

## **The Meaning of Salvation in the Doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism<sup>1</sup>**

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It goes without saying that, for all its profound philosophical systems, Buddhism is essentially a doctrine of liberation. In Buddhism, no salvation is conceivable except for liberation through Enlightenment from the bondage of ignorance and suffering. But does this apply to the doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism in which faith in Amida Buddha has prime importance, or is Pure Land Buddhism virtually a soteriological religion, despite its Buddhist background?

### 1. Suffering

Semantically, the term 'salvation' means the liberation or emancipation from a predicament into which one has fallen. In other words, 'salvation' presupposes some kind of predicament, whatever it may be. What, then, is the human situation which Buddhism envisages as the predicament from which man should be liberated? The Buddhist answer to this question is widely known - namely, the suffering of life. But the term 'suffering of life' is vague and indefinite in meaning. It needs further definition and clarification. What does it specifically mean? To make its meaning clear, we should consider human life as an ever-flowing duration or continuum. One thing to note about our lives is that they keep flowing, ever alternating between doing and undergoing. This alternation, however, is by no means a random or lawless movement. It is governed by a kind of law, so to speak: a law of inter-causation or mutual conditioning. We do, and our 'doing' inevitably makes its influence felt on our way of feeling, sensing and thinking, directly as well as indirectly (through its effects on our environment). Our way of feeling, sensing and thinking being thus influenced, inevitably conditions our subsequent actions.

It is true that an awareness of this law was expressed very early in mythology and folklore and, later, in religion, philosophy and psychology. It is, indeed, one aspect of wisdom that has underlied the development of human civilization. Broadly speaking, however, the bearers of this wisdom have been those who have naively affirmed life with its impulses, cravings and desires, and have sought to gratify life's wants all the more; that is, they apply their awareness of this law for the better enjoyment of life. Life, itself, is never radically questioned. They remain strangers to the tragic sense of life and to the negation of life.

Buddhism started with a keen sense of the painfulness of life and sought, in all seriousness, to penetrate into the nature and origin of human suffering. It declared that no human experience could be free from suffering. In other words, life as we actually live it is, after all, suffering. This declaration may sound bold and too pessimistic. However, it should be remembered that such a declaration is made from the viewpoint of Enlightenment which is able to confer a penetrating insight into the origin of suffering. Buddhism teaches that all the sufferings of life originate in delusion. Intellectually, delusion is ignorance (avidya); that is, the ignorance regarding the 'emptiness' (shunyata) or the 'suchness' (tathata) of things and events. Emotionally, delusion is

primarily a thirsty craving (trishna). Possessed by delusion, we are irresistibly involved in matters of love and hate, gain and loss, honour and dishonour, aggression and defence; in short, in the things and events of the world. The result is that we suffer.

The process of our life alternating between doing and undergoing, referred to above, is thus seen by Buddhism as a vicious circle under the spell of delusion between doing (karma) and suffering. Delusion causes us to do deluded things in our actual life. The deluded things done cause us to suffer, and the suffering tends to cause us to become more and more deluded, and so on endlessly. The law that governs this process is the law of karmic causation.

The origin of suffering as stated above, makes the nature of suffering clear. In Buddhism, suffering primarily means the painful uneasiness or anxiety of being deluded. As such, suffering is pregnant with an urge, even if subconscious or semi-conscious, to break through this delusion. It is precisely in this sense that suffering is declared to be universal in human life. Someone might be conscious of such suffering, but only very feebly and only in exceptional moments of affliction or despair. Another might have no experience of it whatsoever. Nevertheless, no one is exempt from such suffering, as long as they are human.

## 2. Our Inner Togetherness

One thing should be remembered in connection with the problem of suffering, and that is that everyone of us is deeply inter-related with our fellow beings in an inner togetherness. It can hardly be doubted that we are so born as to be sensitive to our inner togetherness. Do we not implicitly mean this when we use the term 'we'? In this sense, our inner togetherness may be called 'we-ness'. As long as our fellow beings are unhappy, none of us can remain aloof from them. We cannot but share their unhappiness. Because of the inner togetherness of man, sympathy can be awakened within us.

The consciousness of the inner togetherness of man finds its fullest and most sublime expression in the sphere of religion. Mahayana Buddhism is especially emphatic about the principle of 'seeking emancipation from suffering together with fellow beings'. In the Vimalakirtinirdesha, we read, 'I (Vimalakirti) suffer because my fellow beings suffer.' This is precisely what the term compassion (karuna) means. The Mahayana principle of 'together with fellow beings' may naturally lead to the vision of the Dharma. The Dharma through which I am truly saved from suffering must be the same Dharma through which all my fellow beings are equally saved; that is, the Dharma that is adequate to all human beings. But what, then, is meant by the term 'adequate'?

We actually live in a world in which we find ourselves bound to others by family, neighbourhood, occupational, religious, political and countless other ties. Our life situation is largely conditioned by such ties. Above all, one's family ties have a fundamental importance in determining this situation. Most men and women are actually living a home life. No one doubts that home life is the normal way of living. The life of a homeless ascetic, secluded from family and society, and however sublime its purpose may be, is exceptional. Most people make much of their home and family, and are ready to accept all the cares that accompany them. They believe

that we are so born as to live and love home life despite all its cares and troubles. It is true that home life is exposed to the danger of disintegration in our highly industrialized society but, nevertheless, it does not seem to have lost its primary importance in human life.

However, it is definitely in the home, as well as in social life, that we experience the full strength of delusion over us. The foliage of such delusion is exuberant on the soil of home and social life. The delusive passions such as attachment, hatred, anger, fear, jealousy, enmity, perversity and aggression become intensified in the tensions of human relationships. It is undoubtedly such passions, and their resultant effects, that afflict us. Suffering is thus inevitable for us living in the world. To suffer because of being submerged in the world - this is precisely our existential situation.

The Chinese Buddhist master, Shan-tao, undoubtedly had this existential situation in mind when he wrote as follows: I am actually an ordinary, sinful being who has been, from time immemorial, sunken in, and carried down by, the current of birth-and-death. Any hope of being rescued from this current has been wholly denied to me.

Some commentary may be needed on these words. By the term 'I', Shan-tao definitely means the 'we-ness' or inner togetherness referred to earlier. He represents here all the human beings of the world. Otherwise, this sentence is not meaningful. The 'sinfulness' mentioned here does not refer to any personal sin, but to the sinfulness of the delusion of human existence itself. The phrase 'from time immemorial' may be taken to express how long the delusive cycle between karma and suffering has been repeated up to the present. In short, this passage expresses a penetrating insight into the existential situation in which man is inevitably bound to suffering and, as such, it still has a vital meaning for the present day world.

The doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism has appeared as the Dharma that is truly adequate to man's existential situation; the Dharma through which alone we can be saved as we are in the world, that is, without deserting our home or social life.

### 3. The Dharma adequate to all ordinary beings

The doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism has a long history of transmission through India, China and Japan. Among the masters who transmitted the doctrine, Tan-luan and Shan-tao (mentioned above) were exceedingly influential both in their own time and over posterity. But the fundamental significance of the Pure Land doctrine as the Dharma truly adequate to all ordinary beings was, for the first time, established by the Japanese master, Honen, who resolutely declared the independence of the Pure Land doctrine from all other Buddhist schools. The depth of Honen's faith, which remained as yet unexpressed by him, was subsequently fully grasped and given a profound and most thorough-going expression by Shinran. The mark that distinguishes both these masters is their decided preference for 'our' salvation over 'my' emancipation. They firmly stood on the ground of the inner togetherness of man.

In his childhood, Honen was exhorted by his dying father, who was murdered by a jealous rival, to become a Buddhist monk and quest for the Dharma through which is emptied every discrimination between friend and foe, love and hate, and through which true peace is attained. He followed his father's dying wish and became a monk of the Tendai sect of Buddhism. His elaborate study of the scriptures as well as his rigorous disciplinary practices for many years in the monastery on Mt. Hiei were exclusively devoted to the purpose of attaining that Dharma. But all his efforts brought him no light. This is no wonder, considering that the Buddhist quest, which had been traditionally undertaken in monasteries, was fundamentally directed to the personal emancipation of each monk, while Honen's quest was exclusively for the salvation of all people in the world. Had his chief concern been personal emancipation, he would have believed that he was steadily marching on the right path to the goal.

The sinfulness of man was continually a problem that confronted Honen. The popular belief of the day that sinfulness could be expiated by the virtue of leaving home and becoming a Buddhist monk was unacceptable to him. Sinfulness was nothing other than the delusion, because of which, man endlessly alternates between evil karma and suffering, thus afflicting others as well as himself. As such, it was definitely a problem for man in general and not merely a personal problem. A personal solution to this problem might well be conceivable, of course, and, in fact, a great number of Buddhist monks have sought a solution of this sort. The sense of our inner togetherness, however, makes this sort of solution less meaningful. Unless 'we' can be saved, what is the meaning of 'my' emancipation? Honen thus exclusively sought the Dharma through which all people can be equally saved and, at last, he discovered this Dharma in the Pure Land doctrine.

In this connection, a reference may be given to the critical view that faith in the Pure Land is dominantly motivated by the desire for happiness or enjoyment after death. With respect to the deteriorated and secularized form of the Pure Land school which is observable among the masses, this criticism is irrefutable. Regarding the genuine form of faith in the Pure Land, however, it is completely misplaced. As stated above, genuine faith in Pure Land Buddhism has, as its prime concern, the salvation of all beings from the predicament of suffering. This concern is really furthest from the ego-centric desire for personal happiness and enjoyment. The spirit of Mahayana Buddhism which emphasises 'seeking Enlightenment together with all fellow beings' is most vitally and thoroughly embodied in Pure Land Buddhism.

#### 4. The Pure Land and the Primal Vow

In the first section, reference was made to 'suchness', and that 'suchness is emptiness', and vice versa. In other words, suchness is the reality of things and events. Beyond suchness, no Ultimate Reality is conceivable. It is primarily because of ignorance that we remain blind to suchness and are attached to the illusory images and views of the world.

It is, however, the common faith of all Buddhists that suchness is attainable for everyone. In this respect, the Pure Land Buddhists are no exception. But such Buddhists have something unique in their view of suchness. For they believe that while suchness is attainable in principle for

everyone, one would never be able to embody suchness in one's own personality as long as one remains in the world. To remain in the world means not to be liberated from the power of delusion. With this thought, they paid keen attention to the dynamic aspect of suchness. What, then, is this aspect?

In the first place, guided by the sutras relating to the Pure Land, they learned to comprehend suchness in terms of a realm, namely as the Pure Land. As the land of suchness which illumines, empties and purifies our delusion, the Pure Land is the land of Wisdom (prajna). Suchness now appears as the Land of Infinite Light. Illumined by the light of the Pure Land, we come to know the delusiveness of this world. Such is the basic conception of the Pure Land. But the dynamic aspect of suchness cannot be fully expressed by the idea of the Pure Land alone.

Secondly, the Pure Land masters further learned to comprehend the dynamic character of suchness in terms of personality, namely as the Primal Vow of Amida Tathagata. The term tathagata means 'one who has emerged from suchness'. Amida (derived from the Sanskrit names Amitabha and Amitayus) means 'infinite'. As such, Amida Tathagata symbolizes the dynamic operation of suchness which is expressed as infinite wisdom and compassion, even though he appears as an individual Buddha in the sutras relating to him. According to the Larger Sutra of Eternal Life, out of the sincerest desire to deliver all beings from suffering, Amida took an incomparably excellent vow when he was in the original, disciplinary stage as a Bodhisattva (Dharmakara by name), which he has already fulfilled. This vow is known as the Primal Vow. The Primal Vow is thus Amida's fullest self-expression and, accordingly, the most sublime manifestation of suchness in terms of Buddhahood.

The Larger Sutra shows that the Primal Vow is differentiated into forty-eight items which are all inter-related in a subtle way. They cannot be fully discussed in this paper but, for the present, the following should be noted as the essentials of the Primal Vow:

It is vowed that Amida's Name should appear as embodying all the virtues that have a bearing on the salvation or deliverance of all human beings and, when the Name appears, it should sound throughout the lands in the ten directions\*.

It is vowed that anyone who, upon hearing Amida's Name praised, awakens faith in Amida's Sincerity and keeps this Name with him, will assuredly be reborn in the Pure Land. It is vowed that the Pure Land shall be such that all those reborn there shall attain Nirvana.

We notice from the descriptions above that two important things are vowed in the Primal Vow regarding the matter of our salvation. One is rebirth in the Pure Land and the other is the awakening of faith in Amida's Sincerity.

Rebirth in the Pure Land, which is held to take place after death has been the central concern of most Pure Land masters, as well as followers, for a long time. It was quite inconceivable for them to attain Enlightenment in this life. As the Buddhist monastic disciplines were so difficult to accomplish, they wished to attain Enlightenment after death in the Pure Land, relying solely on Amida's Primal Vow. As a general tendency, faith in this Vow was regarded merely as a prerequisite for rebirth, but ordinary people hardly realized the profound significance of this

awakening of faith. It was, indeed, Shinran who, for the first time, realized this fact in its full significance. He was revolutionary in shifting the prime importance, hitherto attached to the problem of rebirth or Enlightenment, to the problem of the awakening of faith. Faith is essential; once true faith is awakened and established, rebirth in the Pure Land will take place as a natural result. For Shinran, the awakening of faith in Amida's Sincerity really meant salvation.

\*In the tradition of Pure Land Buddhism, the term 'Name' as applied to Amida Tathagata is something much more than a name in the usual sense of the word. According to the tradition, Amida's Name comprises all of his virtues which, when uttered, are actualized in the utterer himself. How to interpret the actualization of these virtues has been a problem for the nembutsu adherents to tackle existentially.

## 5. The Awakening of Faith in Amida's Sincerity

Shinran grappled, in all seriousness and tenacity, with the problem of faith. He suffered long in his search for pure faith. Any form of faith, so long as it remained an expression of one's will to believe, can never be pure. It is branded with a self-willed character. It is mixed and defiled with calculation, self-interest, suppressed doubt etc. Pure faith must be something cleared of all these defilements and admixtures. Such genuine faith is most difficult to attain because it cannot take place without some 'otherness' coming from beyond and working upon us. How, then, does pure faith in Amida become possible for us?

Influenced by Shan-tao's Commentary on the Meditation Sutra, Shinran came to hit upon the 'Sincerity' of Amida. He learned to see all that Amida did - and does - as the expression of Amida's Sincerity. The Primal Vow itself is the loftiest and most sublime expression of his Sincerity. Suchness has now appeared as Sincerity in the Buddhahood of Amida. Ever disclosing himself in the sound of his Name, Amida, the All-Sincere One, untiringly works upon us. He turns himself over to us. His Sincerity radiates itself as boundless illumination and compassion. Precisely as a genuine response called forth by his Sincerity, the awakening of faith in Amida's Primal Vow takes place in us, when the time is fully ripe. In the awakening of faith, we experience a breaking through at the root of our delusion. We realize how deluded, insincere and sinful we have been. Our self-complacency breaks down at this very moment and we are emptied through and through. At the same time, however, we find ourselves decisively taken in by Amida's Sincerity. For the first time, we attain true rest because the deepest root of our existential anxiety, or suffering, namely, ignorance, is cut through forever. It is still true that the foliage of actual sufferings does not perish - so long as we remain in the world, there is no escaping them. We have to undergo them. But they no longer disturb our fundamental restfulness and serenity. Furthermore, in this experience of awakening, we find ourselves firmly standing on the way which leads straight to the Pure Land. It is the way of the nembutsu or the mindful recitation of Amida's Name.

What, then, is the nembutsu? It is definitely our act and our practice which has been chosen by Amida for us to undertake. Regarding the nembutsu as our act, Honen declared as follows:

By Nembutsu, I do not mean the practice of contemplating as engaged by the sages of China and our country. Nor is it the recitation of the Buddha's Name practiced as the result of understanding the meaning of the term nen (to think). It is just to recite Namu Amida Butsu without doubting that this will issue in one's rebirth in the Pure Land.

Both the contemplative and vocal forms of the nembutsu as resulting from some special understanding are rejected by Honen because they are, after all, distortions into special forms of nembutsu capable of only being practiced by gifted individuals. None of these practices can be our practice as originally intended by Amida. The nembutsu intended by Amida himself as our act, Honen concludes, consists of reciting Namu Amida Butsu; that is, calling Amida's Name out of faith in his Primal Vow. As such, the nembutsu originates in Amida's Sincerity itself. Its significance is clear: it is meant to be that which everyone of us can easily practice. It is precisely that which enables us to go straight along the way of 'no hindrance'. Shinran, too, when he developed a profound comprehension of the nembutsu, took the same position as Honen.

#### 6. The maturing of the time for the awakening of faith

Our next problem is: How do we come to be awakened to Amida's Sincerity and surrender ourselves to it? How does the time become mature and full for the awakening of faith? From the viewpoint of practice, the time is matured for faith through - and only through - the nembutsu. In the last analysis, nembutsu, and nothing but nembutsu, makes us realize what the Tathagata is in reality. It is true that we may be attracted to the nembutsu by hearing of Amida Tathagata, but it is even more true that Amida's Sincerity becomes fully understandable and appreciable to us through the nembutsu. It is more than probable that it was from this insight that Amida himself specifically chose, in his Primal Vow, the nembutsu as our practice.

In the process of the life of nembutsu, time is matured for the awakening of faith. At the outset, however, the nembutsu expresses our urgent need for liberation from suffering. Under the pressure of this existential suffering, we cry out, so to speak, for salvation while calling the Name of Amida. But there is no hope of this need being satisfied from without by, say, some saviour god. This need is not the kind of need which can be satisfied in such a way. What we can do in this situation, insofar as we are existentially inclined to the teaching of nembutsu, is patiently to seek to realize the deepest meaning of the teaching, while intently practicing the nembutsu.

When the time is ripe, a revolution takes place in our nembutsu-mindedness. The nembutsu is no more a mere expression of our desire for salvation at this moment; it now appears as the very vehicle through which Amida's Sincerity of awakening and receiving us becomes fully audible and understandable. We, who have been calling Amida's Name for salvation, now turn out to be the ones who, all the while, have been called by Amida to awaken and take refuge in him. Shinran himself has written: 'The Tathagata has already taken his Vow and turned over the Act (that is, the nembutsu completed by himself) to us for our Act'.

As mentioned previously, so long as we still live in the world, the actual sufferings of life do not cease to press upon us even after we are awakened to Amida's Sincerity. But we do not now desperately grope for the liberation from suffering. We are always with Amida's Name, that is, with nembutsu, wherever we may be or wherever we may go. We never call Amida's Name without returning, at the same time, to the fundamental restfulness and serenity of being saved by Amida's Sincerity. This return to the original experience of the awakening of faith refreshes us and enables us to brace ourselves for natural but courageous living. We are thus, through the nembutsu, enabled to pass the, otherwise, impassable current of sufferings in every moment. To be enabled to pass the unpassable - this is precisely what salvation means in the Pure Land doctrine. The life of nembutsu has been designated as the way that leads straight to the Pure Land.

#### 7. The fruits which faith bears in actual life

What fruits does faith in the Pure Land bear in actual life? Does it introduce something novel? As already observed, Pure Land Buddhism has disclosed itself as the Dharma which is truly adequate to our existential condition. From this fact, it naturally follows that the Pure Land doctrine makes its adherents all the more sensitive to the inner togetherness and inter-relatedness of human beings. Once we are awakened to the Primal Vow that has been vowed for all beings, we can no more look on the suffering of others with indifference or contemplate their folly or evil with detachment. In a similar situation, or under similar conditions, each of us might have done the same thing. We are all 'ordinary beings' as Prince Shotoku has declared. With this in mind, we are emptied of all unreasonable contempt for evil-doers and actors of folly. Arrogance now gives place to humility. What we can do is, first of all, to pray heartily that all our fellow beings, including the persons in question, might awaken to Amida's boundless Sincerity and boundless compassion, as expressed in the Primal Vow. Then we must do all that we can to help bring about this awakening.

It is the experience of the awakening of faith which, emptying and purifying us of deluded thoughts and emotions, enables us to live in accordance with suchness, that is, to live naturally. This life of naturalness is lived in, and through, the practice of nembutsu. The humility just mentioned is one aspect of the life of naturalness. Another aspect of this life is tenderness or tender-heartedness. The boundless compassion of Amida, when we awaken to it and accept it, melts away to tenderness our deep-seated obstinacy and self-complacency. We are thus enabled to confront every problem open-mindedly, flexibly and without prejudice.

This reminds us that, in Buddhism, any wrath whatsoever is outrightly rejected. Even if such wrath is an emphatic expression of the 'justice of God', this makes no difference to Buddhism. Wrath is a violent and destructive emotion. It must be melted away and transformed into tenderness by the boundless compassion of Amida.

In its expression through human relationships, tenderness may bear something in common with tolerance. This something should not, however, be confused with the toleration which is based on the temporary, political suppression of the impulse to justify oneself and blame others. The

tolerance on the part of the nembutsu adherents is essentially rooted in repentance and humility for the fact that the same evil (which is 'tolerated') is finally characteristic of us all. Furthermore, the selflessness of repentance and humility exerts an immense influence upon other people. It naturally calms others and induces them to reflect upon themselves, thus helping to purify them. This repentance and humility springs from faith in Amida's boundless Sincerity and is renewed every moment through the nembutsu. It is in this sense that the nembutsu is called the 'purifying act'. The nembutsu purifies not only the nembutsu adherents themselves but also those who come into contact with them.

In this connection, a reference may be made to Shinran's assertion that 'the nembutsu is the way of no-hindrance'. A careless reading might suggest to the reader that Shinran is here emphasizing the overwhelming supernatural power of the nembutsu to clear away every hindrance and obstacle blocking the nembutsu adherent's way to the Pure Land. But this is a sheer misunderstanding. The term 'no-hindrance' should never be interpreted in terms of power but always in terms of spirituality. Shinran's statement should be interpreted as follows: The nembutsu adherent naturally confronts, with tenderness and humility, every problem that arises. This tenderness and humility themselves make for no-hindrance. Consequently, Shinran's idea of no-hindrance bears no colour of licence or antinomianism.

All of the above has a vital bearing on the problem of morality. What, then, is the basic attitude of the nembutsu adherent to the problem of morality? First of all, they all pay due respect to the importance of morality. It is a pity, however, that we can never do good in the complete sense of the term, considering the fact that our impulse to justify ourselves and to blame others is, finally, characteristic of us all. This fact shows how deeply we have been submerged in the current of birth-and-death, as deplored by Shan-tao. Therefore, we need, by every means, to listen and awaken to, and to thus be purified, by the Primal Vow.

Not out of the consciousness of moral obligation or duty, but immediately out of the humility which arises from being awakened to Amida's Sincerity, the nembutsu adherent seeks to attain a warm reconciliation and communion with others. It has often been the case with nembutsu adherents of deep faith that the humility, tenderness and gratitude to Amida which shine out of their personality, quite naturally influence others around them and thus bring about genuine peace in their local community. Is not such virtue surely what morality envisages as its ideal? Bearing this in mind, Shinran says, 'There is no good that surpasses the nembutsu'.

World peace is our urgent, serious problem. It goes without saying that it can never be brought about by any temporizing measures. Political toleration or appeasement will not avail much. The foundation of peace must be firmly laid in the depth of human nature. In this situation, the doctrine of Pure Land Buddhism may well be rediscovered as a valuable source for bringing peace. This is not to say that the awakening to the Primal Vow of Amida Tathagata is a panacea for all the problems of mankind. However, it should never be overlooked that Pure Land Buddhism has long been, and continues to be in the present, the Dharma that is adequate to the existential situation of all ordinary beings and, further, that it has borne, to all genuine nembutsu

adherents, the aforementioned spiritual fruits, all of which have great importance for the problem of peace.

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