrast with the individual light, the illumination of the Amida is so huge that it is described in metaphors: 'The unhindered light is the sun of wisdom dispersing the darkness of our ignorance' and 'It is a great torch in the long night of ignorance'.³¹

While the light gives all sentient beings warmth and nurture, the process from ice to water represents how the evil karma will dissolve into blissful water when one is released from bondage. The hymn was composed to praise the virtue of Tan Luan, a Chinese master.

Obstructions of karmic evil turn into virtues;

It is like the relation of ice and water:

The more the ice, the more the water;

The more the obstructions, the more the virtues.

Hymns of the Pure Land Masters³²

³⁰ CWS, p.73.

³¹ CWS, p.3, p.403.

³² CWS, p.371. The Zen monk, Hakuin also composed poetry with an inseparable nature of ice and water.

'All beings by nature are Buddha,

As ice by nature is water.

Apart from water there is no ice;

Apart from beings, no Buddha.' Translated by Norman Waddell.

This relationship is widely shared in the Pure Land doctrine. That is to say, one can be transformed into something great as one is. It is like in chess where a pawn can become any other piece such as a queen after reaching a certain point on the chess-board. Or like when a persimmon's astringency turns to sweetness when exposed to cold wind.

Women and Meat

There are two major taboos for a monk practicing Buddhism. One is to have contact with a woman, the other is to eat meat. Yet, Shinran did not refuse to accept a woman's affection and eat fish when it was served.

Firstly, from the early times of Buddhism a monk has to practice the path alone to keep the precepts, but it is not always forbidden to find an agreeable partner for learning Buddhism together as *Suttanipata* verse 45 suggests.

In the case of Shinran, the support of his wife Eshinni, the daughter of Echigo Miyoshi played a great role in helping him successfully to follow the Nembutsu practice. In his youth, he also had a chance to see the incarnation of Bodhisattva Kannon as a spiritual partner, at the Rokkaku hall. It is known as *Nyobonge* as follows.

If any practitioner(s), because of his/their past karma, commit(s) nyobon
I will take on the bodily form of a gyokunyo, life accommodate the rule-breaking
I will adorn him/them all his/their life
Leading him/them at death, I will cause him/them to be born in Gokuraku.

'Sexual Transgression in Shinran's Dream' ³³

Galen Amstutz translated the stanza *Nyobonge* as noted above, and he concluded that there is no connection concerning the doctrine with a similar esoteric text written a

³³ Amstutz, Galen. "Sexual Transgression in Shinran's Dream", *Eastern Buddhist*, vol. 43, 2012, p.221. 'nyobon' is to violate a woman, and 'gyokunyo' means a precious woman.

decade before. While the esoteric text connotes a more sensual intention, *Nyobonge* has a more restrained style and encourages him to be born in the Pure Land.

There are three famous portraits of Shinran: Kagamino-Goei, Anjono-Goei, and Kumagawano-Goei. The first one is the most standard figure and shows him in a standing position. The second one captured a mellower profile of him in his eighties with realistic touches. The last one is unique in terms of portraying him sitting on a mat made of bear skin with a white scarf. A Japanese scholar Yonenura pointed out that the figure has a squint, and the sharp fingers remind us of a shaman.³⁴ One will imagine that Shinran was so wild and vigorous that he could travel around to preach to people in the Kanto regions in his sixties.

Shinran's master, Honen was also kind to socially vulnerable women. He did not refuse to be addressed by a female entertainer on his way to exile in Sanuki (now Kagawa Prefecture).

[A] small boat drew near carrying a woman of the night. She said to Honen, "I heard that this was your boat, and I have come to meet you. There are many ways of getting on in the world, but what terrible acts could have been committed in a former life of mine to bring me into such a miserable life as this? ..."

Honen compassionately replied, "Your guilt in living such a life is surely great and the penalties seem incalculable. If you can find another means of livelihood, give this up at once. But if you can't, or if you are not yet ready to sacrifice your very life for the true way, begin just as you are and call on the sacred name..."
"The Birth of Women"³⁵

The Lotus Sutra is famous for the salvation of women, but both Shinran and Honen

³⁴ Yonemura, Ryuji. "A comment about the Symposium on Shinran's Place in Japanese thought", *Bulletin of the international cultural research institute of Chikushi Jogakuen College*, vol.4, 1993, pp.11-19.

³⁵ Jodo Shu Research Institute, "The Birth (ojo) of Women", <http://www.jsri.jp/English/Honen/LIFE/teaching/poor/women.html>.

encouraged the ladies to practice Nembustu in their lives. It is the only and easy practice for people in a difficult situation to attain enlightenment.

Referring to *Kudensyo* (a memoir of Shinran orally transmitted by his relatives) Chapter 8, the Shin Buddhist Nabeshima suggests that Shinran had gratitude and remorse for taking animal lives from the fact he dressed in his robes on wishing them to be born in the Pure Land when eating fish.³⁶ In Buddhism, it was originally allowed to take meat under certain conditions or in the case of medical needs. It was not until the time of Mahayana Buddhism that eating meat was totally prohibited.

Neither Monk nor Layman

After spending years in meditation as an apprentice on Mt Hiei, a sacred mountain in his youth, Shinran converted from self-cultivation to Nembutsu practice at the age of twenty nine. After a while, he was sentenced to exile in Echigo and wandered Kanto regions in mid-adult life. Eventually, he was obliged to disown his son for his heretical statements. He led a stormy life.³⁷

No other person was stricter with himself than Shinran. He has a unique idea about the relationship between appearance and personality.

Each of us, in outward bearing,
Makes a show of being wise, good, and dedicated;
But *so great are our greed, anger, perversity, and deceit,*
That we are filled with all forms of malice and cunning.

Gutoku's Hymns of Lament and Refection (Italics mine)³⁸

Thus Shinran confronted his own hypocrisy severely, and called it 'snaky mind'. In literature, stories about metamorphoses deal with the subject that personality affects

³⁶ Nabeshima, Naoki. *Shinran no Seimeikan*, Hozokan, 2007, pp.117-121.

³⁷ Arai, Toshikazu. "War and Peace as Viewed from the Buddhist Standpoint" *Shukyo to Rinri*, vol.4, 2004, pp.3-16.

³⁸ CWS, p.421.

the body. For example, the Japanese novelist Nakajima Atushi, described a tragedy of a poet being transformed into a tiger due to his superfluous pride.

[W]e are all of us trainers of wild beasts, it is said, and the beasts in question are our own inner selves. In many case, the beast inside was my self-important sense of shame. That was my tiger, and it damaged me, brought sorrow to my wife and children, wounded my friends, and, in the end, changed my outward form into this animal that befits my inward state.

*The Moon over the Mountain*³⁹

In the Pure Land teaching, ‘a person outwardly gives appearance of diligence whereas inwardly his mind indulges in sloth’ (不得外現賢善精進之相内懷虚仮) is a suitable passage to shed light on the relationship between appearance and personality. Honen interpreted this sentence as the necessity of being diligent in practicing Buddhism in *Passages on the Selection of the Nembutsu in the Original Vow*.⁴⁰

However, Shinran’s understanding of this is more radical and unique than that of his master. He read this passage as an imperative form and casual relationship between one’s mind and appearance, which means ‘Do not pretend to be good, because you have falsehoods in mind’. The falsehoods accord with greed, anger, perversity, and deceit that we saw in the hymn.

Shinran’s uniqueness is found in his annotation as well. When he interpreted ‘It is like tiles and pebbles being made to become gold’ (能令瓦礫變成金), he added in *Notes on ‘Essentials of Faith Alone’*. That is ‘Hunters, peddlers, and others are we, who are like stones and tiles and pebbles’.⁴¹ Thus, he showed such deep compassion for little things and socially disadvantaged people that he identified himself with them.

³⁹ Nakajima, Atushi. *The Moon over the Mountain*. Translated by Paul McCarthy, Hills Books, Bloomington, 2011, p.6.

⁴⁰ Honen. *Senchaku Hongan Nembutsu Shu*. Translated by Morris Augustine, Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai, 1997, p.84.

⁴¹ CWS, p.460. This is a commentary composed by Shinran on *Essentials of Faith Alone* written by one of Honen’s disciples.

Though peddlers and hunters are notorious for miserliness and cruelty, Shinran did not despise them.⁴² They were thought to be far from salvation, because they were against the precept of non-stealing and non-killing. The peddlers were ashamed of roaming place to place to sell products like thieves and beggars and the hunters felt guilty about slaughtering animals, but Shinran assured them that they could be born in the Pure Land regardless of their jobs.

Conclusion

In its doctrine and ritual, Pure Land Buddhism is rich in natural metaphors and descriptions, because of its worldview and precedent texts. The sixth century Chinese text, *Tan-luan's Commentary on Vasubandhu's Discourse on the Pure Land*, is an example of writing which regarded the Pure Land as an 'unalterable' ocean that is not deteriorated by influx of external rivers. Based on this, Shinran further developed the allegory as an ideal realm which allows anyone to enter whether profane or sacred, even criminals. Shinran wrote in Chinese for the educated as well as in Japanese for commoners, and the tendency to describe the Pure Land as familiar is more evident in the latter, particularly his annotations, poems and memoirs.

True Shin Buddhists do their best whatever situation they are in and never cater to authority. A follower may be conflicted because of his ego, but at the same time the person can take consolation from surviving as Shinran did in this world. Unlike the Daoist or Cynic standing aloof from society, Shinran endured hardship patiently as an ordinary man and even identified with useless stones. He had solidarity with outcasts through the consciousness of 'us', which reflects his awareness of equality and diversity of life.

Contemporary individuals have been alienated from nature through urban living and they sometimes fall into materialism or consumerism. Additionally, modern society has become more complex than before, what with genetic engineering, the use of nuclear

⁴² Miyamoto, Yoichiro. "Care toshiteno Syukyo nitsuite" *Oda Yoshiko Sensei Taisyokukinenronshu*, 2018. On page 103, Miyamoto defined the idea of compassion as nonchalant altruism. By contrast, sympathy connotes exclusiveness and pity makes feel a distance between the donor and recipient.

power, and diffusion of social networks. In terms of ecocriticism, we can learn about the human connection with nature through the Pure Land tradition. It is not consumption but compassion that is the means of salvation. In other words, desire is arbitrary and may consume the self, but compassion is simple and benefits others.

The poet Omine, who passed away this year, left a poem. 'When cherry blossoms bloom, there is but One Life. And that's all' (Hanasakeba inochihitotsuto iukotowo).

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