

2 THE MAHAYANA MODE OF THOUGHT

The aim of all Buddhist paths is liberation from the world of pain and delusion and awakening to the truth or reality that transcends it. The hallmark of the Mahayana way is that it does not teach abandonment of ordinary life in attaining authentic existence and genuine self-knowledge. The true transcendent realm also transcends any division between this world and the world of awakening, and is realized not through renouncing everyday life but through transforming it at its roots.

Shinran uses precisely the term “transformation” (see Passage 8), and his fundamental contribution to Buddhist tradition lies in articulating the nature of this transformation as realized firmly grounded Pure Land teachings in general Buddhist, and particularly Mahayana, thought, but also played a crucial role in bringing Mahayana Buddhism to the fulfillment of one of its highest goals: a practicable and unending path to enlightenment accessible to all people.

Since Mahayana thought forms the foundation of Shinran’s understanding of true reality and human attainment, it will be helpful to consider its basic character and elements. In this chapter, we will take up the Buddhist view of ordinary life, and then, drawing on formulations of the early Indian masters, focus on themes and modes of thought that allowed for the unfolding of the Pure Land path: 1) the radically nondualistic quality of true reality or wisdom; 2) the complex structure of transformed awareness and life, in which wisdom is also itself compassion; and 3) the implications of such wisdom or reality for the process of transformation.

The Human Situation

Sakyamuni Buddha, in the first of his Four Noble Truths, pointed out the pain of human existence, and in the second, revealed its cause as blind and desperate craving or thirst.

It is sometimes said that the Buddha’s teaching is needlessly pessimistic, viewing only the dark side of life. The Buddhist analysis of life lived in ignorance, however, is not based on our ordinary judgments of good and bad or relative happiness and discomfort. It points rather to a pervasive disquiet concerning all that threatens our sense of who we are. This anxiety is focused in its deepest levels on our fear of impermanence and death, and manifests itself as a fierce attachment to self—a self we cling to as actual and enduring, but which is only the image we view ourselves as, a fabrication of projected hopes and fears.¹

It is taught that our ordinary life is colored by four kinds of inverted thinking with which we refuse to recognize the truth about ourselves and the world: we assume what is impermanent to be everlasting; we pursue what actually brings pain out of illusions of self-gratification; we see what is defiled by egocentricity as

pure; and we cling to what is egoless and non-substantial as possessing a permanent identity. Viewing the world with our imagined self at its center, we desire all that seems to enlarge or enhance our existence—whether possessions, family, power, or esteem—and at the same time, we regard whatever is menacing or diminishing with antipathy. Having made our selves into an object in the world to be protected and magnified, we view all things and people also as objects, judging them in terms of benefit to the self. Our lives, thus propelled by the incessant and unfulfillable need to affirm the self, are inevitably pervaded in their depths by hunger, dread, and frustration.

By refusing to let go of our egocentric perspective on the world, we lock ourselves into a distorted vision and must experience over and over the disappointments and pain of being in discord with the way things actually are. Moreover, this pain leads us to cling all the more resolutely to the self. In Buddhist terms, our lives are characterized by *samsara*—the “stream of existence from birth to death and death to birth” driven by the desires and hatreds arising from self-attachment. *Samsara* denotes bondage to the futile repetition of suffering that we are doomed to by our clinging. Shinran states we are “shackled,” bound about by our passions (Passage 7).

Sakyamuni Buddha was able to sunder the fetters of samsaric life by eliminating its cause—that is, by perceiving the reality expressed as the Four Noble Truths. Thus the third and fourth Truths: that pain can be overcome through the cessation of craving, and that there is a way to cessation in the Noble Eightfold Path (right view, thought, speech, conduct, livelihood, effort, mindfulness, and meditation). He did not grasp the Four Truths as abstract, objective doctrines. Rather, by realizing them as the actuality of his own existence through contemplative practice, he was able to eradicate the delusion and ignorance that give rise to craving and suffering. The fundamental aim of the Buddhist path, then, is to break through the false structures imposed on experience from the stance of the delusional self. “Buddha” means “awakened one,” and the goal of every Buddhist is to attain Buddhahood, to shake off the dream of obsessive attachments.

Most forms of Mahayana Buddhism teach personal discipline, meditation, and religious exercises by which one gradually strips away the “blind passions” (*klesa*) that manifest self-attachment and releases one’s grip on the imagined self and its compulsions. Those who awaken the aspiration for enlightenment and follow the path are called bodhisattvas, “beings of bodhi” or enlightenment. By annihilating such passions, bodhisattvas thoroughly eradicate the thinking, feeling, and perception predicated on the false self. Such thinking and feeling is characterized above all by the barrier placed between self and others, between the subject that thinks and perceives and the objects that it sets apart from itself and observes with feelings of possessiveness or aversion.

Bodhisattvas, then, are said to obliterate the dichotomous thinking based on subject and object. They perceive no beings or things of the world as separate from themselves, and no self divided from beings. Since the ordinary, unenlightened perspective of the self has been cast off, this realization is also called no-self, or non-ego. Since the ignorance that is the root of blind

passions—the delusional thinking that sees with the self at the center of the world—has been dispelled, awakening is also *nirvana*, the “blowing out” or extinguishing of passions and suffering.

One of the most important features of the wisdom realized by the bodhisattva, however, is that it is not mere quiescence—not a blankness in which the perceiving subject is annihilated. Rather, it functions to see the world as it truly is. When things are no longer turned into objects in the distorting glass of self-interest, the self likewise ceases to be a projection of desires and apprehensions—the objectified image of self—and becomes the self that knows, the actual subject. Thus, when inverted thinking is eradicated, one awakens to true reality characterized by the four noninverted qualities of nirvana: timelessness, bliss, purity, and authentic self. Here samsaric life, the life of ignorance, is transformed into the activity of wisdom or enlightenment. It may be said, then, that emancipation from samsaric life attained in the Buddhist path is fundamentally a new mode of awareness. It is not an extension of our usual ways of knowing into broader spheres, but the emergence of the world and the self free of the subject-object dichotomy.