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Virtuous Persons : How Do Modern Shin
Buddhists Accept Death?

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| メタデータ | 言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2014-02-17 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 中川, 正法, NAKAGAWA, Masanori メールアドレス: 所属: |
| URL | https://chikushi-u.repo.nii.ac.jp/records/261 |

On Being Reborn In the Pure Land

Together with Virtuous Persons

— How Do Modern Shin Buddhists Accept Death ?

Masanori NAKAGAWA

Preface

There is a deep feeling for the Pure Land (Jodo : 浄土) that people believing in the teaching of the Pure Land path (Jyodokyo : 浄土教) have continued to have from long ago. The feeling is as follows: when our life ends, we shall go to the Pure Land, and we will be able to meet the persons who have already been reborn there. This feeling has been accepted with the phrase ‘to meet in one place together’ and handed down from generation to generation.

Sometimes we can find the gravestones of Shin-sect people inscribed not with a family name or Namo-amidabutsu, but ‘*kue-isscho*’ on its surface. In front of the gravestone, people think of the Pure Land and spend the time to face the persons who have been born in the Pure Land [Nohnin: 247-249].

And very often a Shin-sect priest preaches on the teaching about *kue-isscho* to persons who have lost relatives and are sunk in grief.

The phrase Kue-isscho (to meet in the Pure Land together : 俱会一处) is found in the Chinese translation of *Smaller Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* (*Amida Sūtra* : 佛說阿彌陀經) by Kumārajīva (鳩摩羅什) . This Chinese translation was completed ca.402 A.D. The phrase shows one aspect of Amida’ s Pure Land. Namely, in the Pure Land people can meet in one place persons of such high virtue as Arhans and Bodhisattvas.

Shinran (親鸞) did not quote this phrase even in *KYOGYOSHINSHO* (教行信証) or his other works. Shin-buddhist scholars have discussed this point at recent academic meetings [Kawasoe, Watanabe].

I will consider the question why Shinran did not mention the phrase *kue-isscho* in this paper based on the research done by Shin-buddhist scholars.

Further, I want to examine how this teaching is useful to accept their death for the people who are in a terminal care.

I .

Now, I will discuss the sūtra passage including the phrase *kue-isscho* with the Sanskrit Text and English translation from it.

punar aparaṃ śāriputra ye' mitāyuṣas tathāgatasya buddhakṣetre sattvā upaṇṇāḥ śuddhā bodhisattva avinivartaniyā ekajātīpratibaddhās teṣāṃ śāriputra bodhisattvānāṃ na sukaraṃ pramāṇaṃ ākhyātum anyatrāprameyāsaṃkhyeyā iti saṃkhyāṃ gacchanti // tatra khalu punaḥ śāriputra buddhakṣetre sattvaiḥ praṇidhānaṃ kartavyam / tat kasmād dhetoḥ / yatra hi nāma *tathārūpaiḥ satpurusaḥ saha samavadhānaṃ bhavati* / nāvaramātrakeṇa śāriputra kuśalamūlena-amitāyuṣas tathāgatasya buddhakṣetre sattvā upapadyante / (The Smaller Sukhāvatīvyūha, ed by Max Müller, p.96. [Fujita : 82]. Emphasis mine, here and throughout.)

“Furthermore, Shariputra, those sentient beings who are reborn in the buddha-field of the Tathagata Amitayus as pure bodhisattvas who will not fall back and will be separated from awakening by only one birth — the number of these bodhi-sattvas, Shariputra, is not easy to reckon. One can only approximate their numbers by saying that they are immeasurable and countless.”

“Now, Shariputra, sentient beings should set their minds on rebirth in that Buddha-field. Why ? Because *there they will meet persons like themselves, who practice the good*. For, Shariputra, living beings are not reborn in that buddha-field of the Tatha-gata Amitayus as the result of an inferior root of merit.”[Gomez 1996:18-19]

The English translation based on the Chinese translation by Kumārajīva is as follows.

“Furthermore, Shariputra, all living beings born in the Land of Supreme Bliss will progress irreversibly in the path. Many among them are only one more birth away from the full awakening of a buddha. Their numbers are vast. Their numbers cannot be grasped. One can only speak of their spiritual careers in terms of measureless, boundless, incalculable, cosmic ages.” Shariputra, living beings who hear this should generate an earnest desire, wishing to be reborn in that land. Why? Because *in that land one will be able to meet in one place persons of such high virtue as the many living beings I have described here*. Shariputra, one cannot be reborn in that buddha-field, if one depends on the merit of only a few roots of goodness.

[Gomez1996: 148]

Seven Masters seldom mentioned *kue-isscho*, but Genshin (源信) and Honen (法然) refer to this teaching as follows[Kawasoe: 571, Fujita:130].

Genshin considered this passage from the *Smaller Sūtra of Immeasurable Life* as the authority for ‘the bliss of meeting together with the host of sages’ in *ESSENTIALS FOR ATTAINING BIRTH* (往生要集) .

He states that the Pure Land is the place Bodhisattvas can meet together in one place freely, namely “the sentient beings in Pure Land always meet together in one place, have communication, visit and respect each other, and feel an affinity for each other. They may enjoy the situation.”

Honen explained *kue-issho* concretely in his commentary on *Amida Sūtra*.

“In the Pure Land one will meet not only these Sages, but parents, teachers, friends, fellow practitioner, wife and children, fellow beings related since the beginningless past down to this day. So, I think that those persons should attain the birth in the Pure Land who want to meet parents, teachers, wife and children, fellow beings, friends, fellow practitioners in the course of countless lives in many states of existence.”

Honen understood that the Pure Land is not only the world where people can meet Sages, but can meet late family members and relations and so on again.

But Shinran did not mention about *kue-issho* directly.

II .

The Shinran’s feeling about the Pure Land is mentioned in TANNISHO (A Record in Lament of Divergences : 歎異抄) as follows.

“Further, having no thought of wanting to go to the Pure Land quickly, we think forlornly that we may die even when we become slightly ill; this is the action of blind passions. It is hard for us to abandon this old home of pain, where we have been transmigrating for innumerable kalpas down to the present, and *we feel no longing for the Pure Land of peace, where we have yet to be born*. Truly, how powerful our blind passions are! But though we feel reluctant to part from this world, at the moment our karmic bonds to this saha world run out and helplessly we die, we shall go to that land. Amida pities especially *the person who has no thought of wanting to go to the Pure Land quickly*. Reflecting on this, we feel the great Vow of great compassion to be all the more trustworthy and realize that our birth is settled. [CWS : 665-667]

Here we can see his honest emotion about the Pure Land, but there is no mention of meeting again.

Then should we say that Shinran did not have the Pure Land view in the meaning of meeting again in the Pure Land ? We find the following sentences in Shinran’s letters.

The first letter is an answer on being informed of Kakunenbo’s death.

I am truly sad to hear about Kakunen-bo. I had expected that I would go first [to the Pure

Land], but I have been left behind; it is unutterably saddening.

Kakushin-bo, who left us last year, has certainly gone [to the Pure Land] and is awaiting us there. Needless to say, I will surely meet them there; it is beyond words. Kakunen-bo's words did not differ at all from what I have said, *so we will certainly go to the same place[, the Pure Land]*. [CWS: 579-580]

The next letter is the answer to one asking about the Nembutsu.

My life has now reached the fullness of its years. *It is certain that I will go to birth in the Pure Land before you, so without fail I will await you there.* [CWS: 539]

These words show that the Pure Land was understood by Shinran as the world of *kue-isscho* described in *Smaller Sūtra Immeasurable Life* and as the place where people believing in Nembutsu could meet together.

Of course, these are letters and some scholars say that the letters should be distinguished from doctrinal expression, strictly speaking. [Fujita: 131, Watanabe: 661]

III.

Then why did Shinran not mention *kue-isscho* in KYOGYOSHINSHO ?

For one thing, it is said that *Amida Sūtra* is to be regarded as a text(sūtra) expressing a provisional teaching. Therefore, the world of *kue-isscho* should be understood as the provisional Pure Land where practitioner of self-power.

This is confirmed in the following passages.

According to the *Larger Sutra*, true and provisional Vows were established. Further, in the *Contemplation Sutra*, provisional and true teachings are revealed. *In the Smaller Sutra, only the "true" gate is taught, and provisional good acts are not discussed.* Thus, what is true in the three sutras has as its essence the selected Primal Vow. What is provisional in the three sutras is essentially the practice of various good roots of good. [KYOGYOSHINSHO, CWS: 220-221]

By taking the Contemplation Sutra as a model, we know that the [Smaller] Sutra also possesses an explicit meaning and an implicit, hidden, inner meaning.

Concerning its "explicit" meaning, the sutra-teacher Sakyamuni reveals the "true" gate, which consists of the root of good or of virtue, urges *beings to have the single-mindedness of self-benefit, and encourages them to attain the non-comprehensible birth*, rejecting all other practices of small good. Thus, the sutra teaches, "[Saying the Name is] the act of many roots of good,

many virtues, and many merits,” and a commentary states, “The nine grades of beings should all direct [the merit of the nembutsu] and attain the stage of nonretrogression. “Further: None [of the other dharma-gates] surpasses birth in the West through the nembutsu; [With but] three or five utterances, the Buddha will come to welcome us. *This is the explicit meaning of the sutra; it is the provisional means within the “true” gate.* [KYOGYOSHINSHO, CWS: 226]

Concerning birth in accord with the Amida Sutra, through the Vow of cultivating the root of virtue, one enters the “true” gate of ultimate attainment of birth in the Pure Land; choosing the Name that is the root of good or of virtue, one leaves aside the small good of the myriad good acts and practices. Nevertheless, the practicers of meditative and nonmeditative good by self-power doubt the inconceivable wisdom of the Buddha and do not accept it. Taking the Name of the Tathagata as their own root of good, they direct their own merit toward birth in the Pure Land and rely on the Vow that beings ultimately attain birth. [A Ccollection of Pass-ages on the Types of Birth in the Three Pure Land Sutras, CWS: 649]

Are there any other reasons ? KYOGYOSHINSHO states as follows.

Clearly we know, then, that the nembutsu is not a self-power practice performed by foolish beings or sages; it is therefore called the practice of “not-directing virtue [on the part of beings].” *Masters of the Mahayana and Hinayana and people burdened with karmic evil, whether heavy or light, should all in the same way take refuge in the great treasure ocean of the selected Vow and attain Buddhahood through the nembutsu.* Accordingly, the *Commentary on the Treatise* states: In that land of happiness, every single being is born transformed from the pure lotus of Amida Tathagata’s perfect enlightenment, for they are the same in practicing the nembutsu and follow no other way. [CWS: 53-54]

In that land of happiness, every single being is born transformed from the pure lotus of Amida Tathagata’s perfect enlightenment, for they are the same in practicing the nembutsu and follow no other way. *This extends even to this world, so that all nembutsu practicers within the four seas are brothers and sisters. The fellow beings are innumerable.* How can this be conceived? [CWS: 155]

Shinran quoted ‘the virtue of fellow beings’ from *TREATISE ON THE PURE LAND*.

The world shown with ‘the virtue of fellow beings’ has stronger equality and co-operation than the expression of *kue-issho*. It is certain that the faith is the same on the path to the Pure Land in the world shown with ‘the virtue of fellow beings’ .

Here Shinran showed a much wider world of meeting beyond the stage of *kue-issho*.

We can consider the following expressions from *Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu*, which shows the equality along the path to the Pure Land.

When the one thought-moment of joy arises,
Nirvana is attained without severing blind passions;
When ignorant and wise, even grave offenders and slanders of the dharma,
all alike turn and enter shinjin. They are like waters that, on entering the ocean,
become one in taste with it. [CWS: 70]

It may be said that the following sentences appearing in the *NIRVANA SUTRA*, which is quoted in both *II. The True Practice of The Pure Land Way* and *VI. The Transformed Buddha-Bodies and Lands That Provisional Means of the Pure Land Way*, have much in common with *kue-issho*.

Again, there are two kinds of shinjin: one is to believe that there is enlightenment, and the other, to believe that there are people who have attained it. This person's shinjin is belief only that enlightenment exists and not that there are people who have attained it. Therefore it is called "imperfect realization of shinjin." [CWS: 100,235]

The following is one interpretation to this passages.

'A person of perfect realization of shinjin' is a person who believes that enlightenment exists and that there are people who have attained it. It is generally supposed that a person gains the perfect shinjin if he hears and believes the reason of Nembutsu. But it is not the case. At the same time, a person who believes his path to the Pure Land is only the Nembutsu should believe that his late mother and father have already been reborn in the Pure Land and are enlightened just as Amida Buddha. Otherwise his shinjin is not perfect. Shinran says that believing firmly in the existence of both the path to the Pure Land and that there are enlightened people is the true significance of shinjin [Otani: 420].

Suzuki Ayako, a person of Nembutsu who died of cancer at the age of 46 in 1989, wrote as follows [Suzuki:30-31].

The disease of cancer enabled me to face the death and live my past 46-year-life again.
I came to see my home land where I should return clearly through the death of my parents.
My father smiled saying 'We all return to one place, be relieved' two days before his death.
My mother breathed her last, saying, 'You all practice the same Nembutsu . . . ' with her hands pressed together.

I could see the world of *kue-issho* in my parents.

Through her words that she was convinced of the world of the same shinjin, we can confirm that this portion of the *NIRVANA SUTRA* shows the world leading to *kue-issho*.

IV.

The practice in the terminal care by Buddhists in Japan is called the Vihāra movement — a support group for the terminally ill that is organized and operates according to Buddhist teachings [Tashiro:177, Shima:137].

The number of palliative care wards based on the Vihāra movement is on the increase gradually. And there Shin-buddhists are playing an important leadership role.

The Japan Association for Buddhist Nursing and Vihāra Studies was established in December, 2004, to do research and conduct activities regarding the problems of ‘life’ in the field of Buddhism, medical treatment, welfare and education.

And the research on spiritual pain and spiritual care are also needed these days [Shima: 146]. They are discussing the way of Buddhist counseling and grief care [Tashiro: 62-63]. Prof. Naoki NABESHIMA, who gives many suggestions for the Vihāra movement, made a report as follows.

The purpose of the care for the dying person is not making patients accept death.

But it matters that one should understand everyone has an unique life and listen to the wish of the patients facing death deeply.

We were apt to think acceptance of death is the purpose and the destination of patients in the palliative care.

But the people facing death are keeping their wishes till the end. Their wishes are analyzed into three sorts. The first is the extension of daily life, the second is the succession of wish and the third is wish of meeting again [Nabeshima: 2004].

Above all, the question of how Buddhists should think about ‘the wish to meet again’ is being discussed.

My uncle passed away from cancer at the age of 57 in 1999. He was a priest of the Shin-sect and a researcher of Shin-Buddhism. Accepting the newest treatments willingly, he had a strong wish to live, but it was not fulfilled. The last words he told me on the bed in the hospital were, ‘Let us meet again in the Pure Land.’ He expressed ‘the wish to meet again in the Pure Land’ not only to me, but also to his family members and his friends.

Not only the person facing death has the wish to meet again at some place some day in the future, but the persons who lost a family member or relatives also have the wish.

I remember one letter which appeared in a Journal published by the Honganji. It was written by

a mother who lost her son in a railroad accident in China in 1988.

In the sorrow that she lost her dearest son suddenly, she was so desperate that she even wanted to die to follow her son. At that time, she had the opportunity to hear the Buddhist teaching from a priest. The priest said, “*Kue-isscho*, you can meet your son in the Pure Land again.” She wrote at the end of her letter, “I can meet you again in the Pure Land. I want to live each day to the fullest.”

The understanding of the Pure Land called *kue-isscho*, ‘the world of meeting together’ has the great meaning as the teaching to answer the wish of a person who is facing death, and to heal the feeling of great loss of the survivors.

[This is the revised version of the paper presented at the symposium “The Shin Buddhist Path in Global and Comparative Perspective” in Colgate University, U.S.A., on 6th August 2005.]

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