

God and man, Buddha and sentient beings

Michinori Kobayashi (japanese philosopher)

In the thought of faith-based religions such as Christianity and Pure Land Buddhism, we find the logic of the opposition and union of the absolute and the relative. God and man, Buddha and sentient beings, and the absolute and the relative are in opposition to and separate from each other. But that is why, in the religion of faith, they must be united, congruent, and in accord with each other. God descends into the world of man and saves man, and man must repent and return to God. When sentient beings suffer, there must be salvation from the Buddha, and sentient beings afflicted with vexations must be saved by the Buddha.

Conflict and Combination of Absolute and Relative

Religion is a relationship between two contradictory things: the absolute and the relative, God and man, and Buddha and sentient beings. The absolute denies the relative, the relative denies the absolute, and there is an infinite opposition between the absolute and the relative. Human beings are separated from God, sentient beings are separated from Buddha, and there is an infinite disconnect between God and human beings and between Buddha and sentient beings. But that is why the absolute must deny itself and become one with the relative, and the relative must deny itself and become one with the absolute, and the absolute and relative must correspond to each other and resonate as one. God empties himself and descends to man, and man must repent and return to God. The Buddha must kill himself to save sentient beings, and sentient beings must renounce themselves and throw themselves into the bosom of the Buddha. When human beings are afflicted, God's helping hand must be extended to them. When sentient beings suffer, there must be salvation from the Buddha. The self-denial of the Relative and the self-denial of the Absolute must be in congruence. Only then can God and human beings, the Buddha and sentient beings, the Absolute and the Relative become one and be united.

In Pure Land Buddhism, too, it is precisely because there are ordinary unenlightened people who are lost in sin, birth and death that the Buddha comes down to save sentient beings and offers them salvation, and therefore even ordinary unenlightened people in sin, birth and death can be saved. The call of the Buddha must be addressed to ordinary unenlightened people who are full of vexations. Hearing the Buddha's call, ordinary unenlightened people can enter into faith. The relationship between the ordinary unenlightened man, who is guilty of sin, birth and death, and the Buddha is contradictory, but at the same time the two are in contact with each other in a reciprocal way.

We are always lost in life and death, confused by vexations and living with guilt, but at the same time the Pure Land is open under our feet and we are supported by it. We are always lost in vexations and turn our backs on the Pure Land of the Buddha, but the compassion of the Buddha embraces this backslider from behind. It is precisely because sentient beings are lost that the Buddha denies himself and descends to the place of sentient beings to help them. In that boat of salvation, ordinary unenlightened people can go to the Pure Land.

In general, Buddhism teaches the compassion of the Buddha and that in the light of that compassion, sentient beings in sinful birth and death can attain Buddhahood. The Buddha and sentient beings are contradictory, yet compatible through mutual self-denial. There is an absolute disconnection between the Absolute and the Relative, but through the correspondence between the self-denial of the Absolute and the Relative, the disconnection between the two is bridged and the two are united.

Christianity also believes that God's love is infinite and that it is to sinners who bear original sin that God's saving hand is extended. It is to human beings who are afflicted with sin that the Absolute works. God does not simply remain as the Absolute in a place that transcends the human world. On the contrary, He must deny Himself and descend into the relative world to save lost human beings. Otherwise, God cannot be a God of love. The fact that God sent Jesus Christ into the world is also a manifestation of His love. It is precisely because man bears original sin that God denies Himself and sends the Son of God into the human world. Through the redemption of this Son of God, sinful man is saved and can die to self and live to God.

God incarnate and Celestially manifested Dharma-body

Jesus Christ is the mediator who unites God and man, the absolute and the relative. Therefore, Jesus is said to be both God and man. It is a contradiction and a transgression,

but religious truth is found in the unity of contradictory opposites. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is both God and man, is the manifestation of God's love. In response to this work of God's love, man can repent of himself and live under God. Man can only enter into relationship with God through Jesus Christ, the mediator between God and man. Jesus Christ is the reconciliation and bridge between God and man. Here, too, we see the transverse unity of the contradictory things, God and man.

The idea of the incarnation of God also speaks to the idea of the union of the absolute and the relative. It says that God came down to earth for the salvation of mankind and took the form of a human body, the Savior, Jesus Christ. This Christian conception speaks of the fact that the Absolute cannot be absolute unless it denies itself and descends to the place of the relative and is united with the relative. If God only existed in transcendence from the human world on earth, man would not be saved and God could not be God. It is precisely because God has emptied Himself and come infinitely near to man as a mediator with an earthly body in the person of Jesus Christ that man hears God's call and is saved. The Absolute cannot be the Absolute merely by existing transcendently in opposition to the relative. The Absolute cannot be the Absolute unless it is united with the relative.

The Pure Land Buddhist idea of the Celestially manifested Dharma body also speaks of the idea of the union of the absolute and the relative, as does the Christian theory of Jesus. In Pure Land Buddhism, there are two kinds of Dharma, or truth: the Dharma-body (*hoshōhosshin*) and the Celestially manifested Dharma-body (*hōben hosshin*). The Dharma-body is the truth itself, which is colorless and formless, while the Celestially manifested Dharma-body is the truth that has taken on the form of a Buddha and manifested its name and shape for the sake of the salvation of sentient beings. Amitabha Buddha or Dharmākara Bodhisattva (Amitabha Buddha's Name at the time of the Bodhisattva) are such the Celestially manifested Dharma-bodies. Amitabha Buddha or Dharmākara Bodhisattva are considered to be the celestial manifestations of the Dharma-body working for the liberation of sentient beings with his great vow.

In particular, Shinran believed that it is precisely because Amitabha Buddha, as the Celestially manifested Dharma-body, manifests his form and name, places himself on the rank of bodhisattva, and assumes the suffering of sentient beings on their behalf, that even ordinary unenlightened people who are born and die of sin and have no connection to the salvation can be saved in the great compassion of the Buddha. As the Dharma-body is the truth itself, without color or form, it alone cannot play a role in the salvation of sentient beings. The Dharma-body cannot truly be the truth unless it denies itself and manifests itself as the Celestially manifested Dharma-body, and even if it falls into hell, it must ingest suffering sentient beings and help them to be liberated.

Here, too, is the idea that the Absolute can be Absolute by denying itself, descending into the field of the relative and combining with the relative. The absolute and relative cannot be absolute or relative unless they are combined with each other. It is at this point of union that the Celestially manifested Dharma-body of Pure Land Buddhism, Amitabha Buddha or Dharmākara Bodhisattva, manifests himself. This is the Christian equivalent of the God incarnate, Jesus Christ.

Passion

However, the union of the absolute and the relative is not so easy. Because the relative always separates from and rebels against the absolute, there is an absolute rupture and conflict between the absolute and the relative. Therefore, the mediator who tries to eliminate and bridge the rupture has to suffer standing between the Absolute and the Relative. It often tears the mediator in two opposing directions, absolute and relative. The Passion of Jesus Christ on the Cross may symbolize this.

Jesus' death on the cross and the suffering and misery leading up to his death were unimaginable. Many who had previously flocked to Jesus in adoration soon drifted away, and people cast contempt and ridicule on him. Even the disciples who had put their trust in him fled from him, some, like Peter, repudiated him, and some, like Judas, even sold him into the hands of his enemies. Even the women who had followed Jesus from Galilee, attracted to him, were said to have only watched his extreme punishment from afar.

These behaviors of the humans' surrounding Jesus is an expression of how sinful humans are. Man has been separated from God and living with original sin since Adam. This sin as separation from God is manifested in the extreme in the behaviors of the people in Jesus' Passion. On the other hand, God always preaches to man to realize his sin and return to God, and judges man's iniquity and sin. In the midst of this absolute conflict between God and man, Jesus, the mediator between the two, is torn apart. This is what Jesus' death on the cross symbolizes.

This division caused Jesus extreme anguish. As recounted in Matthew (27.46-47) and Mark (15.34-35), Jesus' cry of anguish as he lay dying on the cross was, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus breathed his last with this cry of anguish amidst the treachery, mockery and cruelty of the people.

This extreme anguish of Jesus was also the anguish into which the mediator between God and man had to fall. As the mediator between God and man, Jesus has spoken the word of God to the human beings on earth, and has preached to them to realize their deepest sins, repent and return to God. However, man is not so obedient as to heed the

voice of God. Man lives with the original sin since Adam and is always in a state of separation from God. This unmanageable sin of man manifests itself in the act of crucifying Jesus, the mediator between God and man. It is as if Jesus had been sold to the rebels. For Jesus, who wanted to preach the word of God, it was an incomprehensible unjust. This was expressed in his last desperate words. It was also the fate that the mediator between God and man had to follow. God and man, absolute and relative, are always in conflict, and there is an irreconcilable rupture between them. The last words of Jesus symbolically speak of the division and extreme anguish of the soul of the mediator destined to bridge that irreconcilable abyss.

Atonement

However, even so, the rupture between the Absolute and the Relative must be bridged and the two must be reunited. God and man are in conflict, and between them there is a division and an abyss which cannot be crossed, but which must also be bridged. Man is separated from God, and the righteous wrath of God comes down upon the separated man, yet this division and conflict between God and man must be appeased.

The notion that Jesus' death on the cross was an atoning death for the sins of man symbolizes the reunion of the absolute and the relative, the appeasement of God and man. Jesus was the Son of God sent to man on earth, and through the suffering and death of this sinless Son of God, God took upon Himself the sins that man could not compensate for, atoned for them and forgave them. By understanding it in this way, the rupture between God and man, between the absolute and the relative, was bridged, and the division was reunited. At this point of appeasement between God and man, at the point of union between the absolute and the relative, lies Jesus as Mediator and his sacrificial death.

It was Paul who first emphasized the idea of Jesus' atoning death. All human beings have already sinned and are no longer worthy of the glory of God. But since Jesus Christ, the Son of God, atoned for our sins by His death, we human beings are justified by God without any merit, Paul thought. Therefore, only by believing in God's love and Christ's atonement can man be saved. The idea of justification by faith was thus established. Moreover, since the atonement by the death of Jesus Christ has already been fulfilled, Paul's thought was that this justification by God was not an approaching fact, but a fact that had already been fulfilled. Man is already saved through the atonement of Jesus. Furthermore, Paul sees this as a unilateral act of love from God. God made Jesus Christ,

who knew no sin, to be sin in order to atone for our human sins. By doing so, we human beings are justified by God. It is the manifestation of God's will and the manifestation of God's love.

‘Here is appeasement between the absolute and the relative, between God and man. Jesus Christ was the mediator who bridges this rupture between God and man. Through this mediator, God and man are reconciled. The absolute and the relative are joined.

Vow

The vow of Amitabha Buddha, as taught by Pure Land Buddhism, is also at the point of union of the Absolute and the Relative. Sentient beings are always separated from the Buddha and are lost in the vexations of life and death. In this sense, the Absolute and the Relative, the Buddha and sentient beings are contradictory opposites, but this contradictory opposition must also be overcome and the two must be united. The vows and practices of Amitabha Buddha are at the point of this union.

According to the Longer Sukhāvativyūha Sūtra (Immeasurable Life Sutra)(scroll 1), Amitabha Buddha was once a king, but after hearing the teachings of the Lokeśvararāja Buddha, he renounced his throne, became a salmon, and took the name Dharmākara-bhikkhu. Under the guidance of the Buddha, he made 48 vows for the salvation of sentient beings and vowed that he would not attain the supreme enlightenment unless these great vows were fulfilled. As a result of accumulating merits and virtues, he finally attained the supreme enlightenment and became Amitabha Buddha ten kalpas ago, and is said to exist in the Western Pure Land to save sentient beings.

Following the teachings of the Immeasurable Life Sutra, Pure Land Buddhism holds the following view. As Amitabha Buddha has practiced for a long time, transmitted his merits to sentient beings, and already attained Buddhahood accomplishing his vows for the liberation of sentient beings, we sentient beings are already determined to be reborn in the Pure Land through the power of Amitabha Buddha's vast and boundless fundamental vow, just being unenlightened sinners going through births and deaths. Therefore, sentient beings do not need to accumulate any self-motivated actions or moral goodness, but can be saved only by faith in the power of the fundamental vow of the Amitabha Buddha.

Lost sentient beings cannot be saved if Amitabha Buddha merely remains as Amitabha Buddha in the Pure Land. The Absolute and the Relative remain separated. It is only when Amitabha Buddha manifests himself as the Bodhisattva of the Dharmākara, and when he makes a vow and practices for the sake of sentient beings, that sentient

beings are saved by the power of his vow. It is through this compassion that sentient beings are saved. There is Amitabha Buddha's compassion for sentient beings, his sorrow, and his mercy to take on the suffering of sentient beings. Sentient beings can lay down the burden of their own suffering through the Buddha's compassion and vicarious suffering. Without the Absolute coming down to work in the place of the relative, the relative cannot be saved and the Absolute and relative cannot be united. The vow of Amitabha Buddha symbolizes this union of the absolute and the relative. In this sense, the vows and practices of Amitabha Buddha as taught by Pure Land Buddhism correspond to the Passion and Atoning Death of Jesus in Christianity.

Name of Amitabha Buddha

The chanting of Buddha's name in Pure Land Buddhism is also the very point at which the Absolute and the Relative are joined. The chanting of Buddha's name literally means the chanted name of Buddha: 'Amitabha Buddha' or 'Namu Amitabha Buddha'.

In Pure Land Buddhism, the Truth as the Dharma-body manifests itself as Amitabha Buddha of the Celestially manifested Dharma-body, manifesting its name before sentient beings and making a vow to save them. As expressed in the Seventeenth Vow of Amitabha Buddha in the Sutra of Immeasurable Life (vol. 1), Amitabha Buddha vowed that his name would be heard far and wide in all directions and that all who heard it would come to Amitabha Buddha. Also, as expressed in the Twentieth Vow, Amitabha Buddha vowed that all sentient beings would be saved if they heard the name of Amitabha Buddha and wished to be born in the Pure Land. Therefore, anyone who hears this name and praises it can gain faith and be born in the Pure Land. It was believed that this name had such a mysterious power.

When all sentient beings hear the name of Amitabha, they are illuminated by the immeasurable light of Amitabha Buddha and gain absolute faith in his saving power. Originally, Amitabha Buddha was considered to be a Buddha with immeasurable light and life. In manifesting his name, Amitabha Buddha wished for all sentient beings to be blessed with this immense light and life. Amitabha's light is the mother and his name is the father, and it is the belief of Pure Land Buddhism that through the workings of these two, ordinary unenlightened people can be reborn in the Pure Land.

Thus, in Pure Land Buddhism, salvation is attained only by invoking the Buddha by chanting his name. Honen, too, said that as we sentient beings are incapable of any knowledge or practice, the only way to salvation is to invoke the vow of Amitabha

Buddha, completely depend on him and chant his name. The only way for ordinary unenlightened people to be saved is to be supported by the power of the Amitabha Buddha's fundamental vow, and the only way to be supported by the power of his true wish is to solemnly recite his name.

Shinran reconsidered the meaning of this act of name-honoring and held that name-honoring is to be born into the house of Nyorai. He says that by honoring the Name, one is born into the house of Tathagata for the first time, and that faith is established by the work of the Name, which is the Father, and the Light, which is the Mother.

The name is the point of call and union between the Buddha and sentient beings, the absolute and relative. The Buddha manifests his name before sentient beings and calls out to them. By manifesting his name, the Buddha shows his wish to save sentient beings and arouses them to respond to it. In this sense, as Shinran says in his *Kyōgō shinshō* (Shinvolume), the name is an imperial command to invoke the original wish of Amitabha Buddha. Sentient beings respond to this imperial command by honoring his name. Then they enter the world of the Buddha's fundamental vow and are saved. The name-honoring *Namu Amitabha Buddha* expresses this. The Buddha calls sentient beings just as a mother calls her child, and sentient beings respond to the Buddha just as a child responds to its mother.

Conversely, sentient beings call out to the Buddha and express their wish for salvation through the name-honoring of *Namu Amitabha Buddha*. The Buddha responds to this and manifests his power of fundamental vow to save all sentient beings. Sentient beings call out to the Buddha as if they were a child calling out to its mother, and the Buddha responds to sentient beings as if he is a mother responding to her child.

The Buddha calls out to sentient beings, to which sentient beings respond, and sentient beings call out to the Buddha, to which the Buddha responds. This mutual call and response, or call and response, of the Buddha and sentient beings is none other than the name *Amitabha Buddha*. In the name of *Amitabha Buddha*, the call and response of these two parties echo each other and become one. In the name of *Amitabha Buddha*, the imperative of the invocation of the ordinal wish and the dedication of sentient beings become one. In the name of *Amitabha Buddha*, the Buddha and sentient beings become one, as if they were mother and child. In this personal correspondence between the Buddha and sentient beings, the salvation of sentient beings is achieved and the Buddha's wish is fulfilled. The name of *Amitabha Buddha* is at this point of correspondence.

In the name of *Amitabha Buddha*, the act from the side of sentient beings of honoring the name of the Buddha and dedicating life to the Buddha is at the same time a call and a work from the side of the Buddha. Here, the active and passive are one. Furthermore,

under this name of Amitabha Buddha, the contradiction of the Pure Land and the Defiled Land also overlap into one. Through the name-honoring, sentient beings suffering in the defiled land can be connected to the Pure Land, and by manifesting the name of Amitabha Buddha, the Buddha can also descend from the Pure Land to the defiled land to liberate sentient beings. In the name of Amitabha Buddha, the contradictory opposites of the Defiled Land and the Pure Land are continuous.

In the name of Amitabha Buddha, the contradictory opposites of the absolute and relative, the Buddha and sentient beings, become one. Sentient beings are always separated from the Buddha and wander in the world of vexations, which is why they must be rescued into the world of the Buddha. The function of the name of Amitabha Buddha is for sentient beings to return to the Buddha. From the Buddha's side, sentient beings are always going away from the Buddha, but that is why the Buddha must descend into the world of sentient beings and save them. Where the Buddha descends into the world of sentient beings, there is the function of the name of Amitabha Buddha. Thus, under the name of Amitabha Buddha, the contradictory and opposing Buddha and sentient beings, the absolute and relative, become one and are united. The name of Amitabha Buddha works at this point of union. The name of Amitabha Buddha is the mediator that unites the Buddha and sentient beings, the Absolute and the Relative. Under the name of Amitabha Buddha, opposites are united. In this sense, the name of Amitabha Buddha in Pure Land Buddhism also corresponds to the Passion and Atoning Death of Jesus in Christianity.

The Absolute, Amitabha Buddha, on whom Pure Land Buddhism stands, is the symbol of the fundamental life of the universe. All relative beings, all sentient beings, are already supported by the fundamental life field of the universe. This is what it means to be saved by the power of original wish of Amitabha. All sentient beings can enter this primordial field by praising the name of the Buddha. In this sense, the name Amitabha Buddha is an expression of the primordial life of the universe.

From the fundamental life of the universe, both Amitabha Buddha and sentient beings emerge. And when the Buddha and sentient beings unite and return to the primordial life of the universe, this is where the work of the name of Amitabha Buddha comes from. The primordial life of the universe is expressed as the Buddha, and his work goes out to every corner of the vast and boundless universe to save all sentient beings. The primordial life of the universe is also expressed as sentient beings, who are inspired by and return to the primordial field where the Buddha works. In this way, the name of Amitabha Buddha is where the active and passive workings of the cosmic primordial life coincide. We sentient beings can become one with the primordial life of the universe through the chanting of

the Buddha's name.

Religion is an emotion of return to the primordial life of the universe and of absolute dependence on it. However, we humans are always in detachment from the fundamental life of the universe. This sense of detachment manifests itself as a sense of guilt. In this sense, the absolute and the relative are always disconnected and in opposition to each other. However, those who have separated from the primordial field must also return to the primordial field. The rupture between the absolute and the relative must be bridged and joined. The Passion and atoning death of Jesus, and the Buddha's original wish and name of Amitabha Buddha, are symbols of this point of union. Through the work of this mediator, we, the relative, can be brought back to the primordial and absolute field of the universe. Salvation is a return to such a primordial field. Religion has always sought to return to such a primordial field.

(Source: Michinori Kobayashi, *Philosophy of Life Collection 4*, Minerva Shobo, 2016, in "What is Religion, Sequel", Chapter 2, 3)