

The Problem of “Knowing” and “Doing” in Shinran's Buddhist Ethics

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Abstract

For Shinran (親鸞1173-1262), the founder of Japan's Shinshū (True Pure Land) school of Pure Land Buddhism, the question of how to do the right thing was constrained by the larger problem of how to discern the right thing to do. In his view, human behaviour was constrained by two large issues: the problem of the times and context in which human beings live, *mappō*, and the consequent problem that human beings were not capable of properly distinguishing between right and wrong, good and evil, and thus could commit any kind of act. This paper argues, drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's account of "flesh" and the "horizon", that the possibility of living and acting ethically in the present, among others, depends upon relationships of care and compassion between and among others, within close networks of human relationality, rather than upon abstract ethical absolutes.

Keywords

Shinran; ethics; care; compassion; Pure Land; Merleau-Ponty; relationality

Introduction

In recent months, the world has been experiencing a series of climate catastrophes which seem to encompass the entire world – from the unprecedented drying up of major European rivers such as the Danube, to the Jialing river in China, and the catastrophic monsoon flooding in Pakistan which is reported to have displaced a full third of the population and caused the deaths of over 1000 people. These disasters occur in the backdrop of a reported 1.2°C rise in the global average temperature,¹ caused by the release of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases through human activity. With further rises in the global average predicted in the near future, it would seem that the only course of action to prevent further, and greater disasters² for both present and future generations would be to cease all activities that contribute to global climate change and the warming of the planet.

Humanity cannot even claim the pretence that the contribution of human activity to global climate change was something only recently discovered and demonstrated by scientists. Warnings about the dangers of fossil fuel use and the consequent release of greenhouse gases have been coming out of the scientific community for more than 50 years, only to be met with scepticism and silence from governments around the world. Indeed, the louder and more prominently the issue of global climate is discussed, the louder the voices decrying the cost and inconvenience to industries, businesses and society that making the necessary changes to move away from the use of oil and gas would be. The questions foremost in the minds of these naysayers point to who will pay for these changes, what the impact will be on the economy (that is to say, the profits of businesses and the oil and gas industries), and never what the cost will be in terms of the impact of climate change on human life and the environment as a whole. One

¹ The State of the Global Climate 2020 report from the World Meteorological Organization, published in 2021, reported an average rise in global temperatures of at least 1.2° C.

² Examples include the series of global “tipping points” such as the melting of the Greenland ice sheets, changes in major oceanic currents, and others, as described in *Science* magazine, which could be triggered by a rise of 1.5° C in the global average temperature (Armstrong McKay *et al.* 2022).

cannot but be struck by the disconnect between what must surely be done (reduce all carbon emissions as quickly as possible), and what is actually being done (continued exploitation of oil and gas, and no firm commitments to reduce or even halt further carbon emissions). This refusal to change priorities even in the face of *prima facie* evidence of the immediate negative impact of current levels of economic activity and exploitation, even though such changes would be to the present and future benefit of all human beings is puzzling, to say the least.

While human beings “know” very well what must be done to prevent an even greater series of environmental disasters, there is great resistance to “doing” what must be done. When we consider that even out of pure self-interest changes must be made if only to preserve our own lives and those of our children and future generations, this refusal to “do” what self-evidently must be done is difficult to understand. If even the most selfish of decisions, that to save just ourselves, is difficult in these life-threatening circumstances, how much more the ethical decisions we must make in our day-to-day lives? If we cannot even act in our best interests, how are we to make ethical decisions that would protect others from harm, promote their welfare, and ensure their flourishing? If the very context in which we live our lives necessarily, and inevitably, leads us to make choices that harm ourselves, others, and our environment, can we be said to live in a context conducive to making considered ethical choices? When the ground upon which we make our ethical choices is tainted, are not the results of our ethical choices tainted as well?

In this paper, I argue that in the Pure Land Buddhist worldview of Shinran, the reality of the “impossibility” of ethical choice should lead us not into ethical *paralysis*, but should open up the space for an ethics of responsive care that precisely only opens up to human beings once they confront their incapacity to “choose” and “do” the right thing. Further, by reflecting on Merleau-Ponty’s account of “flesh” and “the horizon”, the possibilities of ethical action as grounded in the consideration of the ethically rich and productive relationship between self and other become self-evident. This approach towards responsive care between and for others is similar to the notion of *ubuntu* within African ethical thinking, where *ubuntu* is understood as the ground from which human

relationality, as care and concern for others, emerges. However, we must note that while *ubuntu* takes for granted the ethical orientation of fundamental human institutions (such as the family, as well as local traditions and practices), this paper will argue that from the perspective of Shinran's Pure Land Buddhism, *ubuntu*, in its valorisation of tradition and the “wisdom of the elders”, does not adequately account for the tendency of human action towards selfishness and greed.

In the first main section of the paper, I explore Merleau-Ponty's account of “flesh” and the “horizon” *vis a vis* the possibilities of ethical action as grounded in the consideration of the ethically rich and productive relationship between the self and the other. That is followed by a section introducing the Pure Land Buddhist worldview, and, in particular, examining Shinran's view of the possibilities and limits of human ethical action. I then conclude with a gesture towards the possibility of an ethics grounded in the fruitful *aporia* which emerges as a consequence of abandoning an *a priori* attitude of “knowing” what to do. I propose that a radical praxis of intimate sharing and care within community provides a useful guide to facing the ethical dilemmas of our present circumstances.

Merleau-Ponty and the Human Capacity for Action

Before one can take any action, particularly one of an ethical nature, one must be aware of what it is that needs (or ought), to be done. Thus, for any action to be taken, it should be apparent to the actor just what it is he or she aims to accomplish. Indeed, most descriptions of ethics involve a rational actor making a free, that is, uncoerced choice between a number of alternative actions, which will lead to a clear set of potential outcomes. While this is the ideal picture of ethical action, what recent psychological and physiological studies of human action have shown is that many decisions which may seem intentional and voluntary to the actor are, in fact, governed by unconscious and involuntary factors (Soon *et al.* 2008).

As Maurice Merleau-Ponty has argued in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), our capacity as human beings to identify and recognise what is possible within our sphere of cognition is framed through our perceptual “horizon”, and bounded within our corporeal embodiment, which he refers to as “flesh”. In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), he could already be seen to be offering an analysis of the intimate connection between the body (and thereby, embodied experience) and our experience of the world. Dorothea Olkowski argues that this is part of an attempt to understand the “body of consciousness, the body accompanying consciousness” which is in opposition to Freud's understanding of the conscious, characterized by a positing of the unconscious as a “first cause for all mental states which causally unfold out of it through the interaction of energies” (Olkowski 2006, 214).

Merleau-Ponty contrasts the Freudian view of the relation between body and world with a “critical philosophy” which sees meaning as constituted in the objective world by the operation of consciousness. He argues that the Freudian model leaves us stuck between a “transcendentally oriented” view of the unconscious as the root of all our emotions and mental patterns, and a “pseudo-physical” view of consciousness as produced by a concatenation of physical and non-physical states. Still, Merleau-Ponty holds that phenomenology and psychoanalysis are not diametrically opposed, but rather inter-related insofar as psychoanalysis can transcend the “subject-act-object structure of pure consciousness” and thereby deepen our grasp of human existence, while at the same time, phenomenology can help psychoanalysis break free from its “mechanistic causal frame of reference” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 57-58).

As Merleau-Ponty sees it, a phenomenological approach grounded in the intimacy between body and world dissolves any dichotomy between body and consciousness, or body and world:

There is no reason to seek to construct in the objective body, as the physiology of the nervous system does, a whole mass of hidden nervous phenomena by which the stimuli defined objectively would be *elaborated* into the total perception ... It is a thought that acts as if the world wholly positive were given, and as if the problem were to make the perception of the world first considered as non-existing

arise therefrom. It is causal, positivist, negative thought (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 231).

The flaw Merleau-Ponty seeks to correct here is the presumption that all the conditions for perception can be retroactively constructed by an analysis of its constituent structures. What Merleau-Ponty posits instead is a dynamic, emergent view of perception that recognizes the interaction of these psychological and physiological structures *within* perception itself:

The ambiguity of the motivations must be understood by rediscovering our quasi-perceptual relationship with the human world through quite simple and nowise hidden existentials: only they are, like all structures, *between* our acts and aims and not behind them (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 232).

As Stawarska argues, the Freudian model, that maps the mind as a psychical apparatus divided into agencies and drives in mutual antagonism, makes it difficult to understand how these causal, yet hidden mechanisms could enter the life of consciousness and organize human behavior into meaningful patterns from within (Stawarska 2008, 58- 60). Merleau-Ponty is careful not to deny the existence of these psychic agencies, but only to question their role as the causes, and therefore the creators, of an *a priori* meaning for human behavior. As structures that lie *between* our actions, their meaning comes to be constituted *in* the act, rather than supplying that meaning beforehand. It is, therefore, ambiguous, in the sense that meaning and signification are not given in advance, but only come to be constituted in the moment. This new approach has the benefit of eliminating the need to frame the relationship between soul and body as if between two positive, distinct substances and to formulate what takes place “in the body” separately from what takes place “in the soul” (with respect, that is, to perception). Instead, “the soul is the hollow of the body, the body is the distention of the soul” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 232-233). Soul and body are intimately related, and so all perception must be understood as arising from within this intimacy rather than operating as a third term standing over and above body and soul. Similarly, the mind is:

The *other side* of the body - We have no idea of a mind that would not be *doubled* with a body ... The “other side” means that the body, inasmuch as it has this other side, is not describable in *objective* terms, in terms of the in itself - that this other side is really the other side *of the body*, *overflows* into it (*überschreiten*), encroaches upon it, is hidden in it - and at the same time needs it, terminates in it, is

anchored in it. There is a body of the mind, and a mind of the body and a chiasm between them (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 259).

Perception, therefore, involves our whole being intimately, an intimacy that Merleau-Ponty calls “existence”, which is characterized by movement “in depth” between the body and personal acts (Olkowski 2006, 216-217). In *Phenomenology of Perception* (2002), Merleau-Ponty clarifies that perception is not *of* the world, in the objective sense, but is called out as a response, or “bodily recognition” directed towards a particular context. Perception therefore as responsiveness in intimacy involves us in particular styles of being, directed towards a field that supports and gives them meaning (Merleau-Ponty 2002, 90-91).

In the chapter “Intertwining-The Chiasm” in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty makes his clearest argument for the notion of “flesh”. Mauro Carbone notes that for Merleau-Ponty, “the notion of ‘flesh’ designates the common horizon where all beings belong,” and is “neither matter nor mind nor substance, but a unitary texture where each body and each thing manifests itself only as difference from other bodies and other things” (Carbone 2006, 133). It is through the flesh that we see “the things themselves, in their places, where they are, according to their being.” It is the “thickness of the flesh” that is constitutive of the means of relationship or communication between the visible and the seer, and is the “sole means I have to go unto the heart of things, by making myself a world and by making them flesh” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 135). This means that the body is not objectively separate from the world, but is that by which the world becomes sensible and relatable because it is intimately “caught up in the tissue of things”, and it is that communication and entanglement between seer and seen that makes the world itself flesh (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 138). Indeed, “Precisely such ‘flesh of the sensible’, to which we all belong and in which we belong to each other makes *communicable* and in this sense, shareable every experience of ours” (Carbone 2006, 135). Yet this flesh is not a “thing” *per se*, is neither mind, matter nor substance nor is it the product of the union or combination of disparate elements, but is “thinkable by itself” and a kind of “incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139-140).

In fact, what Merleau-Ponty signifies here as “flesh” is not the human body, even though it alone can bring us to the things themselves, which goes out to the world *qua* object, but is “a being of two leaves” at once in the world and at the same time that which sees and touches them (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 136-137). There is a doubling at work here, a “relation of the visible with itself that traverses me and constitutes me as a seer ... which forms me” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 140). In other words, it is not an object, but a “synergic body,” formed by relationships that exceed it and animate “other bodies” which for Merleau-Ponty must be understood as “A carnal adherence of the sentient to the sensed and of the sensed to the sentient. For, as overlapping and fission, identity and difference, it brings to birth a ray of natural light that illuminates all flesh and not only my own” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 142).

Thus the body comes to us as that by which body and world, seeing and seen, come to be visible or sensed in carnal experience. This makes the body as flesh neither a thing nor an idea, but “the measurant of the things,” which means we cannot but experience the world as/through/in our bodies; the visible, the sensible, is as intimate with us as “the sea and the strand, unapproachable to anyone who would “survey them from above, but as something constituted not by ourselves and visible to us, “in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being also a dimension and a universal.” (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 130, 136, 142, 152).

This approach has interesting consequences for the Freudian view of psychoanalysis because Merleau-Ponty shows that once we abandon the positivist view of the drives, they lose their deterministic character. Once the Id, unconscious and Ego are understood on the basis of flesh, he argues, then the entire framework of Freudian psychology is understood not to describe positive (or negative) entities but “*differentiations* of one sole and *massive* adherence to Being which is the flesh, “which does away with a hierarchy “of orders or layers or planes” to be replaced by a “dimensionality of every fact and facticity of every dimension.” This dimensionality forms the basis of an “ontological

psychoanalysis,” which recognizes that any entity can figure as emblematic of being (overdetermination) because of the intimacy of mind and body, person and world. An ontological psychoanalysis does not look for causes, but rather the conditions which make certain actions possible:

One always talks of the problem of “the other,” of ‘intersubjectivity,’ etc... In fact what has to be understood is, beyond the “persons,” the existentials according to which we comprehend them, and which are the sedimented meaning of all our voluntary and involuntary experiences. This unconscious is to be sought not at the bottom of ourselves, behind the back of our “consciousness,” but in front of us, as articulations of our field. It is “unconscious” by the fact that it is not an *object*, but it is that through which objects are possible, it is the constellation wherein our future is read (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 180).

That is, insofar as we understand that our past actions come to constitute the field in which we engage in “unconscious” actions and reactions in the present, and our present the future, then this past backdrop of action and reaction must be understood as constituting the very basis upon which all our actions are possible. Which is not to say that this backdrop is deterministic, in an absolute sense, but rather that it shapes the very possibilities of action (and reaction) to events in our present. This, then, constitutes the “horizon” of ethical action within Merleau-Ponty’s view, which is that the very basis of our being and sensing in the world is constituted by relationships of past actions and reactions, as well as by the whole reality of our embodied “being in the world.” Therefore, in this view, there can be no dispassionate, objective observer who makes ethical decisions from a distance; the reality of flesh is such that all relationships of feeling, sensing, being, and doing are bound up, within a “synergic body.”

Turning now to the Pure Land Buddhist view of Shinran, we shall see that his description of the necessarily limited scope for human ethical action does not lead to despair and anarchy but rather towards a conception of care and compassion for others as fellow beings in the world.

The Pure Land Buddhist Worldview

Buddhists living in Japan's Kamakura period (1185-1333 CE) believed that they were living in the worst of all possible times: *mappō*, or, the age of Final

Dharma.³ This was the last of three time periods in the Buddhist imaginary, during which, as Jan Nattier notes, Buddhist practice would become impossible and the spiritual capacity of human beings reach its nadir (1992, 65-66). This period of Final Dharma was believed to last anywhere from 500 to 10,000 years, and would only be brought to an end when the future Buddha Maitreya would reintroduce the Buddhist dharma (1992, 28). The conditions of *mappō* were not limited to access to Buddhist teachings alone, Michele Marra points out that there were the attendant "five defilements," which contributed towards an increase in war and disaster, the spread of false teachings, the strengthening of afflictions and desires, an increase in physical and mental frailty and the shortening of the human lifespan (Marra 1988, 26).

Although there was some debate about the precise dating of the world's entry into the period of *mappō*⁴, in the hundred years or so before Shinran's birth, Japanese Buddhists were convinced that the world had entered the period of Final Dharma. Even for Pure Land Buddhists, whose practice was predicated on reliance on the Buddha Amida and rebirth in his pure land, rather than on attaining enlightenment (nirvana) in the present, *mappō* presented a set of unique challenges.⁵ By the time Genshin (源信, 942-1017 CE) compiles the *Ōjōyōshū* (往生要集, Essentials for Birth in the Pure Land) in 985 CE, the awareness of already living in the age of *mappō* is evident. *Ōjōyōshū*'s preface clearly shows that Genshin wrote his book with the idea of *mappō* in mind:

Teachings and practices in order to be born in the Pure Land are the most important things in this Final Age of defilements (*jokuse*

³ Dharma is a polyvalent term. In its primary usage, it means the teachings of the Buddha. Here it is used to mean a certain period of time in which the Buddhist teachings are available to human beings to learn and practice.

⁴ Particularly due to problems with precisely dating the time of the Buddha's death, which was believed to mark the beginning of the first of the three periods of the Dharma: that of the "True Dharma".

⁵ Whereas in traditional Buddhism nirvana is achieved through the disciplines of ethical precepts, meditation and the cultivation of wisdom, Pure Land Buddhism offers a simpler path through rebirth in Amida's pure land. Once reborn there, the believer can quickly attain enlightenment through the direct instruction of Amida and the resident bodhisattvas, in a world perfectly suited to uninterrupted spiritual practice. By relying utterly on the power of Amida Buddha as established through the 48 Vows, and the practice of "*nembutsu*" or, particularly for Japanese Pure Land Buddhists, reciting the name of Amida Buddha, the pure land believer would be reborn in the Pure Land.

matsudai, 濁世末代). Who, either among monks or laymen, noblemen or commoners, is not going to follow this way? (Marra 1988, 40-41)

In a similar vein, Shinran's master Hōnen (法然 1133-1212) wrote in the *Senchakushū* (Passages on the Nembutsu Selected in the Primal Vow) that:

In the present time, it is difficult to attain enlightenment through the Path of Sages. One reason is that the Great Sage departed from this world in the far distant past. A second reason is that, while the truth is profound, [human] understanding of it is slight. For that reason the “Moon- Matrix” section of the Ta-chi ching (Great Collection Sutra) states, “Out of billions of sentient beings who seek to perform practices and cultivate the way in the last dharma-age, not one will gain realization. This is now the last dharma-age; it is the evil world of the five defilements. This one gate—the Pure Land way—is the only path that affords passage.” (Asano 2001, 54)

For Shinran, living in the age of *mappō* entailed the following: 1) Only the verbal teachings of the buddha Shakyamuni remained, but no-one is able to practice them, and no-one will attain liberation through them; 2) The ideal of individual practice and attainment that is the Path of Sages (that is, following the example of Shakyamuni) is out of step with the times and the capabilities of human beings in the time of *mappō* and cannot effectively show the way to achieve liberation; and 3) The world is mired in conflict and dispute, mired in the “five defilements” and “brewing up only the karmic causes for transmigration” (Asano 2001, 203, 205). Asano argues that for Shinran the concept of *mappō* is not just a hermeneutical lens but “an excellent external system that reveals the internal, true form of “foolish beings of the present,” and, on the phenomenological level, is “a clear recognition of the nature of karmic evil, which has existed from the beginningless past” which completely describes the situation of “the ocean of all beings” (Asano 2001, 67). In a hymn, Shinran writes:

Ignorance and [karmic afflictions] abound, pervading everywhere like innumerable particles of dust. Desire and hatred arising out of conflict and accord are like high peaks and mountain ridges. (Asano 2001, 208)

Ignorance, desire and hatred are recognized as the “three poisons” and are at the root of the production and continuation of karma, and the karmic afflictions or *kleśa*, are hindrances to liberation.

In brief, sentient beings living in *mappō* are everywhere impeded and burdened by the bad karma and mental defilements endemic to the times. Although karma is usually understood as a neutral force, the results of a karmic act (its “fruit” or “result”), can be judged as good or bad. In delineating the negative category of “bad karma,” Shinran can thus be seen to be arguing that from the viewpoint of *mappō*, the balance of all karmic results has been tipped towards the negative.

Knowing the right thing

The effects of these karmic burdens are quite palpable for Shinran. He reflects in the *Kyōgyōshinshō* (A Collection of Passages Expounding The True Teaching, Practice, Faith, and Realization of the Pure Land Way) that, “we are filled with all manner of greed, anger, perversity, deceit, wickedness, and cunning, and it is difficult to put an end to our evil nature” (Shinran 1997, 84). Of his own state he laments:

I know truly how grievous it is that I, Gutoku Shinran, am sinking in an immense ocean of desires and attachments and am lost in vast mountains of fame and advantage, so that I rejoice not at all at entering the stage of the truly settled, and feel no happiness at coming nearer the realization of true enlightenment. How ugly it is! How wretched! (Shinran 1997, 125)

We know also that Shinran felt that karma impacted one's behaviour in the present because he is recorded as saying in the *Tannishō*:

“Good thoughts arise in us through the prompting of good karma from the past, and evil comes to be thought and performed through the working of evil karma. The late Master [Hōnen, that is] said, “Knowing that every evil act done—even as slight as a particle on the tip of a strand of rabbit's fur or sheep's wool—has its cause in past karma.” (Shinran 1997, 670)

Besides, in the “Hymns of the Dharma Ages,” #116 he says:

For if I could know thoroughly, as Amida Tathāgata knows, that an act was good, then I would know good. If I could know thoroughly, as the Tathāgata knows, that an act was evil, then I

would know evil. But with a foolish being full of blind passions, in this fleeting world—this burning house—all matters without exception are empty and false, totally without truth and sincerity.” (Shinran 1997, 679)

Thus, there is no way for a person living in this age of *mappō* to know thoroughly and absolutely, what acts are good, and what acts are evil. In our foolish and deluded existence, everything that we do will turn out to be empty and false because we are not living in the clear light of wisdom.

For Shinran, knowing that one cannot distinguish good from evil taints the traditional notion of Buddhist practice: that it flows from knowing the right thing, to doing the right thing, and that one's intention (*cetana*, or will) determines the karmic result of one's actions. Instead, Shinran will come to understand that any self-generated, or self-directed attempt to discern what is right, and act upon that discernment, given the context of *mappō* is utterly wrong-headed. This kind of "self-power" (*jiriki* 自力) thinking must be "overthrown" into a wholehearted and utter reliance on the power and grace of Amida Buddha's "other power" (*tariki* 他力) (Muriuki 2012, 107). This "other power" was specially designed and granted for those living in the age of *mappō* and, as such, is the only way out of this ethical dilemma. As he says in the *Lamp for the Latter Ages*,

Other Power is the entrusting of yourself to the Eighteenth among Amida Tathāgata's Vows, the Primal Vow of birth through the nembutsu, which Amida selected and adopted from among all other practices⁶... Other Power is entrusting ourselves to the Primal Vow and our birth becoming firmly settled; hence it is altogether without one's own working (Bloom 2007, 94-5)

Further, Shinran argues in *A Record in Lament of Divergences (Tannishō)* #9:

The Buddha [Amida] knowing this to be so from the beginning, calling us “foolish beings burdened with afflictions,”

⁶ Also known as the “principal vow” (*hongan* 本願) due to its importance in the Pure Land tradition. It says, "Were I to attain Buddhahood, and yet if sentient beings of the ten directions were not to be born [in Pure Land] even though they were sincere in heart, had faith and joy, and desired to be born in my Pure Land with even ten [recitations of the name of Amida Buddha], then I would not accept true enlightenment. Only those who commit the five damning offenses or slander the true teachings will be excluded" (Dobbins 2002, 3-4).

thus let it be known that the Vow of compassion is for the sake of those just like us. So all the more should we entrust in it.⁷

So, once we have realized the impossibility of self-power practice, and cognizant of the times and situation that the world is in, only complete reliance on the other power furnished by Amida Buddha provides any way out of *mappō*. Rebirth in the Pure Land is particularly designed and targeted for those of us who are struggling with, and drowning in "blind passions." The power of Amida's vows targets us just as we are, *because* we are utterly embroiled in karmic afflictions and entanglements. This vow power then comes to work on and through the Pure Land believer drawing them to the Pure Land through a "crosswise leap" that instantly cuts across the long, winding path of traditional Buddhist practice. At the point of contact between the power of Amida Buddha, and the moment of faith and trust and abandonment of self-power thinking, the Pure Land believer leaps crosswise into the Pure Land.⁸ As this rebirth in the Pure Land is accomplished entirely through the power of the Buddha, and not that of the Pure Land practitioner, Shinran describes it as occurring "of itself" (*jinen hōni* 自然法爾). This working, "of itself, " in naturalness, means that the Pure Land believer is brought to rebirth in the Pure Land without first having to purify themselves of their karmic afflictions: something that Shinran describes as "inconceivable" (Shinran 1997, 642).

Although this is so, Shinran understands that the Pure Land believer continues to live in this world, with its attendant woes and karmic afflictions. However, the Pure Land believer is now cognizant of the bankruptcy of the self-power orientation, and relies fully on the working of Amida's vow. Having surrendered the notion that they can distinguish good from evil, they give way for the spontaneous working of Amida's vows through them. That is to say, good comes

⁷ Shinran's "A Record in Lament of Divergences"; translation mine. See also Unno 1984, 12.

⁸ That moment of entrusting is called *shinjin*, and, for Shinran, marks the decisive moment when the Pure Land believer is assured of their rebirth in the Pure Land. Coming as a spontaneous recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, *namu Amida Butsu*, is the abandonment of self-power, and utter reliance on the saving power of Amida's vows. As he says in the *Tannishō*, "When the thought of saying the nembutsu erupts from deep within, having entrusted ourselves to the inconceivable power of Amida's vow which saves us, enabling us to be born in the Pure Land, we receive at that very moment the ultimate benefit of being grasped never to be abandoned" (Unno 1984, 4).

to be worked in their lives "of itself," through the fruition of the Buddha's power, without the involvement of tainted human "self-power" thinking. This "naturalness" which comes from the spontaneous working of Amida, is not something that Shinran believes emerges from, or is "owned" in any way by the Pure Land believer, and the ongoing life of the Pure Land believer is not one oriented towards enlightenment or nirvana *per se*.

Doing the right thing, without knowing the right thing

In practice, this vision of the free and natural ethical life faced some unsurprising challenges in Shinran's own lifetime and beyond. As Lewis and Amstutz have pointed out, Shinran's ethical approach does have a lacuna:

On the surface, as in much of Ch'an rhetoric, Shinran's radically minimalist interpretation of the enlightenment process left little to be discussed overtly about social ethics. The repeated principle of reliance on the compassion of Amida and the complete inefficacy of any form of self-enlightenment appears to preclude the promotion of any meaningful praxis (Lewis and Amstutz 1997, 148).

The abandonment of the self-power orientation and its attendant rules and guidelines, certainly left room for all manner of misinterpretations. The idea of "licensed evil" (*zōaku muge*), or the idea of deliberately committing evil acts because, as the reasoning goes, evil is not a hindrance to Amida's salvation, or because evil persons are particularly the target of Amida's saving activity, was held by some Pure Land believers.⁹ Although Shinran condemns such interpretations of Amida's grace, saying that one should not drink poison just because there is an antidote, he does not follow up this admonition with a set of rules or guidelines for Pure Land believers.

This is Shinran's understanding of human beings living in *mappō* - that they are filled with all manner of flaws, misconceptions and karmic burdens, and that this karmic heritage determines how they will act in the present and future. This means that because of the ongoing unfolding of that karmic heritage in one's life, one may commit a wrong or evil act. However, Shinran distinguishes between this "unconscious" act of evil from one arising from deliberate, calculative thinking.

⁹ For an in-depth discussion of this notion of "licensed evil", see Dobbins 2002, 47-62.

As we have seen, for Shinran, this kind of calculative thinking must be abandoned for faith to arise. The continuing presence of this kind of calculation only serves to show how much further that individual needs to deepen his or her understanding of the depth of his or her karmic entanglements.

The difficulty for Shinran, and for those of his followers confused by his teachings, is that he cannot substitute one set of ethical guidelines with a *mappō*-proof set of Pure Land ethical rules. For one, to do so would be to fall prey to calculative thinking, and for another, Shinran deeply believes that the Pure Land practitioner who has had a genuine encounter with the grace of Amida's Vow will, from that point onward, genuinely realize the depth of his or her sinful, karmically entangled nature and would never deliberately set out to commit evil acts. This makes it clear that for Shinran, a truly decisive encounter with Amida's saving vow means a total transformation in both attitude and behaviour. Living in the light of Amida's wisdom means living in full awareness of one's hopelessly sinful nature, and therefore a repudiation of evil or unethical action.

When viewed in the full context of *mappō* and the attendant implication that any programmatic ethical schema would be inherently flawed, we can understand why Shinran does not give an explicit catalogue of ethical do's and don'ts. In brief, any kind of ethical schema along these lines betrays, on the one hand, a kind of lingering self-power orientation, and, on the other, the "calculative thinking" which arrogates to itself the power to "know" as the Buddha knows. An attitude which Shinran decries in the passage from the "Hymns of the Dharma Ages" presented above (Shinran 1997, 679). Instead, we can consider that the decisive ethical action in Shinran's view is precisely to abandon and overthrow any self-centred approach to ethical action, that is, one that begins with the sentiment: what should "I" do. By relying instead on the superior good of Amida's working *through* us, the ethical and the good come to be manifested in this world from an untainted and absolutely effective source - Amida Buddha. The discernment, virtues, and good will of Amida Buddha far surpass any good that can come from any human being, more so those living in the age of *mappō*, with its attendant defilements: "Thus, in entrusting ourselves to the Primal Vow, no other form of

good is necessary, for there is no good that surpasses the nembutsu¹⁰" (Unno 1984, 4). This does not mean that we have no desire to do good or to help others! Shinran recognizes this well, saying in *Tannishō* #4:

In this life no matter how much pity and sympathy we may feel for others, it is impossible to help another as we truly wish; thus our compassion is inconsistent and limited. Only the saying of nembutsu¹¹ manifests the complete and never ending compassion which is true, real, and sincere (Unno 1984, 7).

Further, in *Tannishō* #5 Shinran states: "When we become free from self-power and quickly attain the enlightenment of the Pure Land, we will save those bound closest to us through transcendental powers, no matter how deeply they are immersed in the karmic sufferings of the six realms and four modes of birth" (Unno 1984, 8).

Hence, for Shinran, the only kind of caring and ethical action that can truly accord with our quite natural desire to help and care for those we love, comes from the Pure Land, either in its natural working (*jinen hōni*) through us in this life, or from our achieving enlightenment there, and, upon returning to this world, working to help and benefit others. This means that the Pure Land believer lives, as Keel argues, a moral life that follows naturally from genuine faith: "Faith brings about a change of heart and of our attitude toward life and the world. On the basis of this change, ethical life should be lived in freedom and natural spontaneity rather than in law and duty" (Keel 1995, 143).

Conclusion: Together, alone

In Conclusion, the difficulty with following Shinran's example is that human beings will often struggle with the lack of defined ethical rules, and read this vision of freedom and spontaneity as "nothing is forbidden, everything is permitted". The Pure Land Buddhist view, that the circumstances of the world we live in shape the very possibilities of ethical action, is not meant to absolve Pure Land Buddhists, or indeed anyone else, of responsibility for their actions.

¹⁰ See Footnote 5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Indeed, Shinran himself is foremost in being thoroughly self-critical when he declares that “hell is decidedly my abode” (Shinran 1997, 662), which he considers to be the due recompense for his actions. Whether one tramples the flowers in the garden by accident or design, the flowers are equally destroyed. The harm to others, and to oneself, has been done, and must be acknowledged, must be foremost in the minds of Pure Land Buddhists.

It is clear, from the foregoing, that Shinran saw the ongoing life of Pure Land faith as one of constant struggle with one's karmic afflictions, amidst the ever-deepening awareness of one's absolute depravity. As this insight emerged from a crisis of individual faith and practice, one could see Shinran as implicitly arguing that the ethical life begins, and is located within, individual struggle¹², and the Pure Land community as one of a collectivity of individuals with their own particular karmic burdens. As a group of “fellow travellers” working through their own unique karmic hindrances, community is built not out of the special or particular wisdom possessed by a leader or teacher, but out of the sharing of the feeling and intensity of the ongoing struggle of Pure Land faith. Though one may feel that one is struggling separately, those moments of doubt, uncertainty, and muddled feelings are a chance to connect, one to another, at a deep and intimate level. This sharing of feeling and sentiment opens up the possibility of a praxis built upon the slow, hesitant, intimate sharing of one's inner life with others in the struggle to be and do good in a world gone wrong. One gets the sense that for Shinran, this life of working together, in community, and in deep sharing and honesty, cannot be anything else than the working of Amida's vow, and thus, be right and good.

The idea of community as a powerful source of ethical action and concern is one that is shared by African ideas of communality and care as embodied, for some commentators,¹³ in the idea of *ubuntu*: here, being and living together with others is taken as the ground of human life and flourishing, which is understood not as an

¹² “When I ponder on the compassionate Vow of Amida ... it was for myself, Shinran, alone” (Unno 1984, 33).

¹³ For a few, non-exhaustive examples of these kinds of explorations of Ubuntu, see Broodryk 2008; Bujo 2003; Dolamo 2013.

atomised well-being, but one which is inextricably linked to the well-being and flourishing of others. In this interpretation, *ubuntu* is located “at the core of human existence” and encompasses such values as compassion, forgiveness, understanding, and “humaneness” (Dolamo 2013, 2). From this perspective, *ubuntu* works powerfully to undermine received western notions of individuality and the pursuit of profit within capitalist economic and political systems. We must caveat this, however, with the understanding that for Shinran, the wellspring of good that is communality remains only potential unless unlocked through the decidedly non-human intervention of the Buddha Amida. In Shinran’s view, the tendency of humanity towards selfishness and greed is too strong to be controlled without the salvific power of the Buddha working to gradually illuminate and eliminate our attachment to self-centred ways of living.

Insofar as *ubuntu* ideals of communality rely upon the collective wisdom of the elders, or upon traditional and inherited ideas of the “good”, Shinran’s radical praxis guides us towards understanding how these received ideas of communality, too, are shaped by the “horizon” from which they have emerged and developed. Indeed, viewed in light of the notions of “flesh” and the “horizon” as discussed above, we can see that Shinran’s view of community is based upon the sewing together of intimate networks of feeling and sensing “flesh” that together, without reference to objective judgements that are inaccessible to human beings, nevertheless can form the basis of a shared horizon that shapes the potential of human action towards care and compassion, and away from selfishness, greed, and hatred. This is to say that the abandonment of the individualistic, self-centred orientation towards ethical action, that is, the “I” in the “I know what needs to be done”, is more productively displaced into an ethical orientation towards the embodied community of care and compassion. This body of care intimately and immediately senses the needs of the community as one “flesh”, and, without selfishness, moves towards fulfilling those needs.

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